

Introduction: Disasters as Politics – Politics as Disasters

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Abstract:

What is the relationship between politics and disasters and how does this relate to the recent boom in disaster studies? The introduction to this volume argues that the recent interest in disasters is not because there are more disasters, but because of two recent developments within the social sciences: first, a focus on rupture rather than on continuity and second, a focus on materiality. Disasters are the intersection of these changes. Disasters are ruptures of society and thus inherently political. They provide a particular kind of rupture, one which does not simply affect values and norms, but the material backup of society and its material infrastructure. From this starting point, the article discusses two movements of how to relate disasters and politics: disasters as producing politics and politics as producing disasters. The former begins with disasters and considers how they acquire the power to recompose the world. Disasters from this point of view not only produce politics, but a particular kind of (cosmo-)politics that deals with how humans relate to technology and nature. The latter begins with politics and considers how politics produces disasters. Here, as for example in preparedness, risk assessment and state of exception, politics is the productive force and disasters become means to legitimate, produce and arrive at certain politics.

Sociology Discovers Disasters

Suddenly, disasters are everywhere. The social sciences have recently increased their output in disaster writing massively. The world is one big disaster. Crisis looms. The end is near.

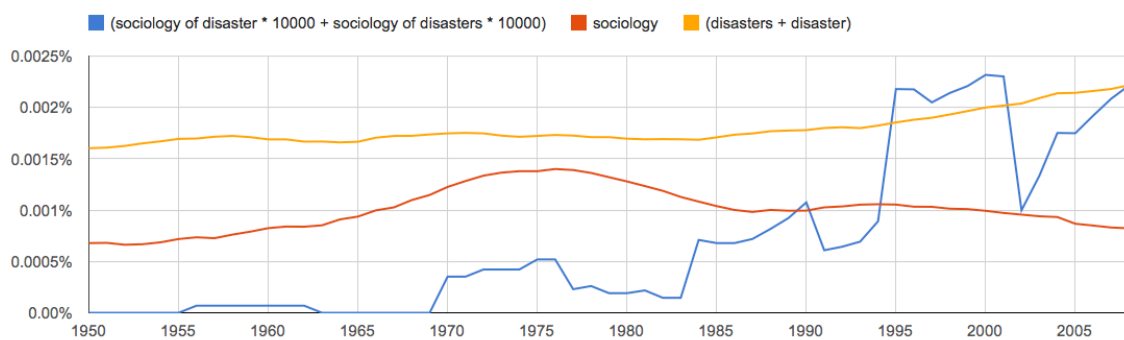
One way to diagnose this state is by pointing to an actual increase in disasters. This could be called a naturalization of the problem. Another diagnosis is to point to a general catastrophic cultural mood, a *Zeitgeist*, what we could call a culturalization.

The first diagnosis, naturalization, is problematic for two reasons: disaster statistics tell a complex story: roughly speaking, throughout the 20th century, the number of people killed by disasters has decreased, while the number of disasters and the damages reported has increased.² In short, society protects people better, but disasters have become more frequent because people build and live in increasingly disaster prone areas. Moreover, sociologically speaking, discourses need not be in sync with events, as every student of anti-semitism or racism knows. Just because there are more disasters, there need not be more attention to them. Conversely, an increase in perceiving disasters does not necessarily mean that there are more disasters. There can be other reasons, as the forecasting of the now forgotten Millennium Bug showed.

The second, the general *Zeitgeist* argument may be true, but it is unlikely: Why should it hold for many societies on very different paths? Why would we assume its continuity, after the end

² The number of people killed by natural disasters has decreased from an average of a million or so per year in the first half of the twentieth century to a few hundred thousand per year in the last decades, but the number of disasters reported, the number of people affected, and the reported damage measured in Dollars has increased by several orders of magnitude since the 1960s. For technological disasters, the same holds, except that the number of disasters reported has decreased since ca. 2000. All data are taken from the International Disaster database EM-DAT: <http://www.emdat.be/natural-disasters-trends> (last visited 2nd of may 2013).

time scare of the Millennium Bug faded? Also, a preliminary bibliographical analysis with Google Ngram shows that the general thematizing of disasters did not really increase, while the sociology of disasters increased remarkably since the mid-1990s.³ The question then is: Why can we observe such an increase in dealing with disasters in sociology and its neighbouring fields, an increase that is way out of proportion compared to the general increase in disaster literature and the actual amount of disasters?



