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**DISASTER POLITICS: FROM SOCIAL CONTROL TO HUMAN  
SECURITY**

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# **Disaster politics: from social control to human security**

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## **A 1. Introduction**

Geographers have long asserted a politics of disaster. Over twenty years ago, Fred Cuny (1983) suggested that activated civil societies might produce new leaders that:

“remain to continue the work of bringing economic change to the community...to replace those who have proved ineffective or unable to cope with the aftermath of a disaster” (Cuny 1983:11-13).

At times the potential for disaster events and their repercussions to catalyse political change is almost irresistible. Within 24 hours of the 6 May 2008 cyclone hitting Myanmar the Chicago Tribune ran a story on ‘Will cyclone unleash change in Myanmar?’ (Goering, 2008)

There has been a steady flow of individual studies, often self-associating with political ecology, but systematic investigation of the political outcomes of disaster by geographers and the wider disaster studies community has been limited. Recent large scale events, perhaps initiated by Hurricane Mitch, 1998 but certainly including the Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2004; Hurricane Katrina, 2005; and, the South Asian Earthquake, 2006, have stimulated interest in situating large disasters associated with rapid onset natural hazards within socio-political contexts and tracking their political outcomes. This complements a small but established literature on the interaction of politics with slow-onset disaster (drought leading to hunger and famine). Rising interest is part of a wider acceptance that development has failed in many parts of the world, and that development failures leading to an accumulation of disaster risks are manifesting reflexively as disaster burdens for the poor (Wisner et al, 2004), with reconstruction and recovery open to manipulation by competing economic, political (Pelling, 2003) and social (Simpson and Corbridge, 2006) interests. The recognition that climate change (IPCC, 2007) and urbanisation (UN-HABITAT, 2007) are increasing the severity and frequency of disaster loss suggests a strategic need for systematising the existing literature on disaster politics with a view to identifying future research needs.

In this paper the term natural disaster is used as shorthand for a humanitarian disaster associated with a natural hazard event. This distinguishes such events from disasters associated with technological hazards, or acts of terrorism and state violence, which are more accepted as being embedded in the political process. The paper presents reviews of two literatures that have sought to connect disasters, politics and development. The first is structured around theoretical and policy trends, the second draws from accounts of individual disaster events. The aim is map out the contrasting lenses through which disasters have been constructed as political events and to assess the state-of-the-art understanding of the political impacts of catastrophic natural disasters (earthquake, flood, hurricane, landslide, tsunami etc).

The potential for transformative political space to be opened by disaster has been recognised by dominant international political actors. USAID (2002) describes post-disaster political spaces as:

“moments when underlying causes [of conflict] can come together in a brief window, a window ideally suited for mobilizing broader violence. But such

events can also have extremely positive outcomes if the tensions... are recognized and handled well” (ibid: <http://www.usaid.gov/fani/ch04/windows.htm>).

Humanitarian NGOs have also recently re-branded post-disaster reconstruction as an opportunity for ‘building back better’ – seeing the developmental potential of reconstruction for social and political as well as physical infrastructure (e.g., UNICEF, 2005).

A core tenet of this paper is that post-disaster socio-political instability and change is neither good or bad of itself, but that the context of any consequent redistribution in social and political power is critical in assessing the impacts of disaster stresses and shocks on development. Our primary interest is in political change but we see this as embedded within social relations (Scott, 1976), consequently the focus broadens to include socio-political systems.

## **A 2. Antecedents for a politics of disaster**

The literature on disasters has evolved as it has absorbed theoretical innovations and in response to a changing policy landscape of disaster and development (Pelling, 2001). The following review identifies key discourses in disaster politics and their legacies in contemporary work.

### *B 2.1 Disasters and decision-making: from electoral politics to policy communities*

In the 1960s social scientists working in the United States introduced an implicit political perspective to disaster studies by exploring group behaviour and the problems of social control (Fritz 1961, Barton 1963, Dynes 1970). The primary goal of these studies was to explore the ways in which social control could be maintained even under extraordinary stress, and thereby minimize the damages and casualties of disaster. Perhaps the first analysis to treat a disaster as a political event in and of itself was published in 1966 by Abney and Hill, who wrote of the impact of Hurricane Betsy on elections in the city of New Orleans. This study highlights two themes that recur throughout the literature – that disaster has important symbolic power in political discourse, and that cultural and administrative context play a large role in shaping political outcomes.

Hurricane Betsy in 1965 killed 75 people in New Orleans. This was a major event, causing President Johnson to fly to New Orleans to reassure both the affected population and the nation that the federal government could be relied upon in times of turmoil (Hearn 2004:57). Betsy occurred at the beginning of mayoral elections in New Orleans. The opposition candidate highlighted the city’s lack of preparation, but this did not prevent the incumbent, Mayor Shiro, from returning to office. At one level this was a result of Shiro’s political ingenuity and substantial material resources. Shiro’s expert handling of his public image in the immediate aftermath and reconstruction periods (shirt sleeves rolled up in the trenches with the people; flying off to Washington to lobby for federal funds), and his control over the resources provided by the state and federal government, solidified both the material and discursive power of his administration. At another level it was an outcome of the distinctive administrative and cultural context of New Orleans. A large number of agencies all with some responsibility for disaster prevention, made it difficult to assign responsibility for the disaster. This, combined with a political culture holding favourable attitudes towards the incumbent and a tendency among the (largely Catholic) population to perceive natural disaster as an act of God outside of politics contributed to Shiro’s political success.

