

## Continuity and change in the applied anthropology of risk, hazards, and disasters

*This article introduces the special issue of The Annals of Anthropological Practice on “Continuity and Change in the Applied Anthropology of Risk, Hazards, and Disasters.” After reviewing the factors that account for the heightened anthropological attention to disasters in the early 21st century, I review each of the contributions to the special issue. The topics included in the special issue represent some of the simultaneously perennial and currently pressing issues in the anthropology of risk, hazards, and disaster: vulnerability, resilience, culture change, culture in practice, risk reduction, disaster capitalism, and response and recovery. The objective of this special issue is to help provide an orientation to the theoretical and applied tools that will help anthropologists better prepare to assist in disaster contexts. It will assist those that may be encountering these issues for the first time, as well as those already working in disaster-affected communities. [risk, hazards, disaster]*

### Introduction

**T**his special issue of *The Annals of Anthropological Practice* comes at a time when anthropological work on risk, hazards, and disasters is having a bit of a moment. Recently, the journal *Human Organization* (74[4]) released a special issue on the topic, featuring contemporary ethnographic work on disasters around the world. This was the culmination of three consecutive years of organizing disaster scholars within the ranks of several professional associations (both formal and informal) around the world, but nowhere so much as within the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA). I could also point to several new book series, including Berghahn Books’ series *Catastrophes in Context*, Routledge’s *Studies in Hazards, Disaster Risk, and Climate Change*, Springer’s series *Humanitarian Solutions for the 21st Century*, and the upcoming second edition of the seminal publication, *The Angry Earth: Disasters in Anthropological Perspective* (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman forthcoming).

Considering that disasters affect nearly a quarter of the world’s population each year, such scholarly attention is apropos, to say the least. Though the number of natural disasters in 2014 was one of the lowest annual rates in the past decade, the global annual average of disaster-related deaths per year is roughly 100,000 and reported economic damages average more than US\$160 billion per year (Guha-Sapir et al. 2015). As the contributors worked to prepare this special issue during the North American winter months of 2015–2016, our attention was called not only to the cases directly considered in this issue, but also those disasters that emerged as we wrote. We saw the people of Taiwan dealing with the devastation from a magnitude 6.4 earthquake; much of Tasmania reeling from more than 70 ongoing brushfires; the American Pacific Northwest confronting the aftermath and the uncertain future signaled by one of the highest intensity wildfire seasons in years; India, Malawi, and Mozambique recovering from massive flooding; Ethiopia facing dire drought and food security concerns; and the people of Nepal struggling to rebuild in the wake of the catastrophic earthquakes that struck in Spring 2015, to name a few. Catastrophes such as these not only claim lives and property; they also displace tens of millions around the globe, cause billions of dollars in losses, and impact the wellbeing of millions. Disasters compel

communities to rapidly adapt to new environments, lifeways, and subsistence strategies. They compel affected people to take stock of their personal and cultural identities in ways they may not have in the past; they hurt, and they reveal much to us about our values, desires, and our whole affective ranges.

Yet, in a sense, the anthropological fascination with disasters—and our capacity to conceive of this proliferation—has come about as much as a consequence of our shifting gaze as any increase (real or perceived) in their frequency or intensity. The conceptual dominance of functionalist and neofunctionalist paradigms and colonialist mentalities throughout much of the 20th century long predisposed anthropologists to examining the all-too-neatly bounded and, importantly, *stable* systems of primitive others; dissimilarities and perturbations were likely to be bracketed out of analysis. Likewise, other social science disciplines, whose chief concerns were previously the populations of the Global North found in their early confrontations with disaster people largely alienated from and baffled by the risks and hazards of environments and “nature” that were to them, other (Faas and Barrios 2015). The anthropological gaze of course shifted from the 1970s onward to suffering and subalternity (Crehan 2002; Robbins 2013), the global embeddedness of localities (Hodder 2012; Wolf 1982), power relations both material and discursive (Foucault 2002 [1972]; Hornborg 2001), the perennial flux of ecologies and human–environment relations (Dove 2006), affect and embodiment (Clough and Halley 2007; Csordas 1994), and the emergent and often improvisational properties of cultural practice (Pickering 2008). Along the way, perhaps gradually and then all at once (to paraphrase Hemingway), anthropologists came to see that the better part of the world’s populations live lives intimately bound to their environments (Escobar 1999), acutely aware of the concomitant risks and hazards, often in the shadow of periodic and looming disasters (Oliver-Smith 1986). Acute sensitivities to subalternity and the sense of impending collapses likely explains much of the recent anthropological fascination with precarity (Muehlebach 2013).