Insert Figure 1 here: Google Ngram of books containing the words sociology of disaster, sociology, disaster (relative total amount of books)

I will thus attempt a third answer, which we could call politicization, much more pertinent to this volume. The answer proposed here is that disasters emerge because our theoretical

³ Google Ngrams shows the *percentage* of books containing certain words relative to all books on Google books. It is a relative, not an absolute measure. I have used the ngrams for “sociology of disaster” and “sociology of disasters”, because these are a small amount of texts. The Ngram presented here have “sociology of disaster” multiplied by 10000 to make them comparable with the other two Ngrams. In other words, unsurprisingly the word “disaster” occurs approximately 10 000 times more often than “sociology of disaster(s)”. The Ngram for sociology is included to show that the increase of “sociology of disaster” is not a function of a general increase in literature containing the words “sociology” (which actually decreases after a peak in the mid 1970s).

apparatus makes us more sensitive to them. They allow social science to test various theories and interests that have come to the fore in the last ten or twenty years. This third answer does not necessarily contradict the other two. It sits beside them. This volume contributes to a further calibration of our conceptions of disasters, focusing on how accounts of disasters are produced and the effects they have in the world. This calibration of disasters also allows us to move the sociology of disasters from the applied margins of the discipline, as an ancillary science to the practical concerns of disaster management, to the central concerns of general sociology (Tierney 2007).

The problem of naturalization and culturalization is that they both conceptualize disasters without recourse to politics. In both options, disasters increase, or discourses increase, but how this relates to politics remains unclear. In contrast, the various articles in this volume attempt to understand disasters as politics, and politics as disasters. In short, they analyze both the notion of disaster and the notion of politics.

Two Movements to Conceptualize Disasters

This new relationship between politics and disasters can be understood by combining two important movements within the social sciences. The first relates to an interest in breaks and ruptures, rather than continuity and structure. This is closely linked to an attendant idea of politics as problematization of the composition of the world. Disasters as ruptures produce new compositions of the world and they force explications of these compositions. The second movement relates to an interest in reconceptualising nature or the non-human as actors.

Disasters, like accidents, are, sociologically speaking, the result of the combination of these two: they radically question the composition of the world, in all its technical, natural and social forms. Before discussing these two movements in detail, it is important to stress that conversely, there are other sociological ways to understand disasters, which eradicate either of the two. To start with, it is possible to understand disasters not as ruptures but as exaggerated

continuations of the normal (Woodhouse 2011). From such a perspective, there are no disasters as ontologically different events from other events in the world. To believe that disasters are exceptional is to misunderstand disasters. Disasters are nothing but what happens in the world anyway, just with a different *intensity*. From such a perspective, there is no need for a different way of analysing and reacting to disasters. There is neither a need for a different methodology, nor for a specific theory, and there is indeed nothing inherently interesting that sociology can learn from disasters. Whatever society is, disasters are part of it. To further elaborate this argument, one could say that to insist on the ontological specificity of disasters implies buying into an ideology of disasters, that uses disasters to legitimate certain political goals (more on this below when discussing the state of exception).

Furthermore, in this argument it is possible to understand disasters as purely social events. Indeed, the original sociological attempts to understand disasters first needed to establish disasters as sociological issues, claiming them from the monopoly of the natural sciences. Sociologists introduced the term disaster to differentiate from hazards, understood as a physical events (Perry 2007, p.8 ff.). According to this definition, a hazard turns into a disaster by its *social effects*. An earthquake happening in a region where no humans live is not a disaster, it is just a trembling of the earth. This definition, then, is not about separating the human from the non-human but instead about trying to account for the fact that some natural events relevant for natural scientists - earthquakes where nobody is harmed - are not relevant for a sociology of disasters. This argument is, so to speak, premised on a negative definition of disaster: a disaster is a rupturing event, specifically one that ruptures human society.

Similarly, sociologists helped to establish the idea that disasters are not natural or technical, in the sense of inevitable and uninfluenced by society, not only in their effects, but “man-made” (Turner 1978) and result from organisational routines (Weick 1993; Vaughan 1996). Such a definition was needed to create space for sociology within disaster studies, a field still dominated by the natural sciences. But for disaster studies *within* sociology such a definition

is tautological: once they are thematized by sociology, what else would disasters be if not social events? Rather, the problem for sociology, once it has identified disasters as a proper theme, is how to conceive of disasters without understanding them as purely social events. Or, in other words: the problem for sociology is how to understand something that has its *origins* (at least in the case of natural and technical disasters) so obviously *not* within society.

