INTRODUCTION

Wreckage upon Wreckage

> Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.
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> —Walter Benjamin, '9th Thesis on the Philosophy of History'

Today the self-declared "leaders" of the world insist on dragging humanity along the very path that has led us to the current predicament, with deathly heat waves, intensified storms, melting ice caps, novel deadly pathogens, species extinctions, and sea level rise, to name just some of the major catastrophes "piling wreckage upon wreckage" and hurling it upon the feet—and heads—of humanity. How might we make sense of the world as it is today, caught in the throes of climate change, but also a devastating pandemic, an unjust global capitalist order founded on deepening exploitation by claiming, ordering, exploiting, and destroying life and the world for the insane goal of amassing profits? Or the rampant promotion of militarization and war as drivers and markers of security, in a world where for billions life becomes more insecure, often as a result of changes justified in the name of "security." Where some populations are targeted and subjected to mechanized high-technology genocide while the world watches helplessly, and the merchants of death and destruction anticipate more exciting opportunities for profits.

This world, in which disasters unfold and leave scars often across many generations, is a troubled place. Capitalism as a world ordering system, or imperialism its highest stage as Lenin once described it, continues to wreak havoc across the planet, leaving scars and open wounds, from the deepest oceans where acidification and warming waters threaten marine life, to the highest reaches of the atmosphere where greenhouse gases today act like a blanket heating up the planet, exacerbating extreme events or unleashing new ones we have never before experienced. Despite the planetary emergency, capital glibly marches on, and its most ardent agents and beneficiaries, with the aid of the loudest and most sycophantic corporate media apparatus ever assembled, shamelessly

trumpet the virtues of the so-called free market, and the self-proclaimed moral authority of capitalist Western civilization, even as entire countries are threatened with disappearing into the rising oceans, or entire populations decimated while their suffering is broadcast live. These are merely its most startlingly obvious indictments.

Disasters refuse to sit within the nice little boxes that have their names or dates on them, usually assigned to the category of nature or accident. They extend and confound our understandings of cause and effect at the same time that they challenge us to reconsider how we draw lines between nature and humanity, between that which is seemingly *given* by nature, and that which is of human provenance. *Vis Major,* the Latin term meaning "superior force," refers to a natural event, the origins of which are neatly marked off from the domain of human culpability. Insurance companies use this concept to mark off the limits of contractual obligations when they describe a disaster as an "act of God." These designations serve a particular socio-political purpose, linking the needs and aims of private property and the contract with the everyday normalized hierarchical orderings of life and well-being, orderings that emanate from and replenish the wellspring of exploitation. But they also reiterate the fact that our neatly drawn boundaries are chock-full of arbitrary claims that become congealed into seemingly "obvious" laws and truths especially when they serve the interests of power. Let us briefly examine what the world looked like recently, in the year 2023, and get a sense of the sorts of questions and entanglements necessary for a more systematic and critically grounded appraisal of disasters, their causes, outcomes, political implications, and systemic links with the world that precedes, survives, and persists after a disaster.

Climate

We live in momentous times. Reeling under some of the hottest temperatures recorded, unprecedented rainfall and flooding, and a pandemic that still continues to threaten after decimating millions within the short span of two years, planet earth's human population slowly but surely is coming to realize in greater numbers than ever before that climate change, and the aggregated effects of human activities across the world, can indeed destroy us and much life on earth. Yes, we need solutions, and there is an added urgency to identifying pathways out of the horror that awaits us, especially since human activities, led and dominated by capitalism, have everything to do with it. The burning of fossil fuels and industrial agriculture together generate the bulk of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon

dioxide (CO_2), methane (CH_4) and nitrous oxide (N_2O). At the same time that oil companies and militarized states scour the planet for every drop of oil they can dredge, refine, and burn, the planet's forest cover is being decimated in order to make way for industrial plantation agriculture and livestock production. Both these activities—fossil fuel production/consumption and plantation agriculture—are justified by their apologists as necessary for human well-being. We are told human beings everywhere desire "better lives" and so need more and more energy and commodities to consume, while the wanton destruction of the world's fragile ecosystems in order to grow commercial crops is blamed on "growing population," never mind the inconvenient fact that humans in the Global South consume far less energy than do their northern counterparts. It is not growing human populations that are driving the planet toward ecological catastrophe, but the fact that the richest and more politically powerful humans of the Global North today consume far more of the natural resources of the planet and release far more harms into the planet's natural systems than do their Global South counterparts. As a recent study puts it plainly, the Global North was responsible for 92 percent of excess CO_2 emissions (Hickel 2020).

The term "natural disaster" is problematic as an analytical category, yet looms large in conventional discourse, sharply distinguished from disasters that more often than not get clubbed together under the rubric of "accidents" of a more directly graspable human origin. While an earthquake is viewed as "natural" in origins, an industrial disaster is primarily an "accident." Whatever the working conceptual distinctions drawn between the two, it is increasingly becoming clear with the looming planetary reality of climate change that we can no longer hold on to these distinctions without anchoring our claims in specific forms of politics. But what is the purpose of refining and clarifying the analytical categories through which we grasp disasters if we do not at the same time also delve into the ways in which these exceptional moments articulate with the messy and contradiction-ridden worlds of human life? Put more starkly, given the links between climate change and capitalism, can we continue to imagine disasters through the distinctions drawn between human activity and "natural" hazards? The numbers are startling, to say the least. Throughout most of the Holocene era (the past 11,700 years) the CO^2 levels in the atmosphere remained below 300 ppm, but in mid-2022 it continued to climb beyond 420 ppm. Just to get a sense of how much humans have transformed the earth, consider the fact that scientists now estimate that the total mass of human-produced material—anthropogenic mass—has outstripped the sum total of biomass on planet earth (Elhacham et al. 2020). Even as we warm up the earth and push our luck

well into the danger zone of climate catastrophe, cities continue to grow along coastlines, areas of the earth that will be most devastatingly impacted by rising sea levels resulting from global warming and the melting of ice in the Arctic and Antarctic. Two thirds of urban settlements of more than five million are located in the coastal zone (McGranahan, Balk, and Anderson 2007). According to the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, the number of people worldwide who were displaced in 2020 as a result of climate change was about 30 million, three times that of people displaced due to war and conflict.[1]

