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Getting to Grips with Disaster

Gaëlle CLAVANDIER

How should we understand and account for disasters? Is a disaster simply a risk that has become a reality? Gaëlle Clavandier makes a case for clearly distinguishing between these two concepts, arguing that instead of understanding disasters under the rubric of risk, they actually require a new social science paradigm.

The concept of disaster seems to be missing from the landscape of modernity, and it has very little credibility in the scientific community. Viewed as obsolete, it has been ousted by probability studies, which are thought to correspond more accurately to the complexity and uncertainties of modern societies. The grand self-confidence inherited from the Industrial Revolution is withering away, but progress, though it is halting, is still part of the outlook of reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1994). Because of the combined recognition of the emergence of a new relationship to the world and the establishment of scientific truths, along with the importance that this lends to expertise and controversies (Bourdin, 2003), risk, as it is conceived today, reduces disastrous events to their bare essentials. In this context, disaster retains its "ragbag" status, and its lack of specificity undermines any real scientific interest. Worse, it is looked on as an idea that by its power to dazzle distracts scientific investigators from their proper research (Coanus, Duchêne and Martinais, 2004). So at best, disaster can be viewed as a field of study. Risk, a new paradigm in rational thinking, thus presented itself as an alternative that enabled us to get beyond an outdated, fatalistic view of the world. That is pretty much the established view in recent scientific studies.[1] Risk has erased disaster, not to say swallowed it up.

[1] If a more nuanced formulation is needed: this generally applicable view is set out to avoid falling into a relativistic posture that would rule out any discussion.

Leaving aside such epistemological considerations, disasters have plainly resurfaced now and then, and inevitably have become subjects of investigation (Clavandier, 2008). Without going back to working out the definition of disaster, it is clear that a series of recent events have brought this concept back to the centre of attention. Associated with "whims" of nature (the tsunami of 2004, Katrina in 2005, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010), technological failures (Bhopal 1984, Chernobyl 1986, the Concorde crash in 2000), or such awful human atrocities as massacres and terrorist acts (genocide in Rwanda 1994, the attacks of 11 September 2001), the idea of disaster is characteristically applied to events with disparate origins and various degrees of consequences. Nevertheless, it conveys a particular relationship to the world, and it has an aura with no real equivalent; hence it is possible to talk of *disaster* in the singular. Accessible to everyone by its immediacy, instructive by its prominence, and terrifying by its scope, the fact remains that it is only vaguely defined. It is easy to understand why researchers tend to avoid it! But the serious issues involved make it silly either to go along with the notion that disasters are mystifying[2] or to adopt the cautious approach of relying on more neutral and straightforwardly functioning models that, by chilling the subject matter, become out of sync with the reality that they seek to describe.

In order to promote discussion and to help give disaster studies scientific legitimacy, this paper will build on the idea that disaster, in addition to being a very rich field of study, also has a heuristic side. Assuming that it is admissible to use the word disaster to describe and to analyse dramatic events, we shall see what consequences follow in the terms of the construction of the object of study. More precisely, taking the context into account, it will be necessary to discuss the implicit collusion between *risk* and *disaster*, and to see if it is valid to use these concepts interchangeably. This discussion is not at all a rear-guard action; on the contrary, it is essential, given the epistemological, methodological and political issues that it raises.

The Parameters of the "Problem"

Whether as an actual event, a series of stunning images, or a potential danger, mentally it is difficult to get to grips with a disaster, because its ramifications are so vast and so widespread. Normal mixtures of fiction and fact introduce doubt into discourse about disaster. Nevertheless, no better term can be applied to a catastrophic event. Besides, the term disaster gives us an interpretive framework that everyone has access to. It easily eclipses

[2] The notion that disasters alter our judgement, or even that they amount to fraud by their falsifications of reality.

established scientific models. It exists for itself; so it has immanence. Immediately accessible, it refers to a tangible reality. Thus, more than risk and its semantic domain (vigilance, vulnerability, prevention, precaution, etc.), disaster has a resonance for each of us. However, can this proximity itself vouch for its scientific status, and should this increase the use of the term in the research community? Even if in principle sociologists and anthropologists have no inhibitions about using an endogenous vocabulary (one that is specific to a particular situation and audience), it is still legitimate to wonder about using a term that might well seem to be overworked. With this major stumbling block, should we say adieu to disaster studies, or at most think of disasters as "realized risks"? I would suggest just the opposite.

