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Book Review: The Shaming State: How the U.S. Treats Citizens in Need

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I read this book as the anniversary of the train derailment in East Palestine Ohio passed. This industrial “accident” leaked 100,000 gallons of toxic chemicals into the environment, to uncertain effect. Contaminants include butyl acrylate, the known carcinogen ethylene glycol monobutyl ether, PVC plastic, which produces toxic dioxins upon combustion, and vinyl chloride, another carcinogen. Amongst the points made in Rebecca Kiger’s (2024) year-long special report for Time magazine is the following observation: ’State and federal agencies have continuously reassured residents that the town is safe. But many people here say it feels like they are being gaslighted by their own government, intent, for some reason, on covering up the extent of the disaster.’ When we read media reports of disasters they often present as random, isolated events, rather than as normal outcomes of systemic practices. Disaster scholars would see what happened in East Palestine as a classic “catastrophe in the making” (Freudenberg, Grambling, Laska and Erikson, 2009): the scything back of protective regulations; an industry that prioritises profits and speed over safety, with weight distribution and inspections being secondary considerations at best; combustible cargoes transported on ever-longer trains; a toothless Federal Railroad Administration which fails to hold railroad companies to account; an unsafe system secured by corporate lobbying power. Not only could a disaster of this type be anticipated, as Salman’s book so clearly shows, the state response could have been expected too.

Salman’s book centers two different constituencies, in two different locations, in the 2010s, who have been impacted by two different disasters. The first group are Iraqi refugees who have been resettled in Wayne County, Michigan. Trying to start again over half a world away, they are trapped in the transit lounge of life, never able to move on, never able to properly belong. They found a state in recession, the automobile industry collapsing, the city of Detroit bankrupt. Their particular county had higher unemployment than the state’s average and a poor median income as well. Economically speaking, ‘Michigan fared worse than the rest of the country, and Wayne County fared worse than Michigan’ (Salman 2023, 57). The best that they can hope for in terms of employment are low paid jobs in the service industry rather than professional careers of the sort that they had left behind. And in terms of official help, the best that they can hope for falls far short of what they are legally entitled to. The second group are New Yorkers who were in the path of a hurricane, residents of Jamaica Bay swamped by Sandy’s seven-foot storm surge. They are predominately civil servants and first responders. They are homeowners, with incomes higher than New York’s median.

There are obvious differences between these two groups: Iraqi and American, refugee and citizen, low social capital and high, fast-food worker and white-collar professional, precariat and middle class, respectively resident in Republican Michigan and Democratic New York, requiring poor relief and disaster relief. But there are also commonalities. Both have risked their lives in performing duties for the state, the former working for American and Allied forces during the Iraq war, the latter as first responders during 9/11 and as active service members of the police and fire departments. As such, both should have been thanked for their service. And both should have been fully entitled to social insurance programs when required. As the author puts it: ‘Each group needed aid at a time of a crisis beyond their control, and each group required a caring response from the government in their moment of adversity’ (page 3). What follows is an extended investigation into the all-important, but
typically overlooked, question of care. Or, more pointedly, its absence. Since the author documents in rich empirical detail the many ways in which the state was missing in action.

Conventional social science wisdom would tell us that one of these groups would be treated consistently better than the other, but in the best tradition of innovative social research the author presents counterintuitive findings.

Under conditions of precarious existence, the last thing you need is precarious assistance, and yet this is what both groups encountered. Service provision for them – at federal, state, and local level – fell far below their expectations and needs. Administrative errors, callous case workers, lost documentation and endless waits were the norm. But this was not merely a catalogue of official ineptitude and neglect, although instances of both abound. For example, Jamaica Bay residents who faced massive inundation were falsely told that they could shelter in place. The authority’s poor decisions were informed by poor data. Flood maps were outdated. There was no up-to-date evacuation plan.