### ***Unheralded encounters and the resurgence of disaster anthropology***

Since the pioneering work of Anthony F.C. Wallace and Raymond Firth in the 1950s,<sup>1</sup> the anthropolog-

ical study of disaster has grown to become a diverse and robust field of inquiry. Anthropologists have long joined scholars and practitioners of all disciplinary stripes to influence policy and practice in disaster prevention, mitigation, response, recovery, and adaptation. However, it bears noting that much of the history of anthropology and disasters begins with disasters visiting the anthropologists, not the other way around. Just as Anthony Oliver-Smith was preparing to depart for the Andean highland town of Yungay in Peru in May 1970, to conduct fieldwork for his dissertation on the political economy of market practices, the entire region was devastated by a 7.9 magnitude earthquake on May 31, leaving just 300 survivors from the original population of approximately 4,500 (Oliver-Smith 1986). At the time, Oliver-Smith was uncertain of how to proceed or if it was even appropriate to do so. When his advisor, Paul Doughty, encouraged him to continue to Yungay to study what happened next, he found himself venturing out into a field little explored by anthropologists. Twenty years later, Susanna Hoffman was neither concerned with disasters as a topic of inquiry nor contemplating any particular fieldwork endeavor when the 1991 Oakland firestorm claimed her home and all of her possessions. She began processing the experience in very personal narratives (Hoffman 1994), while noting that so much of what this catastrophe revealed for her were those core concerns of cultural anthropologists—leadership, relationships, and semiotics. At the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association the following year, Hoffman sought out others who might be working on disasters; the ensuing meeting with Oliver-Smith resulted in an enduring collaborative relationship that has produced two seminal works, *The Angry Earth: Disasters in Anthropological Perspective* (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999) and *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disasters* (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002), both of which remain essential readings in the anthropology of disasters (for more on this history, see Faas and Barrios 2015).

In recent years, the growth and development of the anthropology of risk, hazards, and disasters has been nowhere more evident than in the SfAA, which has long fostered the development of the application of social science to the world’s most pressing and often most neglected issues. Beginning at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the SfAA in Denver in 2013, when Anthony Oliver-Smith received the prestigious Malinowski Award, a core group of about a dozen

disaster anthropologists formed to begin organizing a cluster of panels that featured more than 100 papers on the topics of risk, hazards, and disasters in that first year. This tremendous turnout signaled to many of us that disaster research had re-emerged as a major field of interest among applied anthropologists. In an effort to channel the energies of this loosely affiliated group of scholars, we officially formed the Risk and Disasters Topical Interest Group within the SfAA in late 2013. The Risk and Disaster cluster of panels grew even larger the following year at the 74th Annual Meeting of SfAA in Albuquerque, when we held our first meeting as an officially recognized Topical Interest Group (for a brief history, see Faas and Kulstad 2015).

This Risk and Disasters Topical Interest Group was long preceded by *La Red de Estudios Sociales en Prevención de Desastres en América Latina* (Social Studies Network for Disaster Prevention in Latin America, or La Red), which formed in 1992. This organization played a critical role in establishing a global intellectual community of “disasterologists” working in Latin America that was particularly influential in the development of disaster scholars and scholarship worldwide (see Faas and Barrios 2015; Maskrey 1993). Today, the growth of networks of anthropologists investigating disasters continues to expand globally, with the Disaster and Crisis Anthropology Network (DICAN) within the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2015 and the 2015 International Anthropology Workshop Comparative Study of Disasters and Upehvals at the Southwestern University for Nationalities in China (Zhang et al. 2016). Furthermore, in the interest of application and broader public engagement, the Risk and Disasters Topical Interest Group facilitated a partnership between the SfAA and the U.S. Department of Interior Strategic Sciences Group to contribute to rapid deployments of multidisciplinary teams to advise practitioners and policy makers in ongoing environmental crises (see Faas and Trivedi 2015). These activities point to the advent of a new cohort of disaster anthropologists as markedly engaged with the discipline of anthropology as they are with interdisciplinary conversations and policy and practice.

