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Disaster Urbanization: The City Between Crisis and Calamity

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Abstract

This paper asks what critical urban theory can add to the sociology of disasters. If the fundamental insight of disaster studies is that there's no such thing as a natural disaster, the starting point for critical urban studies is that capitalist urbanization is a disaster waiting to happen. Disasters are promoted and inflected by the specific forms of crisis and vulnerability created by neoliberal urbanization. Disasters are also ways in which urban space is produced and remade, in a process that can be called disaster urbanization. A critical account of the relationship between contemporary urbanization and disaster can help us better understand the disaster-prone, unevenly urbanizing future.

Keywords: Disasters; Urbanization; Crisis; Critical Urban Theory; Neoliberalization; Planetary Urbanization; Vulnerability.

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There are two common, related ideas about cities and disaster. The first sees urban life as teetering on the edge of survival, liable to go into rapid decline or end altogether as a consequence of disaster. In this view, disasters threaten to kill off cities, or cause them to become unviable. The second idea sees disasters as external events that intrude upon urbanization but which are unable to change the essentially heroic nature of city life. Both of these narratives have become common during the COVID-19 pandemic. The geographer Joel Kotkin, for example, sees population density as a sufficiently major problem to threaten the future of urban life. "This crisis is the right moment for the world to reconsider the conventional wisdom that denser cities are better cities... Sadly, many of the attractions that make places like New York so unique and appealing also make them more dangerous" (Kotkin, 2020). Conversely, economist and urbanist Ed Glaeser sees global urbanism as the key to post-pandemic economic life. Writing in a London newspaper, he argues,

> The age of urban miracles is not over. If the Government raises its shield against disease and can ensure that the UK's capital is a good place to do business and live, then the people of London can get back to their ordinary business of inventing the future" (Glaeser 2021).

For a sociologically and politically useful understanding of disaster, neither the anti-urban perspective nor the Promethean view are helpful. Cities have been both surviving and contributing to disasters for a long time. A critical understanding of the relationship between urbanization and disaster requires a different analysis. Rather than demonizing or deifying contemporary urbanization, it would be more helpful to ask if there are ways in which contemporary urbanization encourages and amplifies disaster, and to examine the ways in which disasters might be productive of certain types of urban space.

I want to try to shed some light on these questions by considering what critical urban theory can add to disaster studies. The first critical injunction would be to historicize: rather than asking today about the possible relationship between urban life in general and disasters, we should ask if the specific kinds of injustices and inequalities that are produced by contemporary capitalist urbanization contribute to disasters or are shaped by them. We need to ask how neoliberal urbanization helps to make disaster, and is in turn remade by it.

The challenge for analysts of contemporary urban disasters, I argue, is to understand the relationship between disaster and crisis. The crisis tendencies and contradictions of neoliberal urbanization are creating new structures of vulnerability and risk. It is this uneven pattern that is the relevant context for understanding the relationship between disasters and urbanization today. Disasters are, in this sense, encouraged by contemporary urbanization, and their harmfulness is channeled in specific ways. They are also used to produce particular kinds of urban spaces and processes, which we can call *disaster urbanization*. As disasters become more common (Gu, 2019), disaster urbanization will become more prevalent. This presents something of a paradox: disasters are defined precisely by their departure from the norm (Perry, 2007), yet this abnormal state is becoming increasingly routine. Disaster urbanization therefore points to some of the political and economic fault lines that will define that dreaded anticipatory condition which disasters seem to call into being: the new normal.

It is not my goal here to revisit debates over the meaning of urbanization or planetarity, or to rehash terminological disputes regarding the difference between disasters and related terms (Tierney, 2019; Calhoun, 2004; Quarantelli, 2000). I am not claiming that disasters are exclusively or uniquely urban. Nor am I focusing on the ongoing debate about specific factors that

are currently shaping the transmission of COVID-19 in cities. Rather, I want to explore the relationship between the routine forms of destabilization that increasingly defines contemporary urbanization and the specific forms of destabilization that occurs with disasters.

