

From Risk To Disaster: A New Paradigm

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In the human and social sciences, the pervasiveness of the notion of disaster is an indication that a true paradigm is developing, which seeks to replace the paradigm of risk on which the modern project was constructed. Within that paradigm, man – far from being the master of nature or of the transformations he forces upon it – is weak, vulnerable and fallible. Is man a ‘being for disaster’?

Over the past decade in the human and social sciences, we have witnessed an increase in the number of works written on the issue of disaster. This is evidenced by many publications in sociology, anthropology, history and philosophy, for which it is a key subject. Some journals have devoted extensive features to the question (*Esprit*, 2008; *Le Portique*, 2008; *Terrain*, 2010), straddling the various disciplinary fields. We might think that the rise in the number of recent disasters (to name a few, the 2004 tsunami, hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and more recently the tsunami in Japan, not to mention the explosion at the AZF factory in Toulouse in 2001 and the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers the same year) generally explains the reason for the special attention these disasters have received, whether to understand what they imply or, more specifically, to consider ways of preventing them. However justified it may be, this kind of explanation remains limited. Indeed, it does not enable us to understand why we have recently become more sensitive to events that have always existed in some form or another. Habermas, like others before him, has broadly emphasised this: the 20th century was the century of disasters (Habermas, 1998). Even more so, it does not enable us to measure the fact that the

different studies of disasters tend to constitute, beyond the diversity of their approaches, a field of research whose novelty lies in its creation of an original category.

While the notion of disaster is a fruitful one, its definition nevertheless remains complex. Firstly, it includes events that may seem broadly heterogeneous. The term ‘disaster’ is applied to both cataclysms of natural origin (hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, etc.) and tragedies produced by the will or incapacity of man (terrorist attacks, accidents).

We should then consider the fact that the concept of disaster finds meaning not so much in the *causes* of the event as in its *effects*: what makes a disaster such is the tragic intensity, the magnitude of the consequences, and the collective death inflicted overwhelmingly and brutally (Godin, 2008). From that perspective, the division between that which belongs to the natural event and that which is linked to the effects of technology is incidental, particularly considering that it is often difficult to determine the origin of a disaster (human activities can, for example, cause a weakening of the coastlines which are then particularly vulnerable to hurricanes and tides). However, even in terms of their effects, the heterogeneity of disasters remains: how can the Holocaust, 9/11 (Dupuy, 2005) and the Concorde crash (Clavandier, 2011) be placed in the same category? Added to this heterogeneity of effects is a difference in the modality: a disaster is a catastrophic event described as such because we see the magnitude and tragedy of its consequences, but it is also something that we foresee, that we warn about and which we therefore try to avoid (Dupuy, 2005). The concept of disaster therefore plays on two levels: that of the emergence of the unforeseen event and that of warning or forecasting – a disaster is what seems inevitable, what confirms it as such on the register of monstrous events, and also what can be predicted and therefore avoided. The concept thus has two meanings, which do not immediately go together: a scientific meaning (disaster presupposes a specific method of analysis) and an ethical meaning (disaster is what we think must happen).

This heterogeneity, far from making the notion inconsistent in that it covers too wide an area

or refers to usages that are too dissimilar, is precisely what lends it depth and reveals its challenges. What this category enables us to identify, in the eyes of those who use it, leads us to consider the differences in intensity or register as negligible. In that sense, the notion of disaster does not indicate so much a field of analysis as a recently invented *paradigm*, whose depth must be grasped and whose presuppositions must be questioned.

