INTRODUCTION

Crisis Without Guarantee and the Social Science of Pandemics and Disasters

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In December 2019, people living in the American continent heard news about a growing number of severe acute respiratory infections caused by a virus named COVID-19 in China. By January of 2020, the virus had moved along the routes of our increasingly interconnected world and reached the United States. The daily documented cases of COVID-19 in the United States remained less than two dozen through the month of February, although the actual number of undiagnosed cases was certainly much higher. In the first two weeks of March, the daily count rose significantly from 18 to 556 and would continue to climb exponentially until 10 April, reaching more than 33,000 new diagnoses in a single day. The virus, however, did not stop its spread along the national boundaries of the United States and eventually made its presence in every nation of the hemisphere; that is, the region known as Latin America. But COVID-19 cases were not the only things proliferating in the first quarter of 2020. Crisis, or better yet, the use of the term to describe the sociopolitical and public health implications of the virus's detection and contagion, also spread with great tenacity across news media headlines, the commentaries of public scholars, and the discourse of government officials around the globe. A case in point was the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, who called the unfolding pandemic a "crisis like no other" when speaking of its impact on national economies around the world (Tooze 2020). But it was not just economists speaking of the pandemic in terms of crisis. From the statements of public health experts to social scientists and grassroots organizers, crisis became a preferred means of describing the unfolding circumstances around the globe.

As an anthropologist (Barrios) and anthropologist-historian (García-Acosta) whose careers have focused on disaster studies, the COVID-19 pandemic manifested in a disturbingly familiar way. Since the 1970s, social scientists from a variety of disciplines have recognized that disasters should not be conflated with natural hazards (e.g. hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides, floods). Instead, we have come to recognize that disasters are always given form (what and who is impacted) and magnitude (how much is destroyed and how many people affected) by social factors that enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacity of geophysical phenomena (García-Acosta 2020; Maskrey 1993; O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner 1976; Oliver-Smith 1999). As such, disasters are more historically prolonged political ecological processes involving the interplay of material and human agency than neatly punctuated purely "natural" phenomena that affect societies from without. In the case of communicable diseases and epidemics, the work of social scientists during the last three decades has similarly demonstrated that a virus alone does not an epidemic make (Farmer 1999; Kelly, Keck, and Lynteris 2019). Instead, socioeconomic inequities and political-economic factors greatly affect who is more likely to become infected, who is more likely to suffer a prolonged convalescence, who is more likely to have access to necessary care, and who is more likely to die (Farmer 1999) during an epidemic. Consequently, it was not surprising that, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, many disaster anthropologists wrote extensively about the commonalities between the two (i.e. not being reducible to a "natural" or biological hazard, the role of social practices in shaping a hazard's impact) and pondered the contributions the social sciences of disaster made to the analysis of the ongoing public health catastrophe as well as how the current global health crisis would instigate new analytical developments in the field (Alcántara-Ayala et al. 2020; Alexander 2020; Faas et al. 2020).

One such point of analytical intersection was the recurring use of the term crisis to refer to the pandemic. While it is not uncommon to see the term in popular and news media, anthropologists have become increasingly critical of the concept in recent years (Barrios 2017; Masco 2017; Roitman 2011, 2013). At the heart of these critiques is the concern that crisis is often discursively mobilized by political figures, news media, and social commentators in a way that presents a problematic situation as if it were an anomaly that disrupts a society's desired normal situation while failing to recognize how such "normalcy" often engenders the crisis itself (Roitman 2011, 2013). At the same time, the social sciences in general also have a lengthy history of engaging the subject of crisis as: a) a methodologically opportune moment that allows observers to recognize social structures, tensions, and contradictions—and perhaps power itself—that are more difficult to document in times of normalcy (Oliver-Smith 1996;

Sahlins 1972; Solway 1994; Susser 2010); b) a moment full of possibility for transformative sociopolitical change (Sahlins 1972); and c) a historiographic convention whose meaning and function has changed significantly in the last 2,500 years (Koselleck 1988; 2006).

Struck by the widespread use of crisis as a supposedly self-explanatory term that captured the sociopolitical dimensions of the pandemic and the rich debates, critiques, and analyses surrounding the term in the social sciences, we decided to organize a remote two-day colloquium hosted by our academic home institutions (the University of New Orleans Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, CIESAS-Mexico) that featured contributions from established and early career social scientists from various parts of Latin America and the United States. The questions guiding our invitation included: If the pandemic is a crisis that allows social scientists to observe social structures, tensions, and contradictions that are otherwise difficult to observe, who does the observing? Do all observers behold the world through the same eyes and epistemic positioning? If not, what does the pandemic reveal for whom? Furthermore, we were also interested in exploring the relationship between the pandemic's revelations and processes of social change. For example: Would the pandemic, as some social commentators prophesied, bring an end to neoliberalism or at least a reflection-provoking critique of global capitalism? Finally, what did the analysis of the pandemic's revelations contribute to the growing corpus of anthropological and social science literature on the crisis concept? How does the social science of disaster require us to reconsider and enhance the ways we think about crisis in a pandemic context? Is crisis the appropriate concept to refer to these processes that, in a large part of social studies on disasters, are called thus: disasters?