For this reason, I am not drawing a sharp distinction between so-called natural disasters, such as extreme weather events, and human-made disasters, such as the 2020 Beirut port explosion. The fundamental insight of critical disaster studies is that there is no such thing as a natural disaster (Hartman & Squires, 2006; Smith, 2006). "The origins of disaster lie not in nature, and not in technology, but rather in the ordinary everyday workings of society itself" (Tierney, 2014, p. 5). Disasters may be triggered by any variety of causes, but they are distinguished by the socially-produced damage to human lives, spaces and projects that they cause. "An earthquake happening in a region where no humans live is not a disaster, it is just a trembling of the earth" (Guggenheim, 2014, p. 3). Humans can both directly cause putatively natural disasters as well as decisively shape the contexts that are necessary for them to be recognized as disastrous. As I shall explain, the structure of vulnerability created by contemporary urbanization is one of the most important contexts in this respect.

There are concrete political stakes to properly understanding the relationship between disaster, crisis, and contemporary urbanization. Disasters activate something within cities that crises do not. Disasters are not only actionable — they *demand* action, such that failing to address them is prima facie evidence of misrule. In most places, the onset of a disaster makes it possible to officially declare a "serious incident" or state of emergency, thus triggering not only new executive powers but also additional discretionary funding. Crisis, on the other hand, is a much looser term, more at home in the rhetoric of activists and social theorists. Declaring a crisis may be a way for a political actor to try to dramatize a problem, but most countries lack an official crisis designation. Crises often seem to simply grind on, and only demand action when they boil over into disasters. If the conceptual, political and legal frames around normalcy, risk and harm were altered, perhaps the housing crisis, the climate crisis, or the crisis of care (Fraser, 2016) could generate some of the urgency and energy summoned by disasters.

Understanding the relationship between urbanization, crisis, and disaster is not, ultimately, a question of terminology, but one of concrete political power. What kinds of urban political power and authority are necessary to address both disasters and crises? What is the baseline urban condition that defines normalcy? After a calamitous event, should the urban status quo ante be restored or superseded? In order to answer questions of this sort, we need a critical understanding of contemporary urbanization, its crisis tendencies, and the ways in which it both shapes and is shaped by disaster.

1 Urban Crisis Tendencies

It is possible to imagine a version of urbanization that socializes risk, makes universal residential stability an explicit policy goal, and deescalates the climate emergency. But that is not the version of urbanization that currently predominates. After at least forty years of neoliberal development, urbanization today tends to intensify inequality, risk and precarity. This is the specific context in which urban disasters take place today. If disasters such as pandemics or wildfires are exceptional events, the routine urban life they intrude upon is itself marked by a number of crisis tendencies. The first step in a critical urban sociology of disaster is recognizing that contemporary disasters disrupt urbanization that is already in a state of crisis.

There is a copious literature detailing the development, since the late 1970s and 1980s, of neoliberal urbanization (Hackworth, 2007; Brenner et al., 2010; Brenner & Theodore, 2002 &

2005; Pinson & Journel, 2016). As a term to describe overall urban political-economic change, it is usually accompanied by other processes at various scales, such as financialization (Fields, 2017), commodification (Fenton et al., 2013), and assetization (Birch & Muniesa 2020). These interlocking processes having occurred unevenly, in different ways and to different extents in different cities and urban regions, but they tend to appear together. This is not an argument about every urban region developing in identical ways or following the same logic. But it does name a broad, variegated, ongoing historical process.

For this discussion, one of the most salient elements of neoliberal urbanization is the growth of precarity (Philo et al., 2019; Lancione, 2019; Watt, 2018; Ferreri et al., 2017). This can be seen most clearly in the housing system. As urban development becomes commodified and financialized, housing becomes increasingly inaccessible and insecure. Residential precariousness can be seen in many forms, including the expansion of temporary and insecure tenures, reduced housing accessibility, the undermining of stable forms of social housing, overcrowding, the expansion of informal and illegal housing forms, and the growth of homelessness. In some instances, the creation of fluid or temporary housing was an explicit policy goal, while in others it has been the unintended if not unpredicted outcome of other policies (Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

The housing crisis should be seen as part of a broader crisis of social reproduction (Madden, 2020). Nancy Fraser identifies the "crisis of social reproduction" as the fact that "on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies" (Fraser, 2016, p. 100). What Fraser calls "financialized capitalism" is undermining its own conditions of possibility by disrupting the processes by which labor reproduces itself, without which it cannot continue to exist. This takes the form not only of unstable housing but also exhaustion, depleting household resources and damaging the networks of informal care that make all economic action possible. For many poor and working-class households in big cities today, social reproduction is increasingly taxing and difficult, a burden that is disproportionately though not solely borne by women. In addition to creating extensive misery, this constitutes a crisis tendency at the heart of urban political-economic life.

