

## Shaky Colonialism: the 1746 Earthquake-Tsunami in Lima, Peru, and Its Long Aftermath

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**Reviewer:** Henrik Svensen

This year (2010), the world has seen a number of big earthquake disasters, like those that hit Haiti in January and Chile a month later. Disasters strike when least expected, and the death and destruction that follows represents critical tests of the ability of cities and nations to handle crises and to rebuild. Disasters also have the potential to bring conflicts and social inequalities to the surface. The question posed by many people (as comments in newspapers, questions to scientists, etc) following the recent natural disasters is if disasters are more frequent now compared to during previous times. This is a normal response which always pops up following big crises triggered by natural hazards. Even going back in time to the infamous 1755 Lisbon earthquake, writers and philosophers listed the numerous earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that occurred the previous decade, and remarked that there must be something to be learnt from the long list of disasters. It just couldn't be that the disasters happened for no reason. The reason for disaster, it was believed, was people's sins, and it was God that held the stick behind the mirror. The belief in intervention from God was dominant and the proponents for a natural cause of disasters were outnumbered. The legacy of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake is profound, and has served as an open window into the age of Enlightenment. By the work to the American historian Charles F. Walker in his book *Shaky Colonialism* the window is now opened to another significant Enlightenment disaster: the 1746 earthquake that struck colonial Lima and Peru.

Like the 2010 Chile disaster, the 1746 disaster was triggered by an earthquake and followed by a tsunami. Lima's port Callao was devastated by a 50-foot-high tsunami and only a few hundred out of 5–6000 people survived. Lima was proportionally better off, with perhaps 1400 deaths (from a population of about 60, 000) and another 4000 fatalities from epidemics in the following months and years (p. 68).

The opening chapter of *Shaky Colonialism* is superbly written, and starts with the earthquake and its immediate effects. In a vivid account, the reader follows a commander of the Spanish navy (the Marquis of Ovando) and his experiences during the minutes and hours following the late evening October 28 disaster. Ovando even visited the viceroy of Lima, José Manso de Valasco, who would turn out to be a key person in both the reconstruction of Lima and in Walker's book. When the sun rose the following morning, the shocked commander compared the destructions of the city with Troy after the Greek war. The viceroy constructed a camp in the Plaza Mayor next to the cathedral, and toured the city on horseback to face the destructions, coordinate emergency efforts, and make sure that looters were captured, shot or hang. Walker

goes on to introduce one of the key challenges of the disaster-struck Lima, namely the political struggle between conservatives (the baroque colonialism and the Church) and reformists (the Bourbons and the viceroy). To summarize the long struggle, Walker writes early on that 'The confrontation between the reforming viceroy and the many opposing groups ended, I contend, in a stalemate' (p. 17). We also learn that most people in Lima believed the disaster to be a sign of 'God's wrath over the city's well-known decadent ways' (p. 12). Many held the women of Lima responsible for the disaster, as they were well known for being independent and had an explicit way of dressing. Moreover, it was common for independent upper-class women to have lovers, even from other levels of Lima's multiracial and multifaceted society. In the opening chapter, Walker thus presents the main themes of the book and also his research approach to the topic as a 'homing in on a particular event, a specific time and place, and following its broader repercussions' (p. 11–12). The following seven chapters represent thematic presentations of various aspects of post-disaster Lima.

In chapter two, we read about the interpretations of the causes of the earthquake, mostly the religious ones, and detailed accounts of premonitions or prophecies both before and after the 1746 event. An earthquake in 1687, comets in 1664–5, epidemics in 1718–23, revolts in 1750, and the 1755 Lisbon earthquake: everything pointed towards divine punishment. Franciscan preachers, in particular a Father Parra, preached of the destruction of Lima by balls of fire falling from the sky. Again, it was the sinful ways of the people of Lima that was the core of the problem. Parra was soon inquired of by both the archbishop and the Inquisition. Nuns also had their premonitions, and Walker stress that they '...offer uniquely vivid testimony on eighteenth-century Lima'. The interest in religious ideas that appear after disasters is relatively new, and clearly represent a very valuable source of mentalities and perceptions about the world in the wake of disasters.(1) Many pages are devoted to various premonitions, but after reading about them I cannot help but wonder what Walker thinks of it all. Were the premonitions real, and did everybody in Lima believe in them? Or should they be interpreted as something else?

As a geologist with an interest in environmental history, I was hoping for more information about the natural explanations for the disaster. Walker mentions that naturalistic ideas about earthquakes were held by Llano Zapata, one of the disaster chroniclers, and that he believed that fires in subterranean cavities were responsible (p. 22). This explanation goes back to the Greek philosophers, which used the body, with its veins, cavities, and blood pressure, as an analogue to understand the Earth. Varieties of this explanation were still mainstream until a more modern view was developed by John Michell following the 1755 Lisbon disaster.(2) It would be interesting to know about the reactions to the 1746 Lima disaster from natural scientists in South America – not only the religious reactions. Walker writes (p. 17) that the disaster was widely discussed in both Europe and elsewhere, but never ventures into the details. The same is the case for the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which it would be natural to discuss in more detail in this book.

In chapter three, the focus is the history of Lima before and after the disaster. For the reformists, the city 'had already been unacceptably disorderly and unruly, even before the earthquake' (p. 52). Walker argues that the earthquake seriously threatened to overturn the colonial control of Lima, as the lower-class was hard to control, the upper-class wanted independence, and the Church was strong. Demography and architecture, land ownership and races are discussed before moving on to the effects of the earthquake, the dead ones, the epidemics, and the hundreds of aftershock that terrified the city for a long time afterwards. One of the stunning examples of how the Spanish ruled the colony relates to the reactions to the disaster. Walker has studied the correspondence between viceroy Manso and the Marquis of Ensenada in Madrid. No sympathy and no aid from the Spanish. Actually, in 1748, Ensenada even requested more money to be sent from disaster-struck Peru.

