

The Biopolitics of Disaster: Power, Discourses, and Practices

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With the increase in frequency and visibility of disasters in contemporary state societies, national governments have developed a collection of agencies to manage catastrophic events. These institutions invariably deal with human populations as a political, scientific, and biological problem, an approach Michel Foucault described as biopolitical. In this article, I discuss some aspects of disaster governance, focusing on the long-term recovery process. Specifically, I analyze the fundamental biopolitical assumptions of the discourses and practices on the part of governmental disaster response agencies in São Luiz do Paraitinga, Brazil. In this case of biopolitical response to disaster, the discourses and practices implemented by governmental agencies created the illusion that state agencies successfully responded to the disaster by saving biological lives. This article shows how these biopolitical discourses and practices also had the unintended and unacknowledged effects of devaluing social lives and abandoning disaster-affected populations. By calling attention to the unintended and unacknowledged effects of biopolitical governance, this article demonstrates how disaster anthropology can document and address the shortcomings of governmental disaster recovery policy and practice.

Key words: disaster recovery, biopolitics, disaster governance

Introduction

In his book, *Landscapes of Fear* (1979), Yi-Fu Tuan wrote about the varied ways people have responded to disasters and calamities over the course of history. In the case of ancient Egypt, Tuan described how pharaohs were often concerned with violent natural forces that could destroy entire regions and threaten to disrupt the cosmic order. In order to avoid crop failure-related famines caused by drought, flooding, and pests, pharaohs kept food reserves, and when a crop failure occurred, they distributed food and clothing to the whole population and forgave taxes in the affected areas.

Calamities like crop failures are similar to disasters in that they have occurred for millennia and, alongside fears of social upheavals, have become a governmental concern as urban areas have grown and developed. On the basis of historical evidence specific to Western Europe and France, Michel Foucault (2007) identified the 18th and 19th centuries as times of rapid growth for towns, as well as poverty, unemployment, crime,

and endemic and epidemic diseases. Importantly, Foucault examined how these conditions came to be seen as subjects of governmental concern. To face these perceived problems, scholars and sovereigns developed a number of fields of expertise—each with their accompanying techniques—such as urban planning, public health, and political economy. Together, these expert forms of knowledge and population management—which Foucault referred to as “security apparatuses”—engaged people as a biological population and configured the role of government as the fostering and caring for human populations as living organisms. Foucault named this concern of government for human populations as living organisms (along with the policies and practices necessary to care for populations as biological entities), biopolitics (Foucault 1978, 2003). The technical category of risk also played a central role in this biopolitics. Disaster management experts imported knowledge practices from the world of private insurance into public administration. These allowed government agencies to manage human populations using a set of techniques, security apparatuses, and understandings of social life through statistical analysis, such as the rates of illnesses, deaths, marriages, and births.

Focusing on the context of North America, Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff (2014) make the case that biopolitical forms of governance have not remained the same over time or across space. In the 20th century, biopolitics underwent significant transformation in the United States when the intensification of modernization and industrialization processes

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posed new challenges to the management of collective life and its increasing dependence on interlinked systems such as transportation, electricity, and water distribution. Instruments of biopolitical governance that aimed to foster the “well-being of population, came to be seen as potential sources of vulnerability” (Collier and Lakoff 2014:3). In this context, new security mechanisms were invented to mitigate the vulnerability of these vital systems as part of Cold War preparedness. Furthermore, many of these systems were eventually also used to address a range of anticipated emergencies, such as pandemic disease outbreaks and large-scale disasters. For Collier and Lakoff (2014), an anticipatory technology for mitigating vulnerabilities provides ways for administering emergencies as normal elements of constitutional government, which does not require recourse to the extraordinary executive powers of “states of exception.”

With the increase in frequency and visibility of disasters, there has been a proliferation of security apparatuses to manage risks and crisis, establishing what I call the biopolitics of disaster. Probability calculations, methods of observation, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), statistics, risk maps, governmental agencies, the military and paramilitary units, and sets of actors with a number of governance procedures have been developed to face disaster prevention, relief, and recovery. In many different policy arenas, one can today find “a shared understanding in political discourse both of what constitutes a catastrophe and of the expected government role in preparing for and responding to potentially catastrophic events” (Collier and Lakoff 2014:2). In this process, the concept of *disaster governance* emerged in the disaster research literature. According to Tierney (2012:344), “Disaster governance is often a form of collaborative governance or activities that bring together multiple organizations to solve problems that extend beyond the purview of any single organization.” The concept consists of the interrelated sets of norms, organizational and institutional actors, and practices designed to reduce the impacts and losses associated with disasters.