Thus both of these negative answers of a sociology of disasters become framed, visible and problematic through the development of two separate trends within the social sciences. The first trend is to conceptualize disasters as ruptures and thus inherently *political* and second to conceive of them as *not* within society but still an object of sociology. Taken together these trends demand certain theoretical changes within the general apparatus of sociology. Only once such a general re-orientation of sociology is in place, do disasters start to make sense as relevant objects for a general sociology as opposed to their being simply another object for the expansion of sociology. Disasters, as non-social ruptures, are ideal test cases for these new strands of sociology, precisely because they highlight and enable the discussion of these new orientations.

To understand the first movement, it is important to see how disasters are at odds with most sociological theories and the foundational assumptions of social theory. Since Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the problem for social theory was the problem of order and the explanation of stability: in short, to look at what connects one social instance with another over time, rather than looking at events that punctuate continuity and disassemble one instance from another.⁴ In this tradition of social theory man is disaster - and politics (or society in general) is what saves men from killing each other. Whether it is the state, or values and the social system (Parsons), fields (Bourdieu), imitation (Tarde) or technology (Latour): the arrow of

⁴ Note that this is quite opposed to the general procedure of history (at least before the advent of social history) that looks at relevant events and how they create historical islands of importance.

explanation is always towards explaining what holds society together, what produces stability and predictability, assuming that society has a “natural” tendency to fall apart.

This is why early disaster studies needed to legitimate this unusual derivation. When Erikson did his pioneering study of the Buffalo Creek flood, he thus felt compelled to defend his decision to focus on one “unique human event”, “a task normally performed by dramatists or historians” (Erikson 1976, p.246). The predilection to explain stability also explains why many studies of post-disaster communities can make the seemingly counter-intuitive claim that after disasters communities do not necessarily fall apart, but re-adjust (Carr 1932, p.213), are inventive or even hold together better (Jencson 2001; Kendra & Wachtendorf 2007).

Breaching experiments in ethnomethodology were probably the first attempt to put rupture at the expense of continuity at the heart of social theory and to use rupture to learn about the composition of the world (Garfinkel 1967). The study of controversies has borrowed this insight by understanding that calling into question, critiquing and disagreeing are sociologically productive processes. These perspectives together have informed studies of accidents, breakdown and repair (Heath et al. 2000). As intellectual precursors of disaster studies (as understood here), studies of accidents showed in small scale how the world falls apart and needs to be put together. Disasters considered as ruptures expand these insights and methodologies to a much larger scale and even to the world (see Clarke, in this volume).⁵ By shifting the focus to large scale events and the problem of the contingency of the *world* they allow us to see how the world is composed. Disasters, then, become inherently political events because they pose questions about who should be allowed to re-compose the world and how (see Farias and Tironi). The shift from accidents to disasters is, then, not merely one of scale but of focus: if a disaster cannot be contained within one location, one machine or one organisation, issues of politics, distribution and justice come to the fore. Who should be responsible for action (Farias)? How does society distribute preparedness (see the articles by

⁵ From here onwards, author names without dates refer to articles in this volume.

Easthope and Mort, and Deville et al.)? How should collectives make decisions regarding risks (Weszkalnys and Ellis)? How should the world be rebuilt (Tironi)?

To understand the second movement, it is important to understand that the concepts of disasters and of preparedness measures are both at odds with a purely *social* sociology. If sociology is the analysis of the social world, actual disasters (and not only their aftermath) become difficult to describe for sociology. How to describe a disaster, if not by describing the movement of earth, the masses of water, the falling trees, levees and houses, the rubble and dust, the birds (Rodríguez-Giralt & Tirado) and contaminated letters (Ellis)? How to explain preparedness and recovery without recourse to bulldozers, dams and bunkers (Deville et al.)? This new sociological interest in materiality has its roots in the laboratory and in new technologies. It emerged from attempts to understand how scientists construct facts and invent new technologies. From these initial questions, it has spread to all kinds of fields, but it is important to keep its origins in mind since, as Clarke has argued, the materialism of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its allies is a materialism of divide and control over technological artefacts (Clark 2010, pp.34–40). It usually assumes scientists and engineers construct things in order to control other things or people.

