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Dispossession, disaster capitalism and the post-hurricane context in the Caribbean

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1. The Caribbean since Irma and Maria

Like Bonilla, I have become increasingly interested in making sense of the post/disaster politics that have unfolded in the Caribbean since the devastating 2017 hurricane season. A situation which surprisingly, has little to do with the actual hurricanes themselves, as it does with the ways these disasters become embroiled in a longer history of structural violence that undergird the way the Caribbean has long been experimented with and exploited. Ideas around resilience and ‘build back better’ are increasingly being used to justify recovery efforts aimed at rethinking existing development paradigms. At the same time, events that have unfolded since Irma and Maria have revealed just how much these ‘natural’ disasters intertwine with underlying issues of uneven development, inequality, non-sovereignty and economic and political instability. In the wake of these storms, many questions still remain about the region’s future and its state of readiness for possible future climate-related impacts. Islands like Puerto Rico, Saint Martin, Dominica and Barbuda still face a huge recovery task, which could take several years to attain some semblance of normalcy. Tied to this are questions around the recovery and rebuilding efforts themselves: What exactly should these efforts entail? Who gets to dictate what becomes the priority? And to what extent can regional states’ reconstruction efforts genuinely address longstanding barriers to transformational change? Barriers that require a certain foregrounding of the historical legacies that have been central to the making (and unmaking) of modern-day Caribbean societies and environments, as well as a rethinking of what it actually means to be resilient – a theme that lies at the center of ongoing regional recovery efforts.

For the remainder of this commentary, I want to make two interventions in response to Bonilla’s concerns about the ways these disasters are fast becoming a platform for the promotion of new forms of predatory capitalist interests. The first relates to the ways in which recovery efforts are being used as strategies for the accumulation of new forms of global capital through dispossession increasingly premised

around notions of resilience. The second relates more to the ethical and political implications of the post-hurricane situation. Here, I also reflect briefly on the kinds of opportunities that may arise from the post/disaster crisis for promoting a radically different and transformative politics of change.

2. Dispossession as necessary evil?

I want to begin this section by pointing out that the crisis unfolding in Puerto Rico, while unprecedented and shocking (especially in terms of the scale of the impacts, number of lives lost, and its geopolitical implications), is also very much representative of a wider struggle occurring across the Caribbean in the wake of the 2017 hurricane season. I say this not to downplay in any way the severity of the situation in Puerto Rico, but to demonstrate and foreground how the events that have unfolded in Puerto Rico are part of a much larger and ongoing process of subordination, structural violence and exploitation of Caribbean societies and economies. Equally troubling are the ways the disasters wrought by hurricanes Irma and Maria are being *capitalized* on by predatory capitalist interests. In the case of Puerto Rico, we see this in the ongoing attempts to privatize the island’s education and energy sectors as well as in the scores of speculative investors that have sought to cash-in on the island’s extraordinarily lax tax laws and struggling real estate market (Klein, 2018). Probably the most extreme case besides Puerto Rico, is that of the twin-island state of Antigua and Barbuda, where Barbudans are now at the frontline battling for their ancestral lands amidst proposed plans by the central government to reform Barbuda’s system of communal land ownership (Baptiste & Devonish, 2019; Look, Friedman, & Godbout, 2019).

After being struck by both Irma and Maria (just few weeks apart), the small island of Barbuda was reduced to a barren wasteland in just a matter of days. Over 90% of the island’s buildings were damaged or completely destroyed, and nearly all of Barbuda’s over 1800 citizens were left marooned in crowded emergency shelters in their sister island,

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Antigua, which fortunately did not sustain direct impact from either storm. In just a matter of days, the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, announced plans to reform Barbuda's system of communal land ownership – a system that has been in place since slavery was abolished in 1834. A law that has prevented the purchase of land by foreigners (including Antiguan) – thus preventing the development of foreign-run hotels, casinos, and other such establishments more commonly seen in neighbouring Antigua, that has a free-hold land tenure system. In Barbuda, citizens do not own individual plots of land, instead access is granted by a locally-elected council. The law originated from an unofficial tenure system, established after slavery had been abolished on the island, whereby land acquired would be handed down to descendants and unused lands would be held in commonage. When Barbuda gained its independence from Britain in 1981, the custom survived, and was enshrined in the 2007 Barbuda Land Management Act. This Act has been a point of contention from the instance it was enacted, with the Antiguan-dominated central government seeing it as a barrier to development (Lowenthal & Clarke, 2007).