This edited volume is the result of the conversations inspired by our two-day colloquium. It features contributions from scholars and researchers working and living in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, and the United States. We did invite participants working and living in the Caribbean and other parts of Latin America (i.e. Colombia), but these colleagues were unable to contribute to this volume due to other academic writing commitments. While this is only a fraction of the many nation states that compose Latin America, we believe the chapters in this volume provide us with a range of experiences, observations, and analyses that provoke fruitful engagement of the questions that structured the original colloquium and now tie this book together. We also see this volume as the beginning of a long scholarly conversation that will extend over the pages of future volumes and monographs. We are therefore certain that the presentation of case studies featured here is by no means exhaustive but is certainly stimulating of critical thought on the subject matter at hand.

A critical reader may agree with the theoretical and analytical premises of the book but may very well ask: Why Latin America specifically? Why not structure this conversation at a global scale, since the pandemic was a global phenomenon? We recognize the need and value of exploring the stated questions across the globe. In fact, we hope this volume will inspire colleagues in other parts of the world to compile similar works and to engage with us in scholarly exchanges that will further enrich the conversation we are initiating. At the same time, we chose to focus on Latin America specifically for several analytical reasons. The nation states, communities, cultures, and peoples that compose Latin America have a shared history of a particular form of colonialism as well as a shared experience of postcolonial sociopolitical life. Like other disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic was a sociopolitical process as much as it was a biological one. But commonalities and shared experiences do not mean the pandemic manifested in the same way, or that its revelations were uniform across Latin America. Speaking about the pandemic's revelations and sociopolitical contingencies in the singular with regards to Latin America would be a grave error. For this reason, we chose to focus on the region by including chapters written by contributors living and working in different localities, giving us a sense of how the public health disaster's stakes manifested across national borders. Compiling a volume that paid similar attention to all continents and sociopolitical areas of the world would simply lie beyond the scope of a singular edited volume and our expertise as researchers. Both of us have dedicated our careers to the study of disasters in Latin America (See García-Acosta 2020) and, although we have had the privilege of conducting workshops and brief research visits to other continents, we are by no means experts on the historical and social specificities of other pandemic-affected regions. We therefore find it scholarly responsible to invite the production of similar edited volumes by researchers with adequate regional expertise outside of Latin America.

In many ways, *A Revelatory Pandemic: Crisis, Agency, and COVID in Latin America* follows the footsteps of other important edited volumes that have tackled the complex task of surveying the subject of disasters across the Americas. A case in point is Virginia García-Acosta's *The Anthropology of Disasters in Latin America: State of the Art* (2020), in which Latin American and Latin Americanist anthropologists were invited to write about how disaster anthropology was born, evolved, and its current state in many of the countries that make up the region. Despite the regretful absence of contributions about some nation states, the exercise was a surprising success, as we hope will be the case with this book. In *The Anthropology of Disasters in Latin America* (García-Acosta 2020 and its Spanish edition in 2021), some chapters shed light on the invisibility of disaster anthropology in some countries, while others detailed how disaster anthropology has gradually become a reputable line of research. In the latter instances, disaster anthropology has been increasingly recognized for its attention to local details and histories as it often focuses on the political, economic, and social context of the country in question. Novel concepts such as "disaster landscapes" and "states of uncertainty" also emerged as relevant in analyses that recognized the ways natural and technological factors, social organization, adaptive strategies, and development models become intimately entangled in disaster processes. As in *A Revelatory Pandemic*, all the chapters in *The Anthropology of Disasters in Latin America* highlighted the analytical necessity of understanding the deeper and wider temporal and spatial contexts of disastrous events.

It is also worth noting that Latin America was born amid a health cataclysm that was, to a great extent, human-made. The sixteenth century witnessed a catastrophic loss of life among Indigenous populations, especially in Mexico and Central America, following the invasion by Iberian forces and their Central Mexican Indigenous allies. The process of colonization featured the destruction of crops, forced displacement, and forced labor of millions of Indigenous people. At the same time, the introduction of new animal and plant species and a radically different vision of agricultural production modeled on plantation monocropping reshaped the landscape and displaced—but did not completely replace—Indigenous agriculture, leading to what is today called the biological "conquest" of the New World. The resulting food insecurity and malnutrition combined with the arrival of new viruses that Indigenous populations had not been previously exposed to, led to widespread loss of life and sociocultural fragmentation (Few 2020; Lovell and Lutz 1996; Melville 1994). Such was the devastation that Spanish observer Fray Bartolomé de las Casas described the unfolding bio-social disaster as "the destruction of the indies," urging the Spanish Crown to issue new laws that attempted to mitigate the mistreatment of Indigenous communities at the hands of colonial settlers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars of health in Latin America were quick to point out that many of the colonial dynamics that gave the sixteenth century health disaster form and magnitude continue in the form of stark race, class, and ethnicity-based socioeconomic inequities and exclusions in access to healthcare in many parts of the region today, especially among Indigenous populations (Few 2020). It behooves us, then, to take a careful look at Latin America, to document these historical connections, and to explore their implications for how we think about crisis, disaster, and social change.

In what remains of this Introduction, we provide readers with a more detailed review of the ways anthropologists, philosophers, historians, and social scientists in general have thought about disasters and crises during the last two and a half millennia and why such a history of thought is relevant to our analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also take stock in the state of knowledge in the anthropology of epidemics and why we strongly feel the COVID-19 pandemic demands we bring it into fruitful conversation with the anthropology of disasters. In a way, we engage the question we have asked ourselves since the beginning of the pandemic: Why has there not been a more intimate dialogue between the anthropology of epidemics and the anthropology of disaster?