In disasters, however, the situation is very often quite different. Disasters are situations when matter is out of control and, compared with studies of accidents, out of control on a massive scale. In fact, if there were a need to tell accidents apart from disasters, it would be the remaining amount of control over actor networks. Accidents are contained and control lapses momentarily and spatially on a relatively small scale – a space ship explodes, a car crashes, a train derails–, but the larger network continues to work (it is no coincidence that the examples here most relate to traffic). Repair, as a counter strategy can focus on the technology that stopped working (Graham & Thrift 2007). In an earthquake, nuclear disaster or flood, there is no such possible focus. Disasters then, would be defined as networks or cosmograms

themselves that collapse, which radically poses the question of the composition of the world as a whole. Power and intelligibility ceases not just for one particular part, but for all parts involved. Disasters, even more than accidents, are test cases to understand a world in which the material and the natural are not only an object of concern and control, but the very origin of radical change.

But this very wholeness also poses a problem for Actor-Network Theory because the vocabulary of ANT is geared towards disentangling big concepts into micro-processes. But, one might argue, disasters are precisely those events that cannot be disentangled and that act and are experienced as one big entity. As suggested in the articles of this book, it might be argued that the analytical tools of ANT, and sociology in general, are not very well equipped to deal with such things. It is no coincidence then that the articles assembled here do not give an account of disasters as wholes but of what follows before and after. Temporalization of punctual events is the analytical strategy of choice, but we can legitimately ask, whether this does not miss the very object of analysis. In that sense, a true sociology of disasters still remains to be written.

Based on the two central movements in the sociology of disasters, described above, the articles in this volume adopt different angles in analyzing disasters. The articles collected here are attempts to look at how disasters reconceptualize politics and how politics reconceptualizes disasters. Thereby they engage in various kinds of symmetry (Law 2003). By symmetry it is implied that the articles shy away from settling too quickly for one side of any hot or strong dichotomy: whether it is truth or falsehood, political or scientific explanations, the attempt at explanation or the attribution of blame (Potthast 2007). Symmetrical approaches rather take as their starting point to inquire how attributions to one side of various distinctions are empirically accomplished: why and when are people blamed

or systems explained? When are scientific or political accounts preferred? When are situations explained with symbols and meaning and when with materiality?

However, independently of such symmetries, the authors in this collection begin from different starting points and it is therefore worthwhile to point out how these starting points relate to disasters and politics. The following pages thus try to analytically grasp what it means to start with politics or disasters as the vantage point of analysis. This also allows us to situate the contributions in this book within a wider literature on these issues, including some vantage points not covered. Starting from either disasters or politics produces different accounts of both of these concepts with quite different political solutions, even if these remain often implicit. To sketch these options then allows us to also better understand the underlying conceptions of disasters and politics, through a comparison with some alternatives not taken and not covered in this book.

Disasters and politics may be conceived in the two following analytical ways: first, as “disasters producing politics” and second, as “politics producing disasters”. In the former case, disasters are relevant because they are productive. The disaster itself is noteworthy for its capacity to produce a particular kind of politics. The latter focuses on the problematic role of politics to produce disasters. From this point of view, it is politics itself, as a mode of ordering the world that produces disasters for its own purposes and according to its own rules. Apart from asking how these approaches conceptualize the relationship of disasters and politics, further questions follow: What are their aims of explaining or changing the world? How do they distribute power and blame in the world among actors? Do they seek to distribute it among many actors, or attribute it to one? How do they take into account “non-traditional” actors, such as lay people or nature? How do they distribute an empirical focus between these various actors?

Disasters as Producing Politics

There are at least three versions of “disasters as producing politics” with changing levels of force attributed to disasters. First, there is an approach, which could be termed *disasters as prime empirical sites to understand politics*. This approach is not particularly attentive to disasters as ontological events, but rather starts from empirical practicalities: disasters, it turns out, are particularly good empirical sites for understanding politics. This approach does not necessarily depart from established sociological research. It also does not necessarily theorize disasters, but takes them for granted as *events*. What this strand does understand, and historically, has been early to grasp, is that disasters are prime events for understanding politics, simply because, empirically, all kinds of sociologically interesting things happen, in the same way as ethnomethodology understood that in the collapse of interaction sociologically interesting things happen. In the words of Hoffmann and Oliver-Smith: disasters “unmask the nature of society’s social structure” (Oliver-Smith 2002, p.9), echoed by Petersen in this volume when she writes that disasters “are messy times when norms ... fail” and “make it possible to analytically denaturalize and examine these practices that create norms” (*page 5 of manuscript*). This insight is paralleled by the idea in technology studies to study accidents and breakdown to understand technology in use (Wynne 1988).