Fossil capital is a major driver of climate change, as is the global expansion of industrial agriculture. In addition to both being leading emitters of greenhouse gases, they each, in their unique and mutually linked ways, negatively impact human and non-human life. The extraction, refining, transportation, and consumption of fossil fuels, or the destruction of forests to facilitate the rampant expansion of industrial agriculture and meat production, requires what capitalists consider the "externalization of costs." These costs are borne by communities struggling with poisoned and irreparable harm because they are forced to live with the permitted and normalized poisoning of water, air, and soil, not to mention the destruction of livelihoods and sustainable ways of life. The wanton destruction of forests, soil, freshwater sources, ecologically fragile habitats, and planetary terrestrial and marine biodiversity, are just a few of the harms inflicted by the fossil fuel economy and industrial agriculture, but these harms need to be seen not as aberrations so that they may be "fixed," but as deleterious outcomes productive to the ever-expanding scourge of capitalism run amok on a planetary scale. The "externalization of costs" underlying the war of capital on the planet's environmental survival is but an expansion of capital's incessant assault on human life and nature, through its uncompromising demand that the socially and economically powerless must bear the costs of accumulation on their bodies and lives, just as the fields, forests, atmosphere, soil, rivers, and oceans are expected to simply absorb the ever-expanding detritus of production and consumption crucial to profit.

With global warming we are already seeing an increase in the frequency and intensity of disasters. Heat waves, droughts, powerful hurricanes, tornadoes, heavier rainfall, and so on, can no longer be stashed away in the "natural" disaster box and dealt with as though they simply impinge upon, but have nothing to do with human activities on the planet. In other words, while disaster studies concedes a place for human activities in terms of the vulnerable social worlds that get overwhelmed by "natural" hazards, we now have to take seriously the fact that these hazards are themselves part of the vulnerable social worlds created by

humans. This is not because we have some species-level tendencies to be destructive, but because the majority of human beings on the planet have been forced into material social relationships with each other and with the non-human natural world founded on a double alienation—of humans from one another, and of humans from non-human nature. In the coming decades we will have to face terrifying new catastrophes such as the permanent loss of coastal settlements due to sea level rise, the forced migration and resettlement of hundreds of millions that this will entail, the increasingly unpredictable patterns, and strength of weather events that will more routinely overwhelm defenses developed in times when this was not the case.

Deadly Pandemics

Two closely related lessons may be grasped from our ongoing struggle to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. The first concerns the origins and spread of the virus. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) coronavirus 19 is a zoonotic virus, one that jumps from animals to humans, usually on account of having new opportunities presented by the removal of existing barriers, combined with the ability to travel across the planet along the same pathways and with the same ease and speed that humans and their various material objects do. In recent decades rampant deforestation alongside massive expansion of industrial food production strategies in plantation agriculture and animal farming, and global warming, has contributed to the spread of a host of zoonotic viruses that resulted in deadly pandemics, including SARS coronavirus (SARS-CoV-1) in 2002, Influenza A H1N1 2009 (swine flu) in 2009, Middle East respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in 2012, Ebola in 2013, Zika in 2015, and SARS-CoV-2 in 2019. Much of the world's forest cover has come under massive assault from expanding plantation agriculture and cattle rearing.

> Over the period 2001–2015, cattle, oil palm, soy, cocoa, coffee, wood fiber, and rubber accounted for 58 percent (71.6 million hectares) of all agriculture-linked deforestation (123 million hectares) … Of the seven commodities analyzed, cattle replaced the most forest by far (63 percent of all analyzed commodities)—pasture grazed by cattle occupies some 45.1 million hectares of land deforested between 2001 and 2015. (Dow Goldman et al. 2020)

Further, strategies involving monoculture, genetically modified seeds, the use of enormous amounts of chemical inputs in agriculture, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and the rampant use of antibiotics, and a host of chemical inputs in the raising of cattle for meat, rapidly

accentuate possibilities for catastrophic outbreaks of deadlier strains of pathogens than those that may occur naturally in relative isolation (Davis 2020; Tollefson 2020; Morand and Lajaunie 2021). There is therefore a direct link between the rapid expansion of capitalist food-production strategies, deforestation, and the release of pathogens across protective natural barriers. As forests are destroyed and relatively privileged humans (and their stuff) travel across the world more frequently, and easily, pathogens that once remained in relative isolation become weaponized, so to speak, with pandemic potential.

The second lesson to be learned has to do with the existing state of affairs governing healthcare, and human material and social well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a powerful indictment of the capitalist mode of organizing life on earth. Not only is capitalism's incessant profit-driven expansion of energy and food production directly responsible for increasing risks of catastrophic climate change and deadly diseases, but the aggressive reorganization of healthcare in order to placate the needs and interests of capitalists and their corporations dangerously debilitates societal defenses against the terrifyingly deadly threats proliferating as a result of capital's relentless war on the natural world. The United States, hegemonic leader of the capitalist global order, suffered no less than one million deaths, most of which could have been prevented through timely, socially driven forms of intervention, if the priority driving healthcare were not so tightly bound to the singular demand for profitability and "market"-driven strategies. Healthcare systems in the US and across the world, under the urging of US capitalist elites and their state allies, have been eviscerated over the last two decades, with privatization and the gutting of public health leading to a situation in which quality healthcare remains inaccessible for hundreds of millions, while those services that remain accessible are made unaffordable in an economic order that empowers corporate owners to charge ridiculously high prices for medicines and medical care.