Keeping these observations about biopolitics and its transformations in mind, this article examines the way biopolitical forms of governance are interpreted and reconfigured by the multiple social actors working within government disaster-response agencies in Brazil. As I will show, what is particularly interesting about Brazil is the way post-colonial orders—a term I use to describe the implications of colonial sociopolitical arrangements for contemporary societies in former colonies—become entangled with ideas and visions of biopolitical governance over the course of disaster recovery. As the case study of São Luiz do Paraitinga, Brazil shows, the emergency phase of disasters in Brazil is characterized by the deployment of discourses and performances on the part of state actors meant to create the impression that the state is saving lives (Lund 2006).

In the post-impact recovery phase, however, I argue that the entanglement of biopolitical governance and post-colonial social order creates a context of incoherent agendas on the part of local, state, and federal governments, an incoherence

that produces the devaluation of social life, even as these institutions claim to protect and foster biopolitical life. The state, in this case, is not a homogeneous and monolithic entity. It is a collection of agencies and actors who sometimes work at cross-purposes, with differing agendas and even logics, many of which do articulate biopolitical discourses and practices. In Brazil, the biopolitics of disaster is contradictory; it is a project with arbitrariness and bureaucratic practices that people experience (Gupta 2012). In this paper, I expose some logics of power, discourses, and practices regarding disaster recovery processes in the historical city of São Luiz do Paraitinga, Brazil. I look at policies concerning historical preservation and how these policies, combined with housing reconstruction assistance, have produced social abandonment.

Research Sites and Fieldwork

Located northeast of São Paulo, Brazil (see Figure 1), São Luiz do Paraitinga experienced extensive floods in 1863, 1967, 1971, and 1996. Despite these flood events, governmental agencies and private actors continued to expand the city along the Paraitinga River’s banks. From January 1 to January 4, 2010, São Luiz suffered the worst flood of its history. Water covered nearly 80 percent of its urban area. The Paraitinga River crested twelve meters above its normal level, submerging several neighborhoods and the entire historical center of the town, where 19th century housing structures listed by the Council of Historical, Archaeological, Artistic, and Touristic Heritage Defense (CONDEPHAAT) were located. Half of the population became homeless (5,000 people), including members of both civil society and local government.

At the beginning of January 2010, I began to follow the tragedy at a distance by documenting media stories. My intention was to follow the disaster not as a natural event but as a process (Adams et al. 2009; Lavell 1993), adopting a concept of disaster that is focused on the social experiences that take place in a social time (Oliver-Smith 1998). From this perspective, the disaster can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on the social position of the observer/interpreter (Hewitt 1998; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). This study began in January 2010 and ended in June 2013, although the social process of long-term disaster recovery continues.

Fieldwork, which I conducted from January 2010 to June 2013, consisted of participant observation and qualitative data collection. I opted for an approach that privileges narrative and observation, where “researchers are present and in dialogue with participants to gather local knowledge and information” (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002:12-13). I visited the temporary houses of the *luizenses* and conducted semi-structured interviews with fifty participants (1% of the 5,000 affected people), including men and women, young and elderly, who were selected using convenience sampling methods. I audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed qualitative interview data in light of the disaster recovery literature, which recommends focusing on disaster recovery as an

Figure 1. Map 1 shows State of São Paulo in Brazil, and Map 2 shows the location of São Luiz do Paraitinga City in São Paulo. (adapted from Raphael Lorenzeto de Abreu at Portuguese-language Wikipedia)



expression of power relations. Over the course of my analysis, I recognized two key themes: claims on the part of state agents that their disaster response practices saved biological lives and the effects of these practices, which resulted in the devaluation of social life.

Discourses and Practices of Disaster Governance: The Logic of Saving Biological Lives

It is erroneous either to perceive states as coherent sets of institutions or to assume states and civil societies are clearly separate entities. Christian Lund (2006) suggests an alternative analytical strategy for understanding public authority in contexts where it is not the exclusive realm of government institutions, where institutional competition is intense, and where various apparently apolitical situations become actively politicized. Disasters offer these types of contexts when a convergence of all sorts of social actors come to the scene (Hoffman 2005): engineers, builders, experts, agents, and different governmental agencies using governance techniques and discourses. According to Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002:10), “Under certain circumstances, the performance of state-level organizations in the disaster

process also becomes a catalyst for readjusting the character of relations and interaction between local communities and the structures of the larger society.”