The Conception of this Book: Crises, Disasters, and Pandemics

In 2014, Barrios was approached by the editorial board of *Annual Review of Anthropology* and asked to contribute a review article on the topic of crises and disasters. Upon agreeing to write the proposed text, Barrios reached out to his network of fellow disaster anthropologists, only to find many colleagues had strong reservations concerning the use of "crisis" in the study of disasters. Some researchers felt the term reiterated the idea that disasters are unavoidable catastrophic situations that are an accidental deviation from normalcy and are not intimately related to the normative state of things. Others felt the term simply added more unnecessary jargon to an already saturated analytical lexicon. "What does use of the term contribute to our analyses? Do we really need it?" some colleagues asked. While this honest feedback was much appreciated, it fell short of substantively engaging the crisis concept and exploring its limitations and possibilities vis-à-vis disasters. Aside from Jacqueline Solway (1994) and Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996), who referenced anthropologist Marshal Sahlins' use of *crise révélatrice* to highlight disasters' potential to allow researchers to see social structures in times of upheaval, the term was largely absent in the more recent disaster anthropology literature.

While disaster anthropologists may have kept a distance from the crisis concept in recent decades, the broader field of cultural anthropology has witnessed a robust engagement with the concept since the end of the Second World War (Masco 2017; Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Roitman 2011, 2013; Susser 2010). In a parallel fashion, the postwar period also saw the publication of what is today considered the most thorough examination of the crisis concept's Eurocentric history, Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis* (1988). Per Koselleck's analysis, the term originates in Classical Greece, where it was used to refer to a decision that either led to a patient's improvement or decline in the medical field, a judgment in the legal realm, or a decision to divorce or quarrel in broader social contexts. Of particular interest to Koselleck was the association of *krisis* with legal judgment, which bound the contemporary concepts of crisis and critique as cognate terms.

In the context of Medieval Europe, crisis's association with judgment led historians to use the term to denote the assumed endpoint of Christian teleological history (Fabian 1983; Koselleck 2006). The final judgment became synonymous with the assumed final crisis that would lead to the happily ever after of the Kingdom of Heaven. Such usage, in turn, led to crisis being thought of as a point in time that marked a transition between qualitatively different epochs (the history of humans vs the temporal infinity of God's Kingdom). Although the most common term to refer to these events and processes in Latin American colonial documentation was that of "calamity" (Ruiz 2003), the idea of crisis being both a moment of judgment and a transitional point between epochs went on to become a key historiographic device of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European scholarship. In this instance, crisis was no longer the moment of divine judgment that separated human history from the realm of salvation. Instead, it became the revolutionary moment when history judged society and separated the hardship of the present from a future when social ills were finally resolved. From this vantagepoint, the French and the American Revolutions came to be seen as crises that would once and for all resolve the sociopolitical maladies of their respective societies. Christian salvation was effectively secularized as post-revolutionary utopia. Fast forward to the twenty-first century, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, social commentators and editorial pundits waxed philosophical about this public health debacle being the crisis that would once and for all reveal the contradictions of neoliberalism and demand its end.

Nineteenth-century social evolutionary theory reiterated the idea of crisis as an integral part of a historical telos (Fabian 1983). In Marx's work, history was not only a telos of development that culminated in the crisis of the Communist revolution (which led to the happily ever after of the Communist mode of production); history was also composed of a series of crises precipitated by contradictions in the capitalist mode of production in which the proletariat and its leadership sharpened its organizing and revolutionary skills (Bell and Cleaver 2002; Koselleck 2006).

With regards to anthropology, scholars began to take a particular interest in crisis following the Second World War. Manchester school scholars such as Max Gluckman and Victor Turner found themselves forced to confront the rapid social changes taking place in the Zambian Copperbelt and adapted their analyzes accordingly. Turner drew from his preceding work on ritual and rites of passage, which he viewed as a crisis moment rife with the potential for change but also tempered by conservative forces within communities. Stepping into the realm of rural to urban migration, Gluckman and Turner relied on approaches that prioritized stability in the face of crisis rather than transformative change (Susser 2010).

Anthropological interest in the relationship between crisis and change would not come until the 1970s with the publication of Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (1972). Here, Sahlins revisited Raymond Firth's research in the Pacific island of Tikopia following Cyclone Anne in 1951. In times of "normalcy," Tikopians were known among anthropologists for readily sharing food among members of extended kin groups and for their amicable relationships with the local nobility. The cyclone's devastation of crops threatened a famine on the island. Consequently, Tikopians ceased to share food among broader kin groups and limited food sharing only to members of their households. Customary respect for the gardens of noble families was also suspended, and commoners stole crops to supplement their household diets. Tensions on the island ran high and rumors circulated of nobles plotting to remove commoners from the island. Despite these tensions, a full-scale revolt never materialized.

What Sahlins found interesting about the Tikopia case was that the crisis following Cyclone Anne allowed social scientists to document what he considered to be the true underlying social structure of the Melanisian society. Rather than the kinship group, Sahlins argued that the household was the fundamental social unit. Moreover, for all the anthropological talk of amicable relationships between commoners and nobles, the cyclone's aftermath showed a fracture along the lines of social stratification. For Sahlins, the cyclone and its related food insecurity were best described as a *crise révélatrice*, a revelatory crisis that allowed social scientists to see social structures that were difficult to recognize in times of "normalcy." This observation was not entirely novel in anthropological literature. Manchester school anthropologists had already made such a claim in their work in the Zambian Copperbelt. What was different in this instance was that Sahlins was not driven by an analytical bias that favored conflict resolution between conservative and transformative agents in society, but by an interest in when the revelations of a crisis led to dramatic social change.

