

## Introduction

### Cultures of Disasters

By Anders Ekström & Kyrre Kverndokk

Disasters and hazards are ubiquitous to contemporary societies. There are 1400 earthquakes rocking the globe every day. A new volcanic eruption is occurring every week. The floods and landslides are so numerous that they are impossible to keep track of (McGuire 2005: 9). About 240 million people were affected by major natural disasters in 2011. With the prospects of a warmer and wilder future, the number of people affected by climate-related hazards such as floods, storms, heat-waves and droughts is expected to increase. Despite the global scale of climate change, the suffering caused by such disasters remains unevenly distributed between different regions and groups of people.

But disasters are nevertheless increasingly taking on a connected nature, materially as well as discursively. The Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 is a telling example. The earthquake triggered a series of interconnected events of different temporal duration and geographical reach: tsunami waves and flooding, the Fukushima nuclear explosion and fire, the slow and continuing catastrophe of radiation and environmental effects, financial and social crises. Disasters are not events but processes with unclear beginnings and no obvious endings.

In this and many other respects, contemporary disasters fundamentally challenge our understanding of global and cross-temporal relations as well as long-established distinctions between natural and technological disasters, human and non-human agency, culture and nature. The materially connected nature of disasters further reinforce a long-standing cultural impulse, triggered by the human quest for meaning, to metaphorically and discursively connect extreme events of different scale and character. An "emergency imaginary" (Calhoun 2010) frames the manner in which crises and cataclysms are told in news media and popular culture, and is encouraged by the cultural exchange between them. More or less stereotyped images of disaster also influence how extreme events are managed and remembered, in some cases with devastating results. This is why social norms and cultural metaphors make a crucial difference to the capacity of societies to cope with and come to terms with disruptive events (Tierney et al 2006).

To an influential line of critical thought, from Ulrich Beck (1992) to Giorgio Agamben (2005) and beyond, the emergency imaginary also works to normalize and legitimize an interventionist politics both on a global and a local scale (Fassin & Pandolfi, 2010). In this understanding, there is in the early 2000s a more general

and increasingly powerful tendency towards "catastrophization" (Ophir 2010) in the means by which modern societies are organized, managed and perceived. But catastrophes and extreme nature events were instrumental to the emergence of societal institutions, administrative tools and political concepts in the past as well. For example, recent historical scholarship reveals that early 20th century emergencies of nature such as the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 played an important role in the crafting of modern emergency language (Orihara & Clancey, 2012). So, as much as modern disasters are by definition connected in chains of disaster processes, they constantly connect the world in new and unexpected ways.

Natural disasters turn order into chaos, and threaten to overthrow social and economic structures. However, disasters also inhabit a liminal character, in the sense that they put our understanding of the world on trial. Fundamental norms and values are made visible when the world is tossed and turned, simply because they can no longer be taken for granted. Hence, disasters work as catalysts for negotiations of cultural meaning, norms and values, and the patterns of social organization. Studies of historical as well as recent catastrophes in different parts of the world give rich insights to the intense cultural and social improvisations that are triggered by disasters and that are keys to both immediate and long-term recovery work (Solnit 2009; Hastrup 2011).

Culture in the sense of narration and meaning making is thus a necessary resource in any post-disaster society. The work of interpretation is everywhere in disaster management, including the analysis of causes and the mapping of consequences. It is sometimes stated that catastrophes are beyond representation. But, in fact, the opposite is true. Extreme events are represented over and over again and anything else is unthinkable. Neither are disasters incomparable to other catastrophic events. To the contrary, meaning is transferred to disasters by analogy and comparisons. Such acts of representation links disasters of a different scale and location to each other, and depend on both prevalent discourses, for example on global warming and the war on terror, and on historically and aesthetically established patterns of interpretation (Ekström 2012).

Despite these and other cultural dimensions to the understanding and management of disasters, it is only recently that cultural research on disasters has begun to develop more broadly. This can in part be explained by the history of disaster research. Modern disaster research, dating back to the early 1920s, first developed as a branch of sociology. Early studies of human reactions to disaster drew on late nineteenth-century theories of crowd psychology, framing disaster management as an issue of protecting society from the irrational and dangerous behaviour of panicking victims. From the 1950s and onwards this approach was criticized by sociologists like Enrico Quarantelli who argued that the notion of anti-social behaviour as the dominant response to disaster was weakly supported by empirical research (Quarantelli 2001).

Contemporary disaster research has developed in the context of broader discussions on risk sociology, social vulnerability and societal resilience (see, for example, Alexander 2000; Lindell 2013; Tierney 2014). Much of this research share an overall focus on economic and institutional aspects, but also on communicative practices and political action in relation to emergencies. Signaling an important shift in policies, practices and perceptions of disaster, discourses on preparedness and mitigation, rather than avoidance, have been proliferating in the last decades (Amin 2012). An important contribution of anthropological, historical and cultural studies has been to investigate the systems of meaning that are activated in the management of disasters. Early work on disaster imaginaries cover a broad spectrum of approaches to the representation of catastrophes in art, literature and media and apocalyptic notions more generally (Kendrick 1956; Sontag 1965; Kermode 1967; Steinberg 2000).

It is only recently, however, that disasters have become an expanding humanistic and cross-disciplinary research field in its own right. Some scholars suggest that disaster research has taken a cultural turn (Webb 2007, Holm and Illner 2015). There are several reasons for this growing interest in the cultures of disaster, but most important is an increasing awareness of how cultural aspects affect the how societies manage crises and extreme events.