More generally, urban neoliberalization entails the redistribution and reorganization of risk and vulnerability. Risk is being de-socialized, redistributed away from the state and corporate actors and onto newly "responsibilized" individuals, families and communities (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; Gray, 2009). The movement of risk within the neoliberal city mirrors other neoliberal policy areas, in that it involves both the rolling back of sources of protection as well as the rolling out of new forms of hazard. The privatization of social services, the recommodification of housing, the deregulation of many industries and the erosion of old-age pensions and other forms of social security are all examples of the rolling back of protections against risk. But the neoliberal metropolis is also a place characterized by the creative invention and expansion of new forms of risk, speculation, securitization and hedging that are migrating out of financial contexts to become broader tools of governance (Breger Bush, 2016; Konings, 2016).

The language of risk suggests a set of calculable, knowable hazards. But this picture may be too rationalistic. The uneven exposure to the chances of harm and death in cities today is closer to what Judith Butler (2012) invokes as "an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable" (p. 148). Butler here is describing a far more fundamental process of valuing and protecting some lives while rendering others unprotected and worthless. After

decades of neoliberal development, city life today is characterized precisely by a tactical, uneven distribution of precarity. The question is not the differential expression of manageable risks so much as the systemic generation of the social condition within cities that Oren Yiftachel (2020) calls "displaceability" and Ali Bhagat (2020), calls "disposability": the condition of being easily removed, erased, and forgotten, as a result of direct displacement as well as unequal citizenship, weakened supportive institutions, inadequate and insecure housing, and blatantly unfair juridical procedures.

The neoliberal redistribution of risk and vulnerability varies greatly between global contexts, but in most places where it appears it is deeply racialized. Neoliberal urban capitalism is a form of racial capitalism, and as such, Black urban spaces and communities of color are subjected to specific forms of exploitation and displaceability, and denied the security and protection granted to others. As Ida Danewid (2020) argues, "the racial structuring of life and death in the global city" (p. 291) is deeply marked by histories of empire and colonialism, as well as by neo- and post-colonial patterns in the present.

Neoliberal urbanization itself has neo-colonial qualities, in that it is both expansionary and centralizing. As urbanization develops across the planet, it is in some places densely inhabited, and in others just an infrastructural shadow of city life. Urban development causes the production of space and consumption of resources well beyond the boundaries of urban areas (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). In its contemporary form, it directly causes the creation of extraction zones, mineral frontiers, plantations, transit corridors, wastelands, and other spaces that are geographically and socially far from city centers but which are still central to the urban process (Brenner, 2014). Many of these spaces are not inhabitable or appropriable as social space, but they do require some forms of social practices and residential capacity. And of course a planetary-urban system based upon carbon capitalism is at the center of the climate crisis, with urbanization a major cause of carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases. As Mike Davis puts it, "the urbanization of humanity" is "the single most important cause of global warming" (Davis, 2010, p. 30). Between the commodification of nature and ecological destabilization, the imprint of urbanization on the planet harbors its own crisis tendency, as urbanization threatens the ecological conditions upon which it depends.

If disasters are by definition "non-routine events" (Kreps, 1998), it is important to recognize that the routine state of urbanization into which they intrude is itself a social and ecological crisis. COVID-19 arrived in urban areas that were already enduring housing crisis and a broader crisis of social reproduction. These crisis tendencies are routine parts of neoliberal capitalist urbanization, not signs of its failure or breakdown. Yet by threatening the social and ecological conditions of possibility of urban life itself, they also put it in danger and make it highly unstable. It is not surprising that they set the stage for disaster and sometimes directly cause it.

