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Disasters and history: The vulnerability and resilience of past societies by Bas van Bavel, et al

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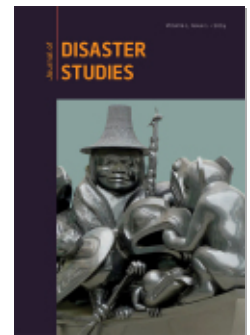


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Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of
Past Societies

Fiona Williamson

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Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies

Bas van Bavel, Daniel R. Curtis, Jessica Dijkman, Matthew Hannaford, Maïka de Keyzer, Eline van Onacker, and Tim Soens

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020

231 pp., \$89.99 USD (cloth), \$29.99 USD (paper), \$29.99 USD (electronic, also open access)

Disaster history is an emerging field that offers tantalizing possibilities for disaster studies broadly conceived. Like many subdisciplines of history, such as environmental history, the focus on disaster as a subject of historical inquiry grew out of contemporary real-world concerns, specifically the rise of interest from sociologists, geographers, and developmental studies experts in understanding the relationship of natural hazards with socioeconomic development and rebuilding out of disaster in the Cold War. Enter the age of the Anthropocene—many of these concerns have coalesced around the possibility of new and more frequent climate change–induced hazards. Under such conditions, the authors of this new book argue, disaster research has burgeoned since the 1960s with significant investment on national and local scales by governments, academic institutions, and nongovernmental organizations.

As the focus for disaster studies has shifted from immediate, technocratic approaches of managing disaster or reducing risk, the field in theory has increasingly moved toward providing a more holistic picture, one that explores the causes, scale, and continued influence of a disaster as a function of inherent socioeconomic conditions and practices. It is here that historians have entered the ring, often informed by environmental, climatic, or economic historical methodologies. As these authors collectively point out, disaster history contributes to the dialogue by taking the long view on past events, teasing out the “causal mechanisms which explain why particular disasters did so much harm in some countries and were countered in others” (14–15).

Written by seven historians well known for their contribution to disaster history, especially in the medieval to early modern period in Europe, this book gives an overview of the current state of the field. In particular, it explores how the most recent theoretical and methodological developments have shaped our understanding of disaster. Taking a close lens to read the disasters and time periods that are most familiar to the authors but tapping on the wealth of disaster literature across time, space, and discipline, the book is

a major contribution for understanding the historiography, themes, and uses of disaster history. The authors acknowledge early on that the text is skewed to their own areas of specialty, especially medieval and early modern Europe, but this does not detract from their clear intention to explore processes, as opposed to trying to introduce the reader to every possible case. It is not written as a research piece but as a review of the current state of play. Anyone expecting a new, groundbreaking monograph will be disappointed, but that type of narrative was never the authors' intent.

The book is an essential introduction to the field. The first two chapters move through areas such as the development of the discipline, key classifications, concepts, and sources; it forcefully highlights the value and use of historical research in better understanding disaster mechanisms. Chapter 3's focus on history as a laboratory is essential in conveying why and how historical case studies can be used to test theories and develop hypotheses that have value far beyond the academic and theoretical space. The next three chapters move into the dynamics of disaster, explaining the underlying complexities of why disasters happen and the extent to which they become disastrous. Economic, political, and societal considerations are foregrounded in this reading, showing how inequality is frequently of more importance than environmental or climatic preconditions in generating levels of risk or resilience. Much of the discussion focus on seemingly inescapable structural inequalities and the related distribution of power with any society, whether in causing the scale and extent of the disaster or recovering from the disaster in the short, medium, or longer term.

The final chapters focuses on the place of disaster history in the Anthropocene and the practical contribution that historians of disaster can make to the contemporary dialogue of vulnerability and resilience in the face of new and more frequent disasters. In so doing, it argues that historical research is a tool for uncovering entrenched and often indiscernible patterns of lock-in that have perpetuated risk, while trying to avoid determinism in historical interpretation. The last few pages offer a tantalizing glimpse into what might be, offering informed opinions as to where the field might grow in the future. Refocusing away from Euro-centric approaches and building in more interdisciplinary research are obvious calls, and the authors point out that while both are widely talked about, they are less widely done. Using history as a laboratory in the ways explained in an earlier chapter is one way to make practical steps toward fulfilling this call. This needs to be made in conjunction with thinking locally, in a step away from the recent trend of global history that can tend to obscure less celebrated cases or the array of different sociocultural responses and coping mechanisms that exist in less studied or documented parts of the world.

This is an ideal text for any scholar new to disaster history. It could easily become the required reading for any university-level disaster history module or for students of disaster studies more broadly. The text also has potential for established academics as a refresher in some of the key areas of their field, for historians of other subdisciplines with an interest in societal-environmental mechanisms, or for disaster studies scholars more broadly to understand how historical perspectives can enrich their work. Most of all, the authors' final call to action needs to be visited by all historians with an interest in disasters, with a view to helping shape the field in the years to come. *Disasters and History* is a handbook that needs to be on every shelf.

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