Lund (2006) states that the practical elements of governance include the administration of rights, allocation of resources, appointments to office, and the authorization of certain practices. Accompanying these practical elements are what he calls “symbolic languages and choreography of governance,” which entail the mobilization of symbols, icons, discourses, and performances of public authority (Lund 2006:690). What I argue in this article is that practical elements and symbolic languages are also used to manage the biopolitics of disaster.

Several external governmental agencies and different social actors were present in São Luiz do Paraitinga. These included external government agencies from the State of São Paulo (CONDEPHAAT, Secretariat for Habitation, Civil Defense, Military Fire Department, Secretariat of Social Development, Geological Institute) and from the federal level (National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute, the Army, Ministry of Tourism). The different social actors included officers, experts, journalists, volunteers, and tourists. The external social actors interacted with the locals, trying to impose their ideas, rules, and techniques, thereby marginalizing locals’

perspectives. The locals, including local governmental agents and other residents, reinforced the category of luizenses as an expression of their cultural resistance against the external agents (Marchezini 2015), a type of brotherhood with spirit of unity and common identity that Oliver-Smith (2012) identified in the disaster of Yungay, Peru.

In these interactions, some practical elements and symbolic languages intertwined and compounded the choreography of disaster governance: (1) institutional actors used discourses and knowledge from different agencies and fields of expertise; (2) state agencies created categories and target populations to guide their actions and to expand their regulations; (3) media outlets produced a disaster narrative that could potentially influence the interpretations people would have of it, showing selected images of destruction and updating the disaster numbers and statistics; and (4) police, social workers, and other agents managed the disaster response.

Gregory Button (2012) points out that disaster narratives tend to reinforce hegemonic forces of society, so discourse about disasters becomes discourse about the politics of disasters. In this process, politics and power penetrate perception. The media controls information and the social production of meaning, shaping and mediating our perception of disasters. This framing process creates a narrative in a selective manner in which news events are presented to the public as natural, rather than as complex cultural constructions. Another characteristic is the rendering of individuals and groups as passive victims, decontextualizing the larger sociopolitical conditions in which risks are socially constructed (Lavell 1993).

In São Luiz do Paraitinga, the press and governmental organizations produced a disaster narrative that, day after day, documented the activities of external governmental agencies that were present and the amount of material and human resources these agencies used. This disaster narrative established categories and target populations. The locals were classified by the external agencies as *desabrigados* (homeless), *desalojados* (homeless living in relatives' or friends' houses), and *afetados* (affected). They were treated as helpless victims, incapable and vulnerable people who needed to be rescued by external heroes. Along this disaster narrative, discourses of expert knowledge circulated, emphasizing the logic of victimization and inspiring dramatic speeches. These discourses and practices also made some governmental agencies more visible than others. The Army and Military Firefighters were represented as heroes, and their mobilization of human and material resources, such as numbers of soldiers, boats, and helicopters, was emphasized. As reported by the Brazilian Newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* on January 2, 2010, “[T]eams of firefighters use boats to rescue the victims. The homeless are taken to the high areas of the city. The Army also assists using a helicopter” (Folha Online 2010).

From January 4 on, media representations of disaster response became more complex and included more information about the new federal and state agencies involved, the actions taken, the amount of newly assigned professionals, and the number of rescues. These news stories produced an

interpretation of the disaster for their reading public, indicating that everything was under control thanks to the efforts of state organizations. Rescues were taken care of by the Fire Department, public security was secured by the Army and Military Police, medical assistance was provided by health workers, and civil defense and government geologists conducted risk assessment. As *Folha de São Paulo* reported on January 4, 2010, based on information from *Agência Brasil* (2010:4):

According to the government, about 300 civil defense professionals, firefighters, military police officers, health workers, and geologists are in the Paraíba Valley, helping the locals affected by the rains. Until yesterday, the government said 3,520 people had been rescued by the fire department. Two helicopters from the Military Police rescued, between January 2 and January 3, 54 people in São Luiz do Paraitinga.