Disaster forms a bridge between *percept* (lived experience, emotions, facts) and *concept* (thoughts, ideas, potentialities). This capacity first to grasp and to describe and then to translate undeniably has good qualities. By starting from experience, using the term "disaster" helps to refer to a meaningful whole that is not simply subject to rational and scientific thought. By definition a *catastrophe* (the word generally used in French for the English word "disaster") is literally something that "re-turns" (*retourne*), in three senses: what is upsetting, what comes back, and what is upside down (Godin, 2008, p. 13). It embodies a rupture, and irreversibly induces an externality; hence the constant reference to disorder, to unrest, and therefore to the realm of emotions. Disaster is creation, and introduces all by itself a whole new universe that has just collided with the routine, the commonplace and the ordinary. Like looking at the other side of the coin, or the action behind the scenes, it requires exploring an unknown part of the world and more particularly of human relations. By its scale, it affects minds, and it resolves itself in a final catharsis that ends the tragedy. The theatrical metaphor is never far away, and the role of the media in defining disastrous events is no accident. The ineluctable and uncontrolled nature of the situation is balanced against the capacity of men to react and to mobilize.

Consequently, reducing a disaster to a realized risk (i.e. retrospectively seeing an actual event as the result of the realization of a risk) has hardly any meaning from an etymological point of view, for two reasons. The disaster would then be nothing but a forecasting failure or a defective preventive model; this assumes that the disaster was predictable.[3] And the disaster would be restricted to its accidental and factual dimensions. But

[3] It would be worth following up this discussion as regards the principle of precaution.

the main characteristic of a disaster is precisely its disruption of established patterns and of perceptive and cognitive models, categorizing it out of hand into the realm of interpretation. From that point onwards, the empirical dimension of the disaster, although not merely anecdotal, is nevertheless insufficient.

Studying one or more disasters entails confronting a quite specific relationship with time, which does not conform to the linear temporal model of rational thought. Concentration on the present moment creates a disjunction with the past (the before), without necessarily foreshadowing the future (the after) by inspiring changes: "it could be said that time has suspended its advance in order to focus better on the incredible event that is underway" (Keller, 1994, p. 22). Disaster, like its memory, remains riveted on the event and for that reason becomes a "problem." [4] However, in spite of the exceptional character of the situation that could suggest that disaster is the opposite of the ordinary, time as it is here conceived is close to phenomenological time, recalling cyclical or even mythical time. Because of its inaugural aspect, a disaster can raise questions about the foundations of a society. So disastrous events are thought about not in terms of progress or regress, but in terms of rupture, emergence and real, sentient life. Thus the great ambiguity of our relationship to such events, which are at the same time reviled and "desired" (Jeudy, 1990). Efforts to define disasters make it possible to understand the connections that are made between real and imagined disasters; their similar tangled scenarios make distinctions between them artificial.[5]

Risk, on the other hand, is more of "a not-yet-occurred-event" (Beck, 2001), which always leads to preventive action. Completely directed toward the future, it is based on a progressive logic aimed at anticipating and predicting tomorrow's crises. If the perception of time is no longer that of a past that establishes the present, but of a future that will probably arrive, the logic of linear time predominates. In this model, society confronts itself and is no

[4] "Live" memory of disasters is based on details, images and objects, all of which relate to tangible experience. This kind of memory has to be weighed against commemorative memory, which re-translates the event into a polished and skilfully constructed memory (Clavandier, 2004).

