Ute Luig (ed.)

Negotiating Disasters: Politics, Representation, Meanings

PETER LANG
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Negotiating disaster: an overview

Ute Luig

1. Introduction[1]

1.1 Prolog

On 11 March 2011, at 14.46 p.m. local time, an earthquake which reached grade 9 on the Richter scale exerted its terrible impact on the east coast of Honshu, Japan. Minutes later it was followed by a tsunami which destroyed the nuclear power plants in Fukushima and devastated the surrounding area. When, after some days of anxiety the feared nuclear explosions happened, Fukushima became the very symbol of the maximum credible accident (*supergau*), to be paralleled only by the events in Tschernobyl in 1986. The term *supergau* implies that radioactive substances are set free and become a threat to humans and the environment. In the case of Fukushima, the exposure to radiation was very high and led to the evacuation of 100,000 to 150,000 people. The enormous destruction of lives, the pollution of the land and sea for many years to come and the following estrangement between civil society and the government turned Fukushima into an archetype of disaster.

Although Fukushima occurred locally, its impact was perceived and interpreted globally, sending shockwaves to the outside world. The devastated landscape appealed to the emotions of the world community, and sparked new discussions about humanity's relationship with the environment. The atmosphere in Europe after Fukushima in many ways resembles the period of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. Susan Neiman (2006: 353ff.) has convincingly described how the destruction of this rich and important city deepened the ideological battles between representatives of the Enlightenment and their religious counterparts. The Lisbon earthquake not only destroyed one of the world's leading cities but also shook the philosophical convictions of the time. Similarly, Fukushima destroyed the belief of many people in the control of technology and aggravated the controversies between supporters and opponents of atomic power. That such

1 My deep thanks go to Carla Dietzel, who has diligently worked on the editing process and to Dr Robert Parkin for correcting the English in some chapters. I am also grateful for a critical reading of this introduction by Dorothea Schulz, Edward Simpson, Martin Sökefeld and Manfred Zaumseil.

a disaster of almost apocalyptic dimensions could happen in one of the most highly industrialised countries in the world undermined belief in unbounded progress.

Like the Lisbon earthquake, Fukushima also represents a mental crisis. This time the subject is not religion or morality but humanity's accountability for nature and its control of technology. As the very symbol of human vulnerability, Fukushima engrossed the disputes about ethics and technology; it intensified feelings of anxiety which Hoffman (2002: 136f) argued are more pronounced with regard to technological risks than to natural ones.

This profound shock had worldwide repercussions in countries that rely on nuclear power, especially in Europe, but also in Japan and Russia. Although Germany was the only country where the government revised its nuclear power politics by seeking to end its reliance on atomic energy, critical discourses in other countries opened up debates about the control of technology as well. These discussions are coinciding with the ongoing debates on climate change, perceived as another global threat. The insecurity and uncertainties resulting from climate change further support scenarios of a world in danger which is threatened by environmental migrations, hunger and deaths due to droughts and endless wars over resources (see Welzer, Soeffner and Giesecke 2010, Hastrup 2009). Many social scientists are aware of these challenges, in which the twin threats of technology and of disasters overlap. Ulrich Beck (1986) has already drawn attention to this problematic in his *risk society*, which was theorised later by Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002: 18) and others (see Paine 2002: 67). The (pre-modern) relationship between a dominant nature and the social world of humans has been turned upside down in the period of (postmodern) global capitalism. It is human activity which threatens the existence of nature: examples like the Exxon-Valdez disaster, the explosion of an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico and the *supergau* of Fukushima, to name but a few, prove the immense devastation of natural resources through human activity in the era of global capital.