In this biopolitics of disaster, the discourses of victimization and the need for salvation by external heroes comprise the main themes of the disaster narrative: the testimonies of the subjects in the scene are selected, and information is ordered in time, producing a narrative that guides what is said about the disaster, identifying heroes and victims who enter the scene and describing how they act. However, there are other discourses and practices that do not appear in the official storyline that can become visible when other social agents, who hold other interpretations of the disaster, are interviewed. In Turkey, the testimonies of survivors of Marmara Earthquake demonstrated that community residents conducted “all immediate search-and-rescue-type operations as outside help takes longer to arrive” (Jalali 2002:122). Hoffman (2012:180) found the same situation in the 1991 Oakland Firestorm: “There was no warning, no evacuation order, no police, or coordination. We were all on our own to save ourselves,” said a survivor. In São Luiz do Paraitinga, luizenses rescued people for multiple days, sheltered neighbors and relatives, collected donations, and prepared meals for families in garages. For the locals, the arrival of the Army and other military agencies happened too late. It occurred when the locals had already organized and taken actions for rescue and protection.

Luizenses affirmed that many of the external agents who arrived in the municipality—including members of the Army and Military Fire Department—refused the help of a local rafting team that provided tourism services before the flood and had extensive knowledge of the river. Confident of their competence, the officers ventured into rescue operations. However, because of their lack of knowledge about the river's dynamics, many of these officers' boats capsized. Consequently, the local rafting team had to rescue the rescuers. This caused one of the commanders of the operation to order the officers to follow the recommendation of each of the local rafting instructors, who began to guide them. According to João, a rafting instructor, “Not underestimating the work of the Military Fire Department, but their boats were

not suitable for the flash flood. And we already had a notion about the places of stones, electric wires, submerged houses, and trees” (author fieldnotes, November 2011).

According to the people I interviewed, the local rafting team performed several rescues before the arrival of external government rescue teams. The local disaster narrative is that there were no victims in the flood thanks to the work of local rafters who came to be known as *Anjos do Rafting* (the Rafting Angels). Rafting Angels, a sociolinguistic invention (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002:11), was a category created by luizenses to name their local heroes and to contest the official discourse of victimization in the media and the discourses of the external agents of emergency, such as the officers of the Fire Department, Military Police, and the Army. The history of the Rafting Angels did not gain visibility in *Folha de São Paulo*, but it was recalled in *Reconstruction Newspaper*, a magazine created by locals to register their disaster recovery process. In late March 2010, the journal featured an article titled “Angels and Heroes of Rafting.” The article read:

In the following days, the situation got worse: the flood that was extensive became violent. An elderly lady had the whole house affected, but soon she met the rafting guys. She said, “They were real *angels* and had all the care in the world to help us. They said words of confidence, asking us to believe in what they were doing.” (Prefecture of São Luiz do Paraitinga 2010:4)

In the city, the term Rafting Angels also became an expression of social change. Before the flood, some luizenses classified rafting instructors as lazy people because they only worked on weekends when tourists were in the city. After the flood, another classification emerged. In the words of Eduardo, the municipal director of tourism and one of the Rafting Angels:

Before the flood, the rafting in São Luiz...you can ask any local rafting instructor...people said we were *lazy people* because we didn’t work during the week. We came to the river to train, but to the others we were lazy people, right? *After the flood*, we became known as *Rafting Angels*. (author fieldnotes, November 2011)

Local government agents were also affected in their public and private activities, because the Prefecture building and schools were flooded. The public authority of local government was questioned and disputed by external governmental agencies, especially by the military, which invaded the city. The Army and other military agencies arrived with their practical elements of governance (weapons, boats, organizational strategies) and symbolic language (organized in troops, serious faces, demonstration of weapons). Increasing control and centralization is one way governmental agencies respond to the crisis, as verified after Cyclone Tracy in Australia, when women and children suffered a forced evacuation from the disaster site and first sent in the Navy and then the state police (Hoffman 2012). The same military logic was reported after

the earthquake in Turkey, when the Army chose to prohibit all NGOs from working in the disaster area (Jalali 2002). In São Luiz do Paraitinga, the military tried to take over the work of residents, imposing what and how should be done from that moment on. The luizenses, however, challenged the orders of the outside command. Sandra, a local resident and municipal social worker, recalled the conflict:

