



Bloated bodies and broken bricks: Power, ecology, and inequality in the political economy of natural disaster recovery



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ABSTRACT

Disaster recovery efforts form an essential component of coping with unforeseen events such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and typhoons, some of which will only become more frequent or severe in the face of accelerated climate change. Most of the time, disaster recovery efforts produce net benefits to society. However, depending on their design and governance, some projects can germinate adverse social, political, and economic outcomes. Drawing from concepts in political economy, political ecology, justice theory, and critical development studies, this study first presents a conceptual typology revolving around four key processes: enclosure, exclusion, encroachment, and entrenchment. Enclosure refers to when disaster recovery transfers public assets into private hands or expands the roles of private actors into the public sphere. Exclusion refers to when disaster recovery limits access to resources or marginalizes particular stakeholders in decision-making activities. Encroachment refers to when efforts intrude on biodiversity areas or contribute to other forms of environmental degradation. Entrenchment refers to when disaster recovery aggravates the disempowerment of women and minorities, or worsens concentrations of wealth and income inequality within a community. The study then documents the presence of these four inequitable attributes across four empirical case studies: Hurricane Katrina reconstruction in the United States, recovery efforts for the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines, and the Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand. It next offers three policy recommendations for analysts, program managers, and researchers at large: spreading risks via insurance, adhering to principles of free prior informed consent, and preventing damage through punitive environmental bonds. The political economy of disaster must be taken into account so that projects can maximize their efficacy and avoid marginalizing those most vulnerable to those very disasters.

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1. Introduction

Sometimes, the human response to a natural disaster can exacerbate its impact, even more than the event itself. Kates, Colten, Laska, and Leatherman (2006: 14659) write “because disasters tend to accelerate existing economic, social, and political trends, the trajectory for full recovery (preexisting population, economy, and infrastructure) is not promising.” Laska and Morrow (2006: 16) argue that the “goal of disaster resilient communities cannot be reached until basic issues of inequality and social justice are addressed.” Bullard and Wright (2009; xxv) add “Quite often, the

scale of a disaster's impact ... has more to do with the political economy of the country, region, and state than with the hurricane's category strength.” Their statements underline a stream of research showing how natural disasters are worsened by human factors such as mismanagement, underdevelopment, profiteering, neoliberal capitalism, and crisis politics (Hinchcliffe and Woodward, 2004; Klein, 2008; Weber and Messias, 2012; Cretney, 2017; Sovacool, 2017, 2018). Viewed in this manner, disasters are more “catastrophes in the making” (Freudenburg, Gramling, Laska, & Erikson, 2009), “unnatural disasters” (Laska and Morrow 2006), and “disasters by design” (Mileti, 1999) instead of random events, by no means the result of biophysical or natural phenomenon alone.

So far, however, research on these types of political economy pressures and disaster recovery (DR) remains scant. Neumayer et al. (2014) offer a compelling assessment of how governments underinvest in DR efforts. Oh and Reuveny (2010) discuss the

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politics of natural disasters from the perspective of international trade. [Cutter et al. \(2014\)](#) explore the dynamics (and geographies) of community resilience to disaster. [D’Alisa and Kallis \(2016\)](#) offer an intriguing connection between Gramscian theories of the state and the political ecology of some types of DR, framed around the notion of climate change adaptation; [Cretney \(2017\)](#) examines the discursive elements of DR and “geographies of crisis.”

In contrast to these works, we aim to offer a conceptual typology that makes mapping political economy pressures more transparent and systematic, in the hope that the vulnerabilities they give rise to can be better managed and minimized. In this study, to conceptualize how DR efforts may encounter issues of injustice, vulnerability, and inequality, we synthesize from four distinct schools of thought: political economy, political ecology, social justice, and critical development studies. Political economy broadly deals with how (capitalist) markets interact with the interests of state actors (government). Political ecology deals broadly with the winners and losers of environmental change (and responses to it). Social justice concerns itself with the distribution of costs and benefits as well as decision-making processes (and forums for due process and representation therein). Critical development studies has emerged to critique an overly reductionist, top-down approach to development assistance and policy that seeks to remake the developing world in the image of western (or Northern) industrialized countries.

Drawing from these admittedly diverse literatures, we propose that DR efforts can, at times, propagate four interconnected political economy processes that operate systemically. Enclosure refers to when public assets become privatized or private actors extend their reach and autonomy into the public sphere. Exclusion refers to when DR actors marginalize particular groups in decision-making fora. Encroachment refers to when DR projects damage the environment, notably biodiversity conservation zones or fragile ecosystems. Entrenchment refers to when DR projects worsen social or economic inequality. Through four case studies we show how DR projects can exacerbate poverty, racism, sexism, and classism (the United States), entrench and aggravate poverty (Thailand and Philippines), and marginalize local communities while slowing down rebuilding and rehabilitation processes (New Zealand).

2. Presenting a conceptual typology of political economy and ecology

In this section, we (briefly) synthesize from four separate disciplines—political economy, political ecology, justice theory, and critical development studies—to lay the groundwork for our political economy typology based on enclosure, exclusion, encroachment, and entrenchment. [Table 1](#) offers a high-level summary of these four disciplines.

In its broadest sense, the term political economy deals with how government, or the “state,” interacts with the private sector, or “the market” ([Gilpin 1987](#)). As [Van de Graaf et al. \(2016: 4\)](#) put it succinctly, political economy examines “the relationship between politics and economics, between states and markets.” Part of this involves the area of inquiry here, notably material provisioning, or how the political-economic system distributes material (and even immaterial) costs and benefits ([Caporaso and Levine, 1992](#)). Political economy therefore involves the study of struggle, or the processes by which some actors benefit from particular systems or processes at the exclusion of others ([Wolff and Resnik, 1987](#)).

The closely related field of political ecology, in its broadest sense, also focuses on the influence of power relations and structural inequalities, but with a closer link to human processes which degrade the natural environment ([Wolf, 1972](#)). [Bryant and Bailey](#)

Table 1
Conceptual overview of related themes and disciplines.

	Political economy	Political Ecology	Social Justice	Critical Development Studies
Primary focus	States and markets, conflict over natural resources, winners and losers	Power regimes, processes, or ideologies that enclosure upon resources or exclude agents from access	Fairness and equity in decision-making practices	Patterns of inequality in global economic development and growth
Related academic disciplines	Resource economics, geopolitics, political geography, political science, economic geography	Human geography, ecology, political geography, sociology, peasant studies	Environmental sociology, law, jurisprudence, philosophy, ethics, energy policy	Development studies, development economics, political geography, political science, international political economy
Key concepts or terms	Resource curse, intrastate conflict, interstate war	Human rights, externalities, accumulation by dispossession, new imperialism, peripheralization, resistance	Procedural justice, distributive justice, cosmopolitan justice, justice as recognition	Core and periphery, development discourse, appropriate technology
Selected authors	Michael Watts, Richard Auty, Terry Lynn Karl, Vaclav Smil, Michael L. Ross	David Harvey, Paul Robbins, Bill Cooke, Uma Kothari, Andy Blowers, Pieter Leroy, Noel Castree, James McCarthy	Karen Bickerstaff, Gordon Walker, Harriet Bulkeley, Benjamin Sovacool, Raphael Heffron, Darren McCauley, Kirsten Jenkins	Jeffrey Sachs, U. Kothari, Arturo Escobar, James Ferguson, James C. Scott, EF Schumacher

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