2 Urban Structures of Vulnerability

If neoliberal urbanism is characterized by ongoing crisis, how specifically does it encourage disaster? One of the key concepts in disaster studies is vulnerability (Faas, 2016; Cutter, 1996). Vulnerability needs to be understood as a social and political condition, located within axes of class, race, gender and other forms of power (see Jacobs, 2019). Making a social group vulnerable, I would argue, is among other things an urban process, one that unfolds through time within variegated, unequal urban spaces. The crisis tendencies of contemporary urbanization outlined above — as well as the specific morphologies and built forms of urbanization today

— create a distinctive structure of vulnerability within cities that is conducive to disasters and tends to channel their damage in distinct ways.

This is not to claim that the urbanization of disaster is unique or new. To some extent, of course, social space in any form is conducive to disaster, because no human is invulnerable. And obviously urbanism has long had to contend with the threat of catastrophe. Ancient urban thought — as found in biblical sources as well as secular texts, such as Thucydides' account of the plague of Athens — is replete with descriptions of disasters befalling cities. But the ways in which urbanization creates disaster varies historically. Generally speaking, there are relatively distinct, identifiable ways in which neoliberal urbanization encourages and shapes disasters.

Neoliberal cities feature distinctive patterns of inequality, and when disaster strikes, these patterns channel harm towards the least powerful city dwellers, those who are relegated to the most deprived neighborhoods and buildings, required to labor in the most risky conditions, and denied the most up-to-date technological and medical protections. Disaster's impact upon place and space is highly uneven, but in neoliberal cities, space and place are highly stratified by race, class, gender, family structure, language, migration status, and other factors. Summarizing a large body of research, it is clear that "the impacts of disasters often fall most heavily on those who are most vulnerable: the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups" (Tierney, 2019, p. 19). Working class households, racialized groups and minoritized communities experience greater harm during them and are given fewer resources to recover from them (Fothergill et al., 1999). Due to gender norms, political exclusion, relegation to social-reproductive labor and incidents of direct violence, women are more likely to die in disasters than men (Juran & Trivedi, 2015; Fothergill, 1998). Disasters are more likely to strike those groups that experience the most acute forms of urban precarity.

Neoliberal urban inequalities have a complex, intersectional character that can become self-reinforcing when disasters occur. Thomas et al., (2019) demonstrate that oppressed or disenfranchised groups tend to experience simultaneous social, economic, political and epistemic marginalization that strongly reinforces their vulnerability to disaster. Differential vulnerabilities are also exacerbated by "colorblind" preparedness policies that fail to recognize the distinctive hazards caused by structural racism (Hardy et al., 2017) and which fail to account for inequalities between different urban districts or neighborhoods as well as inequality within them.

The neoliberal housing system is particularly conducive to disaster. By introducing new sources of precarity, instability and inaccessibility into the housing system, neoliberal changes to the political-economy of housing in many places since the 1980s has meant that many households face new forms of hazard. Private rental housing has greatly expanded in neoliberalizing cities, and public housing authorities have faced severe cutbacks, in both cases shifting risk and vulnerability onto renters. When disasters occur, rent and eviction are significant vectors of harm. According to the large body of research summarized by Lee & Van Zandt (2019), at all phases of disaster, from preparedness to impact, response to recovery, renters are more vulnerable and less protected than owners. Comparing the impacts of Hurricane Andrew on Miami, Florida and Hurricane Ike on Galveston, Texas, Peacock et al. (2014) demonstrated among other things that owner-occupied housing tends to suffer lower levels of damage and to recover more swiftly after a disaster, and that these effects where exacerbated by racialized inequalities. A study of a 2018 tornado in Marshalltown, Iowa (Hamideh et al., 2021a) found that renters, immigrants and other precarious households were less prepared before the tornado and slower to recover after it. Other research (Hamideh et al., 2021b) has also found that disaster vulnerability and harm are shaped by housing type, with occupants of single-family homes tending

to enjoy greater protections before disaster and to be given more support following disasters, compared to residents of multifamily buildings.