The central government plans include replacing the communal land system with a freehold system of land tenure, where land can be bought and sold in the open market. The proposal also includes changing the definition of who constitutes a 'Barbudan,' so that anyone who can claim residency, can buy and sell land in Barbuda. Like Puerto Rico, while the crisis that is playing out in Barbuda certainly resembles a form of shock doctrine,¹ much of what has unfolded is rooted in a much longer history of post/colonial violence and exploitation. Considering these longer histories would certainly demonstrate the ways these 'natural' disasters map onto pre-existing structures of domination that cuts across multiple and overlapping spatio-temporal scales. This also allows for a critical reorientation of modern ideologies of temporality that are inexorably linked to linear teleologies of progress and development, which often necessitate the erasure of the forms of racial and colonial *priorness* that have been central to the making of the Caribbean as a material and ideological space. In other words, the subordinate position Barbuda inherited in 1981 when it gained independence from Britain and was forcefully joined with Antigua (a fate that is quite common among archipelagic states throughout the Caribbean) certainly set the conditions for the events that unfolded post-Irma. Of the two nations making up the twin island state, Barbuda is the smaller and less populated – and enjoys very little political autonomy as a result. It is important to note that Barbudan leaders have been advocating for secession from Antigua since the 1980s, largely due to the differences in land tenure systems on the two islands and the antagonistic politics that have emerged from this axis of difference.

To some extent, this also speaks to what Bonilla calls 'the temporality of disasters.' Bonilla's use of the term 'wait,' draws attention to the lingering effects of disasters and other moments of temporal rupture. In doing so, she recasts disasters as slow and creeping events, in turn shifting attention away from the sudden, macro-scale and the spectacular, towards the everyday and micro-scale realities disaster victims' face in piecing back their lives together. Yet, as Bonilla makes clear, this 'forced act of waiting' is by no means haphazard, but forms part of a wider and ongoing effort of disciplining and subject-making – a grim reality that became so evident in post-Maria Puerto Rico where residents 'felt trapped in a state of suspension' as recovery efforts were stalled. There was certainly nothing *natural* in that. This has certainly been the case in Barbuda as well, where relief aid has not been forthcoming and where rebuilding efforts have been slow and piecemeal at best. In fact, many Barbudans remain without electricity and water some two years since the storms struck their island. Displacement and the forceful act of waiting have become vehicles for the promotion and circulation of new forms of capital. This in many ways aligns with what David Harvey

(2004) describes as 'accumulation by dispossession', where the power of the neoliberal (or neo/colonial) state becomes mobilized in facilitating new pathways for predatory capitalism. But as Harvey goes on to point out, these processes of dispossession are inherently flawed and problematic, and often provoke widespread resistance and counter-attacks as a result that can bring about new possibilities for social change – a topic I now turn to.

3. Towards a transformative politics of being other than

As the post-hurricane context is increasingly being framed as a 'blank canvas'² for re-imagining alternative futures, questions arise around the ways ensuing recovery efforts can genuinely cultivate opportunities for rethinking radically new and different forms of development throughout the region. Various notions of resilience and calls for 'building back better', have become commonplace in both framing and guiding post-hurricane rebuilding efforts. While these post-hurricane efforts are premised on a desire to re-think existing development paradigms in affected nation-states, much remain to be seen as to their potential to effectively advance a radically different and transformative politics. As we have seen repeatedly in the disasters literature, vulnerable and marginalized populations often benefit the least from post-disaster redevelopment efforts. As I have written elsewhere (Rhiney, 2019), this tendency for resilience thinking to consolidate rather than challenge the *status quo*, has been one of the main sources of contention among critical scholars in human geography and other cognate fields. Linked to this are ways resilience has often worked to constrain individual and collective action to "bring about possibilities for radically different forms of life not organized around institutions such as private property, the market, and the territorially-based nation state" (Grove, 2018, p. 21).