Risk and precaution

This paradigm derives its meaning from the radical opposition between the notion of *risk* and that of *disaster*. Seeing what threatens us in terms of risk is an invitation to take into account the greater or lesser likelihood of such threats, and therefore consider disaster only as “the concrete and harmful realisation of a potential risk” (Walter, 2008, p. 13). This is how the precautionary principle (stated in the Rio Declaration, the Maastricht Treaty and, in France, in the Barnier law) compels us to understand the idea of disaster: by making it subordinate to risk and a subject of expertise. Philippe Kourilsky invites us to distinguish between potential risks and known risks (Kourilsky, 2002, p. 42 sq.): while the latter are certain, the former are no less unlikely. The precautionary principle, therefore different from mere prevention, requires us to take into account risks that are only potential, not because they are deemed to be less dangerous, but because our knowledge of them is incomplete. They are not unlikely; they are hypothetical. From this perspective, which assumes that we rationalise the anticipation of risk as much as possible, a disaster is, at best, a mere admission of failure; failure to take precautions and, in itself, a bad evaluation of potentiality. Risk, therefore, is foreseen and measured according to a ranking scale.

The fact that we can thus envisage what threatens us is highly characteristic of the project of modernity. Habermas emphasises that the concept of modernity encompasses at least two inseparable proposals. Firstly, it assumes a historical awareness that demarcates ancient times and new times; it therefore identifies the time in which we live with a time that is perceived as radically different (Habermas, 1988, p. 7 sq.). It also presupposes that the new times – as they

cannot be based on a past from which they are different, find their own basis in themselves. In other words, modernity, by definition, can only relate to itself: it can only find its basis through its own means. It rejects all legitimacy through tradition and therefore does wish to accept rational justification (Habermas, 1988, p. 407).

From that perspective, the notion of risk perfectly realises the project of modernity: it is the expression of the self-awareness of a society that not longer understands how to rely on itself alone or to relate only to itself. Ulrich Beck described this risk society as the product of the final developments of modernisation that took place at the end of the 20th century. Modern industrial society was born in the 19th century, but, turning to wealth creation, modernisation was only concerned with distribution of wealth and the problems this may entail (scarcity, poverty, class conflict, etc.). Late modernity has turned not toward the distribution of resources, but rather of risk. This development has brought about a major change: “an overlapping of one historical way of thinking and acting by another” (Beck, 2008, p. 36). The growth of productive forces, indeed, requires management of the threats it produces, whose scope, as proven by the increase in the number of disasters in the 20th century, is unparalleled. Modernisation has become reflexive: it eventually stopped thinking in terms of the profitability of natural forces and the end of traditional authorities, as it had done previously, and has instead begun to focus on what, in itself, could endanger it. That reflection can be divided into three different perspectives.

Firstly, society has begun to reflect on the management of risks created by modernisation. It relates only to itself, because it considers that, outside of itself, no threats exist. According to U. Beck, in late modernity, there has been an end to the opposition between nature and society on which social theories were based in the 20th century. Industrialisation was based on the idea of a submission of the natural environment to the needs of production. Nature was therefore society’s opponent, the Other that must be subdued (Beck, 2008, p. 146). In late modernity, nature is no longer a non-society. Risks are exclusively social, environmental problems are technological problems, and nature is an artefact. Society no longer has any exteriority.

The individual has also become reflexive within this era of late modernity. The rise of individualisation was unprecedented after the Second World War (Beck, 2008, p. 158). The individual freed himself from social ties and traditional families. Categories that had enabled first modernity to be conceived, such as social class or nuclear family, became obsolete. Late modernity is thus the age of individual choice and self-determination. The individual no longer seeks to conform to models but rather to undertake a quest to construct his own identity.

Finally, late modernity is reflected in a third process of reflexivity. Scientific knowledge occupies first place in the risk society. However, while it has become predominant, it is not dogmatic. On the contrary: it is its own critic, questioning itself endlessly. In the risk society, science's contribution is discussed, except that this is done within science itself; critique is based on expert knowledge, "it now confronts science with all the weapons of science" (p. 352). This is true, for example, of ecological discourse, which is structured around scientific research, particularly in biology.