[5] Conducting a survey on memories of disasters revealed that memories of actual events are contaminated by images every bit as real but not based on real circumstances. In the case of railway accidents, ideal-typical images such as the Lisbon derailment (a key passage in Émile Zola's novel, *La bête humaine*) crop up. Both kinds of images are identical in every way, but they do not come from the same universe. In the same way, at a different level, disasters like that of the Titanic become true "myths" that hardly any longer refer to their historical roots. These compositions and combinations baffle researchers, who cannot and should not disentangle the true from the false, but must rather see how these images develop, what they do for those who "fabricate" them, and what they reveal to us.

longer ruled by laws and causes external to it. If a disaster occurs, it is necessarily internal to the system, a system made up of actors, relationships, and bargaining powers – which brings us back to the issue of experts and decision-making. Then knowledge is shared and expertise is no longer restricted to the "experts." On this basis, the "risk factory" (Gilbert, 2003) becomes a joint enterprise that consists of foreseeing the worst and suggesting alternatives to the surrounding uncertainty. So looking at disastrous events through the magnifying glass of risk means avoiding any further setback, by identifying points of leverage, in particular through "feedback".

It can be seen that reducing a disaster to a realized risk means confining it to a model (in which the disaster is no more than one micro-aspect of the situation), and also drains it of its contents by treating it merely as a consequence or a failure (a human error, a fault in a technical system, defective coordination, a crisis situation, etc.) The first telltale of a disaster, which is to create a different regime of possibilities (in other words a new perspective on the world, through questioning it) is thereby reduced to nothing. Think especially of the events of 11 September, which have redefined diplomatic relations, and more generally have led to rethinking international relations to take religious fundamentalism into account. This creative aspect, quite as deadly as it is enlivening, is stripped bare by being treated simply as an accident. So while the paradigm of risk does conceptualize, order, foresee, anticipate, and "probabilize," and then identifies the internal vulnerabilities, defines the limits of the acceptable, determines what is negotiable (and how and with whom), helps to inform and to guide future generations, inspires decisions and participates in public life, and supports and indemnifies the victims of a disaster, the disaster itself is something else. It is comparable to a rupture and it encourages a temporality of the present moment even while referring to mythological time. Its memory is a "live" memory, and it has no fixed aim. Having no unbreakable limits, it constantly flirts with various potentialities. It inspires forms of communication that do not rely only on the formal networks; thus the importance of a series of rumours. It generates impurities, and it strives to function in an extreme emotional range. Death, corpses, and the defilement of bodies and of living spaces make for a particularly sinister and deadly environment, which is then immediately neutralized by an exhilarating mobilization that creates a level of togetherness that is often unprecedented. In short, a disaster makes sense and is not paradoxical. It is surely this aspect of disasters that is the most important to grasp, because it questions the normative and moral frameworks. By its excesses

and its immoderation, a disaster (what it is and what we make of it) does not conform to the logic of risk.

Methodological Bias

Beyond these epistemological aspects, which could appear merely speculative, there is plainly the question of how to approach the field. Considering a disaster as a realized risk assumes a methodological position that conforms to a particular paradigm. In fact, thinking about *risk* and *disaster* together, or even seeing the latter as simply an aspect of risk, leads to a dangerous bias.

The concept of risk appears in a vast number of forms. However, in sociology, it goes with a particular model, that of reflexive modernity. At the heart of a process, it mobilizes the actors, appears at the centre of public policies, and summons up preventive action. Risk has little to do with imaginative constructions and mythical figures, fate and chance, or fears and old demons, but through its capacity to take a hazard in hand, contingent on the vulnerability of the actors, risk tends to find answers to uncertainty, however fragmentarily. Disaster becomes an opportunity for experimentation. In this model, researchers will concentrate mainly on objective factors, which can further the definition and then the management of a public problem. The emergence of hybrid forums (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthes, 2001), ways of ending a crisis (Borraz, Gilbert, Joly, 2005), and the generalization of feedback (Lagadec, 2001): one could say that all of these indicate that the actors, the issues and the answers are identified in advance, and that this makes for an analysis that is very precise but nevertheless slanted.