Abney and Hill's work is important in demonstrating that even when no visible political impact is recorded (an election lost, riots, a regime change) a disaster is a thoroughly political event. Contemporary work has shifted from conceiving of the political as an electoral competition towards the broader politics of governmentality, and the relative influence of political actors (including civil society and the private sector) in post-disaster decision-making. Drawing on the organisational management literature, Birkland (1997) describes disasters as 'focussing events' gaining political and technical attention because of the policy failures they reveal. He examines the development of US policy on earthquakes and hurricanes to formulate a model of event-related policy learning (Birkland, 2006). The model acknowledges that different policy actors will perceive the disaster differentially (for some as an opportunity) determined by their interests and motivations, ideological and organisational commitments. Birkland argues that post-disaster policy change requires political visibility reinforced by group mobilisation (including those within and outside government), and a strong social vision if changes are to be more than superficial. In the US context, Birkland reports that policy change is likely only following exceptionally large events (Hurricane Andrew, 1992 and Katrina, 2004 are noted). This scale of event is needed for group mobilisation to influence high-level policy. In the UK work has also shown that policy learning is staggered, with rapid change after large events – driven by political-economic rather than scientific or popular agendas (Johnson et al., 2005). This is exemplified in contemporary flood management by a reversal from ecologically centred soft management towards a return to more economically dominated and hard engineering approaches (Johnson et al, 2007).

The climate change community has also begun to explore the ways in which disaster can act as a stimulus for policy change. Barnett and Adger (2007) argue that insecurity comes from changing patterns of natural resources and also from changing capacities of the state to provide critical services and consequently retain popular legitimacy. Here the focus is on the coevolution of socio-political and environmental change. In large part the presentation of climate change disaster politics draws from and echoes that found in contemporary humanitarian debates on disaster reconstruction. In this discourse rapid onset events (hurricanes, flooding) are seen more as a technical than a political space, with reconstruction seen as an opportunity for policy or organisational reform rather than as part of ongoing political struggles (Tompkins, 2005). This is in contrast with slow-onset events (drought and famine) which are more commonly analysed as periods of political as well as environmental crisis in both the climate change (Lemos and De Oliveira, 2004) and disaster risk management literatures. Exceptions to this are works that place the analysis of vulnerability to climate related disasters within an analysis of socio-economic and political history and geography: for example, Adger (1999) has explored vulnerability to coastal flooding in the contexts of political and economic liberalisation in Vietnam pointing to the centrality of changing social institutions for shaping who is at risk. In the context of slow-onset drought disaster, work has also emphasised the reflexivity of disaster and national political crisis (Comenetz and Caviedes, 2002), building on a legacy of work on political and environmental change in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Keller, 1992).

### *B 2.2. The anti-politics of humanitarianism*

The early 1970s saw the production of academic work in support of the delivery of humanitarian aid to 'developing' countries following natural disaster (Green 1977). Increasing scrutiny by social scientists brought the concept of natural disasters as acts of God under formal epistemological attack (Tiranti, 1977). Rather, it was argued, disaster

management should be considered a development issue and was therefore political in nature (Sagav 1979, Taylor 1979). Since aid was often delivered to politically volatile areas, scholars were called upon to analyse the political dynamics and challenges associated with humanitarian interventions (Davis 1975, 1978). This focus on ground conditions made it increasingly clear that some disasters, especially famines, had clear political triggers (Glantz 1976). Some of these studies led to trenchant critiques of the international community's delivery of humanitarian aid where this exacerbated suffering (Sheets and Morris 1974, Aall 1979, Hewitt, 1983).

The humanitarian framing of disaster research provides policy relevance and focus but at the expense of academic distance – few studies step back from technical dilemmas to question the political implications of disaster and response. In 1982, while investigating why similar types of environmental crises differentially affected countries throughout the world, Davis and Seitz bemoaned the lack of studies that systematically applied social-political-economic analysis and the small proportion of investigations beyond developed countries (Davis and Seitz 1982:551). Twenty years on Olson (2000:265) echoed this view arguing that relative neglect is a product of two pressures. First an under-emphasis of politics in the analytical lenses deployed by the leading fields engaged with disaster studies – geography and sociology. Second, that the normative connotations of a politics of disaster was unsettling for many researchers and most practitioners “who essentially believed that there shouldn't be a politics of disaster” (Olson 2000:265-266).

Olson's first observation reflects the priorities of geographical engagements with disaster studies that have on the one hand been championed by the technical concerns of physical geographical analysis, and on the other with an avoidance of any association with an environmental determinism. This has indeed led to a down-playing of the political in geographical and sociological literature on disasters, something we return to in section 3. His second observation suggests two dynamics at play: one epistemological, the other institutional. Olson acknowledges the former, he highlights the adoption by researchers and practitioners of humanitarianism of a particular epistemology in which a neutral position is possible (and in turn making it possible to conceive of the idea of apolitical interventions). The notion of universal moral space that underwrites humanitarian action is dependent on this potentiality. Seen from this perspective, the politicising of disasters interferes with the delivery of goods and services. From an institutional perspective work has been guided by the needs of the humanitarian aid industry: the themes and topics covered, and the applied nature of the work, reflect that influence. Consequently, the limited political analysis of humanitarian action, especially in rapid onset disasters, has been stimulated not by disciplinary canons, but industry failures to deliver. There are exceptions. Buchanan-Smith and Christoplos' (2003), comparative analysis of natural disaster aid delivery in conflict zones, funded by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), focuses on technical concerns such as the use of the military in distributing aid (including in contexts of civil conflict such as Colombia), but also highlights the need for research to extend from a passive analysis of background political context as a problem for humanitarian action to include political analysis of the post-disaster space and of the actions of humanitarians, governments and others. Even where political competition has not led to armed conflict, Lemos and De Oliveira (2004) explain how international funding for drought response in Northeast Brazil has fed political manipulation and corruption as people exchange electoral votes for humanitarian aid generating a repeating cycle of drought, clientalism and poverty.

