Empire and Catastrophe

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Published by University of Nebraska Press

Segalla, Spencer D.
Empire and Catastrophe: Decolonization and Environmental Disaster in North Africa and Mediterranean France since 1954.
University of Nebraska Press, 2020.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/75384.

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The history of disasters is both defined and obscured by the persistent tendency to privilege the results of deliberate human action in history. If Agadir or Orléansville had been leveled by a bomb, their destruction would be as widely recounted as the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But even human-induced events are often neglected if they cannot be ascribed directly to human intentions. From this intention-centered perspective, our understanding of the history of Fréjus seems to hang upon the validity, or lack thereof, of the Schmidt-Eenboom hypothesis, and the history of the Moroccan oil poisoning upon the culpability of the US military. We tend to think that hundreds dead due to an attack matter in a way that hundreds dead due an unintended event do not. If the Front de Libération Nationale blew up the Malpasset Dam, if we judge the mass paralysis in Morocco to be the fault of American imperialism, then these events attract our attention in a way that “mere” accidents do not. A great chasm in historical perception separates the intended from the unintended, the human from the inanimate. I would argue, however, that this imagined chasm limits our understanding of history.

As Timothy Mitchell writes, “We have entered the twenty-first century still divided by a way of thinking inherited from the nineteenth.” The tendency to forget or ignore the suffering provoked by non-intentionally-induced rapid-onset catastrophes is predicated on this way of thinking, which separates the human and the social from the nonhuman. For millennia, humans from a wide variety of cultural traditions tended to anthropomorphize the non-human forces that shape our lives (and voilà, the sun became Apollo, and Indra made the rain). The Western Enlightenment’s rejection of such explanations was accompanied by the partitioning of the physical world from the world of human agents. The former was assigned to science and engineering; the latter to history and politics.
The notion of “environment” (etymologically, that which surrounds or encircles) is predicated on its opposition to the human agent at the center. Despite the idea of motion imbedded in the root verb, *vire* , the environment is traditionally depicted as relatively stable, changing only slowly (but for human intervention). Thus twentieth-century scientists imagined the comforting stability of an eco-*system* in the dizzying activity of nature. The human actor, by contrast, moves impetuously within this “natural” environment, sometimes disrupting it. But this kinetically based distinction between agent and environment fails in the case of rapid-onset disasters, including both earthquakes and anthropogenic accidents in which human creations unleashed massive and unintended effects.

Philosopher Jane Bennett asks, “How can humans become more attentive to the public activities, affects, and effects of non-humans? What dangers do we risk if we continue to overlook the force of things?” Disaster survivors were often keenly aware of the “force of things” in human history, as decolonization and disaster merged into a single perceived event: sudden motions of the inanimate physical world (rocks, water) intermingling with the actions of humans. Of course, tectonic plates, bursting dams, and paralyzing chemicals do not possess intentionality. However, as neuroscience, biochemistry and philosophy undermine the illusion of human intentionality, this point seems less and less relevant, and what remains of the agent-environment distinction depends largely on the distinction between motion (the agent acts) and context (the environment mostly just sits there, surrounding). Gregory Clancey has recognized that rapid-onset disasters appear to possess the unpredictability, arbitrariness, and suddenness of human actors—and also are humanlike in their tendency to thwart modern imperial efforts to know-in-order-to-control. This is not to say that slow-moving events like climate change, erosion or desertification do not have agent-like characteristics: they have effects in history, and the environment never really just sits there, surrounding. The inanimate world acts constantly: it is “vital, energetic lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluescent.” My point here is that this agentishness of the physical environment —what Bennett has called “thing-power”— is more visible in large-scale, rapid-onset events, making “rapid-onset disasters” a useful category.

