All Is Well: Catastrophe and the Making of the Normal State by Saptarishi Bandopadhyay

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Abstract
AS PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS REGARDING the COVID-19 pandemic have ebbed, the media and politicians portrayed this change as a "return to normal." Indeed, the pandemic years are seen as a state of exception from the normal condition. However, Saptarishi Bandopadhyay's monograph, All Is Well: Catastrophe and the Making of the Normal State ("All Is Well"), questions the idea that disasters are exceptional events, and examines how this narrative can strengthen the power of the state.

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Book Review

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AS PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS REGARDING the COVID-19 pandemic have ebbed, the media and politicians portrayed this change as a “return to normal.” Indeed, the pandemic years are seen as a state of exception from the normal condition. However, Saptarishi Bandopadhyay’s monograph, *All Is Well: Catastrophe and the Making of the Normal State* (“All Is Well”), questions the idea that disasters are exceptional events, and examines how this narrative can strengthen the power of the state.

When studying disasters, traditional approaches typically view them either as hazards resulting from changes in the environment, or as consequences of vulnerabilities within social systems (chapter two). In past years, these approaches have become increasingly prevalent in public policy-making for disaster management. Studies following these two approaches have tended to overlook the role of government and the political dynamics behind disaster management. *All Is Well* addresses this lack of critical analysis. Through three historical case studies from the eighteenth century (chapters three, four, and five), Bandopadhyay demonstrates how disaster management has been a historical process that shaped the meaning of catastrophe and how people experienced it. Originated in the eighteenth century, the narrative of catastrophe as exceptional or disruptive

1. (Oxford University Press, 2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197579190.001.0001> [All Is Well].
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events created the fictional image of an idealized authority that could protect society from uncertainty. This narrative remains relevant today in strengthening state power and reshaping international orders (chapters six and seven).

Disaster management in the Great Plague of Marseille reflected the conception of disasters as exceptions to the “normal” state (chapter three). Within this narrative, a society free from disasters was considered normal. Disasters were seen as disruptive occurrences resulting from an imbalance between social and natural orders. To maintain a “normal” society, disaster management mechanisms were put in place to pre-empt disasters. Before the outbreak of the Great Plague, the French government had implemented a complex system of medical, legal, administrative, and information processing techniques and institutions. These disaster prevention tools were aimed at minimizing the risk of disasters by carefully striking a balance between social order (i.e., management of international commerce) and natural order (i.e., spread of diseases). The Great Plague thus became a disruptive fallout that confirmed the narrative of a “normal” state. It also called for disaster management tools to control the risks of future disasters. The rhetoric of catastrophe management presupposed a condition of life in risk and integrated “disaster” itself as a part of disaster management.

Chapter four examines how the 1755 Lisbon earthquake presented an opportunity for the secular state to strengthen its power over the religious sector through disaster management. The prime minister in charge of disaster relief, the Marquis of Pombal, saw the earthquake as “an opportunity for progress and the realization of national and imperial glory.” Pombal promoted a god-less explanation for the disaster by establishing memorial days for the earthquake, encouraging scientific observation and recording of the earthquake, and disseminating news reports about disaster relief efforts. The government also enhanced its control through disaster management by implementing reforms in the legal, economic, and educational sectors.

In both cases, the triumph of the secular sector over the religious sector played a crucial role in shaping the narrative of disasters. The impact of Enlightenment and liberalist philosophies led to a shift from the unknowable risk of divine disasters to the knowable risk of natural accidents. This perspective suggests that disasters are essentially manageable, and even avoidable, if a perfect relationship between social and natural orders is achieved. The belief in this perfectibility reinforced the idea of a “normal” state that is invulnerable to disasters. It also justified the expansion of state control in all aspects of society to achieve that perfect relationship. Citizens of Marseille and Lisbon were therefore guided away

3. All Is Well, supra note 1 at 87.
from the remonstrations of an absentee god towards the explanations of an omnipresent state.