### *B 2.3. Complex political emergencies*

Although generally considered a separate literature, research on complex political emergencies (CPE) arising from drought, conflict and underdevelopment overlap with our interests. The term complex emergency entered UN usage toward the end of the 1980's. With its emphasis on multi-casualty, it was coined in Mozambique to allow the UN to conduct negotiations with both the government and Renamo movement. In 1989, it was extended to help describe the negotiated cross-border Operation Lifeline in South Sudan. In the initial use, the concept of complex emergency tended to emphasize multi-casualty while playing down the political dimensions of the situation (UNICEF 1999).

Some organizations specifically list natural hazards as a potential contributing factor to a complex emergency, others distinguish between disasters triggered by natural hazards and complex political emergencies (ALNAP 2003). The IFRC (2003) suggest that humanitarian crises are overshadowing and possibly drawing both funds and attention away from natural disasters. One thing that almost all organizations appear to agree upon is that a complex emergency entails some level of breakdown of political authority. ALNAP's (2003) definition includes the 'breakdown of state structures' while the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) describes a breakdown in political, economic, and physical order (USIP 2001). Whereas in the case of sudden onset disaster political space tends to shut relatively quickly leaving less room for significant transformations this is not the case with slow-onset disasters, explaining in part their structural and theoretical affinities with CPEs. The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) has identified 140 natural disasters coinciding with complex political emergencies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe 1999 – 2005, these include conflict overlapping with drought in Afghanistan (1999) and southern Sudan (1998), and with tsunami in Indonesia (2004) (Large 2005).

Drawing from his case study of a CARE CPE recovery program in Somalia, Harvey (1998) reminds us that the relationships between political actors should be reviewed carefully in assessments of reconstruction. He identifies that:

“A strong civil society is crucial for development...In CPEs civil society and social capital are badly eroded...Given that there is no government to work with, governance capacity must be built from the bottom up...It is hoped that will marginalize existing predatory authorities... strengthening non-military interests will create a platform...for civil society to express its desire for peace” (ibid:203).

Harvey's conclusions can well be applied to rapid-onset disasters. He reminds us that disaster recovery is underwritten by actors with particular views towards an ideal relationship between the state and civil society. According to his analysis, most contemporary programmes directly or indirectly promote neoliberal (civil society is a check on the state), or neopopulist (civil society can build resilience through bottom-up development) agendas. Both worldviews appropriate civil society as a normative concept. This has traction in policy terms, but civil society is itself an arena for conflict. Narrow definitions of who is included in civil society can be a tool for exclusion just as overly broad definitions can mask conflict and the very uncivil behaviour of some actors.

Pointing to the manifest inadequacies of states' preparation and responses to disasters, and the relative efficiency of local populations in both assessing local needs and understanding local cultures, disaster specialists have stressed the critical role of civil society in recovery

and risk reduction (Wisner et al., 2004), some have gone on to assess the political impact of civil society post-disaster. Reflecting on reconstruction following earthquakes in Kobe, Japan and Gujarat, India Nakagawa and Shaw (2004) show how local social organisations both served to lead and structure local reconstruction efforts and successfully leveraged new political space in process surrounding reconstruction. Özerdem and Jacoby (2006) examine Kobe and Gujarat alongside the Marmara, Turkey earthquake and identify a tense relationship between the state and local civil society with reconstruction characterised as a period of heightened discursive and material competition as actors seek to position themselves for political advantage. In these cases civil society organisations are acknowledged by the state as legitimate political stakeholders, but there is less evidence that new political space or alternative discourses for reconstruction and post-disaster development are generated, rather the disaster and associated reconstruction provokes competition for discursive high ground and influence over material assets within the established political space.

#### *B 2.4 The meta-framing of disaster politics: from political economy to human security*

In 1983, Hewitt brought together an edited collection of critical social theorists to problematise the dominant construction of natural disaster as outside of development and as politically neutral. Notable contributions, for example by Watts, demonstrated the role played by humanitarians in perpetuating cycles of underdevelopment, disaster risk and loss. This global scale analysis was extended by Albala-Bertrand (1993) in a critique of international disaster management built from an understanding of development as a process of inequitable integration of the global South into the global market. This thesis identifies and puts into tension two levels of disaster management. The first, lead by exaggerated estimates of the macroeconomic impact of disasters ensures that top-down economy-oriented disaster mitigation schemes (especially large scale infrastructure projects linking borrowed capital with global markets) will be flooded with resources. The second, presented as endogenous responses, is under-estimated and potentially undermined by the large capital flows being driven by top-down models of reconstruction and management. Certainly, downward accountability is jeopardised. In this analysis, it is predominantly the poorest and most vulnerable, who may have already been made more vulnerable by development, that are most adversely affected by further disaster reduction and reconstruction interventions. This analysis is especially pertinent today as large scale mitigation and adaptation interventions (nuclear power, mega HEP, large scale bio-fuel plantations) are being proposed to alleviate climate change without serious consideration of the impacts for endogenous coping and mitigation.

