

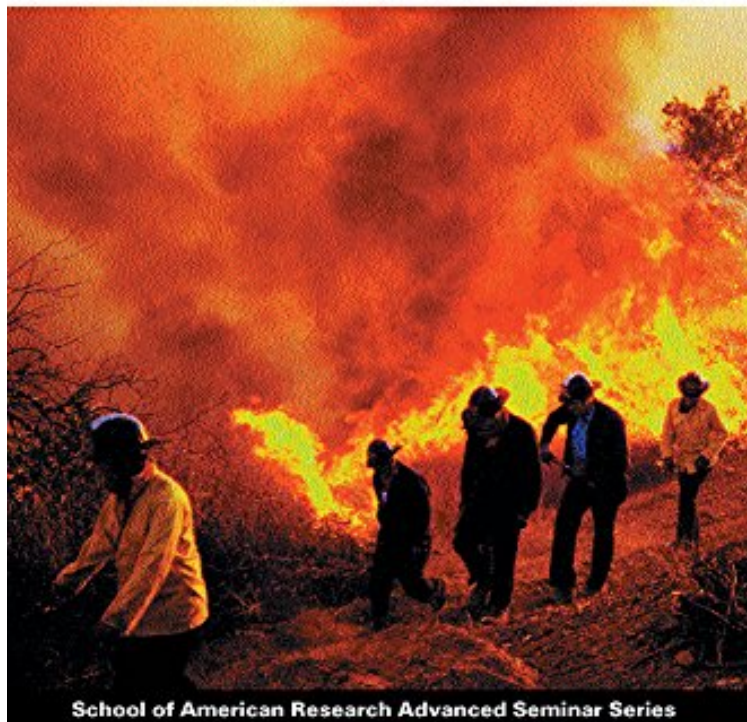
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## Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster (School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series)

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### Catastrophe & Culture

*The Anthropology of Disaster*



*Edited by Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith*

**Contributors:** Gregory V. Button, Christopher L. Dyes, Virginia García-Acosta, Susanna M. Hoffman, J. Terrence McCabe, Michael E. Moseley, Anthony Oliver-Smith, Robert Paine, S. Ravi Rajan, Sharon Stephens

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From School for Advanced Research Press : Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster (School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster (School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Unveiling ComplexityBy Daniel LoboI have just finished the last essay of "Catastrophe Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster", a collection that offers a deep and stimulating insight into the culture of disaster mechanisms. The collection is built upon a multifaceted and collaborative approach that brilliantly argues that "the conjunction of a human population and a potentially destructive agent does not inevitable produce a disaster" but that "a disaster becomes unavoidable in the context of a historically produced pattern of vulnerability."Ironically, that last essay I had parked for a while was "Missing Expertise, Categorical Politics, and Chronic Disasters" by S. Ravi Rajan. Here, utilizing the Bhopal disaster as a case study, Rajan argues admirably about the harm that missing different types of expertise can do to prepare and respond to disasters, from contingent expertise that is ready to intervene immediately, to conceptual expertise to cover the broad range of needs of long-term rehabilitation strategies, and ethnographic expertise that refers to the ability to gain contextual and grounded understanding and the capacity to act on that understanding. And in filling modestly some of those gaps is precisely where it resonated with me strongly, as I aim that part my work, and the conversations supported by Disaster Bound can contribute in that direction.For instance another favorite was "Punctuated Entropy as Culture-Induced Change" by Christopher L. Dyer. The research work done around the Exxon Valdez oil spill serves to develop a critical analysis of the structure of punctuated entropy, being " a permanent decline in the adaptive flexibility of a human cultural system to the environment brought on by the cumulative impact of periodic disaster events," and how it highlights the permanent change, damage and lessened ability to recuperate and sustain community based approaches to disaster resilience. It's an analysis that unfortunately rings all too relevant, and that is immediately applicable to much of the conditions that we are currently living through.But there is much more besides these two examples, and the range of complex topics covered, from environmental impacts, to the influence of popular media or the perception of risk, make this a rich and fascinating volume. If there were a single shortcoming worth highlighting it might be the implicit premise that anthropology would occupy a higher ground from where to develop this critical analysis of the culture of catastrophe, which is uncomfortable since the book also argues and demonstrates so strongly the need for crossdisciplinary efforts. Since the book is crafted initially from that academic perspective the bias can be understood. Much of the extended discourse of the interoperability of academic disciplines falls short on actual enabling the broad understanding it pretends to offer. In fact, most schools offer varying interpretations of what constitutes social science, and for instance the scope studied for anthropology, sociology, or economy. And it is not uncommon to see representatives of these disciplines arguing the contrary: that a definitive and clear interpretation of how knowledge is organized is set. Luckily here, that bias does not preclude the essays to offer a broad, complex, and diverse scrutiny of many facets present in disaster analysis, which is of the essence for a comprehensive approach to the area.In the end, considering the broad range of topics unveiled, the volume offers but an introduction into vast, complicated, and essential areas that unfortunately seem to be barely acknowledged in the mainstream practice of disaster preparedness and response. And it is precisely for revealing so adeptly the solid interwoven mess of sociocultural elements embedded in catastrophe that I felt this collection is so important.

