

Bas van Bavel, Daniel R. Curtis, Jessica Dijkman, Matthew Hannaford, Maïka De Keyzer, Eline Van Onacker, and Tim Soens, *Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 231 pp., ISBN: 9781108477178, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108569743>).

In the era of the Anthropocene, marked by the pressing threats of climate change and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, the study of disasters has shifted from the margins to the centre of academic inquiry. However, a significant epistemological gap often persists between the natural and social sciences, which dominate disaster risk reduction research, and the discipline of history. In *Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies*, a collective of seven renowned historians based mainly in the Low Countries seeks to bridge this divide. By positioning history not merely as a repository of narratives but as an ‘empirical laboratory’, Bas van Bavel and his co-authors provide a rigorous methodological and conceptual framework for understanding the long-term interactions between hazards and human societies.

The primary objective of the monograph is twofold: to introduce historians to the interdisciplinary concepts of disaster studies and to demonstrate to social scientists and policymakers the indispensability of deep chronological perspectives. The authors firmly reject the outdated notion of ‘natural disasters’. Instead, they adhere to the paradigm that while hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts may be environmental, disasters are fundamentally social constructions, resulting from the intersection of a physical hazard and a socially produced vulnerability.

The book is structured thematically rather than chronologically, guiding the reader through classifications, methods, preconditions, responses, and effects. One of its strengths is the excellent combination of concise conceptual overviews with examples from all epochs, from the middle ages to the present, and from all world regions. The first chapters focus on important concepts, dissecting terms such as ‘vulnerability’, ‘resilience’, and ‘adaptation’. The authors navigate the tension between the definitions used in ecology, where resilience often implies a system’s ability to recover or transform, and social history. They caution against a normative understanding of resilience; a society may be resilient in maintaining its structures, but those structures may rely on the exploitation or marginalisation of vulnerable groups. High resilience at the macro level can coexist with, or even depend upon, high vulnerability at the micro level.

A standout contribution of this volume is its methodological chapter ‘History as a Laboratory’. Here, the authors argue for a comparative approach that tests hypotheses across different spatial and temporal contexts. They offer a necessary critique of the recent ‘consilience’ trend, in which natural scientists use historical data for their own (sometimes non-historical) research. While acknowledging the value of palaeoclimatology and large digital datasets such as plague databases or conflict catalogues, the authors warn against the uncritical use of such data without traditional source criticism. They highlight how digitised datasets often obscure the contextual biases of the original records, leading to skewed conclusions about the link between climate and societal crisis.

The core of the book analyses whether and how the social, economic, and institutional preconditions dictate disaster outcomes. The authors dismantle linear narratives of modernisation which suggest that technological advancement inevitably reduces vulnerability. Instead, they introduce concepts such as ‘technological lock-in’, illustrated by the Dutch reliance on ever-higher dikes, which creates a false sense of security while increasing the catastrophic potential of failure (116). Due to limited space, the authors mainly refer to case studies and their outcomes (some conducted by themselves), but less to the sources used. However, some historical images offer a rough insight into the pictorial evidence.

Central to the analysis of this work is the role of inequality and institutions. Challenging neo-Malthusian determinism, the authors argue that it is not population pressure itself, but the distribution of power and resources that determines vulnerability. They engage critically with Amartya Sen’s ‘entitlement theory’ that postulates that famine is in many cases not so much related to a shortage of production and availability, but rather to the ability to buy food, and they expand it beyond famine to include flood and disease. Furthermore, the authors offer a nuanced rebuttal to the ‘levelling’ hypothesis recently popularised by Walter Scheidel, which posits that mass mortality events inevitably reduce economic inequality (154-158). Van Bavel et al. demonstrate that the redistributive effects of disasters are highly context-dependent. While the Black Death may have improved the bargaining power of labour in Western Europe, similar shocks elsewhere or at other times enabled elites to consolidate assets and entrench extractive institutions.

The discussion on disaster responses highlights the tension between top-down state interventions and bottom-up community coping mechanisms. The authors suggest that while strong states can mobilise resources for relief (as seen in the sophisticated ‘ever-normal’ Qing granary system, which intended to stabilise grain prices and provide a safeguard against famine), state intervention often disrupts local ecological knowledge and informal safety nets. The book provides compelling examples from colonial contexts where the imposition of European property rights and agricultural practices eroded indigenous resilience strategies, thereby manufacturing vulnerability to drought and famine.

If there is a critique to be made, it is that the work's analytical rigour sometimes comes at the expense of the human element. In treating history as a laboratory for testing variables, the narrative texture of individual human suffering – the lived experience of disaster – is occasionally subsumed by the structural analysis of institutions and economies. Additionally, while the authors strive for a global scope, the book's empirical weight rests heavily on European, and specifically North Sea area, case studies, reflecting the authors' own areas of expertise. While they do integrate examples from Africa, Asia, and the Americas, the depth of analysis is understandably uneven. This is also reflected in the rich bibliography (188–224), which hardly refers to studies published in languages other than English. It contains more than 700 titles, but only 23 of them (or 3 per cent) are published in French (11), German (6), Dutch (4), Italian (1) or Chinese (1). In this way, numerous conceptual studies on historical disasters, vulnerability, and resilience are not referenced, such as Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen's monograph on the storm surge of 1717 (the first extensive case study on a single disaster placing it in its social, economic and religious context), Jacques Berlioz's *Catastrophes naturelles et calamités au Moyen Âge* (1998), the collection of articles *Am Tag danach*, edited by Christian Pfister (2002), important recent case studies by Daniel Krämer (2015, on the hunger crisis of 1816–1818 in Switzerland), Chantal Camenisch (2015, on the interdependence of climate variability and grain prices in the fifteenth-century Burgundian Lowlands), Thomas Labbé (2018, on late medieval natural disasters), Dominik Collet (2018, on the European hunger crisis of the early 1770s), or the large number of studies on historical earthquakes from Italy, for instance by Emanuela Guidoboni and others.

Nevertheless, *Disasters and History* is a landmark publication in the field of environmental history. It successfully challenges the event-based history of catastrophes, advocating instead for a processual understanding of disasters as long-term unfoldings of social contradictions. By demonstrating that 'natural' disasters are often the result of slow-onset social erosion, institutional rigidity, and inequality, the authors provide a powerful toolset for analysing the past.

Perhaps most importantly, the book serves as a corrective to the technological solutionism that pervades modern disaster management. By showing how historical societies adapted to – or were broken by – hazards, the authors argue that reducing vulnerability today requires social and political transformation, not just better engineering. This volume is essential reading for economic and social historians, historical geographers, and any scholar interested in the deep roots of the anthropogenic crises the world is facing today. It establishes convincingly that we cannot understand future risk without rigorously examining the vulnerability of the past.

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