Albala-Bertrand explores the long-term political outcomes associated with large natural disasters in developing countries, including cases in which regime change appears to be associated with disasters such as the Managua earthquake of 1972, the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) typhoon, and the Ethiopian drought-induced famines of 1973 and 1974. Albala-Bertrand's findings can be summarised into five general observations:

- The observed political, technological, social, or economic effects of disasters are explained primarily by a society's pre-disaster conditions.
- Responses to disasters vary according to the political visions of the major power holders (endogenous and exogenous) and tend to reveal dominant political philosophies associated with the period.

- Government that immediately marshal what material and discursive powers it has at its disposal, may be rewarded with high levels of popular post-disaster legitimacy.
- The structure of highly centralized governments is conducive to the efficient execution of post-disaster rehabilitation.
- If the political preconditions are fluid, a large, rather than a small, disaster is more likely to promote a breaking-point in the political *status quo ante*.

Examples of post-disaster political and policy change include Chile, 1939, where it is argued that an earthquake that killed 30,000 people accelerated policy change towards an import substitution model of development with regional political consequences. This transition culminated three months after the earthquake with the founding of the Chilean Development Corporation, providing a model in import substitution for the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (Gutierrez 1969, cited in Albala-Bertrand 1993).

Albala-Bertrand's fourth finding is perhaps the most contentious. Drawing from Quijano (1971), Albala-Bertrand analyses the 1970 Chimbote earthquake, Peru, as an opportunity seized by the military government to consolidate its popular support as part of a political agenda of nationalist reform. With foreign contributions constituting 50 per cent of the funds, the state coordinated programme reconstructed the urban centres of Chimbote and Huaraz and secured thousands of loans for earthquake resistant home construction. The entire programme was completed in half the time, and with approximately half the amount of money estimated by the Latin American Institute of Economic and Social Planning (ILPES). This example demonstrates the potential for disaster to be a political opportunity when government marshals its material and discursive powers, and the potential for this to be rewarded with high levels of popular legitimacy. Moreover, this case also suggests that it is not centralisation *pre se* that delivers efficient reconstruction, but focussed, coherent and well managed interventions, including partnerships between local and state and international actors and with civil society. This supports critiques of dominant models of reconstruction led by the international community that rely on international private sector actors to deliver reconstruction, with questionable returns and sustainability for local economies, social cohesion, human capital and political inclusion (Klein, 2005).

Contrasting with Albala-Bertrand's critical analysis, Drury and Olson (1998) undertook a statistical analysis of the factors leading to post-disaster political unrest following large disasters occurring between 1966 and 1980. They conclude that post disaster political unrest is greatest when disaster losses are high, when the impacted regime is repressive, and where income inequality and levels of national development are low. Their theorising of the final point takes into account Brinton's (1938) assertion that the immediate concerns of extreme poverty prevent people from organised political action. They also note that a disaster increases political unrest for several years, but the effects decay over time, that prior political unrest will be positively related to post-disaster unrest and that authoritarian regimes can reduce the lifespan of post-disaster political unrest.

Drury and Olson also suggest that higher levels of bilateral and international assistance can limit political unrest. From an alternative epistemological and methodological perspective, that of neo-classical game theory, Cohen and Werker (2006) suggest that international reconstruction aid might distort government and opposition decision-making and the



management of disaster impacts. The model does not incorporate what we refer to as secondary political effects, that is, the rise of novel political groups and/or citizens' actions associated with the occurrence of a disaster. Rather, their research site is the political space within which governments, and to a lesser degree, anti-government forces act in terms of disaster mitigation and response.

Cohen and Werker make an economic case for the local targeting of disaster reconstruction funded by international actors. It is argued that this will minimise state rent seeking, corruption and the political manipulation of reconstruction. This conclusion is supported by many recent critiques of reconstruction that call for more participation from local actors (ProVention 2006). The difference is that Cohen and Werker see local targeting as a way of circumventing the state. This raises significant concerns over sovereignty and the accountability of international actors to the state, a particular concern during the first phases of relief and reconstruction when normal levels of scrutiny are often relaxed. It is also not clear that agents of the state will not be able to penetrate the local level through systems of clientalism and party allegiance. As Pelling (1998) has demonstrated in the context of flooding in Guyana, local political elites are well placed to present themselves as local voices to capture funds allocated by external actors for local level risk reduction.

While an economic analysis is useful, and has purchase with decision-makers, it is partial (reminding us of Olson's observation that disaster studies lack a political analysis). State actors may well be motivated by rent seeking but will also desire to control alternative secondary political effects. This is well demonstrated by the Marmara earthquake, 1999, Turkey. With the state virtually paralysed, civil society organizations managed emergency response and the initial period of relief. When the government finally came out of its stupor, it registered alarm that not only had NGOs slid into the political space that state had occupied—but that some of the most effective organisations had religious orientations. The state acted quickly, freezing bank accounts and preventing aid from flowing except through the state-controlled Red Crescent Agency (Kubicek 2002). Government action used economics but had a political motivation, a combination of the need to protect the secular state from Muslim political aspirations and the deeply felt need to recover the cultural and historical figure of the *devlet baba* (father state)—both of which had been threatened by local NGO activity (Jalali 2002).

