

Key points from *The Uses of Disaster* (by Out of the Woods)

[For tl;dr version, read the red. Green is our extra explanation.]

The writer Rebecca Solnit examines “disaster communities” – those extraordinary moments when people forget social differences and band together to survive a disaster (e.g. earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorist attacks, etc). Once the disaster has passed, the ‘disaster community’ often dissipates too. She suggests that our “great contemporary task” is to hold on to the intimacy, resourcefulness, and sense of purpose of these communities: to make ordinary this extraordinary human behaviour. This task becomes more urgent as our climate emergency intensifies.

OotW dig into this idea of “disaster communities” and offer a few challenges to it. Their first challenge is to note that, for many people, *ordinary life* under capitalism is already a slow, ongoing disaster – not as spectacular as a hurricane but often as harmful.

DISASTER CAPITALISM, CAPITAL AS DISASTER

There is no such thing as a ‘natural’ disaster. Climate change is capitalism-made; climate disasters unfold in capitalist conditions. The victims of capitalism’s ‘ordinary disaster’ are the most vulnerable to the ‘extraordinary disasters’ of climate chaos.

- The extent to which natural forces (e.g. weather systems, plate tectonics) are damaging to human life depends on social, political and economic forces. E.g. areas of low-income housing (cheaply-built, unmaintained by landlords) are more vulnerable to climate shocks than the well-built homes of the rich.
- Focussing on disastrous *events* can obscure the realities of disastrous *conditions*.
 - e.g. Hurricane Maria left Puerto Rico without fresh water in part because the island’s drinking water systems were already unsafe. Meanwhile, poor communities in Flint lack access to clean water as a result of industrial pollution and decades of neglect – a disaster that has unfolded slowly and “lack[s] the spectacular power of a hurricane or earthquake”
- “Climate change significantly increases the frequency and severity of both slow- and fast-moving disaster” – causing damage to food and water supplies, infrastructure, housing. The poor and global south will experience this deterioration in living conditions most severely.
- “This is disaster capitalism: a vicious cycle in which ordinary disaster conditions exacerbate extraordinary disaster events, in turn intensifying the original conditions.”

Nation-states can and do use moments of extraordinary disaster to enact repressive policies (austerity, privatisation, militarisation, etc) that further worsen inequality and living conditions.

- Climate disasters are already enabling states to implement such policies (a process related to what Naomi Klein calls the “shock doctrine”)
 - e.g. “In the months following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico has experienced further privatization, worsening labor conditions, and the arrival of green colonialists” like Elon Musk

SURVIVAL PENDING REVOLUTION

[NB: the heading refers to the Black Panther Party’s community survival projects, e.g. the Free Breakfast for School Children Program, the Intercommunal News Service, free housing repair, free medical clinics...]

Thinking about ‘disastrous conditions’ helps us to see that climate change is not only the result of capitalist production but also “a crisis of *social reproduction*”.

- In order to continue to exist, a society has to continually do certain things (e.g. produce food for people to eat, raise new generations to abide by the society's values, etc). This is referred to as the society 'reproducing itself'. For our capitalist society to reproduce itself, a lot of stuff is mass produced on an industrial scale and globally distributed. But there's also a huge amount of other activity going on alongside industrial production, without which society would cease to function. At the end of their shift, a worker is exhausted and hungry. In order for them to be able to turn up to work again the next day, more effort must be expended: food must be cooked, clothes must be washed, etc (Marx called this the 'reproduction of labour-power'). A huge amount of this extra work of 'life-making' is done by women, not in exchange for money but according to familial or romantic relationships. This unwaged domestic work has been a key area of feminist thought for a long time. The term 'social reproduction' can also refer more broadly to other social structures that mould and maintain people as 'workers' (i.e. obedient, exploitable, healthy enough, skilled enough). These include structures that are often state-managed, such as education, healthcare, the legal system, and social security.
- A 'crisis of social reproduction' is when the ability of the whole society to reproduce itself is in jeopardy, because so many people cannot access the resources that they need to keep on living.

It may seem that 'disaster communities' emerge spontaneously, but their strength often depends on pre-existing networks and skills. Longer histories of collective organising are crucial.

- "the lives of the poor, the dispossessed, and the colonized are not shaped by disaster alone. They involve, at every turn, forms of survival and persistence, often in the form of knowledges and skills passed from generation to generation."
 - e.g. After the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, landowners and speculators planned to demolish quake-damaged homes and build luxury condos. But working class residents fought back and forced the government to seize 7,000 properties for repair and eventual sale to tenants. They drew on existing "organizational links, a culture of mutual aid, and expectations of solidarity. Tenants knew that they had each other's backs because of their past relationships with one another. [...] Their experience of organizing against the ordinary disasters of capitalism left residents well equipped to deal with an extraordinary disaster."
 - Similarly, pre-existing mutual aid networks in Puerto Rico distributed food, cleaned up debris and rebuilt infrastructure after Hurricane Maria. These local networks responded faster to residents' needs than international aid organisations and also "demonstrate[d] that nonspecialists can quickly pick up and share tools and skills for survival". Groups also "organize[d] parties, dancing lessons, and collective cooking sessions, so that communal horizons might open beyond despair."

People can and do use moments of 'extraordinary disaster' not only to help each other survive but also to undermine capitalists. Could we call this a 'shock doctrine of the left'?

DISASTER MIGRATION

- So far, the examples have been of communities located within specific geographic places - i.e. about responses to extraordinary disasters at the sites of those disasters.

Climate disasters also displace people. As climate chaos worsens, this forced displacement will intensify and tend towards a global movement to richer nation-states in higher latitude zones. Harsher border regimes are already being implemented in these zones.

Anti-borders activism is a crucial form of resistance to climate disaster; these networks of migrant solidarity are also 'disaster communities'.

e.g. blockades of Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities in the US; anti-deportation actions in the UK resisting the "hostile environment" policy

The work of 'disaster communities' also has pedagogic value. By working collectively to sustain social life, they teach us to say 'Yes' to other ways of living and 'No' to capitalist social relations.

- This simultaneous "Yes" and "No" is most evident in the disaster communities that fight borders, which "help people mitigate the violence of the border" and explicitly "resist the very concept of the border itself" e.g. in the demand for 'No Borders'.
- And we must say 'No' clearly, if we are "to go beyond the coziness associated with dominant notions of community". We mustn't forget that these communities "will not be free from the welter of violence that constitutes everyday disaster: misogyny, white supremacy, classism, ableism, racism, and numerous intersecting forms of oppression will, sadly, leak into their organizing."

But capitalism is often comfortable with the work of 'disaster communities'

- "All too often, the term is used to label the resilience capitalism itself needs to survive ordinary and extraordinary disaster."
e.g. US Homeland Security praised anarchist-influenced relief efforts after Hurricane Sandy in New York, since these efforts (of unpaid volunteers) left a functioning social life in the city for state and market forces "to recapture once the status quo ante was restored."

So what we need instead is 'disaster communism'

- i.e. more than microcosms of hope – something "hugely ambitious, requiring redistribution of resources at several scales; reparations for colonialism and slavery; expropriation of private property for Indigenous peoples; and the abolition of fossil fuels, among other monumental projects"
- This may seem impossible, or impossibly far off, but "[i]n the collective responses to disaster, we find that many of the tools for constructing that new world already exist."