Studying a disaster as we have defined it implies abandoning this expert position and proceeding in part by analogy. It is helpful to see the disaster as a point of departure and of anchorage, but keeping in mind that it is not reducible to a local and time-specific event, and, even more importantly, that it is not just a conjunction of empirical phenomena totally immune to interpretation. As a social construct developed by different people with only partially overlapping time frames, a disaster contains a significant amount of fiction (Revet, 2007). In this regard, we need to analyse what is meant by the sense of externality, which means testing the togetherness and the established norms. This externality is anthropological; it is equivalent to constructing boundaries and interpreting the world in terms of the rupture in intelligibility, and therefore in terms of the transgression that has caused the disaster. The

palimpsest is the best image for describing the involuted process at work in a disaster. Although every disaster is unique, they all have this characteristic, and involve a methodology of having recourse to identifying the many dimensions of the object of study.

At first, we have to identify the process of designating the event: giving it a name, inserting it into a series of similar events, depicting it by using founding images. Identifiable in every disaster, this process consists of making the regular and known emerge in an environment marked by a rupture in the forms of intelligibility. In the same vein, we have to grasp the operative temporal regimes, and to identify the spatial framework within which the drama is unfolding. Very often several different areas are involved, so we need to ensure a local analysis, at the same time discerning the global effects. For the time scale, we need to focus on elements of a diachronic analysis (which involve slicing time, to describe the time of emergency, the time of getting to grips and of investigating, the time for doing justice, and finally the emergence of a memorial time closing the tragedy and leaving it to history), while remaining aware that the disaster led to a synchronic perspective. This second perspective shatters any relationship with linear time, in order to consider the event while it is present, whatever the temporal distance might be. Besides all of these dimensions related to the designation process (identification, localization, delimitation), other circumstances and objects are subjected to the same process.

The operation of seeking the origin of a disaster and of establishing responsibilities is exposed to the same dynamic. To the various police, administrative and technical committees of enquiry must be added all the attempts to offer alternative explanations. The enquiry broadly defined is conducted by a large number of publics, going well beyond those with sworn duties. To give an illustration, the study of the rumours in a disaster leads to some very interesting reflections. For example, the fire at the "5/7" discotheque in Saint-Laurent-du-Pont in 1970, like the explosion at the AZF factory in Toulouse in 2001, gave rise to alternative explanations involving the possibility of a terrorist attack (Clavandier, 2007).

Besides, looking after the victims and bereaved families cannot be reduced to the "experience of victimhood." In addition to the vulnerability of certain people and required compensation, there are other motifs to be studied. The treatment of injured bodies, and the management of corpses, are not extraneous data; they have much to teach us (Clavandier,

2004). Similarly, the quasi-mythical image of survivors[6] and rescuers (Quail, 2005) helps to build up disasters, giving them a "tragic" form.

The brutal facts of a catastrophe – devastated landscapes, mass death, contamination of living spaces, and so on – along with the surprise occasioned by its rapidity, have the effect of generating unusually strong emotions. Approaching these various upsets is not easy, because our disciplines lack the tools needed to gather them together and to analyse them. Analysis of the data shows the establishment of an emotional grammar that lets one move between "primitive," relatively unmediated emotions during the early hours, and more practiced responses characteristic of when the disaster has been taken in hand, thus transforming the disaster into a space for collective expression and mobilization, and for giving and solidarity, acting as a theatre of conflicts and diverse claims (Clavandier, 2011).

With all of the "habitual" schemes of intelligibility having been shattered, researchers have great difficulty in capturing all of these general aspects of disasters,[7] along with those related to the particular disaster they are studying, which is by definition unique. Composed largely of curves and interlocking structures, the terrain has plenty of pitfalls. To overcome this difficulty, it is essential to gather up the various narratives that shape the disaster and give it a reality in its own right. All disaster researchers agree that the narratives of disasters constitute an inexhaustible resource (Langumier, 2008; Revet, 2007; Favier and Granet-Abisset, 2005). Coming from direct or second-hand accounts, media reports and articles, government statements, experts' opinions, tributes, and recollections, all of these narratives say what the drama is and was. With the purpose of translating the facts into collective speech, these narratives are constructed on the basis of an inaugural discourse that changes little over time and puts a seal on the event in order to control it more effectively. Nevertheless, the diversity of their sources, as well as the temporal distance from the facts, ensures that they remain varied and must be studied in their diversity. The disaster would be nothing without these different registers of discourse. It is therefore a shared subject that has meaning only by the juxtaposition of these narratives, which translate the pain into words. By amplifying or revealing, these words place the disaster into a context or an environment. The fire at the "5/7" in 1970 had a huge echo because it highlighted two movements that were at

[6] The origin of this term (*rescapés*) is attributed to a newspaper article published during the Courrières mine disaster of 1906.