Cohen and Werker also highlight international political isolation as an influence on the national political handling of disaster. They argue that states isolated from the international community are forced to invest in disaster prevention because of lowered expectations of international aid post-disaster. Historical examples of Libya (under Qadhafi) and South Africa (under Apartheid rule) are used in defence of this proposition signifying the recognition in repressive regimes of the potential for post-disaster political disruption. Other cases point towards more complex relationships between national political pride, disaster management and international isolation. China's earthquake prediction and early warning system was developed in response to the 1966 Xingtai earthquake, not a refusal of aid (Ross 1984), and was specifically designed as a politically powerful statement of autonomy (from international capitalism) and was a source of national pride in China's scientists and government. China's polite but firm refusal of international aid in the aftermath of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake shocked the international community, yet despite the great strain put on rail services, fuel and factories in other regions of the country, the country's second largest industrial city was completely rebuilt many years shy of international estimates (Chen 2004). Moreover, amongst humanitarian aid practitioners, Cuba's exemplary record for disaster

prevention and response is legendary, and is also understood as a politically powerful statement of autonomy (from US regional hegemony), and a great source of national pride (IFRC, 2005). Therefore, although the absence of international aid may indeed be associated with higher levels of prevention, we would strongly argue against any suggestion that it is in all cases causal or necessarily linked to the calculus of maximizing economic utility.

Writing from an international relations perspective, Kelman and Koukis (2000) and Kelman (2003) have studied the impacts of disaster diplomacy. The challenge is to examine whether or not inter-state cooperation in the aftermath of a major disasters serves as a catalyst for improved diplomatic relations between formerly antagonistic nation-states. This focus on national security has to date shown few positive cases. The South Asian earthquake, 2005, impacting on Indian and Pakistani Kashmir is a case in point where an opportunity has been missed for building local and well as national bridges in the face of a shared tragedy. The limited influence of cross-boarder events on national security contrasts with events that impact on different sub-national political constituencies. This is complicated further in the South Asian earthquake with some local aid being provided by organisations classified as terrorist by the larger world community so that local political actions post-disaster link directly into global political struggles (Moench and Dixit 2007). It is at this sub-national scale, as Albala-Bertrand (1993), Drury and Olson (1998) and Özerdem and Jacoby (2006) and others have observed, that struggles for political power are more closely entwined with disaster, even though they may reach out to the national and international scales.

At the sub-national scale questions of national security become entangled with claims for human security. The distinction between national and human security was clearly articulated by Booth (1991) who argued that states cannot be counted on to prioritise the security of their citizens: some maintain at least minimal levels in order to promote regime legitimacy but are unmotivated to go farther, others are financially or institutionally incapable of providing even minimal standards, while still others are more than willing to subject entire sectors of society to high levels of insecurity for the economic and political benefit of others who then use their power to support the regime. Moreover, he pointed out that from an analytical perspective, a state-centred model of security obscures the primary sources of human insecurity. One approach that attempts to shift the emphasis from ensuring state stability, towards the protection of people is centred on the concept of human security elaborated in UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report. Linkages between human security, sustainability and development bring emphasis on people's freedoms, values, rights and responsibilities (Anand and Gasper, 2007). Studies on environmental degradation and climate change show a vicious cycle where human insecurity (limited access to rights and basic needs) makes people vulnerable to environmental change and hazard, the impacts of which undermine further peoples livelihoods and capacity to adapt and survive (Nordås and Gleditsch, 2007). The threat to human security from climate change was recognised by the Stern review (HM Treasury, 2006) with the UK chairing a UN Security Council debate on climate change on 17 April 2007. Despite a strong lobby for a shift from state to human security, with a background in CPE, Duffield (2005) cautions that the discourse of security remains vulnerable to capture by global elite interests with potential for the object of security to shift back towards global economic and political stability rather than an assertion of the individual rights and collective needs of the poor as originally conceived by the UN and others.

Thus the normative positioning of critical political economy is replaced by a more comprehensive framework in human security (one that brings into relief local agency (rights) and structural forces (needs), but one that lends itself to a technical as well as a political

analysis. This can be both a strength – bringing together the technical and political audiences – but also a challenge – as past experience in disaster politics has shown technical analysis and reform has too often hidden scope for progressive social and political change post-disaster.

### **A 3. Case studies of disaster politics**

In this section we review secondary case study literature to examine post-disaster political trajectories. This complements the preceding discussion that drew primarily on the theoretical literature and focused on those factors precipitating political change. Table 1 presents a summary of the 15 case studies from 1899 to 2005 included in this discussion. Information and comment on each case study was drawn from a review of disaster and development journals and books, ReliefWeb, humanitarian and development agency reports. Some indicative references are given in Table 1. Only large, rapid onset events with national significance were considered. Over 50 potential disaster entries were identified, however the majority had insufficient empirical detail or quality in political analysis to allow their inclusion. The paucity of routine socio-political analysis of disaster impact and humanitarian response, which constrained the breadth and depth of case analysis below, is itself a major finding of the review.