Some forms of neoliberal urban development are directly implicated in increasing vulnerability to disaster. A study of La Condesa in Mexico City suggests that gentrification contributed to the vulnerability of working-class residents (Castillo-Oropeza et al., 2018). Expensive, inaccessible housing and urban development has the effect of pushing working-class and minoritized people into informal residential zones, with legally unrecognized tenancies, inadequate infrastructure and hazardous maintenance standards that are also more vulnerable to floods (Taş et al., 2013), typhoons (Morin et al., 2016), and other disasters. As a result of neoliberal policies, increasingly unequal employment structures, and new real estate strategies, contemporary housing systems heighten the vulnerability to disasters of the least-powerful households.

There are of course many elements of urban life today that help to reduce and collectivize vulnerability (Vale & Campanella 2005), including public health infrastructure, social housing, and other state institutions as well as social movements, community groups, and dense networks of solidarity and mutual aid. But the neoliberal transformation of the state tends to undermine the public institutions tasked with socializing risk. Privatized social services tend to produce outcomes that are more uneven than those of democratically-accountable alternatives. Weakened public health infrastructures produce less healthy publics, and are less able to respond swiftly in the event of disaster. And while 'bottom-up' responses to disaster play an important role in ameliorating social suffering, they operate at a different scale and must struggle against the effects of the state's abandonment of particular urban populations.

Neoliberal urbanization's distinctive patterns of vulnerability are not only to be found in the centers of cities and urban regions. In its moment of "extension" (Brenner & Schmid 2015; Brenner, 2014) — in the expansion of operational landscapes and urbanizing spaces into new zones — urbanization in its neoliberal-planetary form fosters disaster by placing people and infrastructure in harms way. New forms of agriculture, deforestation and resource extraction, and new patterns of migration and settlement in urban peripheries have been found to encourage a variety of devastating events. These include heightened risks of flooding (Shatkin, 2019; Adikari et al., 2010), wildfires (Radeloff et al., 2018; Greenberg, 2021; Buxton et al., 2011), geo-hazards such as landslides (Cui et al., 2019), zoonotic disease transmission (Connolly et al., 2020, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2019), and other disasters. It would be an error to theorize the link between planetary urbanization and disaster in a neo-Malthusian vein that imagines the problem is too many people in too many megacities on a finite planet. The problem is not population growth; it is the domination of urban life by a system dedicated to accumulation for accumulation's sake and production for production's sake. Significant parts of the world, and especially areas with high population growth, produce negligible amounts of greenhouse gas emissions (Satterthwaite, 2009). It is not urbanization per se, but the specific political-economic form of contemporary urbanization that is pushing the planet towards disaster.

3 Disaster Urbanization

As much as urbanization today contributes to and shapes disasters, at the same time, disasters also produce certain kinds of urban space. What can be called *disaster urbanization* signifies the contested, contradictory processes of citymaking that occur in anticipation of, during and as a result of disasters. Disaster urbanization appears very differently in different contexts, but a few overall patterns can be provisionally observed.

Even before any disaster occurs, disaster preparedness involves the arrangement of urban space in particular ways (Carpenter & Grünewald, 2016; Anderson, 2010; Lakoff, 2007). This can include infrastructure at the scale of the street, larger urban-scale technologies, particular approaches to design, complex systems of surveillance and detection, and a range of domestic and neighborhood practices, sensitivities and knowledges. All spaces and technologies of preparedness, from levees to shelters, raise questions about which people and places the authorities seek to protect, and which people and places will be abandoned (Deville et al., 2014). Urban evacuation and disaster management plans may be based on abstract spatial knowledges, but they can fail if they do not take into account actual spatial practices (Kammerbauer, 2013). The logic of protecting vulnerable people can clash directly with logics of protecting valuable spaces, and the results of these conflicts becomes durable through its installation in the built environment. Efforts at preparedness and prevention are a crucial responsibility of the state, but they can take manifestly unjust forms, as the pursuit of preparedness uses urban space to shield some groups and their resources but not others. Building regulations, planning guidelines and insurance policies also format urban space in anticipation of disaster, but as Elliott (2017 & 2021) has demonstrated, these policies entail thorny conflicts over deservedness, justice and differential risk exposure.

