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## Natural Disaster, Crime, and Narratives of Disorder: The 1861 Mendoza Earthquake and Argentina's Ruptured Social and Political Faults

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Research

***Natural Disaster, Crime, and Narratives of Disorder:  
The 1861 Mendoza Earthquake and Argentina's Ruptured  
Social and Political Faults\****

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**ABSTRACT**

Social scientists studying natural disasters have generally found an absence of panic, a decrease in crime, and survivors working together to find basic necessities in the days and weeks after a catastrophe. By contrast, political and military authorities implement measures such as martial law to prevent chaos and lawlessness threatening private property. The media amplifies narratives of disorder, creating the perception of uncontrolled masses wantonly committing crimes in a disaster's aftermath. Historians study natural disasters to view political, social, economic, and cultural structures stripped of their everyday veneer. The 1861 earthquake that destroyed the provincial capital of Mendoza in western Argentina provides an opportunity to examine narratives of disorder in newspapers and in survivor accounts that highlighted rampant looting and attributed these actions to rural peoples and the popular masses. Reports from the earthquake's aftermath reflected the political conflicts between the hegemonic urban center of Buenos Aires and the interior provinces of Argentina, as well as the social divisions between urban elites and the lower classes. Judicial and criminal records from Mendoza, however, showed a decrease in crime after the earthquake, as well as rates of theft and robbery similar to those before the catastrophe, contradicting popular accounts of pervasive lawlessness.

**KEY WORDS** Natural Disasters; Crime; Elite Panic; Media; Society; Government; Argentina

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On the evening of March 20, 1861, Maunday Thursday of Holy Week, an earthquake destroyed the city of Mendoza, an important entrepôt between Buenos Aires and Chile that was nestled in foothills of the Andes mountains in western Argentina. In the days and weeks after the temblor, newspapers, especially those in Buenos Aires, reported that Mendoza had descended into chaos in the earthquake's aftermath. Looters from the countryside and the urban lower classes allegedly took advantage of the catastrophe to enrich themselves by appropriating private property and raiding ruined provincial towns and villages as well as the destroyed provincial capital city. The authorities responded to the earthquake by declaring martial law and implementing measures to maintain order and protect private property, announcing that anyone caught looting among the ruins would be summarily shot. Country people pillaging the ruins of Mendoza played a prominent role in newspaper reports and survivor accounts of the natural disaster. Despite the dominant narrative of rural peoples engaging in antisocial behavior such as looting the ruins of Mendoza, provincial judicial and criminal records reveal that crime registered after the earthquake decreased and that rates of theft and robbery remained at predisaster levels. Survivor accounts noted that many residents worked together to find potable water, food, and materials to construct temporary shelters rather than pillaging the ruins for valuables.

**DISASTER STUDIES**

Natural disasters often conjure up images of chaos, lawlessness, disorder, and a loss of control. Elites fear and often assume that a disaster unleashes a wave of looting and antisocial behavior that threatens the social and political order; thus, authorities view catastrophes as dangerous situations that require swift and severe sanctions to prevent and deter any disorder and to ensure the sanctity of private property. In their zeal to maintain order and stop social unrest, as a deterrent to curb looting and general disorder, political elites and military officials often enact martial law after a disaster and allow summary executions of survivors assumed to be looting. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and other social scientists who study catastrophes, however, have noted a lack of widespread antisocial behavior in the aftermath of a natural disaster. According to scholars of disasters, the authorities and elites use their resources to protect private property and ensure their political legitimacy as the media reproduce standard tropes of chaos and disorder. The foundational works in the field of disaster studies by sociologists found, in general, an absence of panic, reduced levels of crime such as looting, and prosocial behavior among survivors after a catastrophe, contrary to the assumptions that influence governments' disaster and emergency responses (Fritz 1966; Quarantelli and Dynes 1970; Quarantelli and Dynes 1972).

Sociologists have given the label "elite panic" to the "fear of social disorder; fear of poor, minorities and immigrants; obsession with looting and property crime; willingness to resort to deadly force; and actions taken on the basis of rumor" after a natural disaster (Solnit 2009:127). Looting is often overstated in the immediate days after a natural disaster as survivors sifting through the rubble are looking for food, potable water, and materials with which to build shelter from the elements rather than looking to

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profit from catastrophe. Rebecca Solnit observes that the term “looting conflates the emergency requisitioning of supplies in a crisis without a cash economy with opportunistic stealing” (2009:37). In contrast to popular assumptions, the social order does not break down in the aftermath of a natural disaster; instead, therapeutic or extraordinary communities are formed, characterized by survivors working together to fulfill immediate needs such as food, potable water, clothing, and shelter. Drawing on academic studies, Solnit argues that extraordinary communities emerge as most people in the affected locality engage in spontaneous altruistic acts to help one another amid devastation and destruction.

Sociologists have analyzed narratives and popular images of panic, disorder, and rampant looting that have been reproduced and disseminated in the media after natural disasters. For example, after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, the print media and television emphasized common disaster narratives of rampant looting, antisocial behavior, and widespread criminal activity carried out by survivors in the absence of law and order. Furthermore, according to many media accounts, rather than forming an extraordinary community, Katrina survivors epitomized examples of selfish and greedy behavior that occurs when humans are freed from legal and moral constraints. Media narratives often reproduced elites’ racial and class assumptions. Analyzing the narratives in the print media and television news reports, sociologists have found the narratives often based on assumptions, rumor, and hearsay. The media attributed lawlessness, looting, and antisocial behavior to poor, working-class, and minority groups, especially African Americans. Furthermore, the narratives of lawlessness and of New Orleans as a “war zone” that were disseminated by the media justified the use of force and a militaristic response in the weeks after the hurricane (Dynes and Rodríguez 2010; Tierney and Bevc 2010; Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006).