25 of 25 people found the following review helpful. Superb Focus on Culture Underlying CatastropheBy Robert David STEELE VivasThis is one of those books where the .com referral system worked for me. I would never have found it otherwise. It is a timely book, and it has direct relevance to the 9-11 catastrophe because everything this book talks about in terms of "cultures of catastrophe" (one could call them cultures of oblivion or cultures of inattention) resonates with the findings of the joint congressional panel on the many ways in which the CIA, FBI, and NSA failed America.What most engaged me about this book, apart from its outstanding attention to the relationship between cultures of inattention or distraction and major catastrophic events (the book makes clear that catastrophe's don't have to happen--they make the jump from disasters when the over-all system of first responders and related parties fails to act quickly and correctly in harmony, precisely because of their past culture), is its focus on the total system, on every feature of society in relation to the environment.The editors write: "One of the common sources of the policy-practice defect is its construction on culturally bound assumptions. In disaster contexts, aid often gets delivered in inappropriate forms and according to unsuited principles." The book excels at looking at the uneven record of disaster preparedness, and the lack of understanding to local contexts that often help turn disasters into catastrophes.I recommend this book as a primary reference for national security practitioners as well as state local responders. The ... billions now in the Homeland Security budget was not designed with this book's lessons in mind, and will in all likelihood do more damage than good when we are tested again.The message of the book is so important it merits emphasis--no amount of money is going to prevent catastrophe--absent a commitment to creating a culture of attention and interoperability and information sharing, we will create our own catastrophes each time we are challenged by what could have been nothing more than a localized disaster.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great Food for ThoughtBy Curious SeniorA collection of papers from a seminar on the role of culture in major disasters and their aftermath, as seen through the prism of anthropology, this book offers great insights into the playing out of a community's response to both natural and man-made catastrophes. While neither New Orleans nor the recent Japanese crisis are mentioned, it seemed to explain a great deal of what happened in those more recent instances. I would have given this book five stars were it not for the fact that the academic language of some papers may prove difficult for non-academic readers,

but with patience, it is well worth making the effort.

At a time of increasing globalization and worldwide vulnerability, the study of disasters has become an important focus for anthropological research—one where the four fields of anthropology are synthesized to address the multidimensionality of the effects to a community's social structures and relationship to the environment. Using a variety of natural and technological disasters—including Mexican earthquakes, drought in the Andes and in Africa, the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Oakland firestorm, and the Bhopal gas disaster—the authors of this volume explore the potentials of disaster for ecological, political-economic, and cultural approaches to anthropology along with the perspectives of archaeology and history. They also discuss the connection between theory and practice and what anthropology can do for disaster management.

[T]he contributors to this volume provide a comprehensive account of the nature of disasters, their complex mix of the physical, biological, and socio-cultural, and their use in the elucidation and reconstitution of social life which are the goals of the mining anthropologist... This volume comes out of the School of American Research seminars. This means it is particularly well integrated and interwoven... The end product, then, is a most coherent and interesting read which will resonate with academics and citizens as this brave new millennium of ours continues to present us with new and increasingly complex disasters. --Jonathan Skinner, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. 10, no. 4 (December 2004)

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About the Author ANTHONY OLIVER-SMITH is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Florida. He held the Munich Re Foundation Chair of Social Vulnerability at the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security 2007-2008. He has done anthropological research and consultation on issues relating to involuntary resettlement, as well as the impacts of natural and technological disasters, in Peru, Honduras, India, Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico, Japan, and the United States since the 1970s.

Hoffman is an anthropologist, filmmaker, and writer. ANTHONY OLIVER-SMITH is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Florida. He held the Munich Re Foundation Chair of Social Vulnerability at the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security 2007-2008. He has done anthropological research and consultation on issues relating to involuntary resettlement, as well as the impacts of natural and technological disasters, in Peru, Honduras, India, Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico, Japan, and the United States since the 1970s.