Comparing the case of Tikopia to that of Hawaii, where revolts—another kind of revelatory crisis in Sahlins' opinion—led to significant sociopolitical change, Sahlins pondered why some crises led to transformation and others did not. His verdict: Hawaiian revolts were crises that resulted from the internal workings of Hawaiian history, while the Tikopian post-cyclone crisis was precipitated by an outside agent (the cyclone). In Sahlins' combination of Marxist and Structuralist analyzes, the mode of production of Hawaiian societies had reached maturity, meaning that tensions and contradictions in the mode of production had reached a critical boiling point, whereas the Tikopian mode of production had not. Sahlins' conclusions, however, articulated several assumptions about disasters that would soon be challenged.

In 1976, Phil O'Keefe, Ken Westgate, and Ben Wisner published an article in the journal *Nature* that is today credited with revolutionizing the ways social scientists think about disasters (O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner 1976). In "Taking the Naturalness Out of Natural Disasters," these geographers compared the social and material damages and the magnitude of their triggering hazards in various parts of the globe, concluding that hazard magnitude was not the sole determining factor of whether a disaster manifested or the extent of its impact. In fact, their analysis indicated social and historical variables such as colonial and capitalist extractive economies and socioeconomic inequities played a greater role in determining the magnitude (how much is damaged, how many lives are lost) and shape (what is damaged, who dies or is injured) of disasters. Following this logic, disasters were more social than natural phenomena, making the term "natural disaster" a misnomer. It is also no small sidenote of history that the main examples they presented in support of their thesis were disasters that occurred in Latin America; namely, the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala.

O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner's article marked the onset of a scholarly line of research and theory that would come to be known as vulnerability theory—whose development also took place in Latin American contexts through the contributions of Latin American, European, and US-based researchers. Publications such as *Los desastres no son naturales* (Maskrey 1993)—an edited volume featuring contributions from emerging Latin American and European scholars including Virginia García-Acosta, Gustavo Wilches-Chaux, Andrew Maskrey, Omar Darío Cardona, Allan Lavell, Jesús Manuel Macias and Gilberto Romero—and *At Risk* (Wisner, Blaikie, and Davis 1994) became notable texts in this body of literature and part of the canon of social scientific thought on disasters. By the late 1990s, vulnerability theory was introduced to US academic audiences by Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman with the publication of *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective* (1999). In this and other publications, Oliver-Smith (see also Solway 1994) revisited Sahlins' idea of the revelatory crisis, noting that the catastrophic phases of disasters are moments in which "the fundamental features of society and culture are laid bare in stark relief by the reduction of priorities to basic social, cultural and material necessities" (Oliver-Smith 1996: 304). Additionally, Oliver-Smith considered disasters "one measure by which we can judge the success of adaptation to the environment" (Oliver-Smith 1999: 27); the idea of judgment here resonating strongly with Classical Greek usage of the crisis concept.

Aside from Oliver-Smith's brief acknowledgment of Sahlins' revelatory crisis, disaster anthropologists moved away from the concept in the decades that followed. Meanwhile, other anthropologists interested in the epistemological dimensions of climate and financial matters found much fruitful ground for critically examining the crisis concept (Masco 2017; Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Roitman 2011, 2013). In the mid-1990s, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman reflected on the kinds of subjects that emerged through the experience of living in contexts recognized by the public and policymakers as crises. Focusing on the postcolonial context of Cameroon, Mbembe and Roitman highlighted the ways former European colonial powers perpetuated inequitable power relations with former colonies in post-independence periods. These powers did so through economic and structural adjustment policies that allowed them to continue to exploit the human and natural resources of the Global South while local political elites enriched themselves at the expense of national communities. In this postcolonial context, crisis was the quotidian norm and not the exception to the norm of Eurocentric historiography.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the subjectivity shaping effects of crisis that concerned Mbembe and Roitman (crisis as norm) seemed to have also reached the societies of the Global North. In his article "The Crisis in Crisis," Joseph Masco (2017) considered whether incessant invocation of the crisis concept by news media and political leaders in the United States had the effect of neutralizing the agency of a public besieged by crisis discourses, effectively curtailing the possibility of transformative social change. Climate, economic, environmental, humanitarian, and political crises dominated the twenty-four-hour news cycle, Masco noted, instilling feelings of helplessness and futility upon their audience.

Taking a close look at the aftermath of the 2008 global recession, Janet Roitman (2013) also considered the relationship between crisis and change or the lack thereof. Focusing on the commodification of housing within a capitalist framework, Roitman highlighted the importance of epistemological shifts; that is, a fundamental change in the ways people think and relate to housing—for the transformative potential of crisis to be realized. Roitman's analysis showed how, by focusing on crisis as the result of an error in the normatively desired situation (i.e. capitalist housing markets, the thinking of debt as an asset and houses as financial investments), policymakers and the public at large failed to make the necessary changes in the ways they thought and related to housing in the United States in the aftermath of the 2008 recession. Consequently, the normatively accepted practices that caused the recession in the first place (i.e. the treatment of debt as collateral, houses and mortgages as capital investments) were allowed to remain unchallenged and unchanged. While Masco and Roitman did not see change as a guaranteed outcome of crisis, other anthropologists continued to reiterate the idea that crisis will lead to transformation. In *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*, for example, Gastón Gordillo (2014) hypothesized that climate change would be the crisis that would once and for all bring a halt to the capitalist mode of production.