Examples of antisocial behavior and looting do exist after catastrophes, particularly during civil unrest such as urban riots. When looting does occur after natural disasters, such as in Saint Croix after Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, it often reflects social conditions and crime rates before the disaster. Sociologists studying Hurricane Hugo found that widespread looting occurred on only Saint Croix rather than other affected Caribbean islands. They argued that the looting was based on the scale of damage for the entire island, the inability of the state to carry out a rescue-and-relief effort, and survivors not knowing when help would arrive. Finally, the sociologists pointed to socioeconomic inequalities and racial acrimony that existed before the disaster that were exacerbated after the hurricane and led to antisocial behavior (Rodríguez, Trainor, and Quarantelli 2006). Likewise, after Hurricane Katrina, crime rates increased, but they did so within the context of the vast socioeconomic and racial disparities in New Orleans (Frailing and Wood Harper 2010).

Historians have begun to study disasters, scouring archives and libraries to understand how states and societies have responded to catastrophes in different historical periods and contexts. Historians studying natural disasters in Latin America argue that catastrophes strip away the façade that covers social-economic, political, and cultural structures, allowing scholars to analyze relationships and hierarchies of power (Buchenau and Johnson 2009:4). Furthermore, Charles Walker observes that “natural disasters bring

to the surface both old and new tensions and offer vivid insights into society” (2003:57). For example, the Lima earthquake of 1746 highlighted how the disaster magnified existing social, political, and religious conflicts within Peruvian society and throughout the Spanish Empire (Walker 2008). Similarly, social and economic fault lines also ruptured in Chile after the Valparaíso earthquake in 1906. Chilean authorities already concerned with strikes and protests among the working class in the country’s main port city feared a general social uprising after the 1906 temblor; thus, the government declared martial law and harshly cracked down on any real or perceived criminal behavior. The police and military used markers of class, such as dress and language, to determine who was looting and who was merely picking through the rubble of their homes. The residents of Valparaíso, however, also formed extraordinary communities. Survivor accounts highlighted social leveling as rich and poor worked together to find food, help the injured, provide basic services, and rebuild the city in the days after the earthquake (Martland 2009).

Likewise, the 1861 Mendoza earthquake reflected social and political divisions within 19th-century Argentina. Newspaper reports, survivor accounts, and official documents focused on the damage to elite property and emphasized concerns about looting by the poor and rural peoples. Similarly, the political divisions between the interior provinces and Buenos Aires and between federalists and liberals colored narratives about the provincial government’s response to the disaster, relief efforts, and protection of private property.

## **SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN 19TH-CENTURY ARGENTINA**

The Mendoza earthquake of March 20, 1861, occurred at a critical juncture in Argentine history. The fall of the national *caudillo* (strongman) Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852 plunged Argentina into a civil war, with the interior provinces of the Argentine Confederation forming one side and the hegemonic urban center, Buenos Aires, forming the other. Nineteenth-century Argentine liberals celebrated the demise of Rosas and hoped that the strongman rule that was endemic to the interior provinces and to Argentina more generally could finally be broken under the leadership of Buenos Aires. Liberals, mostly drawn from the upper classes or the wealthy urban merchant class, desired to unify the country under a strong central government emanating from Buenos Aires. By contrast, federalists from the interior provinces desired autonomy and resented attempts by Buenos Aires to install centralized rule. *Caudillos* often allied themselves with federalists, who favored provincial autonomy, and were supported by *gauchos* (cowboys), *campesinos* (rural laborers), the poor, and popular masses through client and patron networks. The conflict between the hegemonic port city and the interior provinces reached a climax at the battle of Pavón in September 1861, when Buenos Aires defeated the Argentine Confederation. By the end of 1861, Buenos Aires troops began to occupy and pacify the interior provinces, particularly in the west of the country, which was a stronghold of federalism, including Mendoza.

The political divisions between Buenos Aires and liberals and between the interior provinces and federalists, as well as social divisions between elites and

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businessmen, on the one hand, and *gauchos*, *campesinos*, and urban lower classes, on the other, were echoed in survivor accounts, chronicles of the disaster, and newspaper articles and editorials about the March 20, 1861, earthquake that destroyed Mendoza. Accounts of the days and weeks after the disaster described marauding hordes of *gauchos* and *campesinos* from the countryside looting and pillaging the province's capital city. Furthermore, the governor's failure to maintain law and order in Mendoza after the catastrophe demonstrated the failures of federalism, according to accounts of the disaster in the liberal Buenos Aires press. Newspapers reports and survivor accounts highlighted heroic behavior by the elites and the "honorable men" of Mendoza in the disaster's aftermath. The social and political divides within 19th-century Argentina were thus reflected in the accounts and narratives about crime and disorder in the days, weeks, and months after the earthquake.

