



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

FIVE

2018

Disasters, risks, and revelations: Making sense of our times

By Steve Matthewman, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Raven Cretney

FOR SOME TIME now, Aotearoa has been colloquially referred to as 'The Shaky Isles'. Since the Christchurch earthquakes over 2010 and 2011 and the Kaikōura earthquakes of 2016, the realities of living in a country that straddles two major plate boundaries has been interjected forcefully into our everyday lives. From these events, geo-physical scientists have been able to increase their understanding of how earthquakes occur as well as the probability and predictability of future occurrences. While the science behind the multiple rupture of fault-lines and the uplift of the seabed has received well-deserved media attention, the social and political questions that have arisen concerning preparedness, risk, and recovery policies has also demonstrated the significant disruption to the social and political landscape that follows these events.

Steve Matthewman's timely contribution *Disasters, Risks, and Revelations: Making Sense of Our Times* explores these topics in great detail, examining the drivers of these events and considering how we, as a society, respond to and recover from them. While he does not deal specifically with the recent occurrences in Aotearoa New Zealand—although the Christchurch earthquakes are mentioned a number of times—the book provides a useful critical analysis of the politics of disaster. Matthewman takes a wide approach to, and definition of, disasters, seeking to understand how these events, from 'everyday' slow disasters to catastrophic, sudden disasters, are shaped by social and political factors. One of the most heartening contributions of this work is the explicit and in-depth connections made between capitalism and disaster. While, for several decades, the field of disaster studies has noted the links between vulnerability, risk, and capitalism, there is a need to re-centre these analyses, taking into account our contemporary understanding of the increasing risk of disaster severity and intensity, as well as the vast inequality in the distribution of risk and vulnerability.¹

Matthewman also tackles the big questions in disaster research—what counts as a disaster? Who counts as an affected population? And how do disasters provoke an opportunity to analyse the dynamics of power and politics in society? These questions are fundamental to understanding the current context of politics both in Aotearoa New Zealand and the world. In this respect, the extensive inclusion and exploration of technological disasters is a valuable aspect of the book. By working from the premise that disasters are more-than-natural events, the inclusion of a wider range of disaster events makes sense. In chapter two, for instance, the role of perception and normal-

1 Ben Wisner et al., *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2004).

cy are highlighted to illuminate how we decide what counts as a disaster. Using the example of car crashes as technological accidents, Matthewman explores the high rates of deaths from automobiles as an example of the normalisation of risk and ‘everyday disasters’ characteristic of modernity, while other, more exceptional, events such as the 9/11 attacks produce significant fear and extensive political responses.² Examples of technological accidents and disasters are given throughout the book, providing important evidence for the role of modernity in shaping risk and vulnerability. For those usually focussed on geo-physical or climactic disasters, these examples, and the interconnections with the politics that mediate these events, are a critical addition to the breadth of hazards and risks that we face in the modern world.

Relatedly, one of the key arguments of *Disasters, Risks, and Revelations* is that ‘disasters are very much part of the modern condition’.³ Drawing on a number of sociological theorists, Matthewman brings more depth to the well-discussed thesis that disasters, rather than being ‘natural’, are the product of society and the social construction of risk and vulnerability. This premise is well-known, but what Matthewman achieves is a novel and engaging discussion of the existing foundations of disaster studies, combined with an exploration of the concept of risk and vulnerability in sociology, and framed in the context of the increasingly unstable politics of liberal democratic capitalism.

Discussing sociological theories of risk in chapter five, the role of modernity in shaping an increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent world is introduced to better underscore the role of society and politics in producing disasters. The ideas surrounding new and diverse forms of vulnerability and risk

2 Steve Matthewman, *Disasters, Risks, and Revelations: Making Sense of Our Times* (Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17.

3 *Ibid.*, 4.

will be of interest to readers navigating the rapidly shifting terrain of global politics.⁴

By building on a number of theoretical perspectives—for instance, using Ulrich Beck to understand the spatiality of risk, and Paul Virilio to frame the role of increasingly fast circuits of communication in capitalist society—Matthewman argues that modernity manufactures the uncertainty that drives contemporary hazards. These arguments increase in saliency in the context of climate change, something Matthewman uses as an example of how ‘apocalypse has moved from myth and religion to science and reason’.⁵ As he describes, we have now created, alongside the exceptional development and wealth of modern society, the very means to end our existence on earth. While many sociologists will already be familiar with the work of Beck and others in discussing these ideas around risk and modernity, this chapter clearly explains the use of these thinkers and their work in the field of disaster studies. More importantly, the arguments outlined here provide a wide-angle view of disaster and risk in a manner that complements the more specific details of other case studies and examples, drawing together a diverse range of perspectives on disasters and building them into a coherent narrative.

The second major theme that runs through the book, but that is treated in most depth in chapters six and seven, is the role of capitalism in shaping disaster and the role of disaster in shaping capitalism. This analysis forms some of the strongest arguments in the book, and contributes to the growing focus on explicitly discussing capitalism and neoliberalism in the field of disaster research. Matthewman draws on Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* to build upon and strengthen the argument that

4 Ibid., 83.

5 Ibid., 77.

capitalism is both a driver and benefactor of disaster events.⁶ The use of cost-benefit analysis to determine risk is one such intersection between capitalism and disaster. Matthewman uses the example of the Ford Pinto—where the low-cost car was found to be at risk of causing death and injury from a design defect, but was not recalled because this cost was viewed as outweighing the cost of compensation for deaths—to demonstrate the potential ruthlessness of cost-benefit analysis under capitalism.⁷ Such an example serves to warn of the motivations of corporations, not only in preventing disaster or accident, but also in response and recovery.