The actuality of climate change and disaster politics has already changed the scientific discourse on 'natural' disasters in fundamental ways. Since Fukushima the long-debated question whether 'nature' or 'humanity' is responsible for disasters (see Alexander 1997) has finally been settled. 'Natural' disasters cannot be perceived any longer as solely natural,[2] but as the complex intertwining of human interventions and environmental vulnerability. Due to the dynamics of globalisation social and natural forces are so closely entangled with one another that the old divide between culture and nature, originating in Western philosophy of the eighteenth century, has lost its foundation. The relentless technological progress as a powerful sign of modernity reveals its very ambivalence, which

2 Alexander (1997: 289) even speaks of this as a misnomer.

is characteristic of an increase in wealth, mobility and technological potentialities, but is at the same time also responsible for environmental destruction, famine, wars and an ever growing difference between access and entitlement to resources (see Sen 1981). Many social scientists are aware of these challenges and conceive the present situation as the necessary beginning of a new theoretical era for the social sciences (see Hastrup 2009). It may still be too early to propagate a turning point in history, but some of its foundations are laid by the present discussions. This volume aims to contribute to these challenges by offering some new perspectives for research. It takes up the idea of closer cooperation between the social and cultural sciences by offering a transdisciplinary approach. In order to understand the ever more complex changes, it has seemed necessary to leave the anthropological looking glass aside, though without abandoning it, for a widened perspective using new theoretical concepts. In contrast to interdisciplinary research, a transdisciplinary approach takes multiple perspectives on common problems which allow for more comprehensive answers. In an edited volume such an approach is only possible in a very rudimentary fashion, but it can nonetheless lead to interesting results, as the contribution by Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono demonstrates.

1.2 An overview

The idea of this publication sprang from a colloquium at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2010. It aimed at acquiring an overview of the state of the art in disaster research, which had seen a tremendous intensification in recent years. Although this publication was conceived before Fukushima, some of the most salient questions and problems deriving from it are discussed by its authors. Some texts are a kind of stocktaking, reflecting earlier research results, comparing them with new empirical findings and questioning their empirical validity. Others open up new debates which reconcile social science approaches with the humanities. Topics like the politics of disaster, culture change, memory, rituals of mourning and good and bad deaths are covered in this book, while others, such as resistance and violence, spaces of death and the analysis of the emotions, will be just delineated in order to provide a trajectory for future studies.

A wide range of extreme events are nonetheless considered in this volume. The spectrum reaches from processes of environmental degradation, whether of pastures (Bollig) or coastlines (Harms), to sudden, incalculable events like lightning, hail (Schröder), earthquakes (Schild, Simpson, Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono), landslides (Sökefeld), floods (Schulz, Macamo and Neubert) or the tsunami in 2004 (Vettori). With one exception, all the analyses are based on long-term fieldwork and accordingly on dense case studies. The events described outline the close entanglement between climate change, increases in vulnerability or resilience and a great variety of coping strategies and interpretations. The examples range from single and/or chronic crises (see Vigh 2008) to

'classical' disasters which, in contrast to crises, are experienced as shocking, overwhelming events which necessitate immediate help. Although some disasters are foreseeable, and in some cultures even prophesied in calendars and in notions of cyclical time, the possibility of their occurrence is quite often suppressed and then comes as a shock. In order to improve our understanding of their particular dynamics, which unfold over time and space and turn them into processes rather than punctuated events, it is necessary to analyse their specific (historical) conditions as part of a transnational context. This space-time-oriented approach also allows us to analyse a processual chain that divides the development of a crisis or disaster into a state before, during and after the event. This time frame is of particular importance when a crisis turns into a disaster (see Macamo and Neubert, Sökefeld this volume) or changes into a catastrophe, as in Fukushima.

The term 'disaster' is used in this introduction in a rather colloquial manner. The reason behind this 'loose terminology'[3] was the idea of taking up important discussions in recent years advocating the holistic analysis of disasters. This approach implied on the one hand showing the intertwining of risk perception, vulnerability and coping strategies which do not always focus on disasters but describe mere or chronic crises as well. On the other hand, since it was necessary to document how social practices and cultural meanings are inscribed on to a material environment over long periods of time, it seemed important to discuss the interconnectedness of risk perception and vulnerability and then to link them to interpretation and coping strategies from an emic point of view. Problematizing emic and etic perceptions of disasters is important in order to open up discussions that critically rethink our use of categories. Most of the case studies in this book bear witness to this problem since they are concerned with problems of classification and method. What is a disaster, how is it differentiated from a mere crisis and under what condition does one turn into the other are salient questions for some of the authors in this volume. Others (Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono, Schulz) reflect on methods in order to understand how people can make meaning of their experiences in the face of disastrous events. They question Western scientific theories in comparison with local perceptions and interpretations. It is in these sections where the differences between different disciplines in accessing the same problems are most obvious and thus enrich the spectrum of theoretical trajectories in disaster research.