The US has one of the worst medical care systems in the developed world, and more than half its population lacks health insurance. As a direct result of decades of cutbacks and downsizing at the behest of capital, healthcare facilities and services were unable to handle the massive numbers of COVID-19 infections, resulting in countless deaths that could have been averted. Disruptions in supply chains across the world brought national economies to their knees, as a neoliberalized world of dispersed "just in time" production could not handle the shocks of stoppages or slowdowns in one or another link in the chains tying together the global capitalist political economy. In some countries draconian lockdown orders resulted in millions employed in the informal sector (thereby with

already weak job security) losing jobs, being evicted from homes, and forced to walk thousands of kilometers to rural homes (Estupinan and Sharma 2020). The pandemic has nevertheless been a boon for capitalists in the healthcare industry, with record profits and the promise of further consolidation and concentration on the horizon as millions across the world continue to struggle with the threat, with little respite from the horrendous impacts of profit-driven healthcare systems.[2]

Pandemics too are not merely "natural" events, but are indeed produced by maladaptive and destructive human activities spurred on today by an expanding global capitalism. Also, pandemics—like extreme weather events due to global warming—are increasing in frequency and intensity as more and more of the earth's natural systems are scoured for resources and new pathogens enter worlds they were safely cordoned off from for millennia. These recurring outbreaks will no doubt debilitate human defenses and directly impact techno-social defenses against various other hazards. Consider, for instance, what happens when a hurricane strikes in the midst of a pandemic. Can a "shelter in place" directive account for the vital need to "socially distance?" Can the spread of a pathogen be contained when floodwaters rise and physical contact becomes necessary for survival? What happens to a society's defenses against a pandemic when the population is struggling with brutal military occupation, or is a persecuted religious or ethnic minority or an oppressed caste group already suffering everyday hardships?

Neoliberalization versus Democratization

It is the Global North that is also the primary capitalist hegemon, coercing all other countries to embrace what is known infamously as the Washington Consensus, a commitment to the unrestrained capitalist reordering of economic, social, and political worlds in ways that suit the needs and interests of capital. Unsurprisingly, this reordering has produced deleterious consequences not only for the planet's ecosystems, as extractive industries, freed from nominal regulatory controls, have decimated fragile natural worlds, but also the lives of hundreds of millions by transferring enormous quantities of wealth and resources into the hands of the propertied, domestic, or international capitalists. This was done largely through the privatization of public resources, the liberalization of trade and investments, which decimated small producers struggling to compete with highly capitalized multinational corporations that could now dump commodities into and repatriate profits out of hitherto protected markets, and the globalization of production, exchange,

and consumption, whereby all economic activities—from production to consumption—are subordinated to the demands of global markets. It is no coincidence that the planet's natural systems have deteriorated rapidly along the same trajectory as have conditions of life for billions of humans, as capital untethered and bolstered by a growing phalanx of neoliberalizing states finds all sorts of new opportunities to exploit humans and nature.

In this new equation of power, the state has come to function more and more as the coercive arm of capital, utilizing both repressive and ideological power, both force and legal methods, to discipline populations and surrender land and resources to benefit shareholders and investors. This is the real material facet of the steep inequalities of our era, in which a tiny number of human beings own most of the wealth in the world, wealth obtained through the exploitation and destruction of human and non-human nature. And this massive transfer of wealth has resulted in a world where twenty-six human beings on earth own more wealth than half of humanity, roughly 3.8 billion people, a trend that accelerates every year as societies are subjected to the ongoing neoliberal capitalist war on people and nature (Lawson et al. 2019). Contrary to the notion that inequalities are simply inadvertent and unfortunate outcomes of "progress," what these figures tell us is that neoliberalization has reoriented life on earth such that the vast majority slide into poverty and destitution while a small minority, which keeps growing smaller each year, accumulates enormous amounts of wealth. The concentration of wealth also closely matches the concentration of capital as fewer and fewer firms today dominate the world's productive, circulatory, and consumptive dimensions of the political economy. All this flies in the face of decades of propaganda bellowed by Western politicians and repeated ad nauseum by their sidekicks and agents in the Global South, that capitalism untethered would unleash the "entrepreneurial" spirit and bestow the planet with prosperity and progress.

There are, of course, vast numbers of humans dependent upon the very processes that exploit them, and so many of us actively participate in activities we know are contributing to the problem, such as driving vehicles or consuming various commodities. Over the last five centuries human populations have been violently or through diktat alienated from land and resources, first by colonial powers, and then by newly independent states that saw in these processes pathways to national development. Dispossession, displacement, and various forms of institutionalized brutality transformed the planet into one where more and more people depend upon working—either in the formal sense or through myriad locally negotiated arrangements with employers in the vast informal

economies of the world—for a wage, as the only means to meet the basic goal of survival. Life thus transformed through the hegemony of work, places demands that are not mere "choices" or personal "preferences." Working people do not simply "choose" to drive to work or use public transportation. They have to. Just as small farmers who burn crops or the urban poor who use natural streams and rivulets for their everyday needs do so not out of choice but necessity. The vast majority of people on earth are subjects of an order that prioritizes private profits over social needs, with billions still lacking basic necessities such as clean drinking water and toilets. Better off, though still hyper exploited, billions of others struggle, holding on to jobs so they can live under a roof, eat regular meals and not face homelessness or starvation. Condemned to a lifetime of work, billions of human beings produce commodities of various sorts, for those who own through fiat of law the productive resources of society, while the meager wages they earn can barely provide for their basic needs. What is commonly understood as poverty is thus not an unfortunate byproduct of prosperity, but its living substance, productive to a global economy sustained by exploitation. Humanity's predicament today cannot but be primarily about the injustices that shape our world in ways that link the exploitation of human beings with the exploitation of non-human nature.

Capitalism—whether in the colonial era or today's era of neoliberalization—never simply rumbled along unopposed, but met with often fierce resistance across the world. In the contemporary historic moment, we witness mass movements linking, with differing degrees of emphasis, social, economic, and environmental concerns in the Global North and South. While these struggles vary in terms of the particularities of place, politics and context, they may be seen to broadly converge on the demand to democratize politics in opposition to the material and social conditions being imposed at the behest of capital. This may take the form of defensive struggles as neoliberalization threatens to undo existing democratic forms of governance, replacing accountable structures with managerial bodies that help capital and its state allies enforce unpopular policies under the guise of technical efficiency. Such was the case in Flint, Michigan in the last decade, when the city's local government was usurped of its power and an "emergency management" team assigned the task of managing the city's water supply, which they did by diverting toxic water from the Flint River into households, in order to "save costs." In other places such struggles may be long-standing demands for democratic practice, including the simple implementation of laws and protocols that benefit the poor, recognizing land and resource claims of marginalized populations, according equal treatment under the law, or protecting

the environment from the depredations of capital and state. This was the case with struggles waged by indigenous populations across the world against dams, mines, and deforestation that devastated land and water, and imposed various forms of violence on already beleaguered populations living in areas now coveted by capital for its extractive or disposal needs. In all these struggles the tendency of capital, under the authority and protection of neoliberalizing states, to impose costs on the politically weak has been countered with a range of critical political strategies that link rights and claims with demands to democratize social, economic, and political life.

