



## Editorial

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A look at the newspapers conveys the impression that “Surviving catastrophes” might be a good characterization for present times. People all over the world constantly have to deal with smaller disasters and turmoil, big catastrophes (e.g. the tsunami of December 2004; devastations by hurricanes in Myanmar and Haiti as well as the earthquake in China earlier this year) and systemic upheavals (e.g. the present financial crisis). Though different in scope and quality, all these events have something in common: they irritate established orders, upset entrenched hierarchies and routines, make new, untried measures and solutions necessary and generally exceed the capacities of state administrations (see Schneyder, 1995; Tierny et al. 2001, 9). In fact, one frequently stressed aspect of disasters is that they are ungovernable and – to a certain degree – hard to predict. Many states, especially those located on disaster-prone territory, prepare for potential disasters. From the point of view of state agencies, potential disasters can be transformed into (calculable) risks with certain presumed characteristics, which allow preparing and mitigating steps. Still, these preparations often turn out to be insufficient or inept. Despite all efforts, the anticipated extreme event may turn out to be ungovernable – both in relation to its prediction and in the reaction to it.

Here, the procedural character of disasters becomes obvious. Rather than defining them as isolated events (e.g. the moment of an earthquake), recent disaster research (especially with respect to “natural” hazards) tends to conceive of disasters as a process that usually has a long prologue, is triggered by an extreme event (the earthquake, the hurricane, the explosion), and includes an aftermath that exposes the full extent of the disaster the results of which might endure for years (Oliver-Smith 1996).

Needless to say, then, every disaster, even the most “natural”, embraces a human factor which significantly defines the disaster itself, and even so-called natural disasters are not that “natural”, after all.

Such a perspective might suggest that every major disaster points toward some kind of state failure – the leviathan, this “mortal god”, obviously was not able to provide the protection it owes to its citizens. The ability to protect, however, is based on the ability to govern the future: to make reliable predictions about the probability and time line of certain events to occur, and to estimate its scope and quality. Further, it implies that measures to protect against the threats are both at hand and can be realized. This is an approach often found in disaster management research, which looks for measures of mitigation and vulnerability reduction; and it has had some remarkable results. Meteorologists can predict the course of hurricanes, seismologists the probability of earthquakes; civil engineers can build flood protection systems and earthquake-proof high rises; and some states have elaborate disaster mitigation and reaction programs.

From a different perspective, though, it might seem that the dream of manageability is a futile hope, since societies as well as disasters are complex things and many disastrous

events (though by far not all) are not sufficiently calculable, or requirements to prepare for them are too exigent. Moreover, other external factors that are barely predictable or do not come to mind as potentially important might play a crucial role (see Mitchell in this issue); to consider them in planning is simply impossible. Therefore it might be more promising to concentrate on strengths that already exist and to confide in more decentralized, amorphous, less controllable coping strategies. Thus, the focus would lie more on the aspect of resiliency, of general robustness, than on vulnerability (Voss 2006, 58). Resilience allows societies, persons or buildings to withstand damage from disastrous events. This sometimes assumes a surprising form, as the example of Mumbai shows: When the city got hit by heavy rains in 2005 (about at the same time that New Orleans drowned in the waters of Hurricane Katrina), it was precisely the allegedly disorganized poor, populating Mumbai's infamously disordered public space, who helped to re-establish a daily routine quickly after the waters had passed. The daily existence of the crowd is marked by precariousness, but this also trains them in flexibly adjusting to daily challenges. In the days after the rains, these people provided an improvised infrastructure, offered shelter, food and transportation, and thus helped to get the city up and running (Anjaria 2008). This is not to say that we should all return to precarious lives – in fact, precariousness was one of the main reasons why the rains in Mumbai flooded huge parts of the city, and the poorest were hit worst. Rather, it shows that strengths might appear where nobody, least the eyes of state administration, would expect them.

Resilience thus becomes a key term in recovery after disastrous events; both as a crucial factor that determines the success of recovery, and as an aim of recovery efforts.

All four contributions deal in some way or another with the relationship between state and disaster, and thus on the importance of uncertainty and interpretation. They focus on the perception of hazards, on sense-making and the attribution of meaning to disasters, including methods of anticipation and coping strategies.

*Uwe Luebken* analyses attempts in Germany and the USA to make the dangers of floods (resulting from extreme weather events) governable with the help of mathematics of insurance. He focuses on the discrepancy between the attempts to turn potential damages calculable by using statistics and probability calculus, and the recognition that such events are relatively seldom and certainly not statistically predictable. At the same time, Luebken shows how in both cases – in the U.S. as well as in the German context – tensions exist between private and publicly managed insurance solutions, as well as between logics of insurance and of public non-insurance aid packages which undermine the principle of insurance but seem indispensable, given the difficulties in the application of risk calculation to “natural” disasters.

*James K. Mitchell* is also concerned with future uncertainties in the context of hazards, but from a different perspective. His central claim is that recovery planning must take into account ‘surprise’, i.e. unexpected developments. Using the example of Tangshan, which experienced great destructions and a death toll of more than 200.000 in an earthquake in 1976 and today looks back on a very successful recovery story, he seems to stress the importance of centralized, state-led, integrated recovery strategies. After all, most of the literature on the Tangshan recovery experience attributes the success of recovery to the efforts of the Chinese People's Army and the strong Chinese government, the centralized state apparatus of the Communist Republic of China. But Mitchell accredits most of the success to wider economic developments (in the course of economic globalization) that could not be foreseen by recovery planners. Thus ‘surprise’ seems to be at least as important as an elaborate and well-coordinated recovery strategy; simultaneously, recovery

planners have to take into account the factor of surprise and try to prepare for the unexpected by rebuilding better, i.e. more sustainable, creating greater resilience.

Resilience is a central theme in the research outline *Martin Voss* presents, too. But in contrast to Mitchell, he takes a bottom-up approach in that he stresses the factor of local attributions of meanings to disasters and locally specific forms of resilience and coping. Voss states that these local voices often are not heard in the international disaster mitigation and reaction community and thus valuable resources remain unused or are even destroyed. Both in order to explain such phenomena and make them visible, Voss develops the concept of *participative capacity*, based on an analysis of processes of discursive exclusion, and mechanisms of ‘translation’ both of power and of meanings.

Disasters expose the flaws of societies, an aspect that is key in the representation of disasters in mythology and (ancient) political literature, as *Sabine Müller* shows. Power and meaning are central features in her account of catastrophic events in ancient literature. She focuses on the depiction of disasters as a result of illegitimate rule and shows that such accounts were a common means of justifying ruptures in the course of transitions of power, both in ancient Egypt and early Hellenism.

Here, our way leads us back to present interpretations of disaster, generally not as a godly sign of illegitimate rule, but as a result of failure of society, and/or of (illegitimate or failing) government. Even the most legitimate, the most advanced leviathan does not manage to completely avoid the chaos that disasters create (and embody); nor can government and its administration deal exhaustively with the disastrous havoc, and might thus appear to be failing. Simultaneously, every disaster, besides creating destruction, mobilizes decentralized, chaotic, creative, emergent forces that might prove harmful but just as well could turn out to be beneficial in the face of disaster, and it might be a matter of survival to take them into account.

## Bibliography

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