### **The special issue**

*The Annals of Anthropological Practice's* focus on timely publication of topics related to the application and practice of anthropology makes it an ideal venue in which to feature the present specially

curated collection of anthropological essays that addresses theoretical and applied questions of broad interest and relevance. The collection of articles in this somewhat unconventional special issue constitutes a critical evaluation of the field's central theoretical and applied foundations; a variety of disaster-relevant issues in an ethnographically grounded, theoretically informed, and geographically and culturally varied series of essays.

The 2015 Annual Meetings of the SfAA, which took place in Pittsburgh from March 24 to 28, featured 22 Risk and Disaster Topical Interest Group sponsored panels and 114 papers. This special issue is the direct result of a plenary panel sponsored by the group at that meeting, which seized on the conference theme—Continuity and Change—and was subsequently billed as *Continuity and Change in the Applied Anthropology of Risk, Hazards, and Disasters*. The plenary featured a combination of established and emerging leaders in the field, all represented as authors in this collection. Each of these scholars contributes to applied anthropological knowledge of risk, hazards, and disasters from a variety of perspectives that shed light on the most vital issues in this still burgeoning subfield. This issue is based on the series of focused conversations about the state of risk and disaster theory and practice featured in this panel. As the title of the plenary and subsequent special issue suggests, the discussion focused on continuities and changes in key aspects of the anthropology and applied social science of risk and disasters. Panelists pointed to cultural, semiotic, economic, political, and ecological dynamics that helped orient newcomers and seasoned specialists alike to the state of the field. Discussions concentrated on the field's history, contributions, and shortcomings, and evaluated alternative theoretical frameworks and the enduring relevance of key concepts. The group also engaged in a lively discussion on one of anthropology's fundamental and overarching topics of inquiry—culture change.

The panel paid equal attention to applied considerations—the effectiveness and politics of global disaster risk reduction strategies; disaster response, reconstruction, and recovery approaches; and incorporating culture into disaster response and recovery. Finally, because disasters have become increasingly common in anthropological work, we considered how risk and disaster studies influence the way anthropologists work more broadly. Our essays in this issue therefore reflect on the ways risk, hazards, and disasters affect field sites, methods,

theories, and anthropologists themselves. The panelists and organizers concluded this fruitful session with a commitment to maintain the panel's momentum by collaborating on this joint publication.

This special issue furthers the 2015 Pittsburgh plenary discussion with eight conceptual reviews that address topics that are fundamental to research and practice in disaster contexts: vulnerability, resilience, culture change, culture in practice, disaster capitalism, disaster risk reduction, and response and recovery. Each manuscript in this issue features ethnographic case material from those who participated in the thematic discussions in the plenary. Collectively, we hope that this timely presentation of ongoing debates and conversations in the anthropology of risk, hazards, and disasters will contribute to the advance of applied and scholarly work on these important topics. The articles in this issue are intended to provide a bit of an orientation to some core concepts in disasters research for those who are relatively new to the field, while simultaneously serving as provocations for seasoned scholars and practitioners who we are sure will continue to work on the frontiers of theory and practice on these issues.

### **Review of contributions**

In the first article in this collection, I review the concept of vulnerability in the study of risk, hazards, and disasters, which once constituted a paradigm shift in the field. Generally employed as a cumulative indicator of the unequal distributions of certain populations in proximity to environmental and technological hazards and an individual or group's ability to "anticipate, cope with, resist and recover" from disaster (Wisner et al. 2004), this concept has influenced disaster research in at least three fundamental ways. First, it helped researchers and practitioners reevaluate the "natural" in natural disasters and consider the role that humans play in catastrophe. Second, vulnerability forced a temporal reconceptualization of calamity. If vulnerability is produced by human behavior and is unevenly distributed, disasters are therefore historically produced. Thus, rather than being discreet events, disasters are actually processes that begin long before a hazard's onset and continue long after it subsides. Moreover, the implication that disasters are "temporary" obscures the fact that daily life for many people is chronically insecure. Finally, vulnerability effectively politicized disaster analysis by placing disadvantaged groups and uneven distributions of power at the center of analysis. This concept, however, is not without its

critics. Critics of the vulnerability concept argue that its measurement is often exceedingly complex and effective measures in one context do not often translate to others. Moreover, vulnerability-centered approaches can render disaster-affected people as passive, powerless victims (Hewitt 1997). They can portray entire regions of the world as unsafe and backward, justifying perpetual interventions into marginal populations (Bankoff 2001). In this article, I engage this theoretical debate by critically examining the concept's historical trajectory, evaluating whether vulnerability continues to be useful and analytically meaningful. Finally, I weigh the potential benefits and/or consequences of incorporating vulnerability analysis in policy and practice.

