

Book Review

- *In the Shadows of Tungurahua. Disaster Politics in Highland Ecuador*, by A.J. Faas, Rutgers University Press, 2023

In this book, anthropologist A.J. Faas addresses a series of socio-natural processes in the Ecuadorean Andes. Faas focuses on the active stratovolcano, Tungurahua, and the eruptions and ensuing disasters that occurred in Penipe Canton, Chimborazo Province, in 1999 and, more critically, in 2006. The events are similar to other disaster stories, including evacuation, shelter, housing recovery, and resettlement, and the book describes many facets of these phenomena. However, *In the Shadows of Tungurahua* is also an empirically rich and theoretically driven account that goes beyond the typical disaster narrative, in that it serves to inspire future research by Latin American and Caribbean scholars interested in politics, nature-culture, indigenous pieces of knowledge, and rural livelihoods in a post-colonial society.

Along with a preface, prologue and introduction presenting Faas' theoretical standpoint, the book is split into three parts: 'Mobility and Legibility', consisting of four chapters; 'The Palimpsest of Minga', with three; and 'Recoveries', containing one final chapter and an epilogue. As with all good pieces of ethnography, the book is the result of Faas' personal and long-standing engagement with this field site, which began in 2009 and continued with visits in 2011, 2013 and 2018. The book makes use of the conceptual tools of disaster anthropology. This approach, along with others from geography and political ecology, has 'denaturalised' the explanation of disasters, accounting instead for the complex and profound social structures that explain their occurrence – an outcome mainly achieved through the concept of disaster vulnerability.

Complementing this theoretical positioning, one of the book's main strengths lies in its general framing: How should we tell the story of disasters? Which actors and materials must we analyse? What do disasters have to do with colonial history? When do we start to recount their histories? According to Faas, disaster researchers regularly equate the disaster with the hazard, analysing the former only following the emergence of the latter. Thus, the focus is placed on 'the earthquake', 'the flood' or 'the volcanic eruption', as if these serve to summarise and symbolise that which societies undergo. However, there is a need to delve

deeper into such stories by simultaneously incorporating natural and human components – in the lexicon of disaster studies: hazards and vulnerabilities.

The author complements his perspective with several concepts from anthropological and social theory, including assemblages, onto-politics, the politics of deservingness and bare life. Such analytical and methodological framing entails ‘ethnographically mapping assemblages’ (p. 15) that describe how different components are put together, including their (unintended) coordination and mutual influence. Adopting this approach, the book focuses on how campesinos in Pusuca and Manzano (Penipe Canton) experienced disaster processes, moving back and forth through time and space to analyse the colonial roots of disaster risk creation, processes of displacement, mobility and negotiations surrounding resettlement, the everyday work of the *minga* tradition, the local politics within cabildos, and so on. The book examines Latin American disaster politics from a more-than-human assemblage: an assemblage of nature-cultures, but also an assemblage of state power.

A particular achievement of the book lies in Faas’ analysis of the complex institution of *minga*. *Minga* is a collective work custom dating back centuries in the region and is based on values such as cooperation, communal labour, mutual aid, and the nurturing of subaltern politics and utopian projects. Embedding *minga* within state assemblages, however, the book provides a more nuanced account of its role in local and state politics. Going beyond romantic and often uncritical assessments of this localised practice, the author describes how it can serve as a means of both domination and liberation – a means by which the state strengthens its authority, and by which local communities exercise their autonomy in an (often) horizontal manner. As such, *minga* emerges in the book as a palimpsest through which a set of localised *tareas* come into existence, often clashing with wage labour and occupying a central position in explanations of how power brokerage works at the local level.

As a book focused on disaster politics, it concludes by addressing processes of recovery and healing, providing a somewhat ambivalent account of what happened to the local people. The eruptions of 1999 and 2006 evoke an eternal recurrence that is experienced in multiple places exposed to hazards. And while far from a weakness, herein lies an aspect that I feel the book overlooks. Although mindful of Faas’ concern regarding traditional disaster stories, the book still pays little attention to the material forces of the volcano and how these are projected in the future. Many of our more-than-human analyses are too focused on the human, leaving aside, in this case, the geological and magmatic forces of Tungurahua. Surely, the volcano is a central agent in the nature-cultural assemblage, including its role in co-living or *convivir*. Tungurahua ages alongside those who live in her shadow, embodying the role of the grandmother for them, and while these ideas emerge in the epilogue, some of Tungurahua’s affects remain unclear. I am particularly interested in the volcano’s ongoing material outcomes as a grandmother, not only concerning local livelihoods but, more critically, to the next potential eruption.

Ultimately, the book is of considerable interest to Latin American and Caribbean scholars and researchers. This is not a book about a disaster, about colonial politics or about rural living in the Andes. It is not a book about a particular Latin American volcano or the practice of *minga*. The history of the Ecuadorean highlands as recounted by Faas is one that can be found in many of our geographies. *In the Shadows of Tungurahua* contributes to Latin American studies, Andean anthropology and disaster studies, but as with only a handful of truly good books, it is a piece of scholarship that works to illuminate many of the ongoing histories, politics and cultures of our region.

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