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for

***Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*, by Niall Ferguson**

Introduction

This is not a history of our perplexing postmodern plague, nor a general history of pandemics. This is a general history of catastrophe—of all kinds of disasters, from the geological to the geopolitical, from the biological to the technological. For how else are we to see our disaster—or any disaster—in a proper perspective?

Chapter 1 – The Meaning of Death

Though life expectancy has hugely improved in the modern era, death remains inevitable and is, in absolute terms, more common than ever. Yet we have become estranged from death. Ultimately, not only are we as individuals doomed, but so is the human race itself. All the world religions and a number of secular ideologies have sought to make this eschaton seem more imminent (as well as immanent) than it really is. What we have to fear is a big disaster, not doomsday. Of the big disasters in human history, the biggest have been pandemics and wars.

Chapter 2 – Cycles and Tragedies

Catastrophe is innately unpredictable because most disasters (from earthquakes to wars) are not normally distributed but randomly or according to power laws. Cyclical theories of history cannot get around that. Disasters are more like tragedies: those who try to predict them are unlikely to be heeded. In addition to predicting more disasters than actually happen, Cassandras are up against a bewildering array of cognitive biases. In the end, faced with uncertainty, most people just decide to ignore the possibility that they as individuals will be victims of catastrophe.

Chapter 3 – Gray Rhinos, Black Swans, and Dragon Kings

Disasters are often foreseen (gray rhinos), yet even some predicted disasters can appear completely unexpected when they strike (black swans). A few have consequences beyond excess mortality that set them apart (dragon kings). Disasters are not either “natural” or “man-made.” Decisions to locate settlements near potential disaster zones—by a volcano, on a fault line, next to a river subject to severe flooding—are what make most natural disasters in some respects man-made.

Chapter 4 – Network

The decisive determinant of the scale of a disaster is whether or not there is contagion. Social network structure is therefore as important as the innate properties of a pathogen or anything else (such as an idea) that can be virally spread. People worked out the efficacy of quarantines, social distancing, and other measures long before they properly understood the true nature of the diseases they sought to contain, from smallpox to bubonic plague. The essence of such measures is to modify network structures to make it less connected.

Chapter 5 – The Science Delusion

The nineteenth century was a time of major advances, especially in bacteriology. But we should not succumb to a Whig interpretation of medical history. Empire forced the pace of research into infectious diseases, but it also forced the globalization of the world economy, creating new opportunities for diseases.

Chapter 6 – The Psychology of Political Incompetence

We tend to attribute too much of the responsibility for political disasters, as well as military ones, to incompetent leaders. Famines, wars, and pandemics often arise from unaccountable governments and avoidable market failures, not simply “acts of God.” The transition from empires to democratic nation-states was attended by much destruction.

Chapter 7 – From the Boogie Woogie Flu to Ebola in Town

In 1957, the response to a deadly new strain of flu was a combination of natural herd immunity and selective vaccination. The Asian flu was about as dangerous as COVID-19 in 2020. The Eisenhower administration’s nimble response reflected both Cold War context and improved international cooperation. Later decades, however, revealed weaknesses in both national and international agencies, exposed again with SARS, MERS, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola.

Chapter 8 – The Fractal Geometry of Disaster

Accidents will happen, from the Titanic to Challenger to Chernobyl. Small disasters are like microcosms of big ones, easier to comprehend but not less complex. The common feature of all disasters, whether sinking ships or exploding reactors, is operator error and managerial failure.

Chapter 9 – The Plagues

Like so many past pandemics, COVID-19 originated in China. But the varied impact on the rest of the world confounded expectations. Taiwan and South Korea fared well, but the US and UK performed poorly. The role of internet platforms in spreading misinformation magnified the problem.

Chapter 10 – The Economic Consequences of the Plague

The shift from complacency to panic in March 2020 led to economically crushing lockdowns in many countries. Attempts to return to normalcy without testing and tracing produced second waves. The crisis also precipitated political eruptions, including mass movements with strong resemblances to past upheavals.

Chapter 11 – The Three-Body Problem

The COVID-19 crisis is widely regarded as dooming the United States to decline relative to China. Yet it is hard to see why countries that handled it well would want to embrace authoritarian models. The crisis shows both American persistence and fragility.

Conclusion – Future Shocks

We have no way of knowing what the next disaster will be. Our goal should be to make societies and political systems more resilient—and ideally antifragile—than they currently

are. That requires better understanding of network structure and bureaucratic dysfunction. Those who yield to totalitarianism in the name of security fail to see that many disasters arise from precisely such regimes.