According to this view, disasters change not society, but the work of the sociologist: they decompose what is usually difficult to analyze. Disasters are primarily a welcome methodological tool.

Considering disasters as *material events* is different from the first perspective, as it takes its guidance from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor Network Theory (ANT) to analyse disasters as events in themselves. This approach focuses on disasters as events, but unlike the first approach, does not leave disasters intact, instead disassembling them into their constituent parts. A disaster, as a rupturing event, then, does not rupture a social system, but is produced as an event (also see the conclusion by Michael). Historically, this research strand

follows the shift from religious to scientific explanations of disasters. If disasters are not punishments by the gods, but natural events, then the naturalness of the events can be analysed. Measuring the location, strength, likelihood and damage of possible or previous floods, earthquakes or nuclear strikes is a scientific problem, for which different solutions with different answers exist (for some examples see Lane et al. 2011; Bijker 2007; Cloke et al. 2013 and Farias, Petersen, Weszkalnys, Giralt / Tirado in this volume). It may depend on who does the calculation, what is included in the calculation, and which objects are seen as intervening in the composition of disasters.

This approach takes a different route to the first with regard to the way in which the empirical focus is distributed. The first attempt accepts disasters as big, single events that pose a problem for society and politics. The focus of analysis becomes the political response, its actors and organisations and the decisions they take to answer to the event. The latter breaks the disaster apart: the question becomes rather when and how⁶ a disaster as a unitary event comes into being. The standard STS answer is that disasters are a result of techno-scientific processes, rather than natural or political. The analysis may extend into politics. The focus of this approach is to disassemble a disaster and turn it into a problem: there are not hurricanes as disasters in themselves, but techno-scientific processes that produce hurricanes, floods, or nuclear accidents – both as events themselves and as accounts of these events. The naturalness of (natural) disasters gets bracketed, not just because political processes are guilty of producing disasters in the first place, but also because science and technology in themselves are not taken as simply recording the occurrence of disasters, but producing them. This is not to blame science and technology in an anti-modernist impulse, as the environmental movement is prone to do, but to accept both that the very materiality of social

⁶ See below the section on “Politics as producing disasters as risks”, for a discussion of temporality, and particularly how disasters have effects *before* they happen, qua risk analysis and preparedness.

disruption is co-produced by science and technology and that there is no way to account for such material disruption without the help of science and technology.

For such an analysis there are thus two levels. First, to study how modern science and technology produces disasters as material events. This may include a study of the building technologies of dams, cars, space shuttles, or of buildings, or, on a broader scale, of ecological change and how such technological advances in themselves create disasters.

Second, it is about studying how scientists account for risks and for existing disasters. What are the scientific assumptions, theories and descriptions for distributing blame between levees, engineers and political decision makers in practice?

Disaster as cosmopolitics is a combination of the two former approaches. Disaster as cosmopolitics uses disasters to understand how the world is reorganized on multiple levels through and after disasters. From the viewpoint of cosmopolitics a disaster recomposes the world on every level. Cosmopolitics asks what the world is composed of, who is recognized as a legitimate actor (Farias) and what capacities these actors have (Tironi). The “who” implies not only distributions of decisions among scientific experts and policymakers, but also among different entities, such as tsunamis, birds and measurements, or: actants in ANT terminology. Cosmopolitics then ideally does not disassemble politics or disasters but observes the assembly of worlds, with politics and disasters both constituting events within this world. Disasters are particularly amenable to cosmopolitics, as they unravel the foundations and processes of composing the world, and may therefore offer a place “in which the cry of fright or the murmur of the idiot” can be heard (Stengers 2005). One may remember here the movie “Train de Vie” by Radu Mihaileanu, in which a village of Romanian Jews, hearing of the oncoming holocaust, entrusts itself to the idea of the village idiot: they charter a train, half of the village dresses as Nazis and “deports” the other half and they all drive west, through enemy lines into freedom, duping the real Nazis into believing they are fellow Nazis.

The looming disaster, and the hopelessness of the situation literally puts the world at stake, making the proposition of the village idiot one worth taking into consideration.