3 For an interesting discussion of possible definitions of disaster, see Oliver-Smith (1999a: 20). His conclusion "that disaster is a contested concept, with blurred edges, more a set of family resemblances …rather than a set of bounded phenomenon to be strictly defined" (ibid.: 21) is good to think with.

2. Engaging with theories

2.1 Thinking about risk and risk management

Discussions in disaster research during the last twenty years have brought four terms to the fore to theorize about: risk, risk management, vulnerability and resilience. Most of these terms originated from other disciplines, like ecology or cultural psychology, and it was some time before they were introduced into anthropological discourses. **Michael Bollig** addresses the history of these terms in his introduction and shows how they can be fruitfully adapted by anthropological theory building. Bollig selects and differentiates three traditions in analysing risk and risk management: actor-oriented, ethnographic and interpretative approaches, and he discusses their merits and shortcomings. According to his reading, the actor-oriented approach mainly discussed this problematic with regard to risk management either in the form of rational choice models or as structuring social institutions and territorial behaviour. Institutions like food-sharing were and are the key strategies in foraging societies in minimising natural risks. Bollig criticizes the fact that, although these studies had clear hypotheses, they did not produce models of general applicability. The same criticism also applies to what he calls the ethnographic approach that focused on African drylands. Problems of desertification, food shortages and social marginalization have frequently arisen in the Sahel since the 1970s and require strategies of survival and community building. But despite fine-grained descriptions of "historically changing modes of risk management" (Bollig: 33) these studies were not embedded in any theory of risk perception, nor were they related to local belief systems. He is also critical of Mary Douglas's publications, which are considered the major anthropological contribution to risk perception by neighbouring disciplines, although their impact on anthropology has been limited. Douglas made the perception of risks the key aspect of her theory, which she discussed with reference to a vast range of case studies. Her main thesis that "risk perception is encoded in social institutions" (Bollig: 34) fits well with her analysis of its many dimensions, but as Bollig suggests it remains analytically diffuse. In his own approach he defines risks as "the culturally and socially embedded perceptions of future possible damage resulting from a variety of hazards" (Bollig:36), while risk management either reduces negative impacts by decreasing vulnerability or limits the impact of damage through a conscious decision. Bollig proposes an analysis that relates risks and risk management to a time- and space-specific structure of resources which is accordingly embedded in historical circumstances.

Ingo Haltermann, a social geographer by profession, shares this historically oriented, contextualised approach with Bollig, but differs from him in that he explicitly orientates his discussion of risk and risk management around the conceptualization and individual appropriation of space. His approach to space is based on a constructionist view of environment which is not limited to a geo-