[T]he coming of the Army was chic...order and progress [national motto inscribed in the Brazilian flag]. But it was too late...one day after the flood. We were already rescuing and bringing food... And they come up and say “stop everything, now we command.” No! We’re going to opine too. We did everything before you arrived. (author fieldnotes, December 2011)

Benedito, an elderly resident, recalls that when the waters of the Paraitinga river receded, he decided to leave the other side of the river and come into the historical center of the city and go home to meet his family. As he attempted to reach his destination, he encountered a blockade commanded by the Army. Soldiers interrogated Benedito, requiring him to prove he was a resident and questioned where he was going. When he arrived home, in Cruzeiro, an area often referred to as a slum, he saw the Matriz Plaza covered by the ruins of the Matriz Church and other historic houses listed by CONDEPHAAT. He then decided to do what he always did to maintain the history of his city: he took his camera to capture some images of the disaster. When he arrived at Matriz Plaza to take a picture, an Armed Forces officer reprimanded him and pulled the camera out of his hands.

Taking pictures of events such as carnival celebrations, religious processions, and floods had always been an important part of daily life for some luizenses, but Benedito was reprimanded by an external public authority. He recalled that while he was being reprimanded, the disaster tourists circulated around the ruins of Matriz Church, taking clay bricks from this 19th century historical relic. Although he declared himself an atheist, he felt violated because a customary luizenses practice and the symbols of his city were violated by outsiders. Through the legitimizing discourse of saving lives, the sociocultural life of local residents was confiscated by a number of state agencies that declared themselves public authority in the city. The debris and the scenes of destruction were reminiscent of war. According to Benedito, “São Luiz do Paraitinga looked like a war scenario. Those militaries armed to the teeth, entering in the city” (author fieldnotes, April 2013) (see Figure 2).

Practical elements and the symbolic language of military governmental agencies informed the choreography of disaster governance and contributed to intensify the psychosocial impacts of disaster. The idea of the state was established by force. There were the Army, Military Firefighters, helicopters, and boats to rescue people. There were military police to guard the blockades. There were shining boots and rifles that brought the message that order would be guaranteed, that the curfew would be respected: nobody entered and nobody

left. The streets were controlled by force, cordoning tapes were put around some houses, and fences were constructed to impede *luizenses* from accessing their ruined dwellings. Anyone could be apprehended if police and military agents found their actions suspicious or inappropriate, regardless of the needs of citizens who, after the flood, had a personal sense of what their rights and duties were.

Maria Cristina, a local government officer, recalled how this practice of military authority affected the actions of the Prefecture. The local government lost its autonomy and became a hostage of the conflicting orders of the external agencies. The Prefecture was simply absorbed by the military governance of the disaster, which controlled the municipal territory and its jurisdiction, determining what should be done. The local government officer detailed some conflicts among military state agencies over their competition to impose different agendas and logics, conflicts that demonstrate how the state is not necessarily a coherent, homogeneous, and monolithic entity:

Many militaries wanted to command...it was almost funny: in the first days, we [municipal officers] talked with each other. "We are now servants of the organs [external state agencies]" because everything they order, you do, do not argue. There were too many colonels, several military ranks in the city, it seemed to be a war headquarters which received officers from everywhere: at first it was the military firefighter, after that an officer from the Army.... I didn't know who ordered more.... [W]e were always following orders. (author fieldnotes, November 2011)

During the emergency period, when the State of Public Calamity was declared, external agencies used the logic of saving lives to justify their actions, which were based on the use of repressive forces. Military officers rescued "victims"; armed soldiers controlled the public sphere and coerced people; experts assessed, mapped, and delimited risk areas. At the same time, media outlets created an official narrative of the disaster which presented state institutions as necessary and effective. The State of Public Calamity ended 180 days after its enactment, and many of the external agencies left the city, but the disaster continued to be experienced by local residents. The biopolitical imperative of saving lives gradually yielded a secondary effect, which was the devaluation of social life. In the next section, I analyze the policies concerning historical preservation and how these policies, combined with housing reconstruction assistance, have produced this secondary effect.

