

Swamy, R., (2025). *Capitalism and Catastrophe: a Critical Disaster Studies Manifesto*. New York: Bergdahn Books.

A social anthropologist, Raja Swamy's new book *Capitalism and Catastrophe* takes readers on an intriguing journey that asks thought-provoking questions about disasters, vulnerabilities, society and capitalism. Swamy's book digs deeper into the social constructs of disasters noting that there is another dimension of 'what constitutes a disaster' adding philosophical threads to the ever-evolving and expanding disaster science literature. "*Capitalism and Catastrophe: A Critical Disaster Studies Manifesto* synthesizes critical perspectives on the impact of disasters in regard to social inequality." Swamy eloquently highlights vulnerabilities in communities and catastrophic disasters noting that disasters will not impact everyone the same way. While touching on the important pieces of the disaster literature, Swamy takes his arguments a step further noting that capitalism is perhaps, more of the root cause for the social pieces that contribute to the making of a disaster. "Objects of study - disasters, power relations, humanitarian practice, vulnerability, risk, resilience, resistance and so on - ought to be understood in historical materialistic terms."¹ Swamy notes that the book utilizes a Marxist framework (p.21).

Capitalism and Catastrophe: a Critical Disaster Studies Manifesto focuses on a couple of interesting themes about disasters. First, Swamy notes how climate change is an important piece of understanding that "disasters" per se, will become more detrimental to the environment and will be potentially more catastrophic because of the earth warming and the various climate effects that arise from this. Many scholars note these same concerns highlighting that the increase of violent storms is certainly a major concern and will be one that needs to be

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effectively managed by governments if they are going to effectively manage such disasters in the future. Swamy builds on this argument, and instead of continuing the conversation about climate change and the effects of it on future disasters, Swamy focuses on some of the root causes of climate change—which he argues is capitalism and the various impacts of capitalism on the greater international political arena.

Swamy writes, “Capitalism as a world ordering system, or imperialism its highest stage as Lenin once described it, continues to wreak havoc across the planet, leaving scars and open wounds, from the deepest oceans where acidification and warming waters threaten marine life, to the highest reaches of the atmosphere where greenhouse gases today act like a blanket heating up the planet, exacerbating extreme events or unleashing new ones we have never before experienced (p.9).”

Where many emergency management scholars note that disasters are caused by administrative failures for a multitude of different reasons, Swamy takes it a step further arguing that disasters are caused by a variety of different issues where capitalism is concerned. In essence, his argument encompasses all administrative failures noting that capitalism creates extensive issues within government systems and society impacting the decision-making process ultimately impacting climate change. He also connects this back to a variety of social vulnerabilities and decisions that ultimately lead to the administrative failures caused by disasters.

Noting several disasters throughout the book, Swamy paints the picture of how disasters are more than what we understand them to be. Previously, scholars may have said that disasters were caused by failure to conduct appropriate mitigation efforts. For many disasters, this absolutely may be a factor. Swamy, however, takes the perspective looking deeper as to why

certain decisions may have been made where mitigation is concerned. Instead of noting budgetary concerns—which many scholars point to, Swamy looks at the situation from the perspective of corporations noting that appropriate mitigation could mean a reduction in corporate profits. As such, Swamy explains that “existing arrangements” may be more effective for corporations because of what it means for capitalism and profit. Swamy also uses the term as “accident”—which many use as a means of explaining disasters—as a justification for how something may have not turned out for the better (p.10).

Capitalism and Catastrophe includes seven chapters: chapter 1: a critical disaster studies framework; chapter 2: the everyday and the systemic; chapter 3: rhythm, rift and conjecture; chapter 4: time and life in the precarious present; chapter 5: modernity, development and underdevelopment; chapter 6: humanitarianism; chapter 7: the Lahaina wildfires of 2023: a case study and the conclusion entitled: “Disasters, Imperialism and the Climate Emergency”. These chapters spotlight various aspects of Swamy’s overarching argument that capitalism and various other components of economics and politics impact the decisions that ultimately determine the social issues that become disasters.

Capitalism and Catastrophe: A Critical Disaster Studies Manifesto by Raja Swamy is a must read for thought leaders in disaster studies: political scientists, sociologists and graduate students seeking to understand all of the facets that become the factors making disasters catastrophic. This book provides an interesting perspective and is making an important contribution to the scholarly literature on emergency management.

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