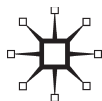


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GOVERNING DISASTERS

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Introduction

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Hardly a week goes by without some “disaster” briefly casting its shadow over the television news headlines. Whether “natural,” “technological,” or “sanitary,” these disasters are as remarkable for the cursory manner in which they are discussed in the media as for their brutal and unpredictable character and devastating consequences. Although long marginal to the study of these distinctly exceptional events—unfamiliar terrain for disciplines accustomed to focusing on relatively stable phenomena¹—the social sciences have recently made deep inroads into this field of study.²

In fields marked by disaster, however, scholars are confronted with a major difficulty,³ one that puts them in an uncomfortable position comparable to that encountered in the study of situations of extreme violence.⁴ How are they to study situations of destruction, displacement, and death while negotiating a particular place for themselves among all of the other actors—journalists, NGOs, rescuers, experts, politicians—who in various ways “intervene” in the aftermath of these events? What stance are they to adopt vis-à-vis the resulting demands and, in particular, what we will here refer to as the double imperative of the “culture of risk”?

Moving beyond the “Risk Culture”

The notion of the “risk culture” has become emblematic of the reflexive modernity movement that formed around the figures of Ulrich Beck

and Anthony Giddens,⁵ who see it as “a fundamental cultural aspect of modernity, in which awareness of risk forms a medium of colonizing the future.”⁶ It has its roots in Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky’s cultural theory of risk,⁷ which proposed a typology of perceptions of risk in terms of the “culture” to which one belonged and the social group with which it was associated. Encountering growing success in the 1990s, the culture of risk was transformed in pace with new research. As this happened, the notion came to be diversified, taking on distinct forms—for example, that of a “culture of prevention” or “disaster subculture” encompassing “all knowledge, rules, values and measures taken at all levels of the social organization that determine, in a given space, a more or less elevated degree of preparedness in view of a disaster experience.”⁸

The manner in which these concepts are applied by actors involved in risk prevention or, in the event of disaster, rescue efforts (whether in the framework of public policies or on behalf of international and non-governmental organizations) can often be summarized in terms of two types of imperative. The first asserts the existence of *an* expert culture of risk that is allegedly possessed by all actors tasked with intervening, who it is supposed have received training in that connection. Faced with risks that are presented as “real” and tangible, this culture, which consists of a collection of knowledge, discourses, and practices, allows action to be taken to save lives, mitigate damage, and reduce costs. The objective has thus been to disseminate this culture of risk as broadly as possible within populations otherwise seen as powerless and vulnerable. On the pretext of risk, there has thus been a concerted effort to “acculturate,” educate, raise awareness, and “transform mentalities” in order to instill the “good practices” proposed by “experts.” This outlook, however, does little to supply a relevant analytical framework for the complex situations encountered in the field.

The second imperative seeks to go beyond this stance. Most often, it is expressed by scholars, practitioners, and activists who are closely acquainted with local spaces and hope to win recognition for the knowledge and practices used by inhabitants to protect themselves from risk or disaster. From this perspective, the objective is thus to promote “traditional knowledge,” “local cultures of risk,” and “cultures of disaster”⁹ for inclusion in good practices guidelines. These attempts to affirm local or traditional ways recognize the plurality of knowledge; a priori, they seek to avoid excluding local knowledge in preference to its more established, expert counterparts. Yet they tend to romanticize “local communities” and continue to draw a “great divide”¹⁰ between

victims and administrators, residents and technicians, disaster victims and donors.

The present book takes a stand against this great divide and the two imperatives with which it is associated in favor of an alternative, symmetrical, empirically based approach. Such an approach reveals a new tension, one that each of the various texts in this volume attempts to conceive in its own way. Two contrasting poles of activity are at the source of this tension: the first consists of the *dispositifs*¹¹ that constitute a government *of and by* disaster; the second concerns the familiar practices and routines that dilute disaster in everyday life. Each of these areas of activity may monopolize the scholar's attention and thereby overshadow the importance of the other. What we are seeking to do here is conceive of this tension and identify the methodological stances that allow one to strike a working balance between these two poles of activity so as to at once grasp the power of these *dispositifs* and the room they nevertheless leave for criticism and everyday practices. Research in fields located at the point of contact between these two poles reveal the forms of interaction that are in play and cast light on the influence exercised by *dispositifs* on practice as well as the manner in which these *dispositifs* are adapted and transformed when implemented.