I contend that the challenge is partly ontological as well. Resilience has a complex intellectual legacy, but in mainstream disaster planning and reconstruction, it basically refers to the ability of a system to 'bounce back' or return to a state of normalcy after a disaster. Likewise, the imperative to 'build back better' relies, to a certain extent, on a kind of normalization (or 'naturalization') of disasters; its logic contains a built-in assumption wherein the destruction and displacement of existing forms of infrastructure and the lives and communities that they bind together, become seen as a necessary precondition to pursue true resilience. This 'will to design' as Grove (2018) puts it, becomes a platform for 'governing through risk and uncertainty,' where policies and programs are deployed to govern and control populations through linking social and political life with either material or abstract risk.

This becomes quite evident in the case of Puerto Rico where the post-disaster landscape is being mobilized as a platform for reifying and extending existing post/colonial power relations and hegemonic practices on one hand, and an avenue for the promotion and accumulation of new (and not-so-new) forms of private capital on the other. Yet, these moments of rupture, as Bonilla points out, could potentially foster opportunities for engendering a new and transformative politics. This is very evident in the case of Puerto Rico, where the current crisis has spurred what Mimi Sheller (2018) calls 'insurgent intellectual networks,' where local and grassroots activists are building alternative visions around renewable sources of energy, food sovereignty and self-determination. Likewise, Barbudans are not sitting down helplessly waiting on their lands to be taken away under the guise of development or resilience. Instead, Barbudans are pushing back at the Antiguan-dominated state, and reaffirming their rights to the land. As Wayde Brown, a Barbudan councilor who had returned to the island weeks after the storms had passed, said in an interview with the Telegraph:

¹ Naomi Klein herself has stated that the situation in Puerto Rico is more like a *shock-after-shock-after-shock* doctrine.

² Former Governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rossello, tweeted back in September 2018 that he sees Puerto Rico as a blank canvas for innovation.

“This is a classic land grab. Barbudans will not sit idly by to allow the government to steal our land, our heritage, our way of life. We are not dead. We are still here. And we will resist” (Telegraph 23 December 2017).

There is also now a small but growing cadre of scholars and activists seeking to attend to, and complicate, the apparent connection between these ‘natural’ disasters, predatory capitalism and post/colonial legacies in the Caribbean. Bonilla has been quite vocal about the plights of Puerto Ricans post-Maria, having written several opinion pieces in popular media, spearheading the Puerto Rico syllabus project, and extending that work in her recent book project. Naomi Klein’s recent film (and book) entitled ‘*Battle for Paradise*,’ provides a critical and insightful examination of the politics behind recovery efforts in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. And more recently, Jeff Popke and I have co-edited a special issue in the *Journal of Extreme Events* on the Caribbean after Irma and Maria comprising several essays reflecting on the post-hurricane situation (Popke & Rhiney, 2019).

A common theme cutting across these efforts is to seek out new and radically different ways of being. Part of this entail new ways of thinking about resilience, what (Moulton and Machado, 2019) refer to as a ‘decolonial model of resilience.’ A form of resilience, as they suggest, that is based on “an affirmative biopolitics; transformative, autonomous, community-based responses that imagine [and] practice post-disaster recovery in ways that seek more socially just and environmentally sustainable spaces.” This bears some semblance to recent calls from scholars such as Kevin Grove (2018) for us to attend to resilience’s political and ethical possibilities, by opening it up to critique and constantly demonstrating that things could always be other than they are; not necessarily to inhibit action but to show there is always opportunities for doing things better or differently. Fostering and making known new ways of being that are attentive not only to future uncertainties and complexities, but also to the various forms of modern-day violence, injustices and inequalities that shape the

experience for many humans and non-humans alike.

Declaration of competing interest

This is to certify that I have no conflict of interest in this publication.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102171>.

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