Roberto Barrios discusses how in recent years resilience, or "the ability to survive and cope with a disaster with minimum impact and damage" (Cutter et al. 2008), has become a pervasive term of trade in disaster scholarship and management. The idea of preemptively identifying factors that might promote the capacity of a given people or place to sustain and adapt to shocks (e.g., Manyena 2006) is understandably seductive. One salient concern, however, is that the framework of resilience places an inordinate amount of responsibility on affected communities for the outcomes of disaster, thereby diverting attention away from root causes. This essentially promotes a naturalized view of disaster—one previously rejected in the long dominant vulnerability frameworks of disasters—and leads us to the mistaken assumptions that local groups (or "systems") must somehow possess the ability to weather environmental "accidents." Many anthropologists have avoided the resilience framework because of these and other perceived issues. Despite these critiques, funders, relief organizations, and fields of study continue committed to the resilience-centered framework. In this paper, the Barrios engages this important theoretical conversation by evaluating the concept's merits and shortcomings, as well as the role it will play in risk, hazard, and disaster anthropological theory and practice. He also evaluates ways in which anthropologists might (or might not) be able to move beyond critiquing and avoiding the term to offering alternative conceptual frameworks that are useful to both policy makers and practitioners working in risk reduction, mitigation, response, and recovery.

Cultural continuity and cultural change—one of anthropology's perennial theoretical concerns—is central to the anthropology of risk, hazards, and

disasters. In the article by Susanna Hoffman, questions of cultural continuity and change are treated as not only theoretically poignant, but also central to how anthropologists advise communities, organizations, and policy makers in disaster contexts. Anthropologists often struggle with interpreting the extent to which disasters lead to cultural change or reify preexisting cultural repertoires and social structures. In *After Atlas Shrugs* (1999), Hoffman addressed this question. The extent to which disasters cause cultural change, she asserted, depends on the following three factors: (1) the size or magnitude of the disaster event; (2) whether we look at change in the short or long term; and (3) whether we consider the deep structures or surface structures of culture. In 2013, Anthony Oliver-Smith also engaged the question by identifying important distinctions between *coping* and *adaptation* in disaster contexts. Coping, he points out, refers to improvisation and creativity in novel crisis contexts. Adaptation, in turn, refers to adjustments in “the fund of general knowledge and practice in a culture . . . the overall ‘toolkit’ for life in a particular environment” (Oliver-Smith 2013:277). Drawing from diverse research conducted in coastal Louisiana after the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, among the Chinese ethnic minority Qiang people in their recovery from the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, and in post-Hurricane Mitch resettlement communities in Honduras, Hoffman revisits the important and enduring question of culture change in disasters by examining the role that risk, hazard, and disasters play in sociocultural change.

Julie Maldonado considers an issue that is central to applied anthropology in general and of risk and disaster in particular: incorporating local culture into practice. Despite applied anthropologists’ relentless and all-too-common recommendation that policy makers and practitioners must incorporate local people and cultures in their work, this advice is commonly ignored or misconstrued. In this article, Maldonado explains why cultural insensitivity in disaster-related policies and practice continues to be a persistent issue. Also, she offers recommendations on how to develop more useful and successful prescriptions for incorporating cultural sensitivity into policy and practice.

Mark Schuller and Julie Maldonado take a critical look at disaster capitalism, or the strategic and opportunistic reshaping of economic practice and regulation during times of environmental catastrophe and in the service of narrow capitalist interests. They address these key points using examples

from Haiti and the Gulf Coast. Such practices, many have argued, prioritize profit over the needs of the communities they are supposed to serve. Schuller and Maldonado begin by defining disaster capitalism and the ways by which such practices not only divert public funds for private benefit, but also serve the political and ideological objectives of capitalist elites. Disaster capitalism, they point out, is at once a policy and a political project that today serves to advance neoliberal policy agendas under the cover of crises that permit extreme measures. They conclude by discussing some of the limitations of disaster capitalism as an analytical concept and point to roles for anthropologists in resisting the advance of capitalist interests at the expense of the vulnerable in disasters.