Governing (by) Disaster

Disasters are events of exceptional impact that call for a response. There exist today tools, *dispositifs*, and practices for “managing” disasters at all levels, from the local to the transnational. The work of rescue, assistance, and reconstruction no longer takes any government by surprise. As the rhetoric they employ becomes ever more homogenous, the number of guidelines increases, resulting in a litany of practices, from the construction of emergency hospitals to the management of refugee camps to the size of homes to be reconstructed. The consequence of this avalanche of *dispositifs* for the government *of* disaster is to supply norms for the exceptional. The latter is thereby routinized, normalized, and, ultimately, rendered unexceptional. Counting bodies, caring for the injured, transferring survivors, and feeding refugees supply the contours of a *biopolitic*¹² that sometimes seems to content itself with maintaining bare life¹³ in the name of a humanitarianism that has been converted into a principle of management. It is the government *by* disaster that thus becomes visible in these contemporary emergency situations.¹⁴

Disasters also contribute to feeding an economy of fear, one of the contemporary era's distinctive modalities of government. Since the mid-1980s, the introduction of risk and the imminence of disaster have been notable phenomena in many domains. This has had an effect on modes of government, political forms, and conceptions of "security."¹⁵ The great technological disasters of the late 1970s and 1980s¹⁶ led to a breakdown of faith in progress, technology, and science to which the Enlightenment had given rise. For the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, ours is now a "risk society," insofar as many actions are now assessed in terms of risk, even if the dangers are no greater than before.¹⁷

One is thus witnessing the emergence of systems that seek to master uncertainty and govern the future, whether by way of prevention policies or via the introduction of the principle of precaution to anticipate risk. The notion of preparedness which locates the government of disaster in a different rationality, is also central.¹⁸ From the perspective of preparedness disasters will happen, even if their probability is difficult or even impossible to assess. Preparation therefore entails the development of an alert mechanism in society. Various techniques—including scenarios and simulations, early warning systems, response coordination plans, crisis communication systems, and the stocking of rescue materials—support the idea that risk is permanent and can strike anywhere at any time. One must therefore be prepared.

Although these systems are a priori exceptional and restricted to emergency situations, they nevertheless shed light on certain characteristics of contemporary modalities of government. One aim of the present work is thus to account for them. We will not simply take note of the power of these dispositifs, however, but will also examine their cracks and fault lines, what remains of everyday practices, and possibilities for critique in moments of disaster.

Everyday Practices and Tactics in Disaster

Indeed, the second area of the axis of tension driving the present work is often ignored by studies that focus on the power of dispositifs for governing *of* and *by* disaster. It is part of a more localized perspective and takes the everyday aspect of these exceptional situations into account. In doing so, the aim is not so much to draw attention to the generalization or routinization of the exceptional dispositifs described above as to acknowledge the critiques to which they are subjected¹⁹ and the manner in which disaster is diluted in the practices of those

who experience it. Living, working, raising children, eating, painting, writing, taking photographs, getting married... The everyday life of “disaster victims” and those “displaced” by catastrophe cannot be summarized solely in terms of the management of a day-to-day existence that has been impacted by these events. Far from the cameras and in unspectacular fashion, life very quickly resumes its course on the ruins and traces of disaster. The practices and tactics that are then put to use are not entirely centered on efforts to “recover” or “cope” with the event, as is too often suggested by research preoccupied with the question of “resilience.” Rather, they bring everyday know-how to bear upon the new issues, actors, and resources that the disaster has introduced. The issue is therefore no longer to recognize and account for what disaster destroys but rather what it contributes to producing, the social recompositions it brings about.