Chapter five examines the power dynamics between Britain and Bengal in the transnational disaster of the 1770 Bengal famine. Bengal was under British rule through the British East India Company, so the famine threatened both the British economy and the legitimacy of British rulership in its colonies. The goal of disaster management in the Bengal famine was to resolve this crisis by rebalancing the natural and social orders in a distant colony. The British rulership associated the hot climate in Bengal with the “primitive” and “decadent” nature of its people, arguing that the people naturally preferred despotic governance. This discourse legitimized Britain’s authority as a “rational form of despotism” that was engineered to suit the native people’s characters and customs. As a result, disaster management regarding the famine led to stronger British control in the operation of the British East India Company and its administration of the colony. The corruption of the Company was viewed as an abuse of power by private individuals rather than an indictment of the British monarchy itself. This perspective allowed the broader imperial mission to remain unchallenged and unscathed.

Across the cases of Lisbon, Marseille, and Bengal, we observe the emergence of an anticipatory risk-assessment discourse in understanding catastrophe. Defining and managing risks has become the foundation of catastrophe management. This approach to disaster management seems rational and objective, as it relies on information processing and probabilistic calculations. Yet, at the same time, it feeds into the discourse of “perfectible governance” and consequently calls for both stronger state control and social order. In chapter six, Bandopadhyay shows how this disaster narrative centred on risk management deepens social hierarchies, concentrates the distribution of wealth and means of production, and creates new orders of vulnerability and exploitation. The connection between scientific assessments of risks and secular justification of state control originated in early modern Europe, as demonstrated by the aforementioned case studies. However, this connection is ingrained in the conception of disaster management and remains relevant today.

Chapter seven extends the insights gained from previous chapters to contemporary times and examines the relationship between disasters and state power nowadays. Bandopadhyay explores the international relationship between developed countries and developing countries concerning disaster management. The “normal” states in the contemporary world are exemplified by the developed

4. Ibid at 116.
5. Ibid.
countries in North America and Western Europe. These countries have managed “perfectible governance” by balancing economic growth with instrumental regulation of environmental, technological, cultural, and intellectual aspects of society. These commitments result in a hegemonic security apparatus originating from the mission of disaster management. On the other hand, developing countries are disproportionately impacted by disasters, and their struggles with disasters are often seen as proof of the states’ impotence. This narrative marginalizes developing countries and challenges their state authority. It also justifies intervention from developed countries and the international community in a post-colonial shadow.

All Is Well is an important contribution to international law and policy-making, as it sheds light on the power dynamics behind seemingly objective and scientific mechanisms for disaster management. The textured historical accounts vividly illustrate the author’s insight on disaster management: Disasters do not result from deficiencies in the existing social order. Rather, they serve to enhance state power through the constant pursuit of risk reduction and climate adaptation. The book’s insights on contemporary humanitarian and developmental discourses are relevant to both practitioners and scholars.

However, the way governments are structured nowadays is significantly more complicated than they were in Europe during the eighteenth century. States in the past tended to be monolithic entities, subject to minimal restrictions. In contrast, governments nowadays are composed of a variety of interconnected sectors, sometimes with conflicting interests. Therefore, to explore the present relationships between state power and disaster management, more consideration could have been given to the internal power dynamics within modern-day states. For instance, authorities often lose control in a crisis, if only temporarily, “over the dramaturgy of political communication.” The existence of international organizations, like the European Union, adds another layer of complexity to power dynamics both within and among states. Such entities can influence

6. See Francis Fukuyama, The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Francis Fukuyama, Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). In these two books, Fukuyama provides a comprehensive look at the evolution of political order, state-building, and the complexity of modern governmental structures.

national policies and complicate disaster management efforts. Factors like these can significantly impact the effectiveness of disaster and crisis management, thus underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of state power in the modern world.

*All Is Well* also invites cross-disciplinary discussions from environmental scientists. With recent advancements in science and technologies, preventive disaster management has undeniably gone through significant progress. Is it a viable goal to control disasters, or is it a mere political fantasy? To what extent have we truly reduced the possibility of disasters or downscaled their destructive effects? Can statistical evidence on the achievements of disaster management justify the expansion of state control? As statistical analysis becomes increasingly incorporated into humanities studies, this book could be a great starting point for cross-disciplinary endeavors on the study of catastrophe.