graphical or spatial relationship but defined by human needs and desires that are historically and culturally constituted. He conceives of the environment as a system "representing a certain section of the external world to which the actions and perceptions of a subject give significance" (Haltermann: 64). These perceptions, together with former experiences, also shape subjective evaluations of risk. They have to be taken into account in order to make assumptions about the feasibility and extent of the dangers which may threaten in the future. The author stresses the concept of bounded rationality favoured by risk research in geography because of its findings that individual actions are not orientated towards cost-benefit factors, but are instead determined by individual interests, cultural values and trust in one's own ability. This psycho- cultural conceptualization of space recalls in certain ways Soja's redefinition of space as active and dialectical (see Keith and Pile 1993: 4). Haltermann goes on to question the ways of individual (and household) risk-taking by introducing the differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable risk-taking, which are discussed in terms of risk acceptance or damage acceptance. Decision-makers have to weigh several risks against several chances, and even risks against risks and chances against chances. Besides this balancing of reasons, the control of resources plays an important role in confirming safety, which is conceptualized as freedom from want and freedom from fear according to a UN convention. Despite this psychological argumentation, he stresses the direct connection between safety and control over wealth, knowledge and power. Social inequality thus becomes a key variable in explaining the unequal distribution of risks that manifests itself in limited possibilities to guarantee (human) security (see also Beck 1986: 55). Under precarious living conditions without access to security, "even extreme natural events lose importance and represent only one further aspect in a general state of continuous crisis" (Haltermann: 77). Later in his text, however, he revises this somewhat deterministic perception. Under situations of increasing danger, so his argument, people will change these limits of adaptation and restructure their culturally determined behaviour, provided that the structural disadvantages of their local households have undergone change. Along with their changing situations, their perceptions of risk will change as well and will lead to changes in risk management.

2.2 Vulnerability and resilience

Haltermann's argumentation in some respects comes close to the so-called risk and vulnerability discourse, which, due to the work of Wisner et al. among others, is one of the most frequently discussed in disaster sociology (see also Bollig, Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono, Schulz this volume). Alexander (1997: 291) has pointed out that risk and vulnerability are different sides of the same coin. Risk is an active concept, whereas vulnerability is more passive. Risks can be taken, but vulnerability has to be endured, though it can also be

changed (see Haltermann, above). According to Alexander it is therefore more appropriate to relate vulnerability to the susceptibility of damage or injury or, in Wisner's terminology, to "correlate it with past losses and the susceptibility to future losses" (quoted from Alexander 1997: 291). In order to avoid discussing vulnerability only in quantitative terms, as a form of material damage or loss of human life, Blaikie et al (1994) have added political factors as well. Alexander's own efforts to unpack this rather blurred category seem interesting enough to be cited in a much shortened version. He differentiates between 1) the total vulnerability of the poor and dispossessed, 2) the economic vulnerability of the marginally employed, 3) the technological or technocratic vulnerability of the rich, 4) newly generated vulnerability, that is, risks to property or other capital assets, 5) residual unameliorated vulnerability that includes risks to modern safety standards, and last but not least 6) delinquent vulnerability, which also refers to breaches of safety norms (see Alexander 1997: 292). Although these ascriptions consist mainly of references to social inequality and a lack of safety standards, they provide insights into the further differentiation and ramifications of the concept.

In their contribution to this volume, **Elísio Macamo and DieterNeubert** take issue with the widely accepted notion (see Wisner et al. 2004) that the greater the vulnerability of local people, the greater their exposure to risk and the "lesser are their chances to recover" (Macamo and Neubert: 83) by introducing two new categories into the debate: the notion of ordinary management expectation, and local relief management capabilities. These two characteristics allow them to understand disasters not from an individual or social-psychological point of view, but as a social phenomenon (ibid.: 85).

Their field of enquiry is the comparative study of coping with floods along the Limpopo (2000), Odra (1997) and Tennessee rivers (2003 and 2004), the latter being part of the so-called Bible belt in the USA. Their main aim is to understand the logics behind the different classifications of these events through an emic perspective which includes analysing local perceptions and religious beliefs, as well as the organization of support by social institutions.

Their interest in risk management is closely linked to the precision and refinement of existing categories to describe hazardous events, the differences of which have to be outlined for scientific reasons, but also for practical purposes. Only if planners and disaster experts understand the assessments of local populations are they able to offer improved measures of support in case of need. The centre of Macamo's and Neubert's endeavour is therefore a critical rethinking of the 'all-purpose metaphor' disaster, deploring its heterogeneous usage in very different contexts. They propose a kind of ranking between extreme events, threats or hazards, disaster and catastrophe, which they link to the functioning of the social order. Threats or hazards are characterized by a breakdown of normality within a certain time window, whereas in a disaster normality is perma-