For Beck, this three-fold reflexivity therefore completes the project of a modernity whose only ambition was to challenge itself. This is basically what is meant by the notion of risk and its usage in discourse that is both scientific and public: society's evaluation of what threatens it within itself, and the rational, graduated consideration, through expertise, of the dangers that have resulted from the very process of modernisation.

The 'disaster' paradigm

In such a context, the notion of disaster, therefore, has only one derived meaning: it is basically no more than a failure in prevention carried out on the basis of risk calculation. Giving it back its centrality means both conceiving differently the things that threaten us and questioning the claims of modern society. Nowadays, the study of disaster tends to constitute a subject whose determinations invert the very idea of risk and constitute a coherent paradigm.

Firstly, because disaster cannot be considered a greater risk (Worms, 2008, p. 20), but should instead be seen as an absolute event, with no possible basis for comparison with other events. This means that understanding disasters is in no way intensive: disasters cannot be measured one against the other, as their meaning is singular and is not derived from their comparison with others. Strictly speaking, there is therefore no small or large disaster because, while there is a scale of risk, there is no scale of disasters.

Disaster also presupposes a specific relationship with time, which is different from that which characterises risk. The precautionary principle is based on the idea that time is linear and continuous, and that the advancement of knowledge limits the part played by the unforeseen. Disaster conceives time as a discontinuity: it emerges in a kind of rupture and cannot be fully anticipated. Disaster eludes calculation. Even when a disaster is forecast, it remains profoundly obscure: its effects cannot be predicted completely, and all its implications cannot be grasped in advance.

As an absolute event that is somewhat unpredictable, a disaster is an event that is intrinsically perceived and experienced globally. On the one hand, its effects can extend beyond borders (as in the case of Chernobyl or 9/11). On the other hand, and above all, its resonance is universal. A disaster is never strictly localised. The compassion it awakens for the victims reflects our own exposure. Of course, everything depends on the closeness we feel to a particular section of the population (this is demonstrated by the world's relative indifference to the earthquake that took place in Kashmir in 2005) and the scope of media coverage. That does not prevent a disaster – and this is what characterises it – from causing emotions whose range goes beyond the event itself.

It is for this reason that a disaster compels us to focus on the plurality of accounts (religious, scientific, philosophical) as much as on the facts themselves. A disaster cannot be separated from

the discourses that recount it, interpret it and thus also play a part in its construction (Revet, 2010). These discourses are connected with the experience of trauma and tragedy. They are constructed on the basis of emotions (fear, anxiety, despair, anger, a sense of injustice, etc.) that necessarily accompany any catastrophic break with time.

Clearly, distancing ourselves from risk and the precautionary principle means opening up a new field. However, even more so it means believing that disaster can enable us to re-evaluate our relationship with morality, politics and, on a deeper level, existence. It is here that it constitutes a true paradigm, which even goes beyond the attention that is focused on one type of event. A disaster therefore enables us to conceive what is not intelligible in the framework of a modern society that tends towards recognising risks. It calls into question the three-fold reflexivity of the risk society as described by U. Beck.

As already mentioned, a disaster is inseparable from the interpretations to which it gives rise. Its unpredictability and scope call for an explanation. Discourses build up in order to rationalise events and identify their possible origins. The anthropology of disaster highlights the plurality of the discourses that interpret a disaster (Revet, 2007, p. 287 sq.). If the main players thus take into account expert scientific discourse, which places particular emphasis on the risks posed by human activity, it is because it may offer an explanation, although just one of many: accounts, both eschatological and naturalist, can appear and identify other causes (God or nature), conceived as being external to society, thus showing resistance to rationalist analysis and the precautionary principle. The fact that players often join in with expert discourse, and – as S. Revet shows – can move from one explanation to another, citing religious and scientific arguments, means that they call into question the legitimacy of a scholarly discourse that aims to be the only possible account of events.