The analytical difficulty of a cosmopolitical approach then is how to juggle the assembly and disassembly of worlds. While the two former approaches can each drill in a single direction and probe the composition of either disasters or political processes, the problem of cosmopolitical approaches is that their field of inquiry and analytical focus is potentially unlimited: who or what should be included in the analysis, and to what extent? This becomes a particular problem if cosmopolitics is conceived as a “positive” form of analysis, that looks into the composition of worlds, and not just the decomposition, into an attempt to ask for new forms of disaster planning (Latour 2007 and see Farias, this volume).

Politics as Producing Disasters

The first, and probably most prominent, version of politics producing disasters is the notion of the state of exception or state of emergency. The state of exception is primarily a legal and technical concept that was given originally political prominence by Carl Schmitt (2005), and more recently through the writings of Giorgio Agamben (2005). While none of the articles in this volume are concerned with state of emergency directly, it is a crucial concept to think about the relationship between disasters and politics, because it highlights the political decisions behind what counts as a disaster from the viewpoint of a state. For Schmitt, to proclaim a state of exception is a sign of sovereignty. But the argument can be turned around. Through the lens of the state of exception – but also “smaller” decisions of the state to act in cases of disasters – it becomes apparent that a disaster, for politics, is not an event out there, but a decision to be taken with repercussions for state action and the state’s relation to the population. A disaster in this version is an event *outside* the state, considered as an

organisation, but (usually) within its territory,⁷ and which the state uses to do something it could not do without a disaster: change laws, make experts produce reports, send recovery organisations (see Easthope and Mort), and control the movements of people and things (Ellis).

The Neo-Foucauldian outlook of Agamben and his followers have pointed out in a critical model the ways that states use the state of emergency to impose new forms of politics on the population. The argument implies that the state of emergency is usually a trick to enforce stricter control of the population, a new biopolitics that would not be possible in normal circumstances. But different from Agamben's focus, what matters here more is not the problem of these extensions of state control, but the way how disasters are used to produce these extensions. In a state of emergency, what matters is that disasters become a resource to justify whatever the state of emergency proclaims. This is a different take from the Foucauldian route Agamben and others take. It focuses not so much on the fact that a state of emergency creates an exception to the law within the law, but rather how the state relates to disasters through a state of emergency. For politics the problem then is to show and prove that its solutions follow from, and are connected to, this external event. While the disaster itself is of no great interest in this perspective, the legal and political processes to connect to the events are. How is it that democratic governments use democratic powers to strip the population or individuals of the very rights that democracy grants them? What is the (discursive) power of a terrorist attack or an earthquake fulfils in these strategies?

Where the state of exception takes disasters as starting point, the second version of politics as producing disasters shifts to focus on the risk of the disaster, prior to its occurrence. It is one of the most notable features of modern states that they develop all kinds of theories and

⁷ However, this does not need to be so: After Chernobyl and Fukushima, various pandemics, and also after 9/11 many states embarked on various paths of disaster preparedness, even if their territory was not directly affected.

practices to imagine, calculate and protect against future disasters. The terms risk and preparedness have come to embody these practices (Anderson 2011; Lakoff & Collier 2010). To focus on risk and preparedness implies to shift the focus away from actual disasters: risk and preparedness are both concepts that try to deal with disasters before they happen. It is constitutive of both of these terms that they deal with the unknown. They express the fact that various actors, as in the case of a state of exception, use disasters to act in the here and now, assuming that these actions will change the course of eventual disasters. Studies that analyse risk and preparedness, then, are not so much studies of disasters as material events, but studies of how disasters produce effects before they even happen. In the case of risks, such effects are mostly of the calculative sort, in the case of preparedness it ranges from exercises, to food larders (Collet 2010) and bunkers (see Deville et al.).

Studies of risk and preparedness are very much studies of dealing with the time of disasters. Like the precautionary principle (Dupuy & Grinbaum 2005) or prevention (Ewald 1986), risk and preparedness move the time of action *before* the event, and since they are aimed at undoing or at least alleviating the event itself, and nobody knows when an event will happen, they decouple it from the event. The centre of analysis becomes the *imagination* of the disaster and the *consequences* various actors derive from these imaginations. Politics becomes a mediator between the imagination and the practices derived from it. As in the cosmopolitical approach, such an analysis is very much an analysis of how we want to live, how we want to compose the world and what we imagine the world is and should be composed of. But rather than looking at how actual disasters recompose the world, this is about how the expectations of disasters recompose the world. Politically speaking, the problem of risk and preparedness is more difficult and worrisome than post-disaster intervention since the historical basis for action is unknown. While disaster as cosmopolitics

builds on some known events and seeks to rebuild a community out of it, preparedness needs to imagine these very events (Weszkalnys).⁸