A section on Hurricane Katrina further elaborates on the role of capitalism following disasters by bringing to the fore the role of the state in negotiating the politics of recovery and response. The interaction between philanthropic organisations such as The Clinton Foundation, federal departments such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and corporations in the production of formaldehyde-contaminated trailers demonstrates how the state is not absent from these forms of disaster governance and politics.⁸ This is a point of some relevance for Aotearoa New Zealand. Notably, the recovery program instituted by the National-led government following the Christchurch earthquakes has demonstrated how the state can act in its own interests to push an agenda of economic growth and investment instead of prioritising social and environmental needs following a disaster. What these chapters tease out in this context is the complexity of ‘disaster capitalism’. This is a welcome development from more simplistic readings of the concept that focus primarily on how corporations exploit the opportunity provided

6 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007).

7 Matthewman, *Disasters, Risks, and Revelations*, 97.

8 *Ibid.*, 108

by these events. Matthewman shows how it is, in fact, through complex interactions between the State, communities, non-governmental organisations, and corporations that the political and governance implications of disasters are shaped.

Matthewman also puts forwards the idea that capitalism itself is a disaster. This further widens the scope, moving from an analysis of the profiteering by corporations and states following disaster events to the disasters of everyday life that capitalism produces. Here, Matthewman draws on Amadeo Bordiga to highlight the ‘damage to life and to living conditions’ wrought by capitalism.⁹ This draws attention to the integral role of crisis and disaster in fostering capitalist politics and economies. Building on Joseph Schumpeter’s idea of creative destruction, this argument frames disaster as a source of opportunity to feed the continual need for capital accumulation.

This double analysis of capitalism and disaster complements the description of Aotearoa New Zealand’s economy as one based on ‘milk and disaster’.¹⁰ With the focus on economic growth and investment through the National-led government’s plans for recovery in Christchurch, and the concurrent and ongoing intensive dairy farming boom, there is a need to see the sudden events (such as earthquakes) as well as the slow emergencies (such as water pollution and land degradation from intensive dairy farming) in the context of crisis and capitalism.

Drawing on Slavoj Žižek to introduce the depoliticisation of politics and the ‘transforming of citizens into consumers’,¹¹ Matthewman suggests that the media portrayal of disasters produces victims and spectators that are separated

9 Ibid., 124.

10 Zaryd Wilson, ‘Regions Need Our Help, Says Labour Spokesman,’ *Wanganui Chronicle*, July 10, 2014, accessed October 17, 2017, http://m.nzherald.co.nz/wanganui-chronicle/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503426&objectid=11290950.

11 Matthewman, *Disasters, Risks, and Revelations*, 116.

from an ability to participate in political life. This also leads to media coverage of disasters that are characterised by an ‘absence of their making’.¹² Thinking back to the dual disaster of capitalism—both sudden and everyday—I was reminded of the increasing depoliticisation of politics in Aotearoa New Zealand and the shift towards more authoritarian forms of neoliberal governance, particularly in the sphere of water management.¹³ The analysis provided by Matthewman raises important questions surrounding how disaster studies can better inform our understanding of these everyday disasters of capitalism and the challenges faced by progressive politics.

In the final chapter, the ideas of social transformation, *communitas*, and democratic processes are brought together with the main points from the previous chapters. The idea of social transformation is an important aspect of disaster research, particularly in the face of the entrenched processes of capitalism and neoliberalism that Matthewman argues are underlying determinants of disaster. While there is a substantial body of research on the importance of community in these processes, analysis of the role of democracy and politics in shaping these avenues for participation comprises a smaller portion of the literature. I was particularly glad to see these arguments and avenues of research included by Matthewman, as they provide one avenue where it may be possible to envision a hopeful alternative to the catastrophic current and future effects of capitalist economics and politics.

Similarly, the focus on *communitas* highlights the contradictory dynamics of the positive change that can emerge from crisis and disaster. This is a difficult topic to handle as it is impor-

12 Ibid., 117.

13 See Amanda Thomas and Sophie Bond, ‘Reregulating for Freshwater Enclosure: A State of Exception in Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand,’ *Antipode* 48, no. 3 (June 2016): 770–789.

tant not to undermine the role of disaster in further entrenching inequality and vulnerability for those most negatively affected by these events. Nevertheless, Matthewman elegantly balances this dilemma by focussing on post-disaster solidarity and the optimism found in the works of authors such as Anthony Oliver-Smith and Rebecca Solnit.¹⁴ These two sections on the politics of post-disaster transformation and democratic processes were the only part of the book that I felt could have been extended further.

Disasters, Risks, and Revelations is an insightful and widely-researched contribution that will be of interest to a wide range of academics, researchers, and students, as well as a more general audience who want to better understand the politics of risks and disasters. A significant portion of the analysis is applicable to current political issues in Aotearoa New Zealand and provides a new take on some issues that have been discussed elsewhere. The extensive use of case studies from a diverse geography of places strengthens the book by bringing in immediately relevant examples to complement the more theoretically oriented content. Further, the explicit connection of disaster with capitalism and neoliberalism provide a timely analysis of their role in shaping both sudden and everyday disasters.

14 Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture,' in *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, eds. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23–47; Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

If you like what you have read, please subscribe or donate.



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

© Copyright Counterfutures 2018