Moreover, as soon as they are set in motion and come into contact with everyday life, modes of governing the exceptional (housing reconstruction, vaccination campaigns, the construction of public works, victim compensation, and so on) are likely to be questioned, transformed, misappropriated. In short, they will be subject to what Boltanski and Thévenot refer to as “critique”²⁰ and Rancière refers to as “dissensus.”²¹

As the fact of disaster is gradually eclipsed by more run-of-the-mill concerns, some of which predate the event, it also reconfigures everyday life. These two dynamics, which jointly enter into play in many fields marked by disaster, must also be conceived together. One must thus guard against being confined to an ecology of problematics dominated by the frontiers of disaster (vulnerability, resilience, reconstruction, causes). Rather, one must be ready to examine vernacular practices²² that are not influenced by the event or are only very slightly so.

At the Intersection of Dispositifs and Practices:

Dynamics of Interaction

Because disaster constitutes an unusual time in which exposed populations find themselves in close contact with public authorities and humanitarian aid groups, the objective of the present work is to open the inquiry so as to symmetrically grasp the ethnography of vernacular practices and the study of exogenous interventions. This ambition raises methodological questions and calls into question the stance of the scholar in the field, who often has to choose between working

mainly with institutional actors or mainly with inhabitants. Disaster encourages the scholar to move among these various scenes in several possible ways.

The first option consists in conserving ethnography's unity of time and place by profiting from the opportunity created by the context of disaster to at once grasp the multiple interventions, arenas, and mobilizations that simultaneously develop there. In the case of a territorialized disaster, academic fieldwork may thus allow to compare observations of institutional interventions with public reactions to them in order to understand the transformations and negotiations to which these interventions give rise. It may also compare interviews conducted among policy actors, technical administrators, and humanitarian actors with those conducted among the public at large to better understand their reciprocal relations. These interactions thereby reveal the dynamics that cut across and transform the scenes explored and allow the disaster to be grasped as an object that is constantly being redramatized and negotiated. In particular, the new configurations that emerge contribute to shifting the initial frontiers between "administrators" and "inhabitants."

The second option consists in privileging a shift in space in order to connect the site of disaster with the various actors and organizations involved in managing it. By thus following humanitarians, diplomats responsible for cooperation, scientists, political, economic, and national actors as well as objects exchanged and viruses, the inquiry aims to reconstruct the network that the disaster has activated. By following the social life of the gift at the international level or the various ways in which a scientific alert is translated, one may grasp the dynamic process by which systems are "indigenized" or, on the contrary, normalized and brought under control, as well as all of the issues that these dynamics entail.

Finally, by attending to the to and fro of institutional response and local mobilization, the third option privileges diachronic depth and displacement—no longer spatial but rather temporal—in order to follow the social reconfigurations brought about by a threat or disaster. This perspective allows one to grasp not so much "the" reaction to the disaster as the interlocking logics of positions that respond to one another, a procedural dimension on which the historical perspective sheds particular light. As a result, the very moment of disaster is not necessarily the point of departure adopted by research in the field. Rather, the scholar can train his or her gaze on the genesis of a technical decision—for example, urban and rural planning or the creation of an industry. Technical, scientific, and administrative controversies

therefore inform us about the genesis of disaster, allowing us to release ourselves from the mere present of the event and restore its contextual density.

Combined in the present work, these three types of approach allow multiple perspectives to be brought to bear on what are a priori very different fields. These fields nevertheless present numerous dimensions authorizing comparison.

Thus, however specific work on these two fields may be, the chapters on the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka and the aftermath of the 2003 flooding of the Rhône in France both problematize the dominant frames²³ of reference of the inhabitants' "participation" or "consultation" in responding to disaster. This is done on the basis of close observation of local reactions to humanitarian aid and government intervention. By selecting the way a humanitarian intervention is structured as her main theme, Mara Benadusi shows how it is based on the principles of "communitarian participation" and is anchored in the practices of a "community," albeit one that has been formed by a Western imaginary and remains a mirage in the field. Local actors thus accommodate themselves to donors' expectations and seek to appear legitimate beneficiaries so as to draw some profit from international aid. Similarly, for Julien Langumier, who discusses an institutional process of public consultation and dynamics of local mobilization, the rhetoric of the culture of risk appears to supply the population with a legitimate vocabulary for interacting with institutional leaders. On the sidelines of the carefully prepared public consultation meetings, resident mobilizations nevertheless do not respond to the (too narrow) appeal of the culture of risk but rather call into question planning choices by repoliticizing the geography of the flood. The export of the "community" and the imposition of the rhetoric of the culture of risk appear as models offering a dramatization of the local and local inhabitants by and for the benefit of external stakeholders. Conversely, these two studies show how local actors strategically position themselves in response as neo-inhabitants and neo-disaster victims, images that are at once reflected and distorted by dispositifs of intervention.