It should not come as a surprise that a disaster reveals the limits of the individualisation that is characteristic of modernity. Disasters are experienced as a collective ordeal, making the idea of

individual choice seem absurd. Self-determination loses its meaning in the face of mass death – unpredictable, irrational and blind. Pandemics, environmental disasters and technological accidents reconfigure the idea of a common destiny. Survival depends on the community (Revet, 2007, p. 130); solidarity is national and global; victims form a collective (Clavandier, 2004, p. 102 onwards). When a disaster takes place, relations break down because there is a high number of victims and social connections are undone. However, they reform through compassion, aid, and mutual assistance. The disaster gives us an understanding of the degree to which these are necessary (Worms, 2008).

Understanding disasters in the discourse of the human and social sciences requires us to distance ourselves from the risk society. An analysis of disasters, when these are questioned in themselves, reveals the limits of a society that claims to have only to deal with itself, as if nothing were external to it. And yet, this distancing of modernity should also lead us to reassess the very principles according to which we relate to the uncertainty of the future. This is the proposal supported by J-P Dupuy: an understanding of disasters should lead us toward ‘catastrophism’. This is a logical ethical standpoint which, to Dupuy’s way of thinking, should put an end to the contradictions in which the risk society traps us when it comes to prevention (Dupuy, 2002). The precautionary principle considers that risks are better controlled when they are linked to our own responsibility. However, there is no denying that such a proposal is ineffective: we do nothing to prevent major ecological disasters that we know, from a reliable source, will take place. Is it not rather by evoking the inevitability of disasters, that is, by referring precisely to what gives them their catastrophic dimension, that we will be able to avoid them? Catastrophism provides the best protection. The risk society leads us to an ethical position that is fruitless, because we do not believe what reason shows us (Dupuy, 2005, p. 11). The representation of misfortune cannot be satisfied with the probability of risk alone, in case it might never win our support. Probability remains a probability – as Dupuy said, a probable risk is only a “risk of risk” (Dupuy, 2002, p. 106). Paradoxically, misfortune should be seen as a disaster, that is, as something that must inevitably happen if we want to be able to avoid it. Disaster is certain, massive, relentless, which

is why we should be afraid of it. Our fear should help us to bridge the gap between knowledge and conviction.

However, Dupuy believes that we can only be awakened to disaster if we can succeed in ridding ourselves of the idea that evil is our own doing. In order for that to happen, we must fight against what he calls the ‘Rousseauisation’ of our minds. Voltaire, responding to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, puts forward the theory of a fault in Creation, going against the system of optimism:

Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well,"

And contemplate this ruin of a world.
Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,
This child and mother heaped in common wreck,
These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts (...)

Rousseau, in his Letter to Voltaire (August 1756), replied that we should accuse neither God nor nature; rather, the evil should be attributed to man. For it is not the earthquake itself that is at issue, but the carelessness of men who build multi-storey houses and concentrate the population in cities where rich and poor do not suffer the same level of exposure. For Dupuy, Rousseau’s line of argument was the expression of a modern mind that tends to perceive any potential danger as a risk, and which therefore is never truly in a position to avoid it. Indeed, in order to anticipate what might happen to us, we must, paradoxically, believe in the reality of disaster and not tell ourselves that we will always find a way to escape, for example by making better use of natural resources. ‘Enlightened catastrophism’ tends to naturalise evil in order to grasp its radicality and, by frightening us about what may happen, prepares us to act accordingly. The risk society suppresses all exteriority: catastrophism tries to turn what threatens us into what is radically exterior.

Of course, not all studies of disaster in the human and social sciences lead us to adopt a position of radical catastrophism. However, all the arguments we cited here have something in common: despite their diversity, they take on their full meaning in their criticism of the modern

project. For it has become apparent that this is impossible, since it is more a result of rationalist illusion than a consideration of history; in short, it shows a profound lack of understanding of man's relationship with nature and knowledge, and of the relationships that bind mankind together. Within what thus constitutes a paradigm, the arguments make up a system that considers modern discourse (of which the precautionary principle can be considered the most significant expression) to be in vain, for disasters show that society can never refer exclusively to itself, that the individualisation of behaviours must come up against our vulnerability, that expert knowledge cannot tell us what we are or protect us from what might happen, and that our discourses shape our experiences just as much as they interpret them.