The broader anthropological literature on crisis presents a few stimulating challenges to the anthropology of disasters. If, as Sahlins, Solway, and Oliver-Smith observed, disasters are revelatory crises that—in true Manchester School form—allow social scientists to evince social structures and processes that are not readily visible in times of normalcy, how does the epistemological perspective of the beholder factor into such revelations? Implicit in both Sahlins' and Oliver-Smith's use of revelatory crisis is the assumption that the observer is a social scientist who beholds a catastrophe either from the perspective of Marxism combined with French Structuralism (in the case of Sahlins) or political ecology (in the case of Oliver-Smith). The assumption here being that these perspectives afford a crisis observer an epistemologically modernized perspective that is devoid of cultural bias and objectively apprehends the social processes that engendered a catastrophe. In the last three decades, anthropologists, philosophers, social historians, and historians of science have recognized that modern epistemology never actually achieved its claims of objectivity (Haraway 1997; Latour 1993); rather, it proliferated the intimate connections between materiality and meaning of nonmodern epistemologies while claiming not to do so. Political ecology, Marxist analyses, and French Structuralism in anthropology operate on several assumptions (i.e. the separation of objects and subjects, nature and society, the existence of natural and social structures that can be accurately documented) that have been proven to be a cultural conceit of modernist thought rather than an objective transcendental truth of how the natural and social worlds operate. In the same sense, Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), a work that Sahlins himself described as "remarkable," challenged social scientists to document and value Indigenous epistemologies that do not follow the hierarchical dichotomies of modernist thinking (i.e. the granting a central and superior ontological status to humans over nonhumans and "nature") and allow people to imagine radically different ontological orders where nonhumans are not necessarily inferior to and at the disposal of humans (Sahlins 2013: 5). Such observations open a space for the consideration of what vantagepoints other than modern epistemology allow the beholders of crises to see and problematize as conditions and practices in need of transformative change.

We would be remiss if this narration of the history of the anthropological study of crises and disasters did not mention one of the most exciting developments in the latter during the last three decades: a growing intersection with science and technology studies (STS). The field of STS multiplies agentive forms (recognizing COVID, hurricanes, geomorphic formations, and industrial designs as agentive, for example), complicating human agency. STS analyses also foregrounded the epistemic complexity and dynamics of disasters; recognizing: a) many kinds of expertise in play in disaster context and their differential authority; and b) the multitude of frames in play in disaster contexts, and how this both complicates and enriches disaster characterization and response. This, in turn, has built important bridges between the anthropology of disaster, STS, and work to understand and address environmental injustice. An important figure in these interlaced lines of inquiry is Kim Fortun and we consider her book, *Advocacy After Bhopal* (2001), an important part of the canon of disaster anthropology (see also Fortun et al. 2017). We also build from dialogues Fortun convened during the COVID pandemic to collectively consider how critical scholars could approach the pandemic. This book partly stems from these dialogues, and some of its contributors (Suárez, Chang) were drawn in through them. With regards to the revelatory qualities of the pandemic, we credit Fortun with the observation that it is social scientists themselves who, through their data collection and fieldwork, produce the revelations of crises and disasters (Fortun, personal communication). A crisis's revelations, then, are not politically or epistemologically neutral matters of fact that await discovery by researchers but are products of academic labor that result in publications such as the chapters of this book.

Toward a Crisis Without Guarantee: Irreducible Agency and Social Change in a Pandemic Context

So what did the pandemic reveal to our contributors and how do such revelations intervene upon existing scholarly discussions about crises, disasters, and social change? To reduce the many contributions the authors featured in this volume make to social science would be to carry out a grave intellectual violence on them and our readers. Each reader will undoubtedly see connections and develop interpretations that we could not anticipate, and we encourage such unpredictable intellectual chain reactions. Nevertheless, if pressed to summarize the volume's collective intervention, it would be this: For too long, scholars and public intellectuals enculturated in the Eurocentric telos of crisis theory have come to expect moments of upheaval to mechanically yield progressive sociopolitical transformations. Such expectations of history amount to what postcolonial historian Saurabh Dube (2004) has called history with warranty. That is, the expectation that historical processes will lead to teleologically expected outcomes. As a counter to such historiographic conventions, Dube has proposed the idea of history without warranty.

Inspired by Dube's proposal, it is our assessment that the chapters in this volume support the idea of crisis without guarantee (guarantee meaning the assurance that a specific thing, such as a crisis, will perform in a specific way); that is, the analytical engagement of crisis with the knowledge that progressive sociopolitical transformation is not an assured outcome. So, if sociopolitical transformation is not a given result of a mechanically operating history, then how does it take place? Discussions of sociopolitical change are inevitably discussions about agency, and discussions about agency are, by necessity, discussions about epistemology. As we mentioned previously, modern epistemology parceled out the world in a false ontological dichotomy of nature and culture and object and subject. Consequently, the analysis of catastrophes based on this dichotomy (i.e. natural disasters vs socially constructed disasters) falls short of grasping the ontological nuance of disasters, crises, and pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. The pandemic as we came to live and know it was the result of a multidimensional interaction of various forms of agency that were irreducible to either strictly natural, human, or social. The virus benefitted from human practices of socialization, trade, commerce, and travel created through the process known as globalization to spread across the planet. Some political officials used the virus's spread to consolidate and further their ideological agendas. Public health experts rushed to devise practices that could hinder contagion (i.e. social distancing, wearing of masks) and to create a form of agency (vaccines) that could counteract the virus. All these actions involved actors that were one part matter, one part semiotics, and one part social, making it impossible and analytically unhelpful to represent them as strictly natural, cultural, or social.