Some of these struggles link the violence of the present with that of the past, and connect what is happening today with long-standing patterns of violence, exploitation, and dehumanization linked to slavery, caste tyranny, patriarchy, religious discrimination, and colonialism. Capital's aggressive assault on humanity and the earth entails an incessant assault on existing democratic practices (where they already exist), or an intensified pushback against efforts to democratize life to the benefit of oppressed and exploited human beings. In short, social worlds are today rife with struggles *for* democratization even as these are just as much struggles *against* the depredations of states and capital allied in the violent promotion of neoliberalization. Whether it is African American communities in Flint, the Lakota Sioux in Standing Rock, the Maasai in Tanzania, Adivasis, Dalits, or Muslims in India, the Ogoni in Nigeria, efforts by state and capital in alliance to deepen and intensify exploitation and oppression have produced powerful social movements and a politics of resistance that we may broadly describe as a tide of democratization opposed to the horrors of neoliberalization.

The Resurgence of Fascism

Having framed the present historical moment in terms of a core tension between neoliberalization and democratization, we must take into account another important development that has come to shape politics and social life across the world today, the rise/return of fascism and various forms of virulently antidemocratic political projects devoted to reiterating supremacist hierarchical politics to replace forms of politics anchored in the goals of universal equality, democracy, secularism, and pluralism. A key impetus driving the rise of these movements is the antidemocratic character of neoliberalization. And it is no coincidence that powerful fascist or neofascist currents dominating politics in countries like India, Turkey, and, until recently, Brazil simultaneously reject ideas of

social equality and universal rights, while embracing neoliberalization as key to erecting political orders that subordinate populations to the demands of institutionalized social inequality and capital at the same time.

The compact between big capital and fascism in recent years echoes the rise of Mussolini and Hitler in the early decades of the twentieth century, when both the fascist and Nazi political parties in Italy and Germany, respectively, rose to crush the growing power of communist- and socialist-led working-class movements, especially in factories owned and operated by the biggest names in industry.[3] The mutuality nurtured between fascist movements and big capital links the financing and support of political parties by the latter with guarantees to ensure profitability and the subordination of labor by the former. The primary bargain between capital and fascist political movements is that the former actively supports or tolerates the latter's use of its newly acquired powers to not only curb and ruthlessly discipline labor across the board, but to also repress and assault the rights and well-being of targeted minority populations who are scapegoated and demonized with the full assistance of media corporations. This is often done indirectly through myriad extra-legal entities that make up the fascist mass movement, as for instance in India when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its various organs attack Muslims, with the protection of the police and legal machinery.[4]

A crucial dynamic to reckon with in the present era is the manner in which diminished and frustrated hopes of social mobility and well-being—the failed promises of neoliberalization—are now programmatically redirected toward a politics of hate and a supremacist cult of identitarian nationalism antagonistic to democracy and social equality. This is especially pertinent to the question why so many among the oppressed and marginalized populations of the world lend their support to political projects that hurt them. But it also helps shed light on how the structures of desire that shape peoples' everyday concerns are enmeshed within such projects. Key to the rise of fascist movements is the mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie and sections of the disaffected working classes, through the deployment of a majoritarian identitarian sensibility that establishes itself on essentialized difference (nation, race, religious community), and is staunchly opposed to horizontal class solidarities especially with those identified as radically different "others." Fascist movements hijack popular angst against the failed promises of liberal democracy, and espouse an antidemocratic authoritarian politics that views with contempt every sacrosanct institution and premise of the liberal democratic state—constitution, elections, parliament, judiciary, law, universal equality, individual rights, cultural pluralism, and so on. It is the mass appeal of fascist currents and their manifestation

as mass movements that needs to be grasped in this moment, not as the efflorescence of innate forms of hatred hitherto suppressed, but as Trotsky noted in the 1930s, as an indicator of "counter-revolutionary despair (2002)."

Be that as it may, the point to be grasped for critical disaster studies is that these new forms of fascist politics challenge the distributional calculus of liberal democracy, turning the question of whether certain groups are excluded or left out of the ambit of development or recovery, into one of whether these groups should even be considered deserving of development or recovery, or even basic liberty or human dignity. Such is the case for Palestinians, Rohingya, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, as well as scores of refugee populations and precarious workers lacking legal status or recognition. Under such conditions disasters can also become opportunities for fascist regimes to settle scores with targeted populations. Further, these fascist currents themselves embody a form of *political* hazard, where everyday life for targeted populations is rife with extreme dangers in a political context that overtly or tacitly legitimates extra-legal majoritarian brutality and violence against targeted populations. For Muslims or Dalits in India or Palestinians living under brutal military occupation, even the most mundane everyday activity—playing football on the beach, sporting a mustache and thereby daring to challenge caste subordination, or transporting cattle to market—can result in horrifying death at the hands of legal or extra-legal actors empowered by majoritarian supremacist state power.

The weaponization of identity toward a majoritarian politics might also draw upon themes of cultural resurgence, and thus may be cast as a politics of affirmation and celebration. Yet such posturing works alongside a commitment to an exclusionary politics where lines are sought to be sharpened with the deliberate singling out of targeted communities. In the Indian state of Gujarat, following the devastating earthquake of 2001, Hindu supremacist organizations built segregated housing for caste Hindus excluding Dalits and Muslims, thereby undoing the heterogeneous (albeit inegalitarian) fabric of many rural communities. This opened the door for what transpired in the following year: genocidal violence targeting Muslims, which was actively encouraged by the then Chief Minister of the state, Narendra Modi, who went on to become Prime Minister of India in 2014 (Simpson and Corbridge 2006; Simpson 2014). These same groups built housing for tsunami survivors in Tamil Nadu, instructing recipients to abandon a more fluid localized sense of religious identity for one anchored in strong Hindu nationalist moorings, while also demanding they disallow Muslim households from living among them, or non-sectarian secular and Christian NGOs from working with them.

