

Natural Disasters in Latin America: Introduction to the Dossier

Desastres naturales en América Latina: Introducción al dossier

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Studies on natural disasters in Latin America are increasing in number and quality for good and bad reasons. First, the bad, or unpleasant. The hemisphere continues to bear the brunt of earthquakes, floods, droughts, hurricanes, and other maladies. The Chilean and Haitian earthquakes are the best known of recent catastrophes but other nations and regions have been plagued as well. The media in Latin America pays growing attention to these. Disaster and distressing aftermath pictures sell newspapers and keep people watching the TV. In fact, in North, Central, and South America, disasters are sometimes the only times that the national media focuses, although briefly, on the poor and *el campo*. Climate change and ensuing “extreme weather” will make disasters and their coverage ever more common. Key topics addressed in these essays—how people understand nature and the built environment as well as how societies react to catastrophes—are increasingly relevant topics in the twenty-first century.

There is, however, a more positive reason. As these studies show, historically-focused works on natural disasters are making important and novel methodological and theoretical contributions.¹ They also highlight a general trend, perceivable in a variety of subfields of history: the attention to good writing and story telling. These five articles, while examining different countries (Chile, Uruguay, Nueva Granada, and Costa Rica), time periods (1600-2000), and catastrophes (floods, earthquakes, plagues, hurricanes, and more), all use disasters to highlight social and cultural issues and to push history towards new forms of analysis. They build from different theoretical schools and sources yet, together, show the benefits of natural disasters as an entryway into rethinking Latin America. Rather than summarizing each text, I will highlight some of these contributions.

Mauricio Onetto Pavez takes us into an almost completely novel field in colonial and modern Latin America—the history of the senses. This highly theoretical piece begins by examining representations of representations of disasters, how artists have depicted how others had understood earthquakes.

DOI

**10.3232/RHI.2011.
V4.N1.01**

The author thus reviews the constructed nature of events and memory, arguing that for colonial Chile (and beyond) *olores* and *colores* proved to be particularly important referents. He notes how eschatology and, in essence, the baroque stressed new forms of understanding smells and flavors. Water plays an important role in the diverse moments he studies, thus linking his article in surprising ways with historians more attuned to water and environmental studies. Onetto Pavez sheds light on how panic-stricken depictions of disasters stressed new smells, flavors, and the use of the senses, the world turned upside down. This sophisticated study should push scholars towards the history of the senses, an almost “untouched” topic in Latin America.

Juan Carlos Jurado Jurado examines religious reactions to New Granadan catastrophes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He explores what Luis Miguel Glave has called “fatalismo barroco” and the fantastic portfolio of saints, rogativas, and processions employed to placate divine wrath.² The research is prodigious. He not only examines popular religiosity over time and place but also reviews changing notions of “disasters,” nature, and calamities. His call in the conclusion to develop the analysis of religious iconography is on the mark—his articles shows the complexity and richness of popular devotion and again indicates the unique perspective gained by interdisciplinary studies of disasters.

Uruguay is not a country often associated with natural disasters. Nonetheless, massive flooding took place in 1959. Mariana Iglesias examines how different political groups framed and addressed the social and economic disruption. This article complements nicely Mark Healey’s recent book that uses natural disasters, in that case, the San Juan, Argentina earthquake of 1944, to reconsider modern politics.³ In 1959, the Partido Colorado had recently relinquished its control of the presidency to the Partido Nacional and Iglesias acutely illuminates how these two groups and internal factions within them understood the flooding. Her examination of the conflicting views of the catastrophe as disaster and, alternately, as war is particularly interesting, a sophisticated indication of the relationship between environmental and political or social history. Mariana Iglesias confirms the unique perspective that natural disasters can provide on social and political phenomena, bringing Uruguay to the front of discussions about catastrophes and politics.

Identidad terremoteada examines the massive 1960 earthquake in Valdivia, one of the most powerful and destructive in global history. The authors, Alfredo Riquelme Segovia and Bárbara Silva Avaria, plot a fascinating path of analysis—how the catastrophe interrupted and affected Chile’s sesquicentenary. They do a splendid job of contextualizing the reactions to the earthquake, highlighting the Cold War language and mentalities and the very mid-century search for national metaphors, often in terms of space. They summarize this in a *frase feliz* as *la nación telúrica*. The article makes many strong contributions but I found the comparisons with this decade’s bicentennials particularly germane. I had reached a point where I doubted that anything original could come from essays on bicentennials—this essay changed my mind. It’s a model of contemporary history, deeply researched, highly analytical, well written, and timely.

“Aportes de la historia aplicada para el estudio de los desastres” addresses an age-old question—is the understanding of history useful for contemporary society? Margarita Torres Hernández and Ana Yolanda Zuñiga Arias state from the beginning that “se parte del concepto

de la historia aplicada, en el cual se resalta la utilidad de esta disciplina para el estudio de problemáticas contemporáneas...". They collect material on hurricanes in the last twenty years in Costa Rica, using archival and secondary sources as well as interviews. What they collect, much more than mere data, constitutes a rich and important asset for scholars and professionals working on hurricanes. While they lament the lessons not learned, they do show that Costa Rica has made progress in understanding, lessening risks from, and reacting to hurricanes. In contrast, a recent book that looks back on the devastating 1998 Hurricane Mitch paints a much more depressing picture in terms of its broad impact in Honduras. The vast majority of its victims, the rural poor, have not recovered and Honduras is no better prepared for hurricanes and other natural calamities than before 1998. In fact, the disaster accelerated the nation's move towards neo-liberalism.⁴ The article builds on Costa Rica's rich historiographical tradition, and correctly ends by noting the need for broader "redes de investigadores e investigadoras que permita el abordaje interdisciplinario de diversas problemáticas donde se conjuguen opciones metodológicas y perspectivas teóricas, que posibiliten a los actores sociales directos constituirse en los ejes de las investigaciones". They have taken a crucial first step in this direction.

Together, these five essays and the accompanying book reviews show that Latin American historians have turned to the examination of disasters with particularly rich results. All of these tell important stories, contributing *a la vez* to national and regional questions about power and society as well as broader theoretical and methodological concerns. All build from micro-history and narrative history—they tell good stories and capture multiple perspectives—and dialogue with other fields and disciplines. Together, they demonstrate a welcome maturity and richness of Latin American history. I am certain that together they fortify this budding field of a truly Latin American history.

Notes

¹ For a key pioneering study, see Virginia García Acosta, *Historia y desastres en América Latina*, Bogotá, CIESAS/La Red, 1996.

² Luis Miguel Glave, *De Rosa y espinas: Economía, sociedad y mentalidades andinas, siglo XVII*, Lima, IEP, BCR, 1998, capítulo VI, esp. 343. See also Jaime Valenzuela Márquez, "El terremoto de 1647: experiencia apocalíptica y representaciones religiosas en Santiago colonial", en Valenzuela Márquez, ed. *Historias urbanas: Homenaje a Armando de Ramón*, Santiago, Instituto de Historia, Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 2007, 27-65.

³ Mark A. Healey, *The Ruins of the New Argentina: Peronism and the Remaking of San Juan after the 1944 Earthquake*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

⁴ Marisa Ensor, ed. *The Legacy of Hurricane Mitch: Lessons from Post-Disaster Reconstruction in Honduras*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2009.