The memory of a disaster also crystallizes the strong tensions between institutional dynamics seeking to confer public or even political recognition upon the event and local practices of commemoration that often belong to the private, indeed intimate sphere. As Laura Centemeri's examination of the Seveso dioxin disaster shows, faced with the expert discourse of risk and attempts to politicize the disaster, local inhabitants longed for a return to normalcy and refused to publically express their

troubles by way of denunciation or the construction of a political cause. Despite outside attempts to exploit the tragedy, the local response consisted an affirmation of the community and of a “local culture” that was worth preserving and did not center upon the Seveso tragedy. Local activists had called for the creation of a “path of memory” reminiscent of the duty of memory familiar to psychologists who treat posttraumatic syndromes; instead, the disaster was relegated by the inhabitants to the status of a “discreet memory.” Susann Baez Ullberg, for her part, examines the memory of the Santa Fe floods in Argentina and its spatial inscriptions, showing how circumscribed institutional recognition of the problem as well as one-off local mobilizations cohabited with the invisibility of “regularly flooded” peripheral neighborhoods, where only the practices of the inhabitants bore witness to the memory of the floods. These two chapters therefore examine processes of collective memory that constantly refashion and redescribe a past experience from the perspective of present issues and according to dynamics of selection that combine overinterpretation and forgetting.

Finally, Marc Elie’s historical study can be compared with Frédéric Keck’s ethnographic voyage to reflect upon the anticipation of disaster and contexts of preparation and prevention in cases of predicted catastrophe. Addressing the risk of an avian bird flu pandemic as seen from Hong Kong and the anticipation of glacial mud slides in the foothills of Alma-Ata, these two texts examine disaster as a scenario demanding response. In the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan of the 1960s, the monumental construction of a dam on top of rock blasted from great swaths of mountainside was in keeping with the positivist political discourse of the Soviet regime, which based its power on the scientific and technological victory over nature. Faced with the prospect of a global, avian bird flu pandemic in the first decade of the twenty-first century, public authorities responded by combining the surveillance of viruses and bird populations with efforts to prepare humans by implementing a biosecurity policy that attempted to reexamine relations between humans and animals. In both cases, the studies show how novel systems of prevention and preparation displace the scene of the disaster toward that of the effects of the measures adopted or projects implemented. Thus, Elie shows how prevention operations may lead to disaster; in this case a result of the decision to open up mountain areas to development following construction of the dam. Keck underscores the emergence of a virtual space defined by disaster in which actors’ practices nevertheless have very real—and sometimes catastrophic—effects, such as the massive slaughter of birds. In contexts as different as

these, neither the implementation of a global policy of biosecurity nor the realization of an unusual development project takes place without interaction with the population: in the case of Hong Kong, Buddhist and Taoist resistance; in that of Alma-Ata, the exclusion of critical local experts and the relocation of inhabitants.

Inescapable Reflexivity

The fields under consideration here are particularly burdened with moral considerations and operational expectations.²⁴ In what concerns discussions of the scholar's "engagement" in the field, the contributors to the present book are free from an obligation to transform their research into how-to guides for decision-makers seeking to harness the voice of the local.²⁵ Indeed, our approach is resolutely nonnormative. This work will therefore *not* conclude with a set of recommendations, however well-intentioned we might be toward the "populations" or inhabitants with whom we rub shoulders in the field. By contrast, the chapters brought together here seek to clarify the research stances that have been adopted. These often reflect the difficulties encountered by the scholar in the course of his or her research, including the methodological difficulties involved in studying places that have suffered or are at risk from disaster. Two objectives therefore orient the scholars' shared compass: on the one hand, to shield oneself from the imperative to respond to emergency or act when confronted with risk; on the other, to construct a symmetrical field between institutional or humanitarian intervention and the practices of the population.