These developments cannot be grasped without an understanding of how new forms of fascist governance are proliferating in parts of the world where disasters present opportunities for the acceleration of agendas tied to majoritarian objectives. During the COVID-19 pandemic India's Hindu supremacist government and its allied fascist organizations, like the RSS and sections of the media, blamed Muslim communities for spreading the virus, provoking and justifying mob violence, threats, and boycotts against Muslims across the country.[5] Supremacist ideology that overtly espouses the idea that some human beings are by virtue of their cultural, religious, or racialized difference simply undeserving of rights, well-being, or dignity similarly informs the Israeli decision to deny five million Palestinians vaccines during the pandemic, even as the beleaguered population living under decades of military occupation struggled with its impacts.[6]

Neoliberal Discipline

Much work under the broad rubric of disaster capitalism brings needed attention to how states intent on advancing neoliberal objectives turn disasters into opportunities for capital accumulation, the curbing of labor and environmental laws, gentrifying neighborhoods, or through outright dispossession.[7] Further, these studies also point to how neoliberalization makes communities more vulnerable by imposing costs on them while taking away resources from public need, including the development of safe and sustainable infrastructure. But how neoliberalization shapes the landscape of exploitation and struggle throws open a different set of questions to consider: how does a disaster impact or reshape the contours of conflict over land, labor, resources, or rights in a given place? How might the representational practices that predominate media and official discourses after a disaster reveal or conceal these dynamics? How might those affected by a disaster view and act upon their experiences, in ways that reveal sharp breaks with official expectations or mediatized representations?

Neoliberalization is as much about disciplining populations as it is about systematically loosening constraints on capitalist exploitation of land, resources, labor and the non-human natural world. It enjoins the transformation of how people view themselves, their relationship with each other and the world, often through processes that appear benign and may also be well-intentioned. In recent decades the spectacular growth of the humanitarian imperative in shaping the contours of life for millions, not only in disaster situations, but also in contexts where

populations struggle under the devastating effects of neoliberalization, has provoked critical attention to the ways in which it has become a key strategic component of contemporary neoliberal statecraft. Disasters empower the humanitarian imperative for a range of well understood reasons. While victims of wars may or may not be viewed as universally deserving of sympathy and compassion (note the horrendous throttling of aid to Gaza in late 2023), those of disasters tend to be afforded a certain distinctly universal legibility as suffering humans. Thus, addressing the needs of those "deserving" compassion, humanitarianism is all about delivering the goods—material predominantly, but also a host of other objective manifestations of compassion—and remaking life for presumably hapless victims. This is more often than not done under the garb of a "non-political" and "non-profit" orientation, with beneficiaries of humanitarian compassion expected to remake themselves in accordance with the expectations of their benefactors.

Of course, this runs into a problem when beneficiaries refuse to view these expectations as purely benevolent, but as attempts to impose costs upon them in the name of recovery, or opportunities to pursue their own political projects (Swamy 2021b). Thus, what a humanitarian actor working under the umbrella of state and multilateral policy views as a "good" might be experienced, understood, and acted upon by beneficiaries of humanitarian action as something less than a universally obvious "good." A house may confer various benefits, but the conditions governing its ownership may impose costs such as displacement and the loss of livelihood. A trailer may provide respite during the period following a devastating disaster, but it can also become a means by which private contractors extort hapless disaster victims under the threat of eviction. The humanitarian "gift" gets even more messy and complicated when recipients view and treat them in ways that directly contradict humanitarian or state expectations. An object offered as a gift to be used in the specific ways prescribed by the humanitarian or state official might be viewed as a valuable asset by the recipient, who might wish to sell or rent it, or use it as security toward a loan, and so on. Humanitarian organizations also replicate hyper-exploitative neoliberal labor practices, doing so often by blurring the distinction between paid and voluntary work, but also utilizing extant practices of recruiting and exploiting underpaid workers in construction. For instance, there are few differences between construction sites of humanitarian and other housing projects, with workers experiencing conditions similar to what that they do elsewhere.

As a particular type of disciplining, neoliberalization works not only through the economic sphere, but also the social sphere, where the

inculcation of new subjectivities around individual responsibility (paying bills, using one's individual initiative as opposed to expecting resources from the government) and legibility (legal recognition by power) requires the simultaneous erasure of a politics of rights and entitlements. Most humanitarians tend to embrace this logic, to produce—in the tradition of civilizing the savages—new citizens or citizen-like subjects, while eschewing an engagement with the political subjectivities of their beneficiaries. In other words, the humanitarian subject cannot simultaneously be a historical or political subject, since these two entanglements make them less deserving of the disinterested giving and care that humanitarians presume to be engaged in (Malkki 1996; Bornstein 2012).

This work uses the term neoliberalization to emphasize the fact that neoliberal projects are not always easily imposed, especially when people push back or subvert official goals and expectations. While the vast majority of humanitarians formally eschew politics, there are many entities working under the broad rubric of humanitarianism that take the political subjectivities of their beneficiaries seriously. Sometimes such NGOs might link their work with ongoing struggles over land, labor, livelihood, rights, and entitlements. Moreover, many social movements around the world have in recent decades embraced the NGO form (recasting themselves as NGOs) in order to make their politics legible in an era of NGOization, and to access funding and gain recognition (Alvaré 2010). Populations reeling under neoliberal assault might be organized to fight against eviction, dispossession, and displacement. And indeed many social movements in the Global South involve a substantial number of NGOs that engage in a far less apolitical form of humanitarian work than most of their counterparts (Swamy and Revathi 2017). Thus, humanitarianism in the neoliberal era is a complex mix of coercive and disciplining power, but also an arena where various struggles take on new forms, with NGOs sometimes serving the vital function of making legible and publicly potent the demands and views of those at the receiving end of power. Part of the challenge in understanding the limits and possibilities of humanitarianism in the context of disasters, therefore, is in ascertaining the politics at play when humanitarians, states, and capital come together under "normal" circumstances. Organizations with stronger ties to local communities, which nurture a solidary rather than an apolitical "service delivery" approach to their humanitarian actions, tend to work more strenuously to defend people against eviction, displacement, and dispossession. Others utilize their "soft power" to gently persuade their beneficiaries to refrain from foregrounding their political demands, as a condition for aid and succor. It is not sufficient simply to note that aid is political, or that humanitarians are dishonest about their lack of

political or economic interest. We need to be able to understand clearly what political work is sought to be done in humanitarian contexts, by ensuring that we read both benefactor and beneficiary as politically invested, socially grounded parties engaging each other within the real historical contexts that are disaster situations.