So if agency is irreducible and no one actor is truly wholly human or nonhuman, social or natural but we are all, instead, cyborgs (Haraway 1997) or collectives (Latour 1993), does that mean we live in a universe of chaotically interacting ontologies in which nothing is within our control and that social scientific analysis is limited to simply stating the truism that everything affects everything? The chapters in this book tell us that such is not the case. They show us that while even people themselves are cyborgs in their subjectivities and bodies, they are also agents with the capacity to reflect, imagine, feel, strategize, and act. We people are not reducible to nature or culture. We emerge in the interaction between various forms of agency that are misnamed as either specifically social or natural by the modern gaze. And while people as agentive beings are neither strictly one ontology nor the other, we do have a consciousness and capacity to act, to take history by the horns and collectively strive for change. While the changes that emerge will never be exactly the ones we hoped for due to the mangle of agency (Pickering and Guzik 2009) that is the world at large, we hope that we can collectively agree that some worlds are more desirable than others as imperfect and self-contradictory as they may always be. We dare say that imperfect self-aware modernism that strives to recognize the value of other epistemologies, for example, is more desirable to us and the members of our collective than bigoted fascism (although we say this with full knowledge that this is a subjectivity-contingent value judgment and that the former can lead to the latter if we do not manage it carefully). These determinations, of course, are themselves political. We collectively and subjectively decide that we would rather live and die one way rather than another and, on some occasions, we commit to addressing the imperfections and inadvertent injustices of the path we have chosen. Now, we turn our attention to the content of the chapters themselves.

In Chapter 1, Sergio Visakovsky and Gabriel Noel take a critical look at how the Argentinian state's response to the pandemic highlighted the nation's precarious economic situation, the inability of the state to respond quickly and effectively to the health crisis, and profound social inequalities that plagued the country. Focusing on public disputes concerning vaccines and vaccination programs, Visakovsky and Noel's chapter also explores how the experiences of many Argentinians differ from the temporality of crisis outlined by European and US scholars and expected by the public. In South America, Visakovsky and Noel argue, Argentines do not inhabit the subjectivity of hopeful futurities. Instead, many live through crisis while waiting for it to deepen and turn from bad to worse, a positionality shaped through preceding decades of political and economic upheavals that created a sense of perpetual crisis among citizens.

Norbert Ross' chapter, which focuses on El Salvador and the experiences of historically marginalized rural and urban populations, reiterates many of Visacovsky's and Noel's observations. As in Argentina, crisis is not a diversion from normalcy; it is and has been the normal long before US-based scholar Joseph Masco coined the palindrome "crisis in crisis." Engaging the revelatory quality often attributed to crisis, Ross notes that the pandemic in El Salvador not only revealed but also exacerbated and transformed longstanding social inequalities. In this case, public health policies meant to constrain virus transmission through limits on spatial mobility and sheltering in place, when unaccompanied by a functioning social safety net, compounded the risk of contagion with the risk of food insecurity and deepened economic marginalization. In this sociopolitical context, public health measures such as lockdowns became disasters within disaster (a theme we will see in later chapters by Suárez and Chang and Ullberg and Zenobi). In fact, Ross argues that the Salvadoran government focused its pandemic response efforts on guaranteeing the safety of the propertied class at the expense of the wellbeing of marginalized groups, effectively revealing the nation's class structure. Invoking Giorgio Agamben, Ross suggests that urban poor Salvadorans were effectively transformed into bare life, people whose lives can be killed for the well-being of fully enfranchised citizens; more specifically, the protection of the biological health of the middle class at the economic expense of the working poor.

Moving further north to Morelos, Mexico, María N. Rodríguez Alarcón echoes the message of the preceding chapters: In many Latin American contexts, the enunciation of COVID-19 as a crisis did not present a disruption from a condition of normalcy or socioeconomic stability. Instead, economically marginalized residents of the state of Morelos had, for a long time, experienced the condition of permanent emergency when COVID-19 arrived. Rodríguez Alarcón's contribution comes from the vantagepoint of people, households, and communities deeply impacted by earthquakes in 2017. As she writes, socially marginalized people were more likely to become infected with the virus, suffer additional health complications, experience enhanced economic precarity, and even die not just as an effect of exposure to COVID-19, but because their pre-existing condition as socioeconomically marginalized earthquake survivors made their lives a permanent emergency.

Turning our gaze south once again, Maka Suárez and Fu-Yu Chang take us to Guayaquil, Ecuador, arguably the city hardest hit by COVID-19 in Latin America. In this instance, the pandemic, as beheld through their eyes, revealed the limited capacity of Ecuador's health infrastructure to respond to the emergency and how this limited capacity was created through neoliberal austerity policies that cut two-thirds of public health resources on the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak. These economic measures disproportionately affected the urban and rural poor, leading to social unrest (what some may call another crisis) in October 2019. In Sahlins' analytical language, one could say the mode of production in Ecuador was reaching maturity in the months prior to the pandemic's onset, but the rapid spread of the virus and the declaration of a health crisis did not lead to a transformative social change. Instead, the Ecuadorian government successfully seized the pandemic as an opportunity to forcefully roll out its austerity agenda and to crack down on civil liberties. The result: The pandemic heightened historical disparities in healthcare access along lines of race, class, and gender, allowing the COVID-19 virus to thrive on social inequalities. Here we see the interplay of agencies that made the pandemic in Ecuador. The agency of a virus and its propensity to spread, working in conjunction with human proximity and sociality, and elected officials, seizing on the virus's spread to further their political agenda.