Whatever the differences among their investigative strategies, reflexivity plays a vital role for all of them. Laura Centemeri thus sets aside her initial expectations regarding the emergence of an environmental health movement in the aftermath of the Seveso disaster to focus instead on the silence in which the inhabitants' troubles are shrouded. In order to win the trust of those she studies, she turns her attention to forms of involvement and local participation. In doing so, the focus of her research shifts away from the "scandal" of nonmobilization and toward the reasons for and extent of this silence.

By attempting to establish and maintain contact with a large number of often conflicting actors in the field of the disaster, Susann Baez Ullberg is faced with the complexity of preserving these multiple and antagonistic relationships, as well as with the (sometimes silent) reproaches of her interlocutors.

Mara Benadusi for her part chose to study the practitioners of disaster management rather than its beneficiaries. Such an approach required greater vigilance and steadfastness faced with the repeated demands of experts, who expected her work to relieve the multiple conflicts to which their intervention had given rise.

Julien Langumier offers to transform his position as an actor at the heart of the public policy of prevention into a post for observing dispositive of public consultation. It is thus in the work of analyzing and writing that reflexivity becomes essential, restoring symmetry to the situation under observation via comparison with other, more classic ethnographic studies.

The silence of some of his sources leads Elie to jointly analyze what the archives do and do not say regarding popular reactions to the Soviet authorities' ambitious technoscientific projects.

Finally, to carry out the nearly impossible project of a "global" ethnography of avian bird flu, Keck must find an appropriate investigative framework. To that end, he offers both a planetary survey of biosecurity policies and a close look through the lens of the biologist's microscope, where viral recombination takes place and the barrier between man and animal is crossed.

At once imposed by the objects of investigation, the studies that are carried out and the shared work of writing, this reflexivity provides the contributors to the present volume with common ground for discussion and permits one to explicitly formulate relations between investigative methods, the definition of objects, and the resulting analyses. The material we have assembled here thus reflects a sociological, historical, and anthropological density that exceeds the mere register of the event and the exceptional, and anchors itself in an understanding of a complex everyday experience.

Beyond the Great Divides

When these stances are encouraged, they allow one to move beyond the great divides that usually inform the literature on these objects. Thus, the generic divides between risk and disaster, natural and industrial danger, North and South, expert and layman, local and global seem largely ineffective in fields characterized by the encounters and articulations of these interdependent notions.

The processes of categorizing and qualifying risks and disasters therefore become objects in their own right. The actors resort to these

qualifications from the perspective of issues that often exceed the immediate context of disaster or danger. The question is thus to understand “what disaster is made of” for each of the actors involved. What “risk” makes sense and in what situation? In order to move beyond the idea that what is at stake is a faulty “perception of risk,” one can only slowly and carefully reconstruct the dense fabric of the situations in which the actors find themselves. It is only in this way that one may grasp all that disasters are capable of “revealing.”²⁶

One also sees fault lines emerge that cut across and structure the world of “experts,” as well as “scientific” knowledge circulating outside of the worlds in which it is produced. Studies that look closely at technicians, scientists, and institutional leaders thus undermine the image of these social worlds as unified and homogeneous. Very often, confrontations take place in contexts where multiple interests are at stake. These can give rise to genuine controversies concerning the state of knowledge. Conversely, research, more attentive to populations exposed to risk or disaster, reflects the development of rationalities that articulate issues relating to “living”²⁷ and ways of taming fear. These draw upon knowledge based as much on practical experience as on expert discourse, which goes well beyond a mere “layman’s understanding” of the situation. On the stage of risk or in the theater of disaster, the actors intervene within social configurations and power relations on the basis of their (often multiple) identifications with the figures of victims, experts, mediators, and donors. In order to grasp the regimes of engagement that are thus at work, it is very instructive to adopt the symmetric perspective or to observe the articulation of various levels, from that of international organizations to the most localized scenes of interaction.