The national and local political consequences of disaster are shaped by historical-political context. Table 1 identifies two broad historical-political fields: post-colonial/Cold War, and liberalisation periods. The post-colonial/Cold War states included share authoritarian governments and international political patronage with instrumental use of reconstruction aid for political manipulation by (quasi- or neo-) colonial powers (e.g., Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Haiti), and the symbolic use of disaster in struggles for political change (e.g., East Pakistan, Nicaragua, Guatemala and China). Liberalising states have a more diversified political base influenced by strong private sector and non-state actors. It is important to stress that these periods do not correspond to an absolute chronology. While the Cold War provided the context for the violent engagement of local and national antimonies in Latin America and the Caribbean, at the same time, the struggle between West and East Pakistan (Bangladesh) that culminated in the 1970 war of Independence, took on the symbols, conflicts and desires of a postcolonial modernizing period.

Place Table 1 here

There is no space here to develop a detailed analysis of each case study (for a summary of each case please visit [www.kcl.ac.uk](http://www.kcl.ac.uk)), instead we present the findings of our analysis and illustrate these with the cases shown in Table 1.

#### *3.1 Towards a comparative analysis of disaster politics*

Comparative analysis requires a common framework that can cope with a diverse range of political actors and contexts and distinguish superficial and profound disaster impacts.

While disasters may lead to a renewed contestation and potentially a re-distribution of power within government, changes are most clearly manifest in the case study literature between the relative influence of state and non-state (civil society) actors. Migdal (1988) recognises that a state can be powerful and accepted by its citizens without having popular legitimacy. This situation framed the failure of a nationalist movement to materialise following Hurricane San

Ciriaco in Puerto Rico, 1899. Just six months before the hurricane, the US defeated Spain (Spanish-American War) and occupied Puerto Rico, inheriting a system of a centralized government. The state was financially ruined by Hurricane San Ciriaco, but US aid underwrote its survival. While the US governor used reconstruction aid as a tool for consolidating power and social control by threatening the withdrawal of food aid and/or swift police action against those who questioned US authority. Thus we suggest that one of the political impacts of this disaster (and possibly others) is to stifle the production organised political opposition so that political alternatives are not voiced.

Our inclusion of historical events was aimed at tracking the long-term political legacy of disaster and to explore the potential for disaster reconstruction to break pre-disaster political trajectories and to entrain an alternative political future. Mahoney (2001) uses the notion of critical juncture as a litmus test for political significance. A critical juncture is a historical moment that can not be reversed. Critical juncture has been used by Olson and Gawronski (2003) to explore the outcomes of the 1985 Mexico City and 1972 Nicaraguan earthquakes on national politics. From our own case analysis, the 1899 Puerto Rican hurricane can be considered a critical juncture. Had the hurricane not levelled the island and destroyed the economic base, elites, who resented the imposition of a foreign political and cultural system, might have allied (albeit temporarily) with labour in a struggle for independence. But since the US government used critically needed aid to prop up the landed elite and repress labour, this option was effectively closed (Schwartz, 1992).

There is no easy way of comparing political freedoms in polities with differing state-civil society relationships. Recent debates on human security as reported above go some way towards an encompassing framework and this is reinforced when combined with the idea of a social contract. This combination focuses analysis on the distribution of rights and responsibilities, arrived at with varying degrees of inclusion or coercion, in which one party cedes some level of freedom and autonomy by agreeing to be governed by the other in return for some level of security. In pre- or anti-modern contexts this might entail an individual's submission to the authority of lineage, tribe, moiety, or village leadership. Ideally, this would include security of identity, and support for the family's biological and social reproduction. In modern contexts, the power derived from the individual's ceding some level of freedom has been vested in the state. In the contemporary liberal context, the privatisation of security and the shrinking of the state mean that non-governmental actors have taken on increasingly important roles in designing, disseminating and directing programs for disaster mitigation, response and relief.

Contestation around the social contract is well illustrated by comparing the political outcomes of two earthquakes. In Mexico City, following the 1985 earthquake, sustained popular activism forced a re-configuration of urban politics and changed priorities around struggles for social housing protecting the rights and human security of low-income survivors (Robinson et al. 1986, in Oliver-Smith 1986). In Turkey, following the 1999 Marmara earthquake, a gap in state led response was filled by organised civil society, this in turn was seen as a threat to the secular state which responded by confiscating budgets and surpassing civil society (Özdem and Jacoby, 2006). Crucially, the state simultaneously terminated the incipient spread of 'earthquake activism', which had begun to take on larger social issues, closing off space for further development of popular action (Jalali 2002, Kubicek 2002). In Mexico City disaster proved to be a critical juncture for the renegotiation of the social contract, that has not yet materialised in Turkey where a stronger state has resisted change, though tensions remain.

The trend towards privatisation of security is circumventing pre-modern and modernist, state-based legal structures for accountability in the social contract. International, private sector response in Sri Lanka to the Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2004, was overwhelming. Despite efforts of large, established humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies to partner the state and co-ordinate actions, smaller private organisations mushroomed to undertake disaster relief work generating a 'second tsunami' (Wickramasinghe 2005). This new landscape of autonomous, often temporary private organisations, threatened the sustainability of local institutions, eroding accountability and undermining the legitimacy of the state replacing it with the logic of business interests (TEC, 2006).

### *3.2 Empirical trends in post-disaster politics*

The cases presented in Table 1 point towards seven working hypotheses. These are illustrated below, and draw on Pelling and Dill (2006).