Because disasters are so different, it is difficult to generalize about the production of urban space during their immediate impact phase (Wray et al., 2020). I would argue that what disasters do seem to open up in cities when they strike is the possibility for urban space to swiftly change valences from a support to a threat. Residential districts are suddenly emptied as inhabitants flee danger. Public spaces that had been sites for conviviality suddenly become deadly. Transportation infrastructures that had been central tools for mobility suddenly fail or become conduits for hazards. At multiple scales — from the elevator in an apartment building to the rivers that support urban regions to the transportation networks that connect disparate cities — disasters can transform urban spaces and infrastructures from the material support for urban life to a threat to its stability and continuity. Part of what makes urban life during disasters feel so uncanny is this valence shift, as familiar urban amenities abruptly become threatening. At the same time, the process can work in reverse as well. First responders or neighbors engaging in emergency aid may make new use of shared spaces like hallways, parking lots and other everyday sites (Wallace and Wallace 2008), in essence turning social infrastructure that had been lying fallow into a crucial lifeline for delivering care and assistance.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, urban space becomes a tool drafted into the response effort (Rodriguez et al., 2006). Mutual aid takes place in public, using the city, its spaces and its patterns of solidarity as a resource in acts of creative improvisation (Solnit, 2009). Public facilities like sports stadiums, community halls, hospitals, hotels or convention centers become sites for relief distribution, shelters or response coordination. The emergency transformation of urban space in the aftermath of a disaster has a strong makeshift character, and may involve extensive volunteer participation dispersed throughout neighborhoods and city spaces (Twigg & Mosel, 2017). During Superstorm Sandy in New York, grassroots responses like Occupy Sandy had a radical quality that managed to question the priorities of the state while also in many ways outperforming it, providing assistance to housing blocks and neighborhoods that the official response was failing to reach (Conroy, 2019). Yet there is still the potential for self-organized responses to perpetuate inequality in terms of race and class (Medwinter, 2020).

The more long-lasting forms of disaster urbanization occur after initial emergencies have passed. During the return and rebuilding phase after disasters, urban space gets reconfigured again. There are examples of democratic, grassroots efforts of neighborhood rebuilding

(Anguelovski, 2014), but rebuilding also offers the possibility for more exclusionary urban space to be produced. Temporary displacement from the impact of a disaster can become permanent reconfigurations as different groups return unevenly to their previous homes (Levine et al., 2007). The racialized impacts of disasters can be compounded by racialized recoveries (Gotham, 2014). Following Hurricane Katrina, neighborhoods with larger proportions of Black residents received less assistance relative to the damage they sustained (Kamel, 2012). One analysis found that in New Orleans, "the damage caused by Katrina did not have a strongly differential impact on black neighborhoods; the differences arise in the ability to return and rebuild in the city" (Bates, 2006, p. 17). Destroyed sites, if they occupy strategic locations, can be treated as opportunities for post-disaster gentrification or speculation. Neighborhoods that sustained greater damage from Katrina were more likely to subsequently undergo gentrification than less damaged areas (van Holm & Wyczalkowski, 2019). Disaster gentrification can be both a cause and outcome of racialized displacement. In the name of repair and restoration, a new urban landscape can be built that purges the city of less powerful populations or less profitable land uses.

The anticipation of future disasters is now a major rationale and ideological justification for urban development. Disaster avoidance and the democratization of safety are often major goals for radical projects that pursue decarbonization or ecosocialist urbanism (Cohen, 2020). But in actually-existing neoliberal cities, the disastrous future is more commonly used to justify elitist urban developments in the present (Castán Broto & Robin, 2020; Shi, 2020; Sovacool et al., 2019; Long & Rice, 2019). The logic of disaster avoidance and resilience provides ubiquitous justification for exclusionary developments promoted as green enclaves. In many cases, these projects do not reduce risk or increase overall protection from catastrophe — they merely shift risk onto other, more vulnerable populations. Thomas & Warner (2019) describe numerous examples of threat displacement, climate gentrification, elite fortification and other forms of weaponizing vulnerability to disasters linked to climate change. The luxury mega-enclave Eko Atlantic in Lagos, for example, is promoted as a utopian solution to a flooded future, but it has endangered the communities beyond its boundaries. Ajibade (2017) found that, "For the most part, the project commodifies not just nature but the idea of adaptation by converting a publicly owned common-pool resource (ocean space and seabed) into a prime estate for capital accumulation." (p. 89) In their attempts to fortify against and secede from the disaster-prone city, some extreme forms of resilient urbanism verge on eco-apartheid (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019). More routine green development can also be associated with a slower but consistent accretion of exclusionary urban space. Philadelphia's suite of stormwater management adaptions, part of their strategy to become "climate ready," were concentrated in wealthy enclaves, and when deployed elsewhere in the city, were associated with gentrification (Shokry et al., 2020). In the name of avoiding future calamities or building resilience against them, disaster urbanization can end up contributing to the very social and ecological catastrophes it supposedly tries to avoid.

