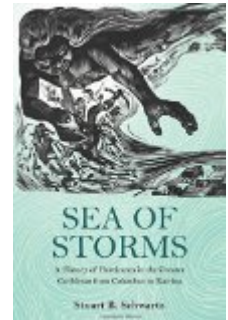


Stuart B. Schwartz. *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 472 S. ISBN 978-0-691-15756-6.



Reviewed by Johannes Bohle

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The term Caribbean provokes a set of images coming readily to mind: from images of sea, sun, and sand over lush forests and bustling cities to devastating hazards like earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes. Defining the Caribbean as a region is a difficult task, it is marked by the great drama of the Americas: the shaping of societies by extermination, colonialism, and forced migration. As Carole Boyce Davies asserts, among others, “[b]ecause the Caribbean is clearly one of those geopolitical locations impacted by [...] larger historical developments, reading Caribbean space in this contemporary period means using different understandings of how this space is contoured beyond assumed fixed geographies” Carole Boyce Davies, *Caribbean Spaces. Escapes from Twilight Zones*, Urbana 2013. . “Sea of Storms” by Stuart B. Schwartz is an extraordinary example of this type of approach to understand the region. He explores the Caribbean and its history by “[...] using hurricanes [...] as a kind of meta-narrative, a general organizing theme” (p. xi) in order to reveal “[...] how the hurricanes shaped social and political life, and how in turn social and political pat-

terns in the Greater Caribbean influenced the impact of the storms” (p. xii).

Schwartz’s book joins the rank of studies of environmental history and social history that explore the interrelations between the environment and societies in the Greater Caribbean, like John McNeill’s “Mosquito Empires” John McNeill, *Mosquito Empires. Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean 1620–1914*, Cambridge 2010. , just to name a well-known one. “Sea of Storms” provides a truly transnational, or rather transregional, study which links Africa, Europe and the Americas by following the paths of hurricanes and looking at practices and effects at different places and times. Organized in nine chronological chapters, the book discusses human efforts to cope with hurricanes as the region’s most characteristic hazard, starting with the Veracruz hurricane of 1552 and ending with an account of hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Schwartz alternates between general explanation of historical developments of societal changes (and the role hurricanes played in these processes) and in-depth case studies of storms. He

thus provides insight into historical concepts about nature and risk and into practices dealing with the threat. The nine chapters span around the main idea that the effects of hurricanes depend strongly on the perception of the phenomenon in the affected societies. Schwartz discusses, for instance, indigenous and European representations of the storms (Chap. 1); how the plantation system dealt with calamities (Chap. 2); the appearance of observation techniques (Chap. 3); changing views of nature and risk (Chap. 5); how issues of social inequality in situations of natural disaster underlined recovery (Chap. 6); the way in which Rafael L. Trujillo exploited the San Zénon hurricane to establish dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (Chap. 7); the creation of (trans-)national institutions (Chap. 8); recent events that resuscitated the debate about social justice in the United States (Chap. 9). Instead of summarizing “Sea of Storms” in its entirety, I will present one chapter as a paradigmatic example.

Chapter four is entitled “Calamity, Slavery, Community, and Revolution” and spans the period between the 1780s and the first decades of the nineteenth century, characterized by the creation of the United States (1783), the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), and the emancipation of slaves in many colonies. Schwartz shows that “[...] at various junctures [hurricanes] did have effects, and even more importantly, political and social changes or the threat of them altered the way in which Caribbean societies and their metropolitan governments responded to natural disasters” (p. 111). Thus, natural disasters became subject to statecraft and issues around relief changed the way of governing the colonies (pp. 113–120). Schwartz also takes a look at the role of God in natural disasters before the new understanding of the providential state started to gain acceptance (pp. 126–129). In addition, he observes another important development, namely the advent of “[...] the idea of a community of interest [...]” (p. 124) among the colonizers. The shared threat and impact of storms created sympathy and mutual

help even in time of war and trade restrictions (pp. 121–123). Another subchapter is devoted to the case study of the Great Hurricane of 1831 which struck the Eastern Caribbean in a moment of transition and interfered with the ongoing debate about slavery and the plantation system. Schwartz contends that the 1831 hurricane was a “[...] mirror that revealed to the planters a vision of what they most feared, a slave population not subject to their command. [...] The slaves looked into the shattered glass of that same mirror [...] they caught a fleeting glimpse of a future in which they would exercise control [...] of their lives” (pp. 138–139). Furthermore, 1831 did not only mark a turning point for the plantation system in the British Eastern Caribbean, but also a new era in hurricane science because of important developments in understanding the physical conditions of hurricanes, their progress and occurrence (pp. 139–144). According to Schwartz this new knowledge brought to an end “early modern hurricanes” (p. 139).

Schwartz’s approach to follow the hurricane paths and to look at different practices and effects allows an innovative view on space created by the interrelation of society and nature. While the first chapters discuss examples from a broad range of Caribbean territories, in the last chapters Puerto Rico and the United States gain importance and thus the book loses somehow its regional balance. A more detailed account of the pre-1492 dealings with hurricanes, although touched on, would have added an important point to the (hi)story of hurricanes and humans in the Caribbean.

The presented environmental and social history of hurricanes in the Caribbean establishes previously underestimated relations and provides the reader with important context to historical processes and their persistent effects, for example ongoing political and social inequalities in the Caribbean. The study covers a broad range of Caribbean territories and gains its importance from the focus on human practices dealing with hurri-

canes. The main argument, namely that hurricanes reveal social functioning (or dysfunction) is explained in a convincing manner. The sources and literature used, in terms of quantity, quality, and diversity, provide evidence of intensive and conscientious research. In short, Stuart Schwartz's book offers a refreshing perspective and is an important contribution to the study of the region's hazards and societies. It is an excellent base for further research and definitively worth reading.

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