My goal in this book has not been to avoid anthropocentrism, for that would be to write an environmental history of these events that makes human history irrelevant and thus reifies the separation of the non-intentional from the historiography of the social and political. Instead, this volume has aimed to explore the role of the inanimate-in-motion in human history. Obviously, the scope of this book is delimited both spatially and temporally by human processes
and anthropogenic places: the era of decolonization; the French empire since 1954; localities defined by patterns of human habitation. The focus throughout has been on the human experiences and human actions that followed the unintended movements of rock, water and cresyl phosphates. I have sought to investigate the history of a neglected category of event, unintended disasters, and a neglected category of human suffering, the suffering of disaster victims. This book is, in other words, a humanistic project: there are no disasters for the inanimate, and rocks do not suffer. The emphasis here has been on how humans, as the social animals that we are, interpret the movements of the inanimate in the contexts of sociopolitical experiences—in this case, in the contexts of empire and decolonization. Yet this book also strives to recognize that humans are not the masters of their own fate, and that the nonhuman world shapes the human experience. Human history is, in Mitchell’s words, “an alloy that must emerge from a process of manufacture whose ingredients are both human and non-human, both intentional and not, and in which the intentional or the human is always somewhat overrun by the unintended.”

It is easy enough to recognize, with Rousseau, that there is no “disaster” separate from the human context it affects. As Mitchell notes, however, it is more difficult to acknowledge that there is no human actor who is separate from the environment. In examining the history of disasters, one might ask: which is agent, and which is environment? Do the humans act, and environmental events constrain these choices? Or does the disaster strike, and have an impact on the human environment in which it acts? Using the rich variety of available sources, the historian might tell a story in which the humans (their empires, their revolutions, their hierarchies) are the environment, and the central agent is the earthquake, flood, or poisonous compound which acts impulsively (though not omnipotently, its effects being channeled by the human environment). Or one might tell a story of human agents, occasionally jostled and challenged by unexpected events in the physical, non-human environment, but exerting power over each other and over the environment. Both of these possible narratives are based on a dichotomy between the human and the environmental which is highly problematic but difficult to avoid. Some historical sources, however, provide a glimpse of what it is like to experience the world without this dichotomy.

The “experts” who appear in this book tended to imagine themselves as free and rational agents acting upon a knowable and pliable, if occasionally recalcitrant, physical environment, an approach which was consistent with the colonial desire to master both the environment and the colonized subject. Engineers, seismologists, and urban planners were confident in their ability to
respond effectively and to prepare for future environmental events by building a brave new world in a ruined landscape. They arrived on the scene in the wake of the disaster, when the motion of the inanimate had ceased or diminished. Among the experts discussed here, only the epidemiologists engaged with the inanimate as it still moved with the speed of agency, playing real-time defense against a still-advancing chemical toxin. The focus of this book, however, has been non-experts, for all of those living in disaster-stricken areas experienced the inanimate in motion. The poison in Morocco moved at a modest pace and was initially unknown to its victims until after the fact, but floodwaters and seismic waves moved with lightning speed through the human and human-built environment, felling buildings and bodies. This experience led to works of memory and representation—by Henri Kréa, Christian Hughes, Ali Bouzar, Mohamed Khaïr-Eddine, and others—that mark no great divide between the human and the environmental, and in particular no great divide between the environmental disaster and the other great transformation at hand, decolonization.

This book has demonstrated that the integration of environmental disasters and narratives of decolonization found in memoirs and later representations is also visible in the archival record produced in the 1950s and early 1960s. This early documentary evidence reveals that, from the moment disaster struck, the inanimate-in-motion shaped the human process of decolonization through multiple avenues of causality, as reactions to these disasters impacted reactions to decolonization. At the same time, humans interpreted the meaning of these environmental events in terms of the political and social events of decolonization. Chemical toxins impaired a superpower’s pursuit of its Cold War objectives while enabling the opposition party in a newly independent state to mount new critiques of the national government. Floodwaters permitted the local reassertion of boundaries between colonizer and colonized in the provincial metropole, in contravention of new state policies. Tectonic movements revealed and exacerbated the inequities of colonialism, undermined the crumbling legitimacy of colonial rule, and inflamed the resentment of the colonized. Seismic waves also created opportunities for diplomacy and the extension of new forms of foreign influence, and destroyed precolonial urban architecture and ways of life. This destruction catalyzed the expansion of domestic state power and created new lines of cultural contestation in the post-colony after independence. In both the immediate and long aftermaths of these events, survivors, witnesses and opportunists produced representations of disasters that merged the environmental with the social and political.

Decolonization was not, therefore, a purely human story.