Anthony Oliver-Smith provides a review of anthropological perspectives on disaster risk reduction and how this is reflected in national and global policy initiatives. Now underwritten by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and several other large, multinational bodies, disaster risk reduction is a global priority. Anthropologists have been active contributors to the development of research and emerging policy in this area for a number of years. In this article, Oliver-Smith takes a critical look at global disaster risk reduction efforts. He examines global policy making processes, including those that took place in the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan. Oliver-Smith identifies current challenges and opportunities for advancing effective disaster risk reduction policies. Moreover, he suggests the roles that anthropology can play in fostering the development of more critical approaches to disaster risk reduction by addressing the root causes of disaster risk.

The article by Qiaoyun Zhang addresses how applied anthropologists can best use their work to inform policy and practice in response and recovery more effectively. It draws on the cases of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Chengdu, China, and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Zhang begins by discussing the “optimistic fatalism” of the Qiang people of China, who perceived disaster and “fortune” in terms of opportunities for change that go hand in hand (Zhang 2012). The earthquake caused tremendous material and human losses, but also brought them unprecedented and even miraculous opportunities for development. However, such development also leads to destructions of social networks and sustainable subsistence practices as well as economic disparities and social unrest. It also essentialized their peripheral and fixed identity as the

ethnic other. The authors discuss the ways in which applied anthropologists can address this dialectic relationship between disaster and opportunity. They also address the need to bridge the epistemologically and practically constructed chasm between expert knowledge and local knowledge. Finally, the authors discuss how applied anthropologists can better engage disaster narratives in response by pointing to the continued rise in funding for humanitarian efforts, while development funding is declining, and how this shapes humanitarian response.

In the final piece in this issue, *Afterward: Preparing for Uncertainties*, Tess Kulstad and I reflect on the contributions to this issue and disaster anthropology more broadly in light of the global proliferation of vulnerability to hazards and disasters in the 21st century. Disasters have historically caught many anthropologists by surprise as topics of research. We offer a focused discussion of a general purpose of this issue—informing anthropological engagements with disaster—by reviewing some notable contributions to the field and summarizing the case for a denaturalized view of disasters. We follow this with an extended discussion of what comes after nature in the anthropology of disasters; that is, if disasters are not properties of nature, but rather of human action, what then are the subjects of analysis? We point to the historical production of vulnerability as a complex domain of inquiry and the hard problems of disaster causality and the complexity of institutional responses to hazards and disasters. We conclude by focusing on what anthropologists can learn from disaster, how they might apply what they learn, and a sincere hope that these matters no longer catch us by surprise.

### Concluding remarks

Today, the potential for catastrophe looms over many communities where anthropologists work, increasing the likelihood that many who have never considered risk-, hazard-, and disaster-related issues will have to grapple with them. The objective of this special issue is to help provide an orientation to the theoretical and applied tools that will help anthropologists better prepare to assist in disaster contexts. It will assist those that may be encountering risk, hazard, and disaster issues for the first time, as well as those already working in disaster-affected communities. Contributors not only cover complex problems confronted by people in disasters, but also

focus on doing so in ways that are amenable to both theory and practice. In effect, the contributors to this issue wish to bid farewell to the days when hazards and disaster caught anthropologists by surprise.

### Notes

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1. Anthony F. C. Wallace called anthropological attention to disasters in his work on the topic with the National Academy of Sciences—National Research Council's *Committee on Disaster Studies* throughout the 1950s. In a series of reports, Wallace and collaborators called attention to the social, cultural, and psychological stresses faced by disaster survivors. His work on this topic continued through the 1980s. Importantly, Wallace engaged in this work through multidisciplinary collaboration with psychologists, historians, and linguists. Raymond Firth's (1959) *Social Change in Tikopia* examined Tikopian responses to two cyclones and a subsequent famine, describing in great detail the modification of ceremonial, quotidian, and relational exchange practices, which he concluded did not rise to the level of substantive change in social structure. For more on the development of the anthropology of disasters, see Faas and Barrios (2015), Oliver-Smith (1996), and Torry (1979).

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