Towards a negative anthropology?

The emergence of disaster as a new paradigm is not only based – or even mostly based – on epistemological criteria. It is more radically focused on the conception of man on which the modern project and its post-modern successor lean. The advocates of disaster, often without realising, therefore share the same anthropology, which underlies their critique of risk, but which nevertheless outlines a new vision of the world.

This is a philosophical anthropology: it questions itself on the way in which disasters alter the very idea of humanity and profoundly affect man's relationship with himself, society and nature. With it, the questioning of the modern project takes an unexpected turn, borrowing from none of the earlier criticisms. For the idea is not to criticise the modern conception of subjectivity – its abstract and 'disengaged' nature (as with communitarian thinkers like Sandel and Taylor) – on the basis of anthropological arguments, nor to recall the importance of custom (Burke), language (Herder) and tradition (MacIntyre) in order, ultimately, to pit history and culture against claims of the self-reflexivity of reason (Gadamer vs Habermas). Nor is it a question of condemning the fateful nature of instrumental reason by showing how it ends up turning against itself (Adorno and Horkheimer) or against the nature that it has fully tamed (Heidegger); nor of guarding against the uncontrolled effects of technology (Jonas).

While echoes of these earlier critiques can indeed be found within the new paradigm of disaster, the singularity of its questioning of the modern project comes from something different. It stems, paradoxically, from the fact that this does not just constitute yet another attack on the modern project. It is not looking to criticise it directly, by repeating, like many others before, that it is intrinsically false and dangerous. Nor is it seeking to exceed it with an increase in reflexivity (Habermas, Beck, Giddens) or a new contract with nature (Serre, Latour). Rather, it demonstrates the faltering or, at least, the decline of the modern projects and their successors. Everything happens as if the advocates of disaster no longer believed in all that the modern project had built up, or no longer wished to believe in it or even propose exit scenarios.

Furthermore, the anthropology that emerges here is of a different kind: it is a negative anthropology, on two counts at least.

Firstly, it does not aim to produce specific knowledge on the various human cultures, as ethnology does, or to philosophically identify the nature of man. On the contrary, this anthropology has developed subtly, in the background of studies on disasters, without ever seeking to define itself or circumscribe its own field of research.

Secondly, if this anthropology is negative, it is mainly because it conceives man by subtraction: not by stating what he is not, but rather by showing *what he no longer is*, and therefore what he must give up being.

This latter point is clearly evident among philosophers such as Günther Anders and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, who adopt a metaphysical perspective when analysing the ways in which disasters have transformed humanity – primarily nuclear energy. For them, the invention of the atomic bomb marked the moment at which the harnessing of technology, which had hitherto been the preserve of men, then escaped them and deprived them of their omnipotence, particularly their

power to anticipate risk. According to them, the bomb is not only a weapon that can be put to good or bad use; it is an absolute that oversteps the logic of means and ends. It is not a risk, balanced by an assessment of its consequences, but a disaster with which we are continually confronted – the destruction of humanity. It is here that the nuclear disaster implies a new anthropology. As Günther Anders states very clearly, “we no longer know if this world in which we live will continue to exist. In the past, each death had its place in the world and each era was part of a continuous history. That type of death is now dead. From now on, we must consider the death of the world and of history themselves” (Anders, 1987, own translation).

