

Petit capitalisms in disaster, or the limits of neoliberal imagination: Displacement, recovery, and opportunism in highland Ecuador

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Disaster capitalism is typically defined as a systematic and opportunistic reconfiguration of economies and economic regulations in service of capitalist interests under the cover of environmental crisis. This article offers another complementary variety of disaster capitalism—the production of capitalist subjects, petit capitalists “empowered” by the state and nongovernmental organizations via initiation into the special knowledge and crafts of small enterprise. This is at once a well-intentioned strategy and one that reveals the limits of neoliberal imagination—the inability to envision recovery but through individualistic, entrepreneurial endeavors. In my study of recovery from the eruptions of Mt. Tungurahua in Ecuador, I present cases of state and nongovernmental organizations providing aid and recovery to affected highland peasants. These projects reveal people being moved to assume certain subjectivities by limited “inventories of possibility” and an internalization of dominant norms and structures. Even as subjects posture their culture and practices as moral, communitarian alternatives to capitalist greed, local economic strategies took on entrepreneurial characteristics that articulated with neoliberal ambitions of state and global institutions; peasant ambitions and desires are produced and invoked as if they were locally derived, while at the same time being co-constituted by dominant interests. I discuss how these dramas unfold, with attention to the creative agency exercised by locals.

Keywords Disaster Capitalism; Cooperation; Small Enterprise; Neoliberalism; Entrepreneurship; Ecuador; Disaster Recovery; Tourism

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