Imperialism and War

We opened with the powerful imagery of Walter Benjamin's prophetic lines about the angel of history's vision of the singular catastrophe of capitalism hurling "wreckage upon wreckage" on its feet. As a world-ordering system, capitalism does not simply impose itself on the planet's populations by persuasion or trickery but through the exercise of power in all of its dimensions, including, very importantly, coercion. Therefore, one cannot ignore the formidable arsenal of repressive force at the disposal of the most powerful capitalist countries on earth, led by the United States, manifested particularly in its global military apparatus and war-making capacities brought to bear on behalf of what are considered "national security" concerns, but primarily center on geopolitical economic interests. While wars and war-making capacities are not restricted to imperialism, their expression in the contemporary world does closely follow the geopolitical economic logics of imperialist power. States deemed to be threats to the political economic arrangements preferred by the core imperialist powers led by the United States are targeted for either indirect control through a variety of means such as coups or subversion, or directly assaulted militarily, more often than not under the veneer of "democracy," "security," or even "humanitarianism." The overthrow of the government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti is a striking instance of the first, while multi-decade campaigns targeting Iraq and Afghanistan, or the relatively short but devastating destruction of Yugoslavia and Libya serve as examples of the second and third respectively.

Imperialism in the era of neoliberalization is about maintaining and expanding a global system of labor devaluation and resource extraction that primarily benefits capital accumulation in the Global North at the expense of populations and ecologies in the Global South. The bulk of profits today are accrued not through the exploitation of wage labor in the Global North, but through the super-exploitation of workers and the destructive exploitation of nature in the Global South (see Smith 2016; Kadri 2023). Maintaining these conditions to the benefit of Walmart, Apple, Starbucks, Exxon or Boeing, is the primary function of the imperialist order and its coercive planetary machinery of repression, even though

these are often proclaimed to serve "security" or "defensive" functions. In effect, imperialism today is primarily about keeping the world "safe" for neoliberal economic exploitation and "defending" the needs and demands of global capital whenever these are perceived to be under threat, or require brute force in order to be realized. A critical disaster studies approach cannot afford to ignore imperialism as an ordering force in the world today, one which not only structures the production and distribution of risk and vulnerability on a planetary scale, but which through its terrifying monopoly of violence also remains a source of hazardous danger for the vast majority of human beings condemned to live or die on its terms. Neoliberal economic policies and war—both key related facets of US imperialism today, while they already devastate societies, also work in specific ways to exacerbate the effects of natural events like earthquakes and floods.

Tens of thousands of lives were lost in the aftermath of devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria in February 2023. Heartrending scenes of rescue workers struggling to pull people out of the rubble filled the airwaves and social media landscape as public criticism grew about the Erdogan government's failures, chief among them the permissive and corrupt regime governing construction standards and building code enforcement, which resulted over several years in the shoddy construction of housing units for poorer, working-class communities, the worst hit by the devastation. Across the tense and war-torn border to the south, rescue and relief efforts in Syria were stifled because the United States' imposed sanctions, intended to overthrow the Syrian government, prevented international aid and urgently needed resources. Two related facets of today's world loom large here, one reflecting the global ubiquity of a political economic order driven by profiteering and private capital accumulation alongside a closely related geopolitical imperialist order where the effects of devastation are forcibly mediated through the logic of militarized conflict and war-making. If the Turkish government, in its eagerness to accelerate building construction by bypassing building codes, signifying fealty to a regime of deregulated and accelerated development driven by private capitalist interests, in effect put hundreds of thousands of people in harm's way as a result, the US government's deliberate stifling of aid to Syria can only be understood in light of its conduct of devastating wars of occupation and plunder in Syria and Iraq over the last two decades. If the images and videos of bodies and battered survivors being pulled out of the rubble in one context reflected the cold calculus of profits over social well-being in the making of the economic policies of a repressive neoliberal government, the desperate inability to do the same in an adjacent context reflected the cold calculus of imperialist domination

and the militarized terror that already afflicts communities caught in the vise grip of forces far more devastating and long-lasting than the earthquake itself. It is not coincidental that the same Erdogan government—closely aligned with the US—is also a participant in the military conflict with Syria, or that its antagonistic stance against its own minority Kurdish population played a key role in its endeavor to quash Kurdish efforts in Syria to assert regional autonomy. Even as communities on both sides of the border were struggling with the devastation, Turkey launched attacks on the Kurdish city of Kobane in northern Syria. Yet the US views Turkey as an important trading partner, which plays a crucial role in the region as a site of investment for itself and its regional allies, principally the oil-rich monarchies that the US supports politically and militarily. Further, as a close NATO ally, Turkey has aided US imperialist polices over several decades, whether in the anti-Soviet military alliance during the Cold War, or in military occupation of Afghanistan in the last two decades. That the cold calculus of power prioritizes profits and geopolitical military objectives over and above societal well-being in the aftermath of catastrophic events is not a startling fact as examples of this are legion. Following the devastation of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the Indonesian and Sri Lankan governments sought and gained advantage over populations that they had long tried to subdue militarily.

Yet, war-making as a core facet of today's global order rests not only on the production and availability of destructive means designed to protect or advance specific material interests, but also on the fact that it is itself driven by the logic of profit. Some of the most powerful players in the global capitalist political economy are defense corporations for whom profitability is directly tied to the capacity for destruction and devastation. In short, war-making on the scale that we witness today in the global capitalist political economy of the so-called "defense industry" is about the incessant production of destructive commodities that rake in enormous profits, whose value rests on their capacity for the obliteration of human life and the material worlds that make such life possible. Here lies a shocking challenge for our understandings of disasters—how do we reckon with a world order driven by imperialism that devotes considerable resources and effort into meticulously conceiving of and producing objects whose sole purpose is destruction? Ali Kadri puts it bluntly thus: "The bomb, for instance, is the perfect waste commodity cum machine whose productivity is determined by the rate at which it consumes human lives" (Kadri 2023, Preface).