[7] To all of these general aspects must be added the study of responses in terms of practices, the reorganization of living spaces, the construction of post-disaster identity and memory, etc.

that time germinating in French society: the generation gap, magnified by the problem of "rural" and "urban" zones; and the modernization of public administration, including the issue of the responsibility of local elected officials.

The analysis of disasters no longer means starting with public actors and policies, but rather by looking at the event in its broadest sense (Bensa and Fassin, 2002). Experience has taught that we need to know how to open ourselves up to the terrain and let it "tell". Accordingly, it is absolutely necessary to avoid immediately going along with a restorative or proactive policy, for that would be to confuse the role of researchers with that of experts and decision makers. It is essential to keep in mind the image of the disaster palimpsest that takes into account the synchronic and diachronic aspects, as well as the diversity of the dimensions in question. This approach, however disconcerting to our wishes, is the only effective one, and it assumes flexibility and constant adaptation.

Issues at Stake

Amalgamating *catastrophe(s)* with *risk*, as is done by most current disaster studies,[8] is not simply an epistemological issue, it concerns a larger issue about research policies and finance. Risk has assumed such importance that it is now the only concept in the public arena. The fact that it was based on a paradigm that effortlessly bestrides the arcana of public policies means that its success is assured for many years to come. There is no doubt that this concept is useful when it comes to studying the relationship of our societies to modernity, and that the sociology of science has everything to gain by taking it on board. Nevertheless, risk is ill suited to disaster studies. Without casting doubt on the legitimacy of this concept, its hegemonic position demands reconsideration. To say nothing of the heteroclite character of the concept's applications (major technological risks, natural hazards, risk prevention in public health, risk-taking in adolescence, etc.).

One of the essentials in this issue is research funding. Even when research on the terrain of disaster emerges from time to time, there is very often a tendency for these first studies (many of which come from doctoral theses) to evolve towards an enquiry in terms of

[8] See especially the thematic issues, "Apprivoiser les catastrophes," *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, no. 95, 2004; "Catastrophes," *Terrain*, no. 54, 2010; and the colloquium "Catastrophes et risques: de l'empirique à la critique", 2010, etc.

risk. In the development of research programs of any kind, the chances of finding funding are ten times greater when they adopt the risk model.

Farther down the road, fitting the study of disasters to the risk paradigm brings certain guarantees: reassuring funders, making work for experts, and ensuring that the research can actually be implemented on the ground. This strategy also has the advantage of segmenting the roles. One could say that journalists deal with the issues in the heat and play up the emotional side, while researchers and experts have to maintain their capacity for cool analysis. This is a caricature, but something very like this vision organizes current research policies. But as we have seen, the whole point of disaster studies is the business of translation, which consists of treating the disaster as a reality in its own right. Out of this dynamic are born the richest and most innovative studies. Without advocating creativity at any cost, we must ask whether real research can be done without being driven by the ability to invent, to renew, and to imagine. Disaster study is an amazing field for such an ability, and it seems to me essential to keep that field alive. That leaves the issue how to avoid falling into the position of excessively glorifying the subject as you would an unchanging work of art, but this great danger should be a challenge rather than a constraint. It should also make us reflect on the position that we take as researchers in the field. The mere fact of generally adopting the risk model is somewhat reductive. So to impose this model even though it is not universally shared, and to make it the paragon of modern societies, immediately impounds any other point of view. In this scheme, whatever might be said, the terrain does not come first, it is subjected to a series of signposts, and analysis is possible only through this lens. During the tsunami of December 2004, it was surprising to see the extent to which western models (especially that of risk) were imposed on the public scene. In some ways, there was a whiff of imperialism in this outlook. It was forgotten that risk is a "rhetoric" (Revet, 2010), nothing more, in the same way that divine anger and ultra-powerful nature are or have been.

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