

Book review: In the shadow of Tungurahua: Disaster Politics in Highland Ecuador

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by A.J. Faas
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Book review by Ksenia Chmutina and Jason von meding

The stories of people impacted have always pushed the listener to problematize disasters as both event and process. Stories are the crucible of human self-understanding as it confronts temporality – because as Eduardo Galeano notes, stories mirror us, and stories mirror each other. Stories of disasters – what disasters are, why disasters happen, how people respond to disaster and how disasters are researched and understood – are no exception.

In the shadow of Tungurahua, by A.J. Faas, is a frame story, a structure that allows a rich tapestry of place-based stories to unfold. Perhaps, when picking up a book about disaster, one might expect a story of sadness and oppression; indeed, both feature in this book – but not as central themes. Far from it. Faas instead focuses on how people confront hardship, how they craft new futures through cooperation and create a local politic that at times mirrors the politics of everyday but sometimes resists it. This book's world view is not inaccessible – Faas understands the present situation of people responding to disaster not as an unexpected development but a manifestation of centuries of social and political activity in a place permanently plagued by conquest and resistance – but it is anything but simplistic. A strident critic of “nature-culture” binary, Faas argues for a wider appreciation of open-ended “naturecultural” assemblages.

The book is beautifully personal while meticulously empirical. Faas has been working in Penipe, Ecuador – where the book is set – on and off since 2009. His book, therefore, offers a wonderful anthropological insight into the everyday of living in a shadow of the volcano – and of the history of displacement, colonialism and reproduction of risks. The book is “a story of how disasters and politics were made in the shadow of Tungurahua and what people came to make of it” (p. 9). He does not focus the reader on the volcanic eruption and its immediate aftermath; instead, as Faas writes, we enter “the story of Tungurahua [...] in the middle” (p. 8). It is through these lenses that Faas offers an opportunity to “reframe disasters”.

The book comprises three parts. In Part 1, Faas unpacks conditions of mobility, historically demonstrating how these conditions are also the conditions of disasters. In Part 2, he focuses on cooperation (*minga*), documenting how different actors bring different understandings of the practice. Finally, in Part 3, Faas emphasizes the politics of disasters in the context of resettlement; this section focuses on rebuilding lives but also on cocreating risks. The three parts are interconnected by stories and characters that the reader comes to relate to, contend with and learn from. Faas is within the story himself, and this brings another dimension to the book. Working to build relationships and participate where helpful, while learning and not passing judgment, you get the impression that he is not there to save anyone.

Overall, Faas provides important on-the-ground insights, bringing the reader to experience people's hope and dreams as well as tensions and disappointments. The book



creates space for important discourses in disaster studies by choosing to focus on topics that are often overlooked: connections to place, interconnectedness between people and responsibilities toward places, people and all living things. To a scholar or a practitioner of disasters, the ideas that Faas develops have both an immediate utility and a deeper intellectual demand for examination.

Firstly, the concept of *minga*, “an institution – or set of related practices – in which power relations are central, but which is pregnant with meaning for those who invoke and practice it [...] at times a vehicle for domination and at times a practice of local solidarity and resistance” (p. 101). Cooperation has been a focus of many disaster scholars; yet, few demonstrated how such practice can be both a state of pride and, at the same time, a marker of “deservingness” – an idea that surely also deserves more attention in the context of disasters. It is striking that so many of the stories recounted in *In the shadow of Tungurahua* reflect the negotiations and discourses in everyday life of who is “deserving” when it comes to resources, or inclusion or choice, or as Faas calls it, the “politics of deservingness.” Given that much framing of disasters in literature has been built around considerations of people’s needs and rights as well as power dynamics, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to “deservingness” until recently. There are many other ideas and concepts such as “bare life” that would encourage the reader to explore alternative worldviews to learn “to see a common world otherwise” (p. 199).

Overall, Faas provides a great balance between telling not only the story of disaster creation and recreation of sacrifice and struggle but also of coping, hoping and healing.

Response from A.J. Faas, San José State University, USA

In lieu of the ~500-word reply I was invited to provide, I could have just as easily submitted merely two: thank you. But since I accepted this hospitable invitation, I would like to write to and briefly expand upon some of Ksenia Chmutina and Jason von Meding’s observations and to perhaps signpost some of the book’s interventions into disaster thinking along the way.

Chmutina and von Meding refer to the book as a “frame story,” a perspective I welcome. Given that they seize on the frame as being anchored to place, I would like to elaborate how this “frame story” plays on time and in a way that is necessarily less fixed. That is, disaster is experienced in several temporal scales and requires analysis at still more. The book begins with several Penipeños narrating their experiences with the 1999 eruptions of Tungurahua and the ensuing evacuation operations. In the media, this is disaster as spectacle, but for Penipeños this was a harrowing event that triggered transformative change in their lives, not something to elide in service of critical analysis of disaster’s *longue durée*. The *experience* of disaster continues long after the eruptions and the spectacle subside, so the book follows people as they are displaced for years on end and time after time, before the construction of resettlements that provide vital resources while also contributing to vulnerability and the experience of disaster as a long-term phenomenon. The *analysis* of disaster requires becoming unstuck in time yet further, and so I attempt a genealogy – two, in fact – of the historical production of disaster. These historical explorations provide glimpses of precolonial pasts – Indigenous mobilities and mutual aid practices – subsequently colonized in the 16th century and turned to fixed settlements and exploitive corvée labor. The book then follows these practices, colonization, institutions and a protean assemblage of the modern state through iterative processes that culminated not only in the production (and reproduction) of disaster but also the means to contest disaster through political practices rooted in mutual aid.

For those seriously interested in justice-oriented disaster prevention and management who blanch at the thought of tilting at 500 years of colonialism, the book offers a framework for stepping out of the vicious circle of reproducing disaster in response and recovery. The first part is to recognize when response procedures operate *on* people instead of *with* them.

The second is to identify when the conditions of recovery recapitulate the conditions that produced disaster in the first place, which in this case primarily entailed compelling people to establish full-time occupancy in fixed settlements, a process openly hostile to their highly mobile livelihoods. The third entails interrogating the politics of deservingness or the many contested distinctions made in everyday practice regarding who merits inclusion in the distribution of scarce resources administered by the community, civil society or the state. Common markers of deservingness include citizenship, residency, productivity, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and suffering. I think researchers, activists and humanitarian types talk about this all the time, but often in locally specific terms. One real advantage of what is often called theory in the social sciences is that it helps develop a vocabulary that transcends specific contexts and places the patterns we observe in disparate locations in conversations with one another. Scholars discuss exclusion and types of state deservingness and some discuss community-level disputes of deservingness. I see my own contribution as identifying how these processes often work together in an ensemble of politics of deservingness. And finally, and most importantly, I point to more-than-human webs of relationships that animate life in Penipe and locally derived cultural logics of what is good, of how to co-live with a volcano and the complex assemblage of in life the shadow of Tungurahua.

Ksenia Chmutina

*Department of Architecture, Building and Civil Engineering, Loughborough University,
Loughborough, UK*

Jason von Meding

*Florida Institute for Built Environment Resilience, University of Florida,
Gainesville, Florida, USA, and*

A.J. Faas

Department of Anthropology, San Jose State University, San Jose, California, USA