*1. Disasters often hit politically peripheral regions hardest emphasising inequality in the production of vulnerability and in unequal disaster response. This can lend a regional dimension to political tension.* The 23 February 2004 Moroccan earthquake led to a rare display of open dissent with street protests stopping military and aid convoys and marching to the regional governor's office in north-eastern Morocco to protest the poor response of the government. The demonstrators came from a region with a long history of resistance to a succession of colonial and national rulers with the earthquake having symbolised perceived inequality and partiality in the dominant regime (African Research Bulletin, 2004).

*2. Disasters provoke scrutiny of dominant technical, political and institutional systems.* This is especially the case where maladaptive development is seen to have generate disaster risk or failed response. The underlying social inequality that shaped risk and failed response in New Orleans in 2005, fed into an ongoing critique of the competence and priorities of the Federal government (Elliston, 2004).

*3. Pre-disaster inequalities can be exacerbated by response deepening economic exclusion and political marginalisation.* Political conflict following disaster often manifests around attempts to re-distribute titles or usufructory rights to land. It is commonplace for developers and speculators to claim rights over low-income settlement space (often assisted by government assessments that land is too dangerous for further habitation, and the clearing effect of the disaster), with the effect that land is transferred from low to high-income groups. The transfer of coastal land from village to commercial use in Indonesia and Sri Lanka following the Indian Ocean Tsunami has generated tension between local actors and capital interests and between host and resettled communities (TEC, 2006).

*4. Pre-disaster political trajectories are the greatest influence on post-disaster political outcomes.* Critical junctures following disaster are common and predominantly shaped by the pre-disaster balance of political power. Temporary breaks in the material and discursive pre-disaster social contract are observed but these are usually short lived. This is the case both in the post-colonial and Cold War period where political competition was centred on the state, and in the liberalising period where non-state and international actors have a more direct influence on development and disaster response.

*5. Spontaneous collective actions by non-government sectors in the aftermath of a disaster is common and tends to be treated as a threat by the state.* This observation is made for

authoritarian and democratic regimes. Following the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, the military dictatorship focussed rehabilitation on the capital city, ignoring severely damaged rural Maya communities. Abandoned by the state, local organisations adapted to new community needs and continued working past the search and rescue phase to co-ordinate rebuilding. The government perceived emerging local Maya leaders as a political threat and violently repressed them. The democratically elected Turkish government also repressed civil society organizations activated during the Marmara earthquake. To regain control of the political space opened by post-disaster civil society action, the government froze bank accounts and proclaimed illegal all but select state-authorized civil society activities. The repression was focussed especially against organisations identifying with a religious, Islamic orientation. These examples also point to the need to explain national political action following disaster within the international political context. Repression in Guatemala unfolded in a Cold War client state. Turkey is caught between the external pressures of EU candidacy and US strategic interests, which magnify deep-set internal struggles between political, religious and ethnic interests.

*6. In the aftermath of disaster, political leaders may regain or even enhance their popular legitimacy.* This trend was noted by Abney and Hill's analysis of political recovery after the 1966 Hurricane in New Orleans. At a larger scale, the 1976 Tangshan earthquake in China took place during a period of enormous political upheaval following the death of Mao Zedong. Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng expertly portrayed the Tangshan earthquake as a culturally symbolic event revealing social imbalance and portending great change. He appropriated the disaster as a site from which to introduce a new leadership, and successfully dismantled the opposing power base controlled by the 'Gang of Four' (Chen, 2004). Once again, the nature of the regime (democratic/authoritarian) does not appear to affect this pattern. What these two cases have in common is leaders who successfully manipulated disaster events to maintain or elevate their popular legitimacy within a specific political institutional architecture

*7. The repositioning of political actors in the aftermath of a disaster unfolds at multiple scales.* Local, as well as national political actors, use disaster relief and recovery to extend their influence over development policies and programmes. In Central America local NGOs stepped into the new political space created in the aftermath of the 1988 Hurricane Mitch, while strengthening regional alliances (Wooster et al, 2005). Such influence may be temporary, lasting only as long as the relief or reconstruction periods, but can potentially lead to a long-term influence and involvement in development planning and thus access to political power. Following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, several prominent activists involved in reconstruction efforts entered city and nationwide politics, the structure of city government was reconstituted, and the ruling party lost its 70-year hold on the capital city (San Juan Victoria, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

The pressures of climate change, urbanisation and failures in international development are placing more people and assets at risk from natural hazards. That subsequent disasters and reconstruction actions can have repercussions for political systems is widely assumed by practitioners and in part used to justify international interventions. Academic studies have lagged behind policy in this field leaving a gap between received wisdom scientific analysis. This paper sought to respond to two key challenges that have prevented a filling of this gap. First, a key challenge in building systematic knowledge comes from the diversity of epistemologies applied to disaster politics each with different scales, categories and aims of

analysis. This paper has presented a review of the key contributions and challenges facing these literatures categorised by their organising focus (electoral politics and governmentality, humanitarian denial, complex political emergencies, political economy and human security), and has identified the conceptual and theoretical contributions of each. A second reason for the lack of a coherent analysis of the politics of disaster is the relatively small number of existing focussed empirical studies that can be used as a base for theory building. However, the beginnings of a comparative analysis is possible, and has been exemplified here through fifteen case studies producing seven post-disaster political trajectories.