The final approach analyses politics itself as (producing) a disaster. While the former two approaches take politics as answering actual or eventual disasters, politics as itself a disaster assumes that the disaster is an effect of political decisions.⁹ As with Foucauldian studies of the state of emergency, such studies assume that disasters are not events beyond political control, but instead are produced by politics in the first place. Underpinning these studies is very much a distrust of the notion of “natural” or “technical” disaster. Rather than taking the disasters as the starting point of analysis, they take the political as the starting point in the production of disasters. They operate from a critical perspective, which seeks to re-orient the blame question and de-neutralize it through sociological analysis. By putting political processes centre stage, and very often concentrating on a particular range of political actors (such as elected politicians and government office holders), disasters become thoroughly politicized. These studies become primarily about actions of political actors, and very often, from a critical angle, about their failure to act before, during and after disasters. Such research is deliberately asymmetrical, since it attempts to point to the fact that it was political decisions that caused a disaster and its subsequent effects. This research is the mirror image of the account given of “politics as producing disasters as risk” since it is about the failure to have created, and prepared for the right risks. “Politics as producing disasters” research points either to the failure of producing the right risks, or, having prepared for the right risks, to have failed to act adequately to address these risks. For example, a large part of the discussion on Hurricane Katrina has focused on the question of whether national and local government assessed the risk of a hurricane adequately, whether the material forms of preparedness, the

⁸ For a new method how to imagine these events see (Guggenheim et al. forthcoming).

⁹ This view has been popularized by Naomi Klein in her bestseller “the shock doctrine” (Klein 2007).

levees, were adequately designed, and whether FEMA and other government agencies acted adequately after the hurricane. Politics as disaster research also points to the fact that the state and its disaster organisations use disasters for a militarization of response and for taking responsibility out of citizens' hands (Tierney & Bevc 2007). Historically, it follows a trajectory of arguing for a de-militarization of disasters and for preferring the improvisational skills of the population over the organized, bureaucratized and militarized work of state organisations (see Mort and Easthope).

Overview

The special issue is organized in three sections. Each section focuses on a different problem of the relationship between disasters and politics. It starts with a section "Materials: Ontologies" that circles around the issue how to conceive of disasters once we take seriously the non-human and material nature of disasters. First, Nigel Clark sets out to clarify how the notion of the anthropocene challenges our understanding of politics and disasters. Clark radically seeks to shift agency not simply to the non-human as a general category, but to the earth's climate and its long-term human induced changes. For Clark, the main question is how we can politically understand temporal and spatial processes that far exceed normal sociological concepts of human agency and nation state. In the next article, questions of the redistribution of agency are taken from the biggest scale of the anthropocene to the smallest scale of birds. Israel Rodriguez Gíralt, Francisco Tirado and Manuel Tironi look at a toxic spill in the Doñana National Park in Spain to question the notion of disaster: Rather than being circumscribed in time and space, they show that disasters should be understood as "meshworks". As the authors show, it is the ringing of the birds, and the possibility to trace how they spread toxic spill, that turns the disaster into a meshwork, with birds as moveable and traceable distributors of what was initially a local event. Drawing on the work of Tim

Ingold, they argue that disasters are dynamic realities, difficult to localize and always distributed along disparate scales and actors. In their view, disasters have a dual reality, unfolding actually and virtually at once.

In the third article, Ignacio Farias uses the example of the failing of the Chilean warning systems to argue that we should analyse disasters not as instances of accidents but as instances of inquiry. For Farias, what is at stake in the case of cosmopolitics is a generalized problem of recognition, as it has been phrased in critical theory: Who recognizes whom as legitimate and irreducible actor? For Farias, the failure of the warning system must be discussed as a failure to recognize tsunamis as actors and based on this first failure, a failure to openly explore the world.

In the second part of the book entitled “experiments: governance” we focus on collective political experiments: these articles deal with different ways of deploying heterogeneous technologies for managing disasters, technologies that are in each case contested, challenged and mutable. Hence the section title: disasters enhance uncertainty, yet the technologies aim to stabilise them, but become matters of conflict and experiment.