As in the case of El Salvador, Suárez and Chang's documentation of the pandemic in Guayaquil shows that, in the context of Latin America, shelter in place and lockdown public health measures that were unaccompanied by robust state-organized social safety nets became lopsided means of pandemic control that ignored the realities and necessities of the urban and rural poor. Isolation protocols also had the effect of acting like an echo chamber for disinformation. Like others in this volume (Marchezini, Ross, and Brannigan et al.), Suárez and Chang did not remain satisfied with simply documenting pandemic inequities; they acted as public social scientists. Suárez and Chang collaborated in the making of videos to counteract the spread of misinformation concerning scientifically unproven COVID-19 preventive measures and cures, enhance bio-literacy by explaining how tests work and the different existing types, and making recommendations on how to safely emerge from shelter in place orders. The videos explained biomedical information in nonspecialized language with an ethnographically informed sensitivity to local needs and were successfully circulated among a wider audience. The success of these videos was due to the rapport and trust built by these researcher-social scientist-health workers over long periods of community engagement, a trademark of anthropological practice.

Victor Marchezini is a Brazilian disaster social scientist with a long history of community engagement and participatory research. Echoing Norbert Ross, he problematizes the ideas of necropolitics that circulated during the pandemic, a concept theorized by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben as a key technique of biopolitical governance in which state agents and agencies appoint themselves arbiters of whose lives and what ways of living are expendable for the wellbeing of the national population conceptualized as, first and foremost, a biological population. In the case of Preventório, Niterói, Brazil, a socioeconomically underprivileged neighborhood where Marchezini worked during the pandemic, the state of exception that cast the lives of marginalized Brazilians as expendable was resisted by neighborhood residents who devised grassroots solidarity responses to mitigate the social abandonment implicit in governmental pandemic response. Inspired by these interlocutors, Marchezini reveals how the residents of Preventório managed to reverse the state of exception in which state agents claimed the right to make necropolitical decisions: A moment of creative subaltern solidarity that fostered the life of historically expendable socioeconomically marginalized peoples.

From Brazil, we return to Mexico, where Raymundo Padilla critiques the Mexican government's risk communication strategies. From his positionality as a disaster researcher trained in the vulnerability perspective, Padilla makes the case that the Mexican government's pandemic response revealed the dangers of using the term crisis as synonymous with disasters when the former articulates the assumption that a catastrophic situation is an accidental anomaly from the norm, effectively ignoring the role of the norm in the engendering of the disaster (or pandemic) at hand. Padilla contributes yet another methodological approach to the volume, focusing primarily on the analysis of use frequency of crisis and disaster in the Mexican government's risk communication strategy as well as the meanings and assumptions accompanying these terms. Padilla calls for the foregrounding of critical approaches to risk communication that recognize the role of socially created vulnerability in the manifestation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving south once again, Susann Baez Ullberg and Diego Zenobi provide yet another vantagepoint from which to examine COVID-19's revelations: What is revealed when the locality of San Luis, Argentina, is observed through the lens of infrastructure anthropology? Ullberg and Zenobi's chapter allows us to see the challenges confronted by Argentines when road closures, shelter in place orders, and state agencies incapable or unwilling to look after their survival needs, forced people to make moral decisions and judgments (the stuff of Classical Greek definitions of crisis) concerning health, safety, and mobility to provide for their daily basic needs. In this instance, the focus is on the purposeful disabling of infrastructure on the part of state agencies (road closures) to reduce mobility and diminish virus contagion. As in Suárez and Chang's chapter, these infrastructure-focused public health measures, when applied without proper state food security and economic assistance (especially to the most economically marginalized), forced residents of San Luis to make decisions weighing public health and biosecurity versus survival and sociality. Through their infrastructure-centered lens, Ullberg and Zenobi are also able to examine broader questions such as the relationship between infrastructure and subjectivity as well as—very much like Marchezini's interlocutors—the creative strategies many people in South America had to devise to survive not just the pandemic, but public health responses that were ignorant or insensitive of local livelihoods and needs.

The next two chapters beckon readers to consider one of the fundamental facts of life in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic: Informal migration to the United States. This focus reminds readers that development, strategic "security," and labor policies tying the region to other parts of the hemisphere (the United States) since the early twentieth century have increasingly challenged the idea of Latin America as a territory that begins south of the United States-Mexico border. Instead, focusing on transnational migration encourages us to understand Latin America as a dynamic, mobile, and multicultural populace that wrestles with issues of postcoloniality, racism, and various forms of violence. Civil conflict, extractive economic policies, human rights abuses, and US-backed state terror have all contributed to conditions of economic insecurity and everyday violence that drive people to leave their communities and migrate north to the United States and Canada, especially since the 1980s. These migrants, many of them informal, have established diasporic communities throughout the United States. Their status as disempowered exploitable labor in foreign lands put them in unique conditions of precarity during the pandemic (Besserer and Ruiz Grajales 2023). In Chapter 8, Claire Branigan, Jessica F. Brinkworth, Korinta Maldonado, Ellen Moodie, and Gilberto Rosas document the experience of transnational communities in the US Midwest, shedding light on the multiple risks and vulnerabilities imposed on migrant workers and the role of racialization in their exploitation by US employers. Like other contributors in this volume, these authors were not content to be mere beholders of crisis and mobilized to assist migrants. Their applied ethnographic approach reveals how Central American, Mexican, and Mexican-American migrants find themselves in new multicultural contexts where they can themselves observe or coexperience the violence and inequities of racist labor exploitation of other transnational populations from places such as the Congo. Their chapter—also like others in this volume—highlights the social importance and ethical need for praxis on the part of social scientists in disaster and pandemic times.