Invisible Disaster: The Devaluation of Social Life

Judging by the various infrastructural projects that have been completed to date (road works, contention walls constructed to reduce the risk of landslides, new tourist information signs, the reconstruction of some dwellings in the historical center), the city seems to be rebuilt. Beyond these

Figure 2. Rifles in São Luiz do Paraitinga. The Light Automatic Rifle (FAL) 7.62 mm took the streets of the city. The gun has a highly destructive power with a rate of fire of 650-700 rounds per minute. (Joel Silva/Folha Imagem, March 6, 2010 [Uol News 2010])



disaster recovery actions, the permanence of social inequality is, paradoxically, one of the main secondary effects of biopolitical disaster response. The spatial manifestation of this inequality can be seen in the reconstruction practices carried out in different parts of the city.

The historical center of São Luiz do Paraitinga is located on the left bank of the river and is governed by three agencies. At the federal level, there is the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN), which declared the city as a national heritage site in December 2010, after the flood. At the state level, there is CONDEPHAAT, which has listed São Luiz as a heritage site since May 1982. Finally, at the municipal level, there is the Prefecture.

Before the flood, the historical center held the Matriz Church and more than 200 homes listed by CONDEPHAAT. These houses had 19th century facades, with wood doors up to three meters in height, wood windows, and an architectural style that expressed the prosperity of the Brazilian coffee economy from 1840 to 1930. Today, in contrast, the homes are in a state of disrepair. Many of the owners are elderly, and others inherited the properties. Many of the latter did not have money to construct houses following the historic preservation requirements of IPHAN and CONDEPHAAT. Many of those whose homes were damaged by the floods also cannot reconstruct new houses and therefore continue to be displaced. For IPHAN and CONDEPHAAT, the reconstruction of historical buildings to attract tourists was more important than the social role of property. Wood panel walls were also built by governmental agencies in order to hide the ruined houses, maintaining a palatable facade for visiting tourists.

Passing by the historical center towards the economically marginalized zone of Várzea dos Passarinhos, flood marks are clearly visible on house walls. This territory is also located in the floodplain of the river and on its left bank, but it is not a heritage site regulated by IPHAN and CONDEPHAAT. In this impoverished zone, the logic of biopolitics is expressed in another way. During the flood, civil defense and experts declared the zone a risk area. But when waters receded, risk areas were arbitrarily deemed *áreas congeladas* (frozen areas). According to the mayor, “All places that have been considered risk areas are frozen. We don’t permit any reconstruction there” (author fieldnotes, December 2011).

Risk areas and *frozen areas* are updated biopolitical discourses, which recall a long history of housing displacement and removal policies in Brazil. Janice Perlman (1979) documented this process and their multiple effects on residents in Rio de Janeiro, pointing out that policies to condemn, contain, and dismantle the *favelas* (slums) were implemented at the end of the 19th century and intensified after 1930s. In 1968, during Brazil’s military dictatorship, the Coordination of Social Interest Housing of the Greater Rio Metropolitan Area (CHISAM) was created to coordinate the favela removal. From its inception “in 1968 until its demise in 1975, it removed over 100 favelas, destroying more than 100,000 dwellings, and leaving at least half a million poor people without their homes” (Perlman 2010: 271). Today, housing removals continue to occur due to infrastructural building associated with the World Cup and the Olympic Games.¹ But disaster contexts are also used as an opportunity for housing removal, displacement, and other capitalist strategies.

After the 2004 tsunami in Asia, Klein (2007) reported that all the tsunami-struck countries used military and other first responders to control and impose buffer zones, preventing villagers from rebuilding on the coasts. In order to receive food rations and small relief allowances, survivors moved to miserable temporary camps patrolled by soldiers. When the “fishing families returned to the spots where their homes once stood, they were greeted by police who forbade them to rebuild” (Klein 2007:387). Officially, governments said the buffer zone was a safety measure, meant to prevent a repeat of the devastation should another tsunami strike. But resorts were completely exempted from the buffer-zone rule: “Hotels were being encouraged to expand onto the valuable oceanfront where fishing people had lived and worked” (Klein 2007:388). These discourses and practices show that disaster capitalism and biopolitics are deeply entangled in disaster response and recovery, making it more difficult for the poor to regain access to their property or other rights they had prior to a disaster. This process was also identified after the mandatory evacuation in Hurricane Katrina: “New Orleans became a city that could be (re)constructed on neoliberal principles of capitalist utility,” limiting the possibilities of return “for the city’s African American working class” (Barrios 2010:595).

