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Purpose – This paper discusses the potential contributions of Critical GIS to disaster studies. I argue that critical GIS, on the one hand, helps to destabilise ‘scientific’ knowledge about disasters and, on the other, can take advantage of science’s persuasive power to advocate for positive socio-environmental change. My contribution aims to expand the range of critical cartographic practices in disaster studies, which have so far been dominated by participatory mapping.

Design/methodology/approach – To illustrate this argument, I draw on my research on social vulnerability to disasters on the Litoral Central, in Chile. I use as examples three maps, which combine standard geospatial datasets (Census data, SoVI, and other quantitative data from governmental agencies) with qualitative data produced for this project through resident interviews, focus groups and policy analysis.

Findings – This work shows the usefulness of Critical GIS for questioning and expanding the data sources, analytical categories and representational practices routinely used in disaster research. Furthermore, it underscores that ‘doing Critical GIS’ depends less on adopting specific cartographic techniques than it does on developing critical approaches to mapping, i.e. approaches that are reflexive, theoretically grounded and sensitive to power relations.

Research limitations/implications – Drawing out the research implications, I suggest that Critical GIS is especially promising for interdisciplinary research and for research that aims to influence public debates. I also address the eurocentric roots of Critical GIS research, suggesting that this methodology must be viewed as one of many valuable approaches to disaster mapping.

Originality/value – This paper highlights the value of Critical GIS, a set of methodologies that have proved productive in other areas of environmental research but have been largely overlooked in disaster studies.

Emerging voices and pathways to inclusive disaster studies