Katrina Petersen in her article “Producing space, tracing authority: Mapping the 2007 San Diego wildfires” takes a look at how technologies of representation produce different kinds of disasters. In the case under discussion, two different kinds of maps produced completely different disasters with different repercussions for how to deal with the fires. The county produced maps, which ended at the borders of the county, whereas those produced by a group of local media and local academic organisations with Google My Map tracked the actual fires. The former aligned with the responsibilities of the state organisations responsible for dealing with the fire, whereas the latter followed those of the population affected by the fires.

Petersen’s main point here is to highlight that the groups that produce the maps are actually overlapping and have similar interests, but it is the different forms of map production that result in different forms of disasters and how to deal with them. In the next article Manuel

Tironi asks to what extent disasters, as radical moments of vital indeterminacy, create extended and iterative forms of political experimentalism. Tironi grounds his argument in the case of Talca, Chile. After the 2010 earthquake, two competing participatory experiments coalesced in Talca. On one side stood the idea that the disaster only unveiled the previous deterioration of the city. This endemic problem should be overcome with a masterplan and the role of the Talquinos would be to evaluate proposals. Against this stand the ideas of Talca con Tod@s, whereby the problem of Talca was not its decay, but its rich history of citizen groups, and its social capital: citizens in this view were engaged, and they were experts. These experiments publicly contested each other's assumptions and principles. The result was what Tironi calls an atmosphere of indagation, an amplified exploratory setting in which the experiments themselves became objects of political inquiry - thus creating a much messier and topological modality of governance.

The sixth article by Lucy Easthope and Maggie Mort looks at recovery work after the floods in Toll Bar, UK. They engage with a detailed comparison of how the regulated recovery work clashes with the contingent world of post-disaster recovery and how what they call “technologies of recovery” shape and become shaped by these local situations. They show that recovery work has to balance the adaptation to these local circumstances with keeping to its standardized practices, but they also show how local residents remake the technologies of recovery themselves.

The third and last section entitled “preparedness: anticipation” focuses on the fact that disasters exist and create political (re)arrangements *without* even happening. Disasters are politically powerful and generative even when absent, looming, or simply being invoked. The section starts with an article by Ryan Ellis on “Creating a Secure Network: The 2001 Anthrax Attacks and the Transformation of Postal Security.” Ellis looks at how the anthrax attacks led to a reconfiguration of the postal network, which eventually favoured large commercial mailers. For Ellis, the anthrax attacks were just spikes in a story which experts had seen

coming. The attacks were not so much a disaster, as the events which led to a political re-organisation of infrastructure: re-enforcing problematic power asymmetries by distributing costs unequally across different categories of users, and engaging in the policing of labor in an effort to aid the shift toward temporary labor.

Next, Joe Deville, Michael Guggenheim and Zuzana Hrdlickova look at shelters as materialized forms of preparedness. Drawing on the notion of concrete governmentality, they highlight how shelters, as particularly stubborn and stable forms of preparedness, produce a number of surprising effects. First, they compose preparedness by changing the relationship between citizens and the state. They also decompose preparedness by falling out of use.

Lastly, they recompose preparedness because they remain, while disaster experts need to find new disasters to justify their existence. In Deville et al's view, it is not so much the disaster itself, but particular kinds of preparedness that create different relationships between citizens and the state. In the last article entitled "Anticipating oil: The temporal politics of disaster-yet-to-come" Gisa Weszkalnys looks at an extreme case of preparedness and what disasters could be. She looks at how the prospect of oil in São Tomé and Príncipe is dealt with as a disaster yet to come. Her interpretation closes a circle by linking back to the problem of anthropocene in Clark's opening article. Weszkalnys asks when a disaster starts and she presents a sliding scale, from the timescales of geology to theories of resource curse and ethnographic observation of how the people in São Tomé and Príncipe react to the expectation of oil and their attendant ontological conversions, from crude oil to commodity into money.

Finally, in the afterword, Mike Michael complements this introduction by looking at the relationship of disasters and politics through the lens of temporality. For Michael, what the diverse articles do is to tie disasters into knots: they turn past experiences into preparations for the future and they turn these preparations into actual events.

These articles draw in various ways on the notion of disasters as politics and politics as disasters. As the section titles make clear, some focus on temporal aspects, some on material

and others on those of governance. Where they all converge is to turn the relationship between disasters and politics into a problem. The problem we face is not how to react to existing disasters. The problem we face is how to live in this world knowing that we produce innumerable disasters, which ones we want to prepare for, and how we want to live together in the wake of acknowledging these disasters. These articles are but a first step to answering these questions.

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