Some patterns of this biopolitics were also found in São Luiz do Paraitinga. State agents cut water and electricity services to ensure reconstruction did not take place in the marginalized neighborhoods within the frozen areas. Such mechanisms prohibited the presence of the poor and the reconstruction of their homes in the Várzea dos Passarinhos. In this territory, the owners cannot rebuild their houses, sell the land, or rent it, and the properties cannot be expropriated which, according to the federal constitution, should compensate owners. This invisible disaster continues three years after the enactment of frozen areas. In the poor zone of Várzea dos Passarinhos, lives were not lost during the flood. After, however, the social and cultural lives of the local poor are not allowed to continue. Both the historical center and the Várzea dos Passarinhos are zones situated in the floodplain of the river and on its left bank, and both were affected by the flood. But the historical center is not an economically marginalized zone and was therefore not declared a frozen area. The incoherent agenda among governmental agencies makes plain that social inequality is one of the characteristics of biopolitics of disaster in Brazil.

While the historical city center was not included within the frozen areas, it is considered one of those spaces governed under the regulated reconstruction. The historic center can only be reconstructed following the bureaucratic parameters approved by IPHAN and CONDEPHAAT. Luizenses also value their architectural patrimony, but they do not have the financial resources to reconstruct it, leaving them to criticize the bureaucracy of the two institutions that have jurisdiction over this territory.

To deal with the abandonment of the architectural patrimony, CONDEPHAAT created specific measures to rebuild the historical center. The homeless owners who have income up to ten Brazilian minimum wages per month (\$3,240 per month) can receive public subsidies to have their homes reconstructed by a private company contracted by CONDEPHAAT. These measures are intended to improve the landscape of the historical center so the tourism economy would not be harmed by visual evidence of the disaster. The homeless owners from Várzea dos Passarinhos and other areas of the city did not receive this public subsidy to rebuild their houses. The displaced families of this group were provided a housing allowance of \$135 per month, which is granted by Secretariat of Social Development of São Paulo State (SDS). To use this housing allowance, displaced families had to adhere to conditions imposed by SDS: they could only rent a house that was not located in a risk area. However, many houses were damaged by floods and the prices of the housing market had risen. Consequently, displaced families found it difficult to find housing in the city. Furthermore, the city did not offer job opportunities. The destiny of many of the displaced was to move out to another city. According to luizenses, about 250 people left after the flood.

In several territories of São Luiz do Paraitinga, there are different types of biopolitical discourses and practices,

but a general characteristic is that locals are not subjects of disaster recovery. Instead, they are the target populations of the recovery, and they are therefore unable to participate productively in their city and are left to fend for themselves (Biehl 2005). In these biopolitical zones, they play an active alternative role in the production of their city (Agier 2011) through cultural resistance, which consists of songs, poems, symbols, drawings, and paintings (see Figure 3).

The devaluation of social life takes place when the capacity of being luizense is repressed by others who make decisions in your place, because they claim to know what it is the best for luizenses. Public hearings were organized but non-participatory, only informative. Luizenses could not make suggestions for creating recovery policies for their own city. The subjects who held microphones and who sat in front of the table were mostly external agents. They used technical and scientific terms that disregarded any opinions that luizenses had about their city, river, and culture.

During a public hearing, an engineer showed the plans to construct walls along the Paraitinga River to protect people from floods. Suzana, a resident of the city, recalled that she was there and noticed that very few fellow residents were consulted about their opinions. For her, the Paraitinga River is part of the culture of São Luiz; the river was part of the luizenses' life, as well as the floods. Suzana criticized these rebuilding projects on the part of external governmental agencies and their experts who had no connection with the place but who saw it solely as a way to put their ideas into practice. Furthermore, she criticized the lack of explanation about the procedures and the type of public hearing—whether it was informative or deliberative and what each of these types meant.