### ACCOUNTS OF LOOTING AND ELITE PANIC

Newspapers published reports and firsthand accounts describing and lamenting the widespread looting of Mendoza. *El Imparcial*, a newspaper from the interior province of Córdoba, published an article with the headline "A Party of Vampires" on April 5, 1861, detailing a putrid scene of corpses decaying and perfuming the rubble and of people overcome with "greed for gold,"<sup>1</sup> (Suárez 1938e:299).<sup>2</sup> The account proclaimed that looters removed everything of value they could find on the rotting corpses they uncovered as they picked through the rubble and "laughed at the pain that they do not understand, to take a bit of gold, albeit tinged with blood!" (Suárez 1938e:300). The report concluded with the observation that Mendoza had fallen into the hands of criminals who had come "to exploit the great ossuary!" (Suárez 1938e:300).

Accounts of the earthquake and its aftermath often exhibited elite panic as the upper classes blamed the lower orders of society, often *gauchos* and *campesinos*, for criminal activity and malevolent behavior. A liberal Buenos Aires newspaper, *La Tribuna*, published on April 14, 1861, a survivor's account of "Daily Observations," which chronicled the first ten days after the earthquake. The entry for March 22, two days after the earthquake, observed that bands of *campesinos* arrived in the provincial capital with tools, supposedly to pick through the rubble to loot. Although some country people traveled to Mendoza to help by providing aid to the earthquake survivors, pulling people from the rubble and also recovering and burying the dead, others had nefarious motives: to use their tools to pick through the ruins "to discover booty" (Suárez 1938c:122). Wenceslao Díaz, a Chilean scientist and doctor, was part of the medical commission sent to Mendoza after the earthquake as part of a relief effort by Chile. His scientific and medical report on the 1861 catastrophe included observations on the social conditions and highlighted the lack of law and order in the days and weeks after the catastrophe. Díaz wrote that *gauchos* and *campesinos* ignored the cries of victims trapped beneath the ruins of buildings and instead stole the victims' goods, possessions, or anything of value that they could uncover. He also reported that some of the looters took pity on residents buried under the rubble but charged them a fee to be extricated from the ruins. According to the Chilean doctor, rather than help with the community's rescue and relief efforts, the

looters refused to even help clear the streets of debris (Díaz 1907:30). In a letter dated March 27, 1861, earthquake survivor Eugenio Menéndez wrote in a letter to his friend Jacinto Corvalán, in the city of Rosario, that after the earthquake, the *gauchos* from the surrounding countryside invaded the city, terrorized the population, and ran off with as much loot as “their horses and mules could carry” (Suárez 1938a:195). In his account of the catastrophe, prominent politician Eusebio Blanco (1936), who played a central role in the rebuilding of the provincial capital in the years after the earthquake, also noted that people from outside the city began to arrive in Mendoza in the days after the earthquake. According to Blanco, bands of marauders reportedly helped to free prisoners trapped in jails and then stole anything of value they could find in the rubble without paying any respect to the bodies of the dead.

Narratives of the disaster included stereotypes of traits associated with scavenging animals to describe the country peoples’ motives and behavior after the earthquake. For example, Díaz compared the *gauchos* and *campesinos* to bands of “jackals” and “crows” (1907:30). Blanco compared the bands of marauders to birds of the plains that descend to earth when they see a dead animal, to devour it (1936:191). Another account of the catastrophe, this one by A. Clereaux (1938), observed that *gauchos* and *campesinos* also reportedly descended on the provincial capital to loot the ruins. Similar to Díaz and Blanco, Clereaux also compared the accused looters from the countryside to animals, describing them as “hungry jackals” and “bands of outlaws” that systematically and extensively pillaged Mendoza for five days after the earthquake in the absence of the authorities, not frightened by the aftershocks that continued to shake the earth (1938:161).

Urban masses were likewise identified as looters and criminals. In a letter to a friend dated March 30, 1861, a person identified by the initials R. J. R. wrote that the worst part of the catastrophe was “the looting and general robbing,” blaming the rampant crime on “the plebe,” who scavenged and picked through the ruins of businesses and targeted the upper classes’ houses such as his for pilfering (Suárez 1938b:198).

The Chilean doctor, Díaz, asserted that the lower orders took advantage of the disaster situation as a means to target elites. Quoting the looters, he wrote that the lower classes believed that “the misfortune, they said, was for the rich” (Díaz 1907:30–31). The scientist and medical doctor portrayed the popular masses as uncaring and immoral people interested only in taking what was not theirs. Even the violent shaking of the earth did not scare the lower classes enough to deter them from engaging in antisocial behavior; instead, they ignored the cries of the injured and dying, neglected the relief efforts, and focused only on enriching themselves through looting. In his description of the lower classes’ actions after the earthquake, Díaz wrote, “Only pillage and rapine occupied those hands with harpy claws” (1907:31). The doctor went on to assert that popular masses engaged in “thievery and sacrilege when the foundations of the world were shaken!” (1907:31).

Clereaux’s chronicle of the disaster also observed that the popular masses used the disaster as a means to exact retribution. He noted, “These cannibals reach out their hands to the unfortunates, who ask them for help getting up [from the ruins and rubble of Mendoza], not to help them in effect, but to strip the virgin of her rings and earrings and

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the rich man's watch and money" (1938:161). Manuel Blancas, the president of the Buenos Aires Medical Commission, wrote in his account of the earthquake published in *La Tribuna* on May 7, 1861, that in addition to the earthquake and fire, "the plebe practiced robbery" (Suárez 1938g:254). For Díaz, the elites were the only social group that acted honorably after the earthquake. The noted scientist characterized the lower classes as concerned only with looting the properties of the upper classes, although, "there were, however, honorable exceptions among the enlightened people" (Díaz 1907:31).

