BOOK REVIEW


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This is an edited volume of eight essays on a variety of topics, all focused on the devastating Hurricane Mitch that struck Central America in the fall of 1998. Like most edited volumes, the essays cover a somewhat idiosyncratic choice of subjects, but the whole hangs together better than in many such volumes.

The introductory chapter by Anthony Oliver-Smith describes the methods and theoretical framework adopted by the group. The book is the result of a coherent group of researchers that met to discuss Hurricane Mitch and its aftermath, eventually getting funding for ethnographic projects in Honduras from a variety of sources.

The authors all accept what Oliver-Smith describes as the ecological perspective on disasters, holding that they “do not inhere in societies; they inhere in societal-environmental relations” and require the conjuncture of human populations and disaster agents. Disasters are the outcome of historical events and social choices that create particular “patterns of vulnerability” (p. 5). The authors were interested in opening up those events and choices to understand the patterns of power and resource allocation in Honduras and how they affected the results of the event, which allows them to consider the highly complex chains of causality for the event and the equally complex processes of reconstruction and recovery.

Using this understanding of disaster as a starting point, the second chapter by Ensor and Ensor offers an astute analysis of the root causes of the disaster as well as responses to it, in terms of the country’s economic system, patterns of settlement, and political realities. They note that socioeconomic conditions obtaining in Honduras prior to Mitch compounded the physical devastation caused by the storm. A pattern of dependent development led to increasing concentration of land control by a small elite class in combination with companies based in the United States, an extremely uneven distribution of income, and high levels of environmental degradation. Other factors include the high rate of population growth, rapid urbanization, and deteriorating health, as more peasants were pushed off the land and into shantytowns belts around the major cities. Finally, the levels of hazard mitigation and emergency response planning and preparedness measures were very low, and the disaster response reflected this lack of foresight. Warning systems were ineffective or nonexistent, and information flow after the
hurricane was extremely limited. With this picture of high vulnerability, it is unsurprising that Mitch caused so much damage, especially to the poorest citizens of this poor country.

In Chapter 3, Winograd demonstrates a holistic approach to examining socioeconomic and environmental vulnerability. The approach is based on four indices: Environmental Vulnerability, Population Vulnerability, Social Vulnerability, and Infrastructure Vulnerability. These indices are weighted and combined to form an overall vulnerability index, which is mapped in GIS to show areas of critical priority. This is fairly standard stuff; the most interesting part of the chapter is the resilience analysis focusing on “the capacity of a system to absorb perturbations or stress while maintaining structure and function” (p. 57), which is illustrated by two methods that allow the reader to visualize a community’s absorptive capacity, making them useful tools when attempting to communicate the possible results of different development strategies.

Chapter 4 by William M. Loker is a fascinating first-person account of the hurricane and its aftermath, based on the author’s journal entries and recollections of his experiences during Mitch. It provides a vivid sense of how such an event can affect an isolated, poor community, and the self-organizational processes that are used to fill in the gaps of governmental and external NGO aid. The author ends by arguing that such situations are a way to examine the health of affected societies: “If you want to see if the dog is alive, give it a kick” (p. 96).

The following chapter by Vilma Elisa Fuentes, which addresses the opportunity for political change that the disaster presented, is particularly poignant in light of last year’s coup in Honduras. A promising beginning to the process of curbing the absolute power of the Honduran oligarchy described by Fuentes appears to have been short-circuited by an event that constitutes a flashback to the 1950s. After Mitch, it appeared that pressure by newly invigorated and organized civil society, supported by donor countries and NGOs, was having some success as it challenged government corruption in the distribution of aid and the country’s traditional highly centralized power distribution. The internal divisions in civil society and its general lack of institutional capacity are noted as potential problems, and may have contributed to the end of this hopeful phase in Honduran politics.

Chapter 6, by Marisa Olivo Ensor, provides a gender analysis of the reconstruction process. Although her view of “traditional disaster research” (p. 130) that paid little attention to the role of gender in structuring society may be somewhat overstated, the importance of such an analysis is clear when studying a basically conservative society such as Honduras. More men than women died in Hurricane Mitch, perhaps due to their higher tolerance of risky behavior and their higher participation rates in search and rescue operations. Women’s psychological and emotional health suffered more than that of men, however, as did their economic welfare. Most disturbing is the high incidence of domestic violence reported, perhaps affected by the general frustration with a slow recovery and the lack of public safety in the hurricane’s aftermath. Although there is some evidence of low levels of participation by women in the post-disaster flowering of civil society, the chapter concludes with a call for better data collection with a view to understanding the reality of gendered disaster recovery processes.
Roberto E. Barrios in Chapter 7 describes the resettlement process in a southern Honduran city, Choluteca, where 3,000 homes had been destroyed. The history of two housing developments provides an interesting study of the differences between the officially sanctioned, internationally financed Limón de la Cerca neighborhood with 1,200 houses and the neighborhood of Marcelino Champagnat, where residents worked with the international NGOs to change the original designs for the neighborhood and the 330 houses that were eventually built there. While the first neighborhood became plagued by gang violence and resident dissatisfaction, the second benefited from a process of mediation that allowed for the damnificados to express their needs to the project managers in a context of mutual respect, resulting in a healthier community.

The concluding chapter (Ensor, Ensor, Fuentes and Barrios) focuses on the need to shift from talking about post-disaster reconstruction to addressing poverty reduction, placing “poverty alleviation at the heart of disaster mitigation, post-disaster reconstruction, and development discourse and practice” (p. 187). The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper prepared by Honduras with assistance from the World Bank and the IMF was influenced by the country’s Master Plan for National Reconstruction and Transformation. The PRSP is built on six pillars: “accelerating equitable and sustainable growth; reducing rural poverty; reducing urban poverty; raising investment in human capital; strengthening social protection for vulnerable groups; and ensuring the strategy’s durability by improving governance and environmental management” (p. 187). These are indeed noble goals, but implementation has been poor, and there was actually a decline in attention to environmental protection in the ten years after Mitch. The Millennium Challenge Account agreement signed in 2005 (the Honduras Compact) promotes economic growth and infrastructure development, with little attention paid to income distribution levels. The Central American Free Trade Agreement, which Honduras joined in 2006, is not expected to eliminate unequal development, and in fact may increase Honduran economic and ecological vulnerability levels. The authors’ main critique of post-Mitch policies is their “almost exclusive focus on macroeconomic policy” based on the discredited trickle-down theory. Foreign aid could have been used as an incentive for policy change, but instead it has mostly supported the top-down processes that produced the pattern of vulnerability that existed before the hurricane.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature on development as well as the disaster research literature. Although the chapters are uneven in style, their quality was almost uniformly good, which is the mark of well-edited work. Readers will be left with many questions that beg the authors to revisit their topic in post-2009 Honduras.