Figure 1 brings together the theoretical and empirical evidence to highlight those features of political context that have been shown to shape post-disaster political trajectories, the diversity in trajectories is also noted and is mediated by the unique time-place context of a polity. Two key temporal principles are identified: that over time disaster effects decay or become reified as political symbols, and that post-disaster political outcomes are largely shaped by pre-disaster political trends, relations and positions of power. In Figure 1 and throughout this paper conflict is considered at the level of discourse as well as material expressions such as marches, riots or armed violence. Both rapid and slow onset disasters are considered together. The internal diversity within these categories and the political systems in which they unfold is perhaps larger than any useful comparison that can be made between the two. But we do recognise the concentration effect of some rapid onset disasters, such as earthquakes, particularly when they impact on major cities generating intense political moments and as in the case of Mexico City, and arguably also following the Marmara and Kobe earthquakes where new political space was opened.

Place Figure 1 here

Comparing post-disaster political trajectories by regime type yields some superficial similarities for democratic and authoritarian states. Political leaders in both systems have successfully manipulated disaster recovery to enhance their popular legitimacy, irrespective of culpability. Repressive regimes were associated with increased post-disaster tension or unrest but this was often successfully suppressed in authoritarian regimes (although the contribution of such repression to underlying political struggles was also noted). In democratic regimes post-disaster tensions had the potential to be worked out at the level of discourse rather than material struggle and conflict. Post-disaster self-organisation was common but also often perceived as a challenge to the state. Here again democratic and authoritarian regimes tended to differ in their strategies for survival, the former tending towards accommodation the latter to repression. Where centralisation is exhibited it has been shown to reduce political tensions where decision-making structures are inclusive.

Clientalism and inequality in the distribution of reconstruction was observed in the majority of disasters and unfolds at local as well as national levels. This contributes to spatial expressions in post-disaster organising and protest or where protest is absent or ineffective, of unequal accumulation. The international community has been slow to respond to clientalism and resource capture within civil society leading to local capture of resources or where aid is absent to the capture of political initiative by non-state political and religious interests. The international community has also failed to support self-organised political movements post-disaster, these are often ephemeral and are certainly vulnerable to backlash from the state. Where these movements are progressive opportunities have been lost to support political opening. In part a lack of theoretical work has contributed to this, allowing post-disaster

political movements and actions to go un-theorised, a research need that has yet to be adequately addressed.

Detailed case study work set within a common framework of ideas can help meet this need. There are perhaps three key themes that geographers in particular are well placed to address. First, a tracing of the flows between the local and global enabled by reconstruction, including movement and change in values as well as material resources and information, and pathways enabled by civil society, private sector and intergovernmental linkages. Second, an exploration of the implications for human security of dominant needs based humanitarian practice – examining how far reflexive and participatory mechanisms for decision-making can be built into the command-and-control led reconstruction process. By extension this will help to unpack the relative implications of centralised and decentralised governance for equity and peace in reconstruction. Thirdly, greater focus on the political-economy of local reconstruction is needed to critically examine the cycling of emergency and reconstruction aid through (and too often out of) local places.



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**Table 1: Rapid onset disasters and their political repercussions 1899-2005**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Hazard/Disaster</i>	<i>Political impact</i>	<i>Indicative source</i>
<b>Colonial and Cold War Security States</b>				
1899	Puerto Rico	Hurricane San Ciriaco	US led relief undermined nationalist movement	Schwartz (1992)
1930	Dominican Republic	Hurricane Zenon	Reconstruction cemented US supported dictatorial authority	Peguero (2004)
1954	Haiti	Hurricane Hazel	Protests contribute to regime change (elite dictator-elite dictator)	Library of Congress (n.d.)
1970	East Pakistan	Cyclone Bhola	High losses symbolise intransigence of West Pakistan and fuel independence movement	Sehgal (2005)
1972	Nicaragua	Managua Earthquake	Gross state corruption in reconstruction feeds popular revolution	Kates et al. (1973)
1976	Guatemala	Guatemala City Earthquake	Guerrillas use earthquake in oppositional discourse	May (1999)
1976	China	Tangshan Earthquake	Earthquake appropriated as a symbol of political failure	Ross (1984)
<b>Liberal(ising) Security States</b>				
1985	Mexico	Mexico City Earthquake	New middle-class and grassroots alliances re-shape urban politics	Olson and Gawronski (2003)
1998	Nicaragua	Hurricane Mitch	Disaster management reconstructed as technical specialism	Olson et al. (2001)
1999	Turkey	Marmara Earthquake	Temporary resurgence in civil society surpassed by secular state	Kubicek (2002)
2001	India	Gujarat Earthquake	Response reinforced civil society but exacerbated social inequalities	Özerdem and Jacoby (2006)
2004	Morocco	Al Hoceima Earthquake	Impact and relief reflect regional inequalities and fuel open dissent	African Research Bulletin (2004)
2004	Sri Lanka	Indian Ocean Tsunami	Response dampened conflict, reconstruction increased tensions	Stokke (2006)
2004	Aceh, Indonesia	Indian Ocean Tsunami	Peacebuilding during reconstruction	Le Billon and Waizenegger (2007)
2005	USA	Hurricane Katrina	Opens popular scrutiny of underlying political causes.	Kelman (2007)

**Figure 1. A summary of factors shaping political outcomes and post-disaster political trajectories**