Crime occurred with impunity, unchecked by the authorities, according to reports and accounts from Mendoza in the days and weeks after the earthquake. For Díaz, the worst part of catastrophe was not the fire that broke out on March 24 and engulfed the ruins; instead, "the looting, the most stupid vandalism, the most inhuman indolence soon came to be the worst plague that followed the catastrophe" (1907:30). Instead of helping the trapped, injured, and dying victims of the disaster, the marauders from the countryside reportedly stripped them of their valuables, according to Clereaux's chronicle of the catastrophe. He observed, "Nothing escapes their plunder," and that neither the continued trembling of the earth or the cries of suffering from the dying affected them, that only "vice and immorality moved their depraved souls" (Clereaux 1938:161). Survivor accounts, letters, and newspaper reports noted the impunity with which the looting of the ruins took place. The March 23 and 25 entries from the "daily observations" in one survivor's journal simply noted, "The looting continues," and the March 27 entry stated, "Looting continued in the rest of the city" (Suárez 1938c:123–124, 126).

### **THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE EARTHQUAKE**

Argentine newspapers assigned blame for the disorder in Mendoza after the earthquake. A civil war between Buenos Aires and the Argentine Confederation racked the country when the temblor destroyed Mendoza. The Buenos Aires press attributed the lack of law and order in Mendoza to the federalist provincial government, especially to Governor Laureano Nazar's tepid response to the disaster and abandonment of his responsibilities as the leading provincial official.

The frequent aftershocks added to the terror in the days after the temblor, and fire raged through the ruined city as municipal and provincial officials either were absent or scrambled to respond (Suárez 1938c:121–128). The "daily observations" of one survivor included an entry for the day after the earthquake, which noted that when the flames rose, engulfing the rubble and ruins of houses and business, no authorities could be found as "disorder and confusion" reigned in the streets and plazas throughout the city (Suárez 1938c:121). On March 22, two days after the earthquake, this survivor wrote that people from the countryside arrived in Mendoza, mostly to pillage and loot the ruins as the fire spread throughout the destroyed city with increasing intensity. The dead began to putrefy beneath the rubble, but the authorities did not take any action to extinguish the fire, stop the looting, or bury the dead to stop a potential public health crisis (Suárez 1938c:122).



Food and potable water were in short supply in Mendoza after the earthquake. On March 23, three days after the seismic shock, Governor Nazar ordered three cattle slaughtered and distributed to the people taking refuge in the main square. On the fourth day, the governor ordered that any remaining cattle be slaughtered and distributed to the survivors. Potable water could be found only at a great distance from the provincial capital (Suárez 1938c:122–123).

One account connected antisocial behavior with increasing desperation among survivors left to fend for themselves in the absence of a concerted government response. A letter from a disaster survivor published in *El Imparcial* noted that the author had “witnessed people stealing and looting” and lamented the lack of humanity found in Mendoza because he had not seen anyone helping to pull the injured or dead still trapped beneath the rubble of their houses, businesses, and churches (Suárez 1938e:305). At the end of the letter, in the same paragraph noting the lawlessness and lack of humanity in the city after the earthquake, the writer connected looting and selfish behavior with the shortage of provisions and desperation, concluding, “Here there is no more meat or water, but no one thinks about eating or drinking” (p. 305).

After emerging from the rubble, survivors took refuge under trees in Mendoza’s main plaza before moving away from the city’s center. The provincial government moved very slowly in helping to provide relief or organize shelter. Manuel Blancas, the head of the Buenos Aires Medical Commission, in an April 25, 1861, letter to Bartolomé Mitre, the leader of Buenos Aires, published in *La Tribuna* on May 7, 1861, wrote that the survivors had initially taken refuge beneath trees or tents but that only at the end of April, a month after the earthquake, had hastily built temporary shelters been constructed to provide protection for the injured in need of medical attention (Suárez 1938g:255).

At the beginning of April, survivors gradually moved from the main plaza to the hacienda San Nicolás, which was to the southwest of the city center. There, they were still able to use the rubble from the destroyed city to build temporary constructions, and public officials began to organize relief efforts and distribute aid from Chile, neighboring provinces, and Buenos Aires (Scobie 1988:113).

The failure of the provincial government to respond to the earthquake by maintaining order or providing relief to survivors was largely blamed on the federalist governor. Nine days after the earthquake, Governor Nazar withdrew from the provincial capital to his country estate at Tres Acequias (Suárez 1938c:125). Buenos Aires newspapers were outraged that Nazar had abandoned the city and allowed Mendoza to descend into disorder and lawlessness. According to an article published in *El Nacional* on April 15, after five days of complete inaction, Nazar’s abandonment of the provincial capital and his responsibilities left the city free for nefarious individuals to plunder and pillage the ruins of Mendoza (Suárez 1938f). The earthquake survivors gathered under the large trees in the main plaza and later at San Nicolás. There, the property owners and merchants of the city gathered to address the absence of Nazar, law enforcement, and a relief effort (Suárez 1938f:280–281). An April 15 report in *El Nacional* noted that the new governing elites’ objective was to restore order to a city engulfed in “this chaos of pain and suffering” (p. 281).