Having read the first three chapters, a lot of very detailed information has been presented, and a clearer picture of the disaster aftermath, the political struggles, and the religious ideas, emerge. However, I started to think that a chronological rather than thematic presentation of the events would be easier to follow. This feeling wouldn't let go when reading the rest of the book, as it is sometimes hard to keep track of all the details, the names of the numerous people presented, and the sequence of events. Also, the strong narrative

grip that Walker showed in the first chapter, including its vivid prose, fades somewhat through the book.

Like in Lisbon in 1755, or in Haiti in 2010 for that matter, there were discussions in Lima about moving the city instead of rebuilding. In chapter five we learn that a move never materialized due to several issues. It would be too expensive (and Spain wanted the money), it would lead to juridical problems, but most importantly, a move would lead to a loss of control on the slaves and the lower-classes. Rebuilding was the only possibility, and was led by the French scientist Louis Godin. He came to South America as a participant of the famous French expedition together with Condamine and Bouger with aims of measuring the shape of the Earth. Godin stayed behind in Lima until 1751. With Godin in charge, Lima was in good hands. He quickly presented a new building code, and stressed that all new building should be of maximum one storey and four to five meters tall. The streets should be made wider and public spaces bigger. The hardest resistance to the plans came from the upper-class, as the new code of only one storey would lower them to the level of the commons. Ironically, tall buildings would increase their own vulnerability to any future earthquakes. The measures taken by the viceroy and Godin were successful, and many of Lima's buildings were rebuilt after a decade.

In chapter six, Walker goes into depth about the role of the Church after the disaster and how the viceroy and the reformers tried to reduce its dominance. Interestingly, the Enlightenment intellectualism and the deism that was so prominent in parts of Europe never became important in Lima. Manso wanted to reform the Church and also 'fortify the distinction between secular and sacred spaces' (p. 117). Throughout the chapter, the struggle between conservative and reformist forces is thoroughly presented. The degree of bureaucratic intrigues and discussions in post-disaster Lima was substantial.

Parts of the blame for the earthquake disaster was given the women of Lima due their style of dressing and 'sinful sexuality'. Soon after the disaster, the Church 'took measures against all women who wore immodest clothing' (p. 132). Interestingly, the dress style included the use of a veil (*la tapada*) inspired by Muslim habits in Spain, and it was argued that the veil actually led to more freedom for the women to move around without having to reveal their identities. This chapter (seven) is more than 30 pages long, but the reader gets the point early.

The final chapter of *Shaky Colonialism* is devoted to the social and racial tensions following the earthquake – both within Lima and in the surrounding regions. A crime wave among the black and Indian population raised fear among the ones that were better off. The viceroy's worst concerns, however, were Indian uprisings. More than a dozen uprisings, for instance in Lucanas south of Lima in 1736, had taken place during the decade prior to the disaster. A key question becomes how or if the Indians used the earthquake as a part of their struggle for independence, but this is not easy to grasp reading the chapter. Rumours about a coming uprising in June 1750 led to immediate action. Three rebels were arrested and 'their heads, skins peeled off and salted, were exhibited on bastions of the city's walls' (p. 173). Other uprisings followed in the provinces, and they actually took control of one area before they were captured in August that year. Viceroy Manso believed that parts of the problem about the Indian uprisings was the lack of marriage between Indians and the other races, which would have created a single people with a uniform loyalty to the colonial rulers. This chapter could be better organized, as it is somewhat difficult to separate out the events in time and space.

In the epilogue, Walker hints that the ‘political fragmentation that marked 1746 continue to echo’ (p. 192). Moreover, a (rhetorical?) question is posed: is this book about Lima in 1746 relevant to the City of Kings in the twenty-first century (p. 191)? As a reader, I wish that Walker had spent more time on this and related issues. To what extent can information and lessons from ancient disaster be used to understand how societies respond to disaster today? And to what extent is this something that historians and other researchers on disasters should aim at? After all, there is an urgent need to better understand how disasters impact societies. Should environmental science and historians in this respect only provide historical information per se (to be used in feature stories every time a journalist calls)? I am sure that these and other questions will continue to be discussed by academics the coming years.

To conclude, *Shaky Colonialism* represents an impressive account of a disaster, and is a very thoroughly researched book. It will become (and perhaps already is) an important source-book for the 1746 event, but more and longer quotes from many of the very hard-to-get sources would be desirable in that respect. Although the introduction chapter raises the expectations, and almost promises a ‘popular science’ account of a disaster (a la Simon Winchester’s *Krakatoa*), the bulk of the book is written for a more specialised and academic audience.

## Notes

1. A good recent work of this type is Ted Steinberg’s *Acts of God: the Unnatural History of Natural Disasters* (Oxford, 2000). T. D. Kendrick’s *The Lisbon Earthquake* (Philadelphia, PA, 1957) is also a prime example. I also shamelessly mention my own book here, Henrik Svensen, *The End is Nigh* (London, 2009), in which I trace the religious responses to several 20th- century disasters.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Frank Dawson Adams’ *The Birth and Development of the Geological Sciences* (New York, NY, 1954) is still among the best for tracing the intellectual history of natural phenomena (including earthquakes).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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