Roberto also attended this public hearing about the floods. He thoroughly recounted its procedures and subtle ways of silencing:

They organized the roundtable and *held the microphone*. When you had just asked something, the person who was controlling the microphone *went away from you*. On the roundtable, an authority *answered something completely different* from your question. And *did not give you the right to reply*. So you had to scream. But *if you screamed, it would be considered a contempt of authority*. (author fieldnotes November 2011, emphasis added)

Roberto was also outraged with these forms of subordination to the external agents. For him, residents were apathetic, silencing themselves amid the expert discourses of external agents who spoke for luizenses, identified what was the best for them, and defined how the reconstruction processes should proceed: “The residents arrived, looked, but no one rose a hand or said something. It seemed that they were hoping that someone decided to fight for them” (author fieldnotes, November 2011). He believed that the public hearing had no value to luizenses because it was not democratic. For him, people were used to create the illusion of a participatory public hearing, but it was predominated by voices of experts

Figure 3. Wood Panel Walls Built by CONDEPHAAT to Hide the Ruined Houses. Luizenses painted them in red and white and drew a golden dove, the symbols of the Festival of Divine. This festival has been a custom since 1803 and was maintained after the flood. (author's files, December 2011)



and other external authorities with their expert language that was unintelligible to lay people. These external agents acted in the name of luizenses without identifying their real needs for disaster recovery.

This research reveals the devaluation of social life that results from biopolitical disaster response. This devaluation could be identified in the bureaucratic procedures of legal and exceptional measures of different governmental agencies with their jurisdictions and incoherent agendas, such as CONDEPHAAT's regulations for reconstruction of the historical center. In the midst of the power relations that inform biopolitical disaster response, the luizenses also lost their capacity to speak for themselves and to define their future. These social devaluations were not produced by the disaster; they were enacted by a collection of post-colonial biopolitical state institutions, creating a disaster after the disaster (Schuller 2008) whose instrumental use of catastrophe is now framed as an opportunity for resilient investments and to build back better. There were no deaths during the floods, but disaster survivors have experienced various forms of social death caused by the policies and practices of some governmental agencies. In the voice of an elderly woman, who talked about the loss of the luizenses' agency in their own city:

São Luiz was invaded by outsiders. Outsiders draw up plans for the properties. Outsiders formulate the governmental policies. Outsiders say what has to be done in the river. Outsiders say how we should build our houses. Apart from all that has happened here, our future is not defined by ourselves. I don't know if it was our fault. We are not the protagonists of this city anymore, says Adriana. (author fieldnotes, December 2011)

Conclusion

In the Brazilian state's response to disaster, biopolitical governance is recognizable during the period of emergency, when several discourses and practices are implemented by governmental agencies to give a magical idea of state agencies saving lives. Practical elements and symbolic languages intertwined and informed disaster governance: discourses of power and knowledge, categories and target populations, disaster narratives, the management of the disaster response by the police, and social workers.

During the emergency period, when the State of Public Calamity was declared, the logic of saving lives was utilized by external agencies to justify their actions and the use of repressive force: military officers rescued the "victims"; armed soldiers controlled the public sphere and coerced people; experts assessed, mapped, and interdicted the *risk areas*; luizenses were classified as homeless and became a target population to receive donations of food and clothes to maintain their lives; and media outlets created a harmonic storyline for the disaster. The State of Public Calamity ended 180 days after its enactment, and many of the external agencies left the city, but the disaster continued to be experienced in social time. The mandate of saving biological lives was gradually converted into the devaluation of social life.

The devaluation of social life can be considered an invisible disaster and is easily identified in the sociospatial inequalities of reconstruction: some territories are enriched, while others are neglected. Locals are not the subjects of disaster recovery but its target populations. They are unable to participate productively in their city as luizenses and are left to fend for themselves. Luizenses have lost their capacity to speak for themselves and to define their future. These devaluations were not produced by floods; they were socially produced.

State organizations have biopolitical discourses and practices that consider local cultures irrelevant or irrational. However, it is important to respect, comprehend, and incorporate the local cultures into disaster response and recovery. It is necessary to look at survivors not merely as affected people but as subjects with their cultures and coping strategies. Organizations must create opportunities for social recovery and not undermine the capacities of people to plan, decide, and externalize what is best for them. Public hearings should take the form of public consultation, identifying what types of disaster recovery policies the people desire for their city. Life has a biological dimension but a social dimension too. It is important to reduce vulnerabilities and social inequalities in disaster response and recovery. One of these vulnerabilities is the manner that organizations look at the meaning of life in their biopolitics of disaster.

Notes

¹According to United Nations Human Rights Council (2009:8) in Atlanta, "1,200 social housing units for the poor were destroyed in preparation for the Olympic Games. In Sydney, reports suggest that around 6,000 people were made homeless in the run-up to the Olympics." In Brazil, 170,000 were displaced due to mega-events (Ancop 2012).

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