## PROTECTING PRIVATE PROPERTY

The earthquake destroyed police and infantry stations in Mendoza, killing police and infantrymen. The lack of law enforcement officials and rank-and-file infantrymen made enforcing order and protecting private property difficult. Miltón González del Solar, a doctor who led the Argentine Confederation's medical commission to Mendoza, included in his records a death toll, with names of the deceased, if they were known, and the location where bodies were found. His toll included the majority of the city's prisoners, along with 14 soldiers dead at the city jail; 20 soldiers dead and many others injured at the infantry garrison; and approximately 100 prisoners and guards dead at another garrison (González del Solar 1938:220).

The lack of police and infantrymen was a central concern for the authorities, who organized informal groups from among the earthquake survivors to provide security and protect private property from looters. In the absence of the governor after the earthquake, two military men, Manuel J. Olascoaga and Juan de Dios Videla, took charge and began to organize relief efforts and maintain order with scant resources. Olascoaga organized and led a group of young men to protect private property and maintain order by shooting anyone caught looting and plundering the ruins and rubble without compassion (Scalvini 1965:258). Videla helped create informal groups that provided security and guarded private property, especially in the parts of the city where survivors had taken refuge. According to the March 29 entry in a survivor's "daily observations," the watch groups proved successful in impeding looting and pillaging in much of the city and surrounding suburbs, but in other parts of Mendoza, the plundering continued unabated (Suárez 1938c). *El Nacional* reported on April 1 that an infantry squad had been mobilized to ensure order, protect valuables covered in dust and rubble, and protect widows and orphans (Suárez 1938f:259). During its session on March 23, the legislature from the neighboring province of San Juan authorized the governor to mobilize and send men and resources to restore order and protect private property in Mendoza (Suárez 1938d:378).

In Mendoza, the authorities attempted to protect private property from looters and thieves by regulating who could enter the destroyed city center. In cities throughout Latin America, elites and merchants maintained residences and businesses near the main plaza, where government buildings and churches anchored society and daily life. Anything of value was buried beneath the ruins and rubble in the city center and along the Alameda, the main street of Mendoza. On March 23, the provincial authorities prohibited all people except the police from entering the destroyed city center from Sauce de la Cañada in the north to the Plaza Nueva in the south and from the Zanjón, a canal that ran along the east side of the provincial capital, to the Tajamar, an irrigation canal located on higher ground to the west. Anyone found in the prohibited area would be assumed to be a looter and shot on the spot. Residents who needed to enter the destroyed city could apply for and receive a pass from the police that stated the names of the property owner and those who accompanied him (*Registro oficial* 1877:135).

Earthquake survivors migrated to the neighboring provinces of San Juan and San Luis, bringing any possessions they could carry with them. According to an article in *El Imparcial* published on April 3, earthquake survivors fled Mendoza because of continued

strong aftershocks, the fear of looting, and the threat of disease from the decaying and putrefying bodies, and the government of San Luis provided transportation to protect migrants' possessions (Suárez 1938e:290).

The government and citizens from the neighboring province of San Juan were among the first to respond after the earthquake. Several wealthy men from San Juan provided carriages for transporting families and other resources for the earthquake victims. The caravan returned to San Juan, dropping off the earthquake survivors and then gathering more resources to take back to Mendoza. The provincial government of San Juan also sent a wagon train to provide security to survivors and protect their goods during transit. In addition, San Juan's legislature approved a sum of 10,000 pesos for the protection of the migrants from Mendoza. On March 25, the first carriages arrived in Mendoza from San Juan, bringing aid for the injured and transporting some families back to San Juan. The following day, more families lined up in hopes of finding a spot on the wagon train to San Juan. One earthquake survivor expressed their appreciation for the help from the neighboring province, stating, "We owe a lot to our neighbors of San Juan" (Suárez 1938c:124). In a letter to Jacinto Corvalán dated March 24, 1861, Eugenio Menéndez wrote of the desperation of the survivors to escape Mendoza because of the sickening smell of decaying bodies and the lack of food, reporting that residents of the provincial capital dug out what few possessions they could from the rubble and made the journey to San Juan by whatever means available (Suárez 1938a:195).

The mass exodus of earthquake survivors, however, made ensuring the integrity of private property difficult. At the beginning of April, the provincial authorities decreed that in the interest of quelling disorder and maintaining the public good, measures needed to be taken to guarantee private property and the possessions left behind by the migrating earthquake survivors. The acting provincial authorities issued a law that prevented migration out of the province without a passport. Residents who needed passports could obtain the documents from the police chiefs in the areas of city where they resided. The police issued residents tickets that included information about the resident's property, recording the number of people leaving, the branding mark on any animals, valuables the residents were carrying, and certification that the property they were taking was in fact legitimately theirs. The authorities declared migrants without proper documentation to be thieves subject to criminal laws regarding possession of stolen property (*Registro oficial*, 1877:137–138). Despite the official decrees and the legal attempts to determine and maintain the proper ownership of property, however, authorities continued to struggle to ascertain the legitimate holders of animals, possessions, and goods leaving Mendoza with migrants and those still buried beneath the rubble.