As a mental exercise, if we were to compare images of desperate survivors clawing through the rubble of buildings devastated by an earthquake or a bombing, we would find little to differentiate the two. On

reflection, however, the devastation caused by an earthquake may raise questions for us about the inadequacies of built environments, the political opportunism of governments, or the geopolitical dynamics of military conflict. That of a bomb may raise other sorts of questions, having to do with the causes and moral/political calculi that permitted the intentional devastation of human life, the necessity for not just relief and rehabilitation for the survivors but also political resolution to a situation where there are perpetrators and victims, agentive actors whose goals and decisions produced the devastation, and those whose bodies and lives bore the costs of those goals and decisions. Such are the questions that arise in grappling with the cold calculus of power as it directly focuses its energies on the mechanized obliteration of life, which we are witnessing now in Gaza.

Gaza

By late August of 2024 close to forty thousand Palestinians—half of them children—in the tiny besieged enclave of Gaza in occupied Palestine, had been massacred, hundreds of thousands injured, and more than a million rendered homeless in an indiscriminate and genocidal campaign of relentless bombardment targeting homes, schools, hospitals, streets, refugee camps, and vital infrastructure, within the span of just ten months. Nobody is spared. Not children, the elderly, infirm or disabled, patients, nurses, doctors, emergency medical staff, journalists, poets, artists, professors, nobody. Every single university, every single hospital, most schools, clinics, parks, and other sites of everyday civilian life have been bombarded, and destroyed with a ferocity that cannot be explained using standard military justifications such as "collateral damage." The intention is to destroy an entire people, under the full glare of a hyper-mediatized world that watches in horror the impunity, cruelty, and unapologetic violence committed by a racist state that openly flouts international laws governing the conduct of military operations, or views with contempt those international humanitarian conventions that protect civilian populations. Here, not a natural hazard by any stretch, but one of the most powerful military forces on earth simply targets defenseless civilians ostensibly in response to a deadly assault in early October 2023 by the enclave's ragtag fighters against the occupation's military and civilian outposts outside Gaza.

Gaza's evisceration today at the hands of a settler colonial power that desires to rid it of its people cannot be understood without reference to a long history of dispossession, forced displacement, besiegement, and

imprisonment, interspersed with bouts of carpet bombing, torture, and brutal control of life over five decades. Eighty percent of the inhabitants of this tiny strip of land trace their origins to the *Nakba*, the catastrophe, during which 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly evicted from their lands by Zionist militias who went on to build, on the ruins of their villages and towns, the modern state of Israel. In fact, the cold calculus of power governing Gaza resembled the management of a prison or concentration camp for almost two decades before the present bout of genocidal violence. We cannot understand Gaza's destruction today without reference to a suffocating siege in which the occupying power, when it was not dropping bombs on homes or shooting civilians who protested their plight, decided the everyday fate of 2.3 million inhabitants by regulating how much food it allowed in based on meticulously calculating the minimum number of calories required for basic human survival. Gaza was described for almost two decades as an "open air prison" or "concentration camp" by even those who may not have been very sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle. Reckoning with the horror of a genocidal bombing campaign targeting civilians already living under such conditions shatters our conventional assumptions regarding law, ethics, and rights, let alone disasters or vulnerability. But such a situation is a reality today because the occupying power carrying it out is considered an important part of the US imperialist calculus in the region.

Gaza's destruction by the West and its regional executor is a horrific foretaste of what lies in store for humanity caught in the crisis-ridden death throes of a failed global order under the jackboots of capitalism, in its imperialist phase. If it was far-fetched that an entire population could be subjected to genocide and ethnic cleansing by a state that enjoys not only impunity, but also ample military, political, and economic support from every leading Western power in the world, such is not the case today. This same alliance of power that drives the world toward ecological catastrophe is stating in no uncertain terms to the horrified world that it is both capable and more than willing to inflict unimaginable horrors when it comes to defending its primary interests, the military strategic control of vital resources deemed too important for international law or even humanitarian red lines to elicit circumspection. Toward this end, the brutal control or destruction of populations becomes a generalizable strategic imperative of power, and not a matter of legally or morally constrained action. As the president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, noted at the COP 28 climate summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in December 2023: "Genocide and barbaric acts unleashed against the Palestinian people is what awaits those who are fleeing the south because of the climate crisis, … what we see in Gaza is the rehearsal of the future."

Groundings

This book adopts a Marxist framework to the study of disasters, which emphasizes the following conceptual and theoretical criteria for a critical disaster studies approach. First, the objects of study—disasters, power relations, humanitarian practice, vulnerability, risk, resilience, resistance, and so on—ought to be understood in historical materialist terms, and not in isolation from history and the material social relations that shape life. Second, the dominant discursive framings of these objects of analysis ought to be subject to critical scrutiny while alternative framings that center both the workings of power and the capacity of human beings to act on their lived material social worlds ought to be central to the analytical process. In this regard it is important to center analysis on the everyday activities that constitute the durable and stable conditions of normalized life, experienced and constituted spatio-temporally. Third, insofar as disasters impact the everyday life-making practices of real historical human beings, we must strive to connect the domain and scope of agency within these everyday life-making practices in their dynamic relationships with power. In other words, we must move beyond identifying the workings of power, and strive to view disaster situations as moments that reveal power in its dynamic, historically open and dialectical sense. Fourth, a critical disaster studies approach must have a clear grasp of the historical and systemic features of global capitalism's social, material, and ecological dynamics, especially since through its exploitative and extractive dynamics in the incessant pursuit of profits over all other considerations, capitalism threatens human material social well-being and the viability of life itself on earth.

The opening chapter offers a set of guidelines for what a critical disaster studies approach may look like. I argue that we must begin by seeking to grasp the normative underpinnings of the social world within which people live and make life. In any given moment people are engaged in particular activities as well as struggles, often under conditions they have little direct control over. This normal, which I describe as "prevailing conditions," is rife with contradictions, necessitating an examination of the material and social worlds that shape everyday life. The normal, I argue, must be grasped through its historical production, and not as a static state of affairs. Toward this we need to pay close attention to how people make life, specifically the materialities and socialities governing how people live, work, and thrive as human beings in society, in distinct relationships with each other, and with nature. Further, as subjects of specific orderings of power, and as objects of authoritative discourses and representational practices that have bearings for how we think and talk about those affected by disasters.