Both groups were subjected to ‘bureaucratic legitimacy tests’ (Salman 2023, 133), and both reported ‘experiencing feelings of humiliation and abandonment’ (Salman 2023, 4). As the author notes, this withdrawal of care is deliberate. It is a punitive system by design (which also means that it does not have to be this way). A strategy of calculated callousness, it is fed by many tributaries: the enduring power of the American dream; the salience of distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor; deeply entrenched national cultural values lauding independence, individual and personal responsibility, where the state is seen as an unreasonable fetter on freedom rather than an ever-present fact of life. But its main source is neoliberalism, or what Salman prefers to call ‘market fundamentalism’, which exacerbates all that just mentioned. The neoliberal state is an uneven state. Overdeveloped in the domains of corporate welfare, criminal “justice”, and military operations, but underdeveloped in the sphere of social rights. As the state conflates with market, social welfare is conflated with dependency, care with weakness. Hard work, irrespective of availability or remuneration, is what really counts.

The author does an excellent job of tracing the rhetorical strategies through which social rights are repositioned as privileges rather than entitlements. Instead of asking “Do they deserve it?”, the question becomes “Can we afford it?” This shifts the focus away from actual people in need to the abstraction that is the American taxpayer, and from concerns about welfare to ‘efficiency and waste and fraud minimization’ (Salman 2023, 79). Preventing theft trumps meeting needs. For the underlying assumption is that no one truly deserves welfare. Institutionally speaking, magical thinking prevails. People can overcome their conditions. Such a sensibility shifts vulnerability from being a shared element of the human condition – we are all enmeshed in networks of mutually dependency, we must all rely upon a host of others – to something else entirely: a stigmatized trait. This often results in self-loathing or suspicion of undeserving others (Why else would the state be so punitive?). Discipline displaces care (Salman 2023, 143), and what responsibility remains is put out to the market. The author writes ‘of the state’s almost blind faith in the private sector and the state’s obliviousness to citizens’ needs’ (Salman 2023, 108).

In this environment even the need for help arouses suspicion. In classic victim-blaming fashion, those requesting it were interrogated rather than assisted, humiliated instead of supported. Vulnerability, which is a function of social location, is recast as individual moral failing. ‘The experience of shame links material insecurity to symbolic insecurity’ (Salman 2023, 161). Public issues become personal problems. In the author’s apt phrase, this amounts to ‘late modern gaslighting’ (Salman 2023, 19). As she writes of the refugees: ‘They left Iraq because they had to. Arriving in the United States, they
understood that starting a new life would be arduous, but they did not expect it to be humiliating’ (Salman 2023, 1). Such is the shaming state.

There is much of worth here for the Critical Disaster Scholar. The book is particularly welcome as disaster recovery is the most complex (Lonne, McColl and Marston, 2016), least studied (Rubin, 2009) and consequently least understood (Tierney 2019, 203) element of the entire disaster cycle. The key takeaway is this: there are no deserving victims under conditions of market fundamentalism. The legitimate aid recipient does not exist (Salman 2023, 73). At least in human form. Corporations, by contrast, seem to be beyond reproach. Here the author provides us with an unflinching vision of what neoliberal disaster recovery looks like, cataloguing its manifold failures. One of the work’s greatest merits is its demonstration of the ways in which core disaster concepts like resilience and social capital – which are often viewed within disaster studies and policy domains as unqualified goods – are weaponised by the powerful to deflect blame and responsibility away from them, rightly noting that “the social valorization of private notions such as “social networks” and “community” overlook both the extent to which state carelessness exists today and the extent to which state programs substantiated the formation of social capital historically’ (Salman 2023, 100; and see Evans and Reid 2014, 99). Additionally, emotions are granted a central role of in disaster scholarship. As she writes, ‘the title of the book is a result of recognizing the strong presence of shame in experiences of needing care in the aftermath of disasters’ (Salman 2023, 5).

Individualised recovery is disastrous. It is too much for private citizens to bear. The book closes with some thoughts as to ways forward. We should recognize that we are all vulnerable, we should uncouple notions of self-worth from employment status, we should refuse to internalise the shaming state’s dictates, and we should resist the tendency to take out frustrations in various forms of horizontal violence. Absent the state, the value of various community organizations is noted, as is the power of mutual aid. Although one suspects that the true solution will come when people collectively organise to transform the conditions of their own immiseration.

References