Trying to end the confusion over property ownership, provincial and municipal authorities issued further regulations. As the earthquake had reduced Mendoza to a pile of rubble that contained putrefying corpses and worldly belongings, property and goods were left buried beneath the rubble of homes and businesses either because residents died or emigrated. Furthermore, with all of the city's buildings lying in ruins, having collapsed onto one another, it was unclear where one property ended and another began. Property owners who returned or stayed to pick through the debris of their homes and businesses often ended up with their neighbors' possessions. In the confusion, it was difficult for the

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authorities and those picking through the rubble to determine who owned the goods dug out from the ruins. Furthermore, provincial authorities asserted that ill-willed people had taken advantage of the chaotic situation to loot.

To control the situation, the provincial authorities appointed a citizens commission to record the possessions left behind by the migrants. During the second week of May 1861, the provincial authorities declared that anyone with goods that did not belong to them should turn them into the citizen's commission within eight days to avoid being charged with a felony or another crime. Dubiously owned or possessed items could be dropped off at a police station for inspection. The house of anyone denounced for or accused of harboring stolen merchandise or goods was placed on a list and the objects in question were turned over to the citizens commission until the legitimate owner could be determined (*Registro oficial*, 1877:142–144).

In the aftermath of the earthquake, police collected stolen or misappropriated items, but many owners did not return to claim their possessions. In June 1861, the provincial courts required that all stolen or misappropriated property be held in police custody until claimed by the rightful owner. If no one claimed the items after a waiting period, the goods were considered public property and sold at auction. The authorities compiled and published a list of 315 items to be claimed by their rightful owners. Among the valuables collected were merchandise, jewelry, clothing, and home furnishings. In December 1861, four groups of unclaimed goods were auctioned. The first batch of goods was worth an estimated 83.89 pesos; the second lot required 82.03 pesos to purchase; the third assortment of goods was valued at 83.15 pesos; and the fourth passel of items was appraised at 82.50 pesos (AHPM 1861c). The ambiguity in determining the owners of items buried beneath the ruins and rubble of Mendoza also complicated the narratives of endemic looting found in survivor accounts and newspapers, especially when compared to crime rates tabulated from provincial criminal and judicial records.

### **CRIMINAL AND JUDICIAL RECORDS OF THE PROVINCE OF MENDOZA**

Immediately after the earthquake on March 20, 1861, few specific incidents of crime were reported or recorded. Accounts from Mendoza published in newspapers throughout Argentina in the days and weeks after the earthquake generally referred to widespread looting and pillaging carried out by *campesinos*, *gauchos*, and the urban lower classes. Survivor accounts and newspaper reports, however, included few specific examples of disorder and criminal activity. In an effort to maintain law and order and to ensure the sanctity of private property, the provincial authorities announced on March 25, five days after the earthquake, that anyone caught looting the ruins of Mendoza would be summarily shot. The next day, according to one eyewitness's "daily observations," four "marauders" were pulled from the rubble of the provincial capital and executed, and two more looters were shot without any legal recourse or process in the department of San Vicente (Suárez 1938c:125). The liberal Buenos Aires press, however, did not judge every attempt at the enforcement of martial law and summary executions as legitimate or necessary for restoring order. An article published in *El Nacional* on April 17 decried federalist Governor Nazar's autocratic and arbitrary actions in Mendoza after the

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earthquake. According to the report, before he fled the provincial capital, Nazar ordered the execution of a group of earthquake survivors who had petitioned to leave the province and denied any wrongdoing. Before the judgment could be carried out, Juan de Dios Videla took charge of the province in the absence of Governor Nazar, who had retreated to his country estate, and halted their imminent executions, becoming a hero in the pages of the liberal Buenos Aires press (Suárez 1938f:281).

Despite the provincial and municipal authorities issuing regulations to ensure the legitimate ownership of animals, possessions, and goods leaving the province with migrants, thieves were able to leave Mendoza with stolen items. Looters who had taken property from the rubble of Mendoza were later apprehended in other Argentine provinces. A newspaper in Córdoba, *El Imparcial*, reported on April 3 that the previous evening, the authorities had stopped Francisco Navarro, a “peon” and soldier, who told the authorities that he had come from Mendoza, where he had participated in the looting of the destroyed capital. In Navarro’s possession, the police had found a silver watch, a chain with three gold clips, a gold ring, three pesos, earrings made from French gold, a silver pigeon that adorned a mate cup and an accompanying straw, and three reals of stamped silver (Suárez 1938e:300). Similarly, a soldier fled Mendoza in July 1861 with some of the recovered property that the citizens commission had collected that was either unclaimed, misappropriated, or stolen (AHPM 1861c). After the city of Mendoza moved to a new location, the ruins and rubble of the old city still provided opportunities for looters. During the winter of 1864, the police caught a man looting the ruins of the Iglesia Matriz, near the main plaza of the old city. The thief had confiscated a silver crown and various pieces of wood from the ruins of the church (AHPM 1864).

**Table 1. Crimes per Month in the Province of Mendoza during 1861**

Month	No. of Crimes
January	2
February	7
March	7 <sup>a</sup>
April	2
May	7
June	6
July	12
August	3
September	2
October	7
November	3
December	3

*Notes:* Table is based on judicial and criminal records for the Mendoza Province from the Sección Justicia y Criminal, Epoca Independiente, Archivo Historico de la Provincia de Mendoza.

<sup>a</sup> Crimes registered during the month of March occurred before the earthquake on March 20, 1861.