Disasters also transform the nature of urban authority and the scope of urban policy. In Zeiderman's (2016) study of the government of "zones of high risk" for disasters in Bogotá, risk becomes central to a pervasive political rationality that shapes both the state's understanding of its own tasks and the demands that city-dwellers pose to it. In Bangladesh, Paprocki (2018) has demonstrated that climate adaptation predicated on the inevitability of accelerated urbanization serves as a form of governance that legitimizes agrarian dispossession. In other cities, "resilience" has become the dominant political frame, focusing urban authority around technocratic solutions to the climate crisis while defining other issues — such as housing injustice

or labor exploitation — as irrelevant to the new policy emphases (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2020).

Disasters in their destructiveness have the power to reveal the fissures and injustices of contemporary urbanization. It is certainly possible for urban disasters to be used to rearticulate public understandings about who is helped and who is harmed by the dominant model of urbanization and become vehicles for city-dwellers to make new claims about welfare, social citizenships, and the distribution of safety. The space of exception that disasters enact within urban politics can be deployed for a variety of purposes, including a critical politics of disaster that seeks to transform the normal urban condition, not just prepare and repair it. But the predominant direction of change for the politics of disaster urbanization has been technocratizing rather than democratizing. Disasters endow urban government with new emergency powers and a new remit to reorganize space in the name of preparedness and recovery. This often coincides with spectacular forms of municipal failure. But so far they have not led to the establishment of new governing regimes or political-economic configurations within cities.

4 Conclusion: For a Critical Urban Disaster Studies

If the fundamental insight of disaster studies is that there's no such thing as a natural disaster, the starting point for critical urban studies is that capitalist urbanization is a disaster waiting to happen. Both of these perspectives will be needed to make sense of the disastrous, unevenly urbanizing future. Disasters, I have been arguing, are ways in which urban space is produced and remade, just as disasters are promoted and inflected by the specific forms of crisis and vulnerability created by contemporary urbanization. The intersection between the event of disaster and the process of urbanization will be a crucial point of social and political conflict for the foreseeable future.

If the world will be marked by more frequent urban disasters, then disaster urbanization is going to become an increasingly dominant mode through which urban space is produced. Activists, advocates, political actors and engaged scholars need to develop ways to pursue a critical politics of urban disaster that can address the ongoing crises that are endemic to neoliberal urbanization as well as the periodic disasters that impact it. There should be mechanisms that allow the housing crisis or the crisis of social reproduction to activate the same urgency as disasters, as addressing them in a democratic way would not only reduce immediate injustices but also help de-vulnerabilize the city. Disaster preparedness needs to be aimed at critically reconstructing urban life along more democratic, egalitarian lines. There must be radical understandings of preparedness and risk (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021; Jacobs, 2019) that take into account situated knowledges and intersectional oppressions.

More generally, disaster urbanization should be recognized as a major way in which the urban landscape is negotiated and shaped. Cities will not be destroyed by disasters, but they are being changed by them. As disasters become more common, disaster urbanization will become an ever more dominant mode of citymaking. Urban disasters are anticipatory, future-shaping events that entail moments of destruction and moments of creation, when urban space and urban politics are torn apart and reconstructed. An adequate understanding of urban disasters needs to be attuned to both of these moments, as they contain the threat of immense harm as well as the potential for profoundly remaking urban life.

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