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The phrase “natural catastrophe” is an oxymoron. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and great storms are all part of nature and on geological time scales are as normal as breathing is to us. The catastrophe is that we insist on building and living on earthquake faults, in floodplains, on the flanks of volcanoes, and in places frequently visited by violent storms. That the ancients did so can hardly be held against them, living in ignorance of the causes and history of such events; but that we do so today speaks volumes about the complex relationship between modern man and nature. It is a relationship that continues to exact an enormous toll in human suffering and which molds the political and physical infrastructure of much of the world today. Continued ignorance of the history and nature of this relationship portends and unending string of “natural” catastrophes.

Stuart Schwartz’s brilliant and entertaining Sea of Storms casts a welcome light on this fascinating if disturbing blind spot in our relationship to nature, meticulously describing the social effects of hurricanes affecting the greater Caribbean region, from Barbados to the U.S. Gulf and southeast coasts. This is not a blow-by-blow account of each and every hurricane known to have affected the region; rather, Schwartz uses individual hurricanes to illustrate the complex interplay between social institutions, notably slavery, political systems such as socialism and capitalism, and natural hazards. Running through this exceptionally well researched book are a number of interesting threads that seem invariant over time. One is the tension between commerce and public safety. As trade expanded across the Caribbean in the 16th Century, Spanish governors concentrated people and wealth in coastal ports to support shipping, thus making island communities increasingly vulnerable to hurricanes. After such ports were smashed, they were simply rebuilt, negating any tendency to adapt to the hazard. Fearing lawsuits from local businesses, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin delayed the evacuation of his city as Hurricane Katrina approached in 2005, a decision that probably cost hundreds of lives. The continued reckless
development of coastlines in the face of repeated catastrophes testifies to the triumph of money over safety.

Yet there has been much evolution in the relationship between man and hurricanes since the pre-Columbian era. The ancient Mayans, Tainos, and Caribs, along with early European settlers, regarded great storms as acts of God or gods, often as retribution for sins. As enlightenment science revealed these events to be natural phenomena, victims increasingly blamed politicians and governments for the disasters and accordingly sought relief from governments rather than from their neighbors or from charitable contributions from private citizens and sovereigns. Savvy politicians learned to use hurricane disasters to bolster their reputation and consolidate their power over their constituents. Examples include Fidel Castro’s response to Hurricane Flora in Cuba in 1963 and Governor Chris Christie’s use of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 to advance his political career.

If there is a weakness in Sea of Storms, it is its light treatment of insurance and reinsurance as means of dealing with hurricane disasters in modern times. The interplay and tension between private insurance and government insurance, regulations, and disaster relief is a fascinating and important part of the story of how humanity deals with natural catastrophes. But this is a small complaint about an important contribution to the understanding of how we interact with nature.

If only all citizens and politicians in hurricane-prone regions would read and absorb the lessons of Sea of Storms, we might not all be doomed to repeat the disasters of the past.

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