The second chapter offers an analytical approach to linking the everyday aspects of life-making with the systemic character of prevailing conditions. I argue that disaster studies needs to make a theoretical move away from a focus on vulnerability and toward a theory of exploitation. Given that the everyday hazards people contend with are in fact *productive* to the exploitative needs of contemporary capitalist relations of production, exchange, and consumption, we must be able to better link the everyday normalized reproduction of unequal social relations (productive inequalities) on the one hand with the maldistribution of risk and the ways in which post-disaster reconstruction and recovery strategies are conceptualized and contested, on the other.

The third chapter introduces three key theoretical Marxian formulations that engage the problem of temporality. These may be applied toward developing a fine-grained, theoretically sound analytical strategy for examining the relationship between the everyday and the systemic in the contemporary world dominated by capitalism. If rhythm and rhythmanalysis (following the work of Henri Lefebvre) offer a framework for the close examination of everyday life in terms of its cycles and rhythms, especially in light of how these shape the unequal social orders that make up everyday life, the concept of metabolic rift enables an examination of the epoch-defining systemic contradictions at play in a world racked by climate and social catastrophe. A third formulation, that of the conjuncture, challenges us to think about the political possibilities inherent in moments of systemic crisis marking the transition from one era to another, when an existing set of durable, hegemonic ideas and practices begin to falter and fail, making way for new possibilities. Thinking conjuncturally, we may seriously consider the potential for a critical disaster studies that goes beyond illuminating disasters, their effects, and outcomes, or providing reformist solutions for existing capitalist orders, and toward envisioning the potential for alternate socialist political futures.

The fourth chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of how time and life in the world today are experienced and understood in the context of everyday life-making struggles under conditions of precarious work, super-exploitation, accumulation by dispossession, and genocidal violence. Delving into a variety of illustrative contexts across the world, the chapter develops rhythmanalysis as an analytical tool to explore the production of precarious material social conditions, as well as the struggles over the outcomes and goals of recovery, such as those against forced displacement.

The next two chapters engage the problem of representational choices that dominate understandings of the world, whether in light of discussions around development and modernity, or in the context of

humanitarianism. The first is a short critical assessment of scholarly tendencies to view disaster situations through the dichotomous framework of modernity and tradition. I argue that we must without hesitation acknowledge the historicity of human populations, specifically by understanding that their worlds and lives are neither outside of modernity, nor sacrosanct havens of some imagined tradition or the other. Further, we must take seriously that modernity itself is a contested term, and that exploited and marginalized people affected by disasters are as much invested in staking claims to material social transformations loosely associated with modernity, such as roads, hospitals, electricity, and so on, as are those we easily identify as *modern*.

The next chapter examines the humanitarian imperative, and the problems and possibilities of "doing good." Exploring first the nature and scope of humanitarian antipolitics in the neoliberal era, the chapter delves into the structural entanglements linking capitalism and humanitarian action, focusing on the exploitative character of "doing good" and the structural limitations of a form of social action tied to the temporal contingencies and uncertainties of power. I also consider the contradictory spaces of humanitarian practice, where instead of depoliticizing populations an activist NGO might support or encourage possibilities for resistant politics. The final chapter is a case study of the wildfires that devastated West Maui, Hawai'i in 2023. It offers an illustration of how we might use a critical disaster studies framework to examine the workings of power, history, and material social relations in the constitution of a disaster situation, the maldistribution of its impacts and effects, and the uneven and contested trajectories of recovery. I conclude this work with a call for critical disaster studies to grapple with the combined challenges of imperialism and the climate emergency. Toward making sense of, and perhaps helping heal our troubled world, we must take seriously both the everyday and the systemic features of contemporary capitalism, focusing on exploitation, contradiction, history and power, while grounding our exertions in a committed politics of planetary solidarity.

Notes

1. Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. Retrieved on 17 December 2024 from https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2021/.
2. "Seven health insurance CEOs raked in a record $283 million last year," 2022, *New York Times*, 12 May. *5 December*. Retrieved on 14 December 2024 from https://www.statnews.com/2022/05/12/health-insurance-ceos-raked-in-record-pay-during-covid/; "The Pandemic Will Fuel Consolidation in U.S. Health Care,"

2021, *Harvard Business Review*, 3 September., Retrieved on 5 December 2023 from https://hbr.org/2021/03/the–pandemic–will–fuel–consolidation–in–u–s–health–care; "India's Vaccine Makers Are Profiteers, Not Humanitarians," 2021, *The Intercept*, 19 June. Retrieved on 5 December 2023 from https://theintercept.com/2021/06/19/india–covid–vaccine–profiteering/.

3. See Éric Vuillard's vivid description of the alliance between German industrial powerhouses such as BASF, Bayer, Agfa, Opel, IG Farben, Siemens, Krupp, Allianz, Telefunken and the Nazi Party, epitomized in an infamous "secret meeting" that took place on 20 February 1933. Not only did these companies enable the rise of Hitler by generously funding his election campaign that fateful year, but they and others like BMW, Daimler, and Shell also made ample use of slave labor supplied by the SS from the death camps. These big capitalist firms continued thriving, growing even more powerful after the war thanks to their rehabilitation by Western powers (Vuillard and Polizzotti 2018).
4. RSS – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, fascist paramilitary organization with a track record of genocidal violence targeting Muslims and other minorities in India. It counts among its members Gandhi's assassin as well as the present prime minister of India whose political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is one of many institutional progeny of the RSS.
5. "Blamed for Coronavirus Outbreak, Muslims in India Come under Attack," 2020, *NPR*, 23 April. Retrieved on 5 December 2023 from https://www.npr.org/2020/04/23/839980029/blamed–for–coronavirus–outbreak–muslims–in–india–come–under–attack.
6. "Denying COVID-19 vaccines to Palestinians exposes Israel's institutionalized discrimination," 2021, *Amnesty International*, 6 January. Retrieved on 5 December from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press–release/2021/01/denying–covid19–vaccines–to–palestinians–exposes–israels–institutionalized–discrimination/.
7. See Klein 2008; Schuller and Maldonado 2016.