Humanistic research within this field also reflects and elaborates the discursively connected nature of disaster imaginaries. Disasters are incessantly foretold and re-told – in news broadcast, movies, novels, operas, computer games and amusement parks. Due to global media networks and communication technologies, audiences all over the world are able to follow the stories of floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in real time and at long distances. The myriad of stories of cataclysm are structured around a limited number of narrative forms and motifs; for example, the theodicy, the apocalypse, the state of exception, and the trauma (Holm 2012) This repertoire of cultural patterns not only structure how we imagine disasters, they also structure how we handle them. A much discussed instance of this was the fatal consequences of the flawed disaster management after hurricane Katrina and how the action of authorities was affected by stereotyped reports of the event in certain news media (Tierney et al 2006, Dynes and Rodríguez 2007). Thus, stories of disasters may work as both models for and models of social practices.

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This thematic section of the journal *Culture Unbound* is one result of a joint initiative to bring together ongoing cultural research within the field of humanistic disaster studies, and to create a forum for exchange between scholars within the human and social sciences who work on the cultural analysis of disasters from different research traditions. With this objective in mind, we started the network project "Cultures of disasters" in 2012, funded by the Research Council of Norway, and

organized in collaboration between a group of researchers at the universities in Copenhagen, Oslo and Uppsala. In the autumn of 2012, the network organized two workshops inviting Scandinavian researchers in the field to present and discuss their ongoing work. A year later, in November 2013, the conference "Cultures of disasters" was organized in Oslo. The conference was attended by scholars from Europe, America, Asia and Australia, and with a focus on humanistic approaches to disaster research. Paper presentations, keynotes and panel discussions covered a wide range of topics including, for example, case studies of past and more recent catastrophic events; historical perspectives on cultures of risk, uncertainty and resilience; disasters fictions and apocalyptic imaginaries in popular culture.

After the workshops and the conference, participants were invited to contribute to two special journal issues on the theme of "Cultures of disasters". The first group of articles was published in the journal *Tidsskrift for kulturforskning* 2014:3. This issue of *Culture Unbound* contains the second collection of articles. It has been divided into three sections, tentatively entitled, respectively, "Disaster Narratives", "Catastrophizations", and "Contingency, Resilience and Culture".

The first section includes four papers on quite different types of narratives. The first three explores one of the most deeply rooted disaster imaginaries – the apocalypse. The papers discuss how societal and environmental issues are articulated as apocalyptic narratives. Gaia Giulliani is concerned with how the cultural fear of disasters has influenced Western self-representations. More specifically, her paper examines the racial stereotypes, "white fantasies", and gender hierarchies in a number of zombie movies and TV-series. Jacob Lillemose investigates the animal horror movie *Kingdom of the Spiders*, and argues that it articulates an environmental critique that is best described as a "speculative staging of apocalyptic processes in the 'deep ecology'". The title of Jerry Määttä's contribution is "Keeping Count of the End of the World", and that is exactly what the article does. Using quantitative methods from the sociology of literature, Määttä's paper traces the historiography and canonisation of Anglophone apocalypse and post-apocalyptic literature and films. The last article in the first section has a somewhat different focus. Katrin Pfeifer presents a close reading of two fairly unknown Dutch poems about a storm that ravaged the island of Texel in 1660. Early modern disaster poetry is a genre that most often frame disasters as an instance of divine punishment, but Pfeifer demonstrates how in this particular case a secular and spiritual understanding of the storm was combined.

The second section on "Catastrophizations" consists of two papers that share an analytical focus on how an optics of disaster, and political and cultural narratives of different types, in some cases translates into prolonged and even permanent states of emergencies in a much wider sense. It is from this perspective that John Ødermark, in his article "Avatar in the Amazon", examines the entanglement of popular culture, environmentalism, ethno-political and cultural theory in the framing of the Amazon as an ecological symbol. Peer Illner, on the other hand, turns to the history

of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 70s, and its modes of operation in mobilizing African Americans by proclaiming a continual emergency. From different vantage points, both Ødemark and Illner take issue with the notion of disasters as singular and disruptive events, focusing instead on the cultural work involved in processes of catastrophization.

The last section on "Contingency, resilience and culture" displays some of the variety of cultural approaches in contemporary disaster studies. The first three articles in this section investigate how mass mediation and practices of communication affect the political, social and cultural response to disasters. Sara Bonati inquires the relationship between the level of Western involvement in remote catastrophes and their mass mediation. By comparing the Western response to the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 and the Tohoku tsunami in 2011, the paper discusses different forms of "Westernization" in relation to disasters in non-Western parts of the world. Hamish McLean and Jacqui Ewarts contribution to this section is focused on communication processes in the management of disasters, and especially the role of politicians in communicating disasters. Based on interviews with emergency agencies in Australia, Germany, Norway, and the UK, the article outlines a roadmap for how to involve political actors in disaster communication processes. In the third paper in this section, a research group led by Christian Webersik argues for an interdisciplinary approach both to disaster research and emergency management. They emphasize the importance of socio-cultural perspectives on how people imagine, prepare for, respond to and perceive disasters as an integrated part of emergency management. The last contribution to this thematic issue on "Cultures of disaster" takes an explicit theoretical approach to one of the key concepts in contemporary understandings of disaster, the concept of resilience. From an analysis of the role of this concept in disaster studies as well as disaster management, Rasmus Dahlberg argues for a merging of the concepts of resilience and complexity as a useful development for emergency management.

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