For Günther Anders and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, disaster is therefore what defines the new condition of man, or even more so, what enables him to question his existence as a human being – on the condition, however, that this is perceived as unavoidable. While mankind sees it as a potential risk, he cannot be at one with it, and continues to live with a dangerous illusion. Martin Heidegger’s influence can be felt here. For him, death is what governs the way we live in the world: as long as we continue to see it as something that can be stopped and not as an event that is part of destiny, then we are living in a state of inauthenticity. *Dasein* (being) only reaches unity through an awareness of the unavoidable nature of death (Heidegger, 1985). In the same way, for Anders or Dupuy, disaster governs mankind; we are constantly exposed to it. An awareness of disaster follows that of finiteness. It constitutes the basis for an authentic existence – being open to the world in a manner that is different from instrumentality. Man is no longer a “being for death”, instead becoming a “being for disaster”. Disaster therefore represents the event through which we conceive our ontological difference: humanity can be perceived in relation to its unavoidable destruction.

Negative anthropology – clearly found in philosophical reflections on disaster, and a great deal more implicit, though still present, in the human and social sciences – therefore guides our assessment of everything we should today give up. Firstly, all the ostentation of modern man: his belief in scientific progress and technology, his teleological vision of history and his claims to

control nature. We should also abandon our post-modern distrust and the prudence of reflexive modernity, which, while acknowledging the uncertainty of our actions, are still considered able to evaluate the effects. It would therefore be futile to think that we can only learn technological lessons from disasters – like Prometheus, whose fall made him wiser and more modest. The only lesson to be learned from disasters is that we are fallible; we are vulnerable and helpless in the face of events that we can never truly control. At the beginning of the 1930s, Walter Benjamin wrote of this fatigue of modern man who vowed to remain poor and asked to be released of his responsibility to answer continually for the world:

“Poverty of experience. This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty – their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty – that it will lead to something respectable.”

This is the kind of “poverty” for which the disaster paradigm today wishes to achieve recognition, thereby rejecting in a single action modernity and post-modernity, trust and reflexivity. This action is by no means arbitrary or isolated. Rather, it directly echoes the various intellectual undertakings that endeavour to rethink social ties, not on the basis of abstract rationality but in terms of compassion, mutual help and vulnerability.

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We cannot deny the fact that we must assess the limits of the modern project. The disaster paradigm and negative anthropology which underpin it, more or less confusedly, play a vital critical role in that they enable us to broadly balance the optimism of a risk society that is too trusting of expert discourse. However, the disaster paradigm is still affected by contradictions that limit its critical scope.

The study of disasters rejects the abstraction and homogeneity of the notion of risk, and endeavours to restore the manifold apprehensions of a single event (emotions, accounts, representations, memories). Paradoxically, however, it gathers very different events under one rubric. While the Holocaust, the attack on the Twin Towers, hurricane Katrina and Fukushima are certainly disasters, they are not so in the same way or on the same basis. The disaster paradigm, however heuristic it may be, perhaps leaves out the main point: the fact that we label events as ‘catastrophic’ when we are actually referring to their unyielding singularity.

We should also question the position given to different types of interpretation in an analysis of disasters. Although expert discourse claiming to give a scientific explanation for the causes of disaster does not have a monopoly over our understanding of them, and other interpretations should be taken into account, can we nevertheless state that risk is just one rhetoric among many, *of the same sort* as divine fury or the whims of nature? (Revet, 2010, Clavandier, 2011) Saying that science is a social construction does not imply that all discourses are of equal value or that we can overlook their historical or cultural effectiveness. Rather, it is better to focus on the porosity between science and non-science, and on the exchanges that take place between these two spheres, which would allow us to incorporate the scientific explanation into a more comprehensive vision of disasters.

Finally, can we really think, as some proponents of catastrophism do, that we will better avoid catastrophes as soon as we consider them to be unavoidable and are sufficiently afraid of them? That the future of humanity is played out in the realisation that we are “beings for disaster”? We could argue that fear is never a good counsellor, that there is no proof that it awakens reason, and that it is perhaps less important to end the optimism that surrounds science and technology than to keep watch over their use, particularly through monitoring measures and democratic deliberations.

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