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Survivor accounts and newspaper descriptions of rampant looting in the days and weeks after the earthquake were not reflected in the criminal and judicial records for the Province of Mendoza. No crimes were registered after the earthquake in March, and only two were noted during the month of April 1861 (Table 1). All criminal activity registered during March in the criminal judicial records of Mendoza occurred before the earthquake on March 20, 1861. The absence of registered crime during the last eleven days of March could be due to the difficulty of keeping formal records, because earthquake survivors more concerned about finding clothing, food, and potable water and with constructing shelter, and because government resources were absent or were slow to respond. Likewise, official government documents had to be recovered from the ruins of government buildings, demonstrating the difficulty of record keeping in the days and weeks after the catastrophe. Indeed, the chief of police in July 1861 enlisted prisoners to search for and extract documents missing in the rubble resulting from the earthquake (AHPM 1861c).

**Table 2. Robberies and Thefts Annually in Mendoza Province, 1858–1864**

Year	Animals	Money	Possessions	General <sup>a</sup>	Total
1858	16	0	3	16	35
1859	9	2	1	16	28
1860	27	6	18	17	68
1861	5	8	12	10	35
1862	12	3	8	14	37
1863	8	4	4	11	27
1864	18	4	11	20	53

*Notes:* Table based on judicial and criminal records for the Province of Mendoza from the Sección Justicia y Criminal, Epoca Independiente, Archivo Historico de la Provincia de Mendoza.

<sup>a</sup> “General” refers to robberies and thefts not accompanied by annotation in the archive’s indices or case description noting the type of object(s) stolen.

Crime rates based on the criminal and judicial records from the province of Mendoza initially decreased in the days, weeks, and months after the earthquake and generally reflected predisaster levels in the years after the catastrophe. The two crimes registered in the judicial and criminal records for Mendoza during April 1861 were robberies. The police apprehended one criminal who had stolen a pair of stirrups for a horse and pocketed 70 pesos and another thief who had taken animals (AHPM April 1861a,b ). In May, criminal activity returned to predisaster levels, with seven crimes registered, of which five were categorized as robberies and one labeled a suspected robbery. During June, another two robberies were cited and one case of fraud registered, out of a total of six cases for the month. In the winter month of July, however, crime ballooned to a high of twelve registered infractions, of which six were either robberies or thefts. Crime decreased again in August and September, with only a handful of cases. In October, seven cases were registered, including four labeled as robbery or theft and

another noted as suspected theft or fraud. As spring turned into summer in the Southern Hemisphere, crime remained low in the province of Mendoza, with three cases registered in the criminal and judicial records for each of the months of November and December. When compared to the months before the earthquake, however, criminal activity, including robbery and theft, was similar to that for much of the rest of the year. For example, out of the seven crimes entered in the criminal and judicial registry for February, four were robberies or thefts. In March, another seven crimes were registered, of which three were robberies or thefts. An examination of criminal cases in the years before and after earthquake shows that robberies and thefts decreased significantly in 1861 before returning to predisaster levels (Table 2).

**Table 3. Robberies and Thefts Compared to Total Crimes Annually in Mendoza Province, 1858–1864**

Year	Robberies/Thefts	Total Crimes	Robberies/Thefts as Percent of Total
1858	35	107	32%
1859	28	63	44%
1860	68	116	58%
1861	35	61	57%
1862	37	78	47%
1863	27	60	45%
1864	53	118	44%

*Note:* Table based on judicial and criminal records for the Province of Mendoza from the Sección Justicia y Criminal, Epoca Independiente, Archivo Historico de la Provincia de Mendoza.

Despite authorities' concern about possessions being stolen and then taken out of the province during the migration to neighboring provinces after the earthquake, and despite narratives of endemic looting in newspapers and survivor accounts, judicial and criminal records for the province of Mendoza show that the number of robberies and thefts in 1861 decreased by nearly half from the previous year (Table 2). Indeed, the incidence of the theft of animals decreased from a high of 27 cases in the year before the temblor to only five cases in 1861. Similarly, cases of theft of possessions decreased from 18 cases in 1860 to 12 incidents in 1861. Likewise, cases categorized as "general theft or robbery" in the province's judicial and criminal records also decreased, from 17 incidents in 1860 to 10 in 1861. A total of 116 crimes were registered in 1860, with robberies and thefts numbering 68, representing 58 percent of all criminal activity that year (Table 3). In 1861, the year the earthquake struck Mendoza, the judicial and criminal records included 61 total criminal cases, with 35 robberies and thefts registered, representing 57 percent of all crime for that year. Similarly, in 1862, 1863, and 1864, robberies and thefts as a percentage of total crimes reflected levels before 1860. Thus, although the reported incidence of crime decreased after the catastrophe, rates of robbery and theft as a percentage of the total

number of crimes committed annually reflected predisaster levels, belying narratives of an unprecedented wave of criminal activity after the earthquake in Mendoza.

The narratives published in newspapers and recorded in survivor accounts described marauding bands of *gauchos* and *campesinos* pillaging and looting the ruins of Mendoza. Rather than an increase in crime from pre-earthquake levels after the disaster, which would be expected based on the firsthand accounts and newspaper reports, a decrease in the number of criminal cases was seen in the days, weeks, and months immediately after the earthquake, and all criminal activity declined in the year after the catastrophe. After the earthquake, theft and robbery as a percentage of the total number of reported crimes remained steady or at levels similar to predisaster rates. Indeed, there is some evidence that residents of Mendoza, rather than engaging in the reportedly widespread antisocial behaviors, formed extraordinary communities to help their neighbors and fellow citizens find food and potable water, construct shelter, and care for the injured in the days and weeks after the earthquake.