Maintaining the transnational mobility theme, Alfredo Danilo Rivera gives us a view from the other side of the migration process. Writing from Guatemala, Rivera details how the pandemic revealed the unique and profound vulnerability of returnee informal migrants who, as an effect of their immigration status, often find themselves in situations where they cannot appeal to a state for rights and protections under the law. This is a topic that remains largely underexplored in disaster anthropology, which usually focuses on the impacts of hazards on populations who can make claims before the state in terms of citizenship and national belonging. In fact, in Barrios' own ethnographic work on the experiences, challenges, and accomplishments of informal migrants who moved to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to work on the city's reconstruction, his interlocutors have remarked how the pandemic revealed their profound vulnerability. What has surprised him most is that these interlocutors have done so without prompting; that is, without him bringing up the notion of disaster as a revelatory crisis. As a researcher working with one of Guatemala's premier social science research agencies (AVNACSO), Rivera gives us a unique look at the experiences, hopes, and concerns of informal migrants moving across national borders in search of a better life during a global health disaster.

The book closes with a chapter by Gustavo Peña-Flores, a journalist who has reported on Honduran politics and economy for the *Los Angeles Times* and who is a highly regarded emerging Honduran scholar. His chapter bookends the volume by revisiting a theme brought up by Visakovsky, Noel, and Ross: The fact that the temporality of crisis in Latin America differs profoundly from that of Eurocentric scholarship; that is, many Latin Americans have hardly experienced periods of "normalcy" punctuated by crises but have, instead, lived through multiple crises since the twentieth century and do not share the optimistic future orientation of the post-crisis happily ever after. Perhaps more importantly, Peña-Flores also documents how Honduran political culture and the transnational political economy that shaped it since the early twentieth century played a key role in creating a public with limited scientific literacy. This public, in turn, was one upon which political and economic elites unleashed politicized pandemic knowledge for the purposes of political control and wealth accumulation. As his chapter details, the incorporation of Honduras into networks of commodity production and extraction—often involving US economic interests—necessitated the intentional destruction of scientific and social scientific literacy and knowledge, creating a volatile context where misinformation could be politically mobilized and thrive alongside the COVID-19 virus.

A Pandemic's Revelations and Crisis's Relationship to Transformative Change

In Latin America, geopolitical relations, economic conditions, civil conflicts, and foreign military interventions during the last century created conditions narrated by the region's people as a perpetual crisis. An astute reader will point out that such a condition is no longer alien to the Global North, and particularly the United States. We argue, however, that what is particularly revealing about our contributors' chapters (especially in the case of Marchezini, Padilla, Rivera, and Ullberg and Zenobi) is that, unlike Masco's speculative pessimism (his proposition that a state of perpetual crisis has the potential to immobilize the public), Latin Americans show much agency, courage, creativity, and perseverance in the face of unending strife, upheavals, economic debacles, and, yes, pandemics and disasters. If experience shapes the subject, the continued quotidian experience of economic, political, and social upheavals at regional, national, household, and individual levels have made people who do not become passive in the face of catastrophic circumstances. Whether it is sharing scarce resources with each other, forming grassroots solidarity networks, and even migrating across national borders in search of opportunity, the Latin Americans represented in the chapters that follow do not become immobilized in the face of dire circumstances, even life-destroying ones. They are, in fact, subjects forged in the fire of upheaval who do not expect the happily ever after of post-crisis utopia, but whose internalized temporalities drive them to brace for the crises that will follow present ones and make meaningful lives, livelihoods, families, and communities against the odds.

With regards to the idea of crisis with guarantee, many Latin Americans, these chapters show us, do not have such expectations but they also do not succumb to fatalism. They see life as a series of struggles that must be valiantly taken on, even if resolution and salvation are not guaranteed. In the streets of Mexico City, where Barrios usually finds himself in summers, he often sees an image of the popular wrestling figure, Blue Demon, accompanied by the words: "No hay peor lucha que la que no se hace." "There is no worse struggle than the one you don't take on." This phrase encapsulates the Latin American ethos before crisis: Take on the fight, even if it is a losing proposition, because not doing so is an even sadder state of affairs. The experiences, and the voices of our many Latin American interlocutors, then, are a challenge for us all to take history by the horns as anthropogenic climate change and the Anthropocene take effect. To realize our agency as actors of history and to not expect social transformation to simply occur organically or mechanically, but to make it happen. It is a challenge to the anthropological trope of Latin American fatalism and the Eurocentric and US-centric passive optimism that has permeated crisis theory for too long. It is up to us, "history" is not coming to save us.

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Nebraska Press) and coeditor with Susanna Hoffman of *Disaster Upon Disaster* (2022, Berghahn). His current research documents the experiences of informal migrants who helped reconstruct the city of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and their struggle for belonging in an often-inhospitable environment.

Virginia García-Acosta is a social anthropologist and historian and is an Emeritus Professor at CIESAS (Mexico City campus), Emeritus Researcher at the National System of Researchers, and a Member of the National Academy of History in Mexico. She has published over one-hundred articles and book chapters and thirty-two books in Mexico and overseas. She has also been PI and Co-PI of several research projects funded by Mexican and international agencies. Her research focuses on food history, disaster, and risk from a historical–anthropological perspective with a specific interest in Mexico and Latin America. She is former director of CIESAS (2004–14) and a founding member of the Latin American disaster researcher network "La Red."

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