### **AN EXTRAORDINARY COMMUNITY**

The common experience of surviving the natural disaster helped to create what scholars of disasters have termed extraordinary communities or therapeutic communities. In the “daily observations” of a survivor’s journal, the entry for the day after the earthquake observed that many lives had been lost because of absence of an organized government response. Instead, the survivors had worked together to provide aid to the injured and to those taking refuge underneath the trees in the city’s main plaza. The chronicler noted that survivors who had taken refuge in the plaza received the charity of those who passed through the provincial capital. Two days after the earthquake, the families who had helped to pull the injured from the ruins also gave any aid they could to those they saved (Suárez 1938c:121). In the entry for March 26, the firsthand account noted that families, the injured, and the sick who had taken refuge in the plaza had left and “several charitable neighbors have gathered in groups in neighborhoods around the city, where they live as a single family linked by a common misfortune” (p. 124).

Politician Eusebio Blanco’s narrative of the catastrophe noted that survivors bonded through the experience of “the common misfortune” of the catastrophe. The earthquake struck on the evening of March 20, 1861, and witnesses recalled observing residents burying the dead, digging out the living from beneath the rubble, and providing medical care for the injured the next day as best they could with the resources they had. Still other survivors formed groups here and there to console each other about the great losses of life and property throughout the city and to find solace in their common religious beliefs. Indeed, Blanco (1936:191) pointed out the dire situation in the days after the earthquake, noting that the survivors lacked provisions, food, potable water, warm clothing, and shelter to protect them from the elements.

In Mendoza after the earthquake, people engaged in acts of humanity by providing aid to fellow residents and outsiders, alongside antisocial behavior such as looting often cited in accounts of the disaster. After highlighting acts of depraved human indifference and looting, Félix Ferías’s chronicle of the disaster turned to acts of



humanity as he wrote, “Let us set aside the sight with horror of these acts of barbarism and recognize that they did not lack in the midst of those scenes of desolation, charitable souls for which treasure could not be sought under the earth more precious than the life of a man” ([1884] 1938:171). Similarly, Clereaux’s account of the earthquake noted that in the midst of such a great calamity, residents of Mendoza came together and engaged in “acts of the most touching charity, of self-denial, and of Christian resignation alongside crimes of refined perversity, to unprecedented scandals, there perpetrated sacrilegiously defying the wrath of God, desecrating the corpses, and the most holy of temples, and destroyed smoking homes” (1938:161). Indeed, often-forgotten selfless acts occurred, and extraordinary communities formed, solidified by the experience of the disaster, alongside the acts of inhumanity and depravity frequently reproduced in newspapers and survivor accounts of the natural disaster.

The Mendoza earthquake of 1861 magnified the deep political and social divisions within 19th-century Argentina. The temblor struck the province and capital city at a turning point in Argentine history as Buenos Aires and the Argentine Confederation were fighting a civil war (1852–1861). Narratives of disorder after the natural disaster in Mendoza found in survivor accounts and newspapers reflected the political conflicts and perspectives of federalists and liberals in the interior provinces and Buenos Aires. Liberal newspapers in Buenos Aires reported and published accounts that highlighted the inability of the provincial government, and particularly the federalist governor, to stop the chaos and looting that was endemic in the days and weeks after the catastrophe. Many firsthand accounts exhibited elite panic in their descriptions of marauding bands of *gauchos* and *campesinos* looting and pillaging the provincial capital with little regard for the injured still trapped beneath the rubble of their homes and businesses. Similarly, many descriptions of the disaster’s aftermath observed that the lower classes used the disaster as an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the wealthy.

Despite narratives of widespread disorder and chaos after the 1861 earthquake in Mendoza, however, an examination of the provincial judicial and criminal records shows a decrease in reported criminal activity. The decrease in crime could be the result of underreporting due to the difficulty or inability to document or record crimes in the weeks and months after the earthquake. Studying criminal and judicial records from 1858 to 1864 provides a wider scope with which to compare the narratives of disorder and documented incidence of crime registered in the immediate months and years after the disaster to crime rates before the earthquake. Thefts and robberies, as well as total crime, decreased in 1861, the year the earthquake struck Mendoza. When robberies and thefts are tabulated as a percent of the total number of crimes for each year, however, 1861 and the years after the natural disaster reflect pre-earthquake rates. Thus, the narratives of disorder and elite panic prevalent in survivor accounts of the natural disaster do not reflect documented crime rates and levels of theft and robbery in Mendoza. Instead, examples of survivors working together in informal and extraordinary communities to provide for their basic necessities such as food, potable water, and shelter also exist alongside accounts of antisocial behavior. Natural disasters such as the 1861 Mendoza earthquake, then, provide an opportunity to view political and social tensions within a community and country without the everyday façade that often conceals them.

## ENDNOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2. The Junta de Estudios Históricos de Mendoza collected a variety of primary sources, including survivor accounts, newspapers, scientific reports, archival records, correspondence, and government documents from libraries and archives around Argentina that are particularly helpful in studying the 1861 earthquake. The sources were published in volumes 2 and 10 of the *Revista de la Junta de Estudios Históricos de Mendoza*.

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