Finally, this perspective also allows one to extract situations of risk or disaster from the mere register of the exceptional and show how the social dynamics that act on these fields reconstruct themselves without ever having been suspended. It therefore appears essential to take temporality into account—whether by returning in global perspective to a time prior to the event or, on the contrary, allowing time to pass—in order to put what happened back into perspective. Tracing this continuity encourages the researcher to extend the analytical focus beyond risk and disaster to embrace the transformations of a territory as well as of its political history and social struggles.

By articulating modes of qualifying and regimes of engagement, the question of power is put back at the center of research into risk and disaster. It also allows one to understand how the “governmentality of

unease”²⁸ characteristic of the present day acts, while at the same time attending to the spaces of tension and confrontation to which these systems give rise.²⁹ What is at issue, then, is to shed light on the forms of critique³⁰ that emerge in response to these modalities of government and to be attentive, in the words of Michel de Certeau,³¹ to all of the makeshifts (*bricolages*), tricks, and ways of doing that accompany the implementation of the government of risks.

Depoliticization/Repoliticization

Finally, it is to be underscored that the present work does not instrumentally analyze dispositifs of intervention as one might do by reconstructing their archaeology or genealogy to better understand the underlying ideology or policy that is being defended. The authors draw upon a certain number of invaluable academic references regarding the Community Based Disaster Management (CBDMD) in development projects, the culture of risk characteristic of prevention policy, “biosecurity” norms in preparation for viral pandemics, “risk evaluation” in the event of environmental contamination, and sociotechnical omnipotence in territorial planning policies. In each case, however, the authors set these dispositifs in context to better understand their interaction dynamics with the population. Ultimately, this choice raises the question of the depoliticization or repoliticization of fields characterized by a collective threat on the basis of an ethnographic observation that makes no a priori assumptions concerning the political resources that are in play, the possible depoliticization of dispositifs of intervention, or the possible political mobilization of populations.

While flood prevention efforts in France traded upon the discourse of the culture of risk, the humanitarian intervention in post-tsunami Sri Lanka presented itself as anchored in the practices of a community. By appealing to a participative ideal that is taken to settle conflicts, both may appear to be dispositifs of depoliticization. Neither, however, came to terms with the political issues involved in decision making and the nature of the expected projects. As a result, they found themselves submerged by these same issues once it came to implementing decisions in the field. Local actors do not frontally mobilize against these dispositifs: some succeed in skillfully profiting from them at the risk of denaturing the intentions of their instigators, others keep their distance, indicating by their absence a significant limit of the *dispositif*. Biosecurity norms and risk evaluation may also appear to be legitimated

by technoscientific expertise, which is taken to exclude any possible choice in view of recommendations regarding how to most effectively deal with danger or contamination zoning objectives. In practice, the light shed on the plurality of expertise reveals the choices, arbitrations, and power struggles that lead to these dispositifs.

Faced with the implementation of these new prescriptions and prohibitions, populations turn to other forms of knowledge and experience in order to challenge and circumvent expert dispositifs. The ethnography of collective mobilizations thus takes into account the divisions that cut across them, the power struggles that structure them, and the preexistent social configurations that strengthen the demands of certain groups at the expense of others. Thus, humanitarian aid intended for the most destitute of post-tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka led to projects that profited landowners with ties to the current government. The preparatory measures taken in response to the risk of an avian bird flu outbreak in Hong Kong gave rise to one-off, sector-specific reactions among poultry farmers, shopkeepers, and religious groups without forming a large-scale movement of political protest capable of giving voice to more general demands. The demands made by the community/association mobilizations of those living along the Rhône River in France for greater fairness in river planning reflected profound sociological divisions between farmers and periurban dwellers, old and new inhabitants. In Seveso, efforts to politicize the tragedy were directed by outside actors who offered an interpretation of it that bore little resemblance to the inhabitants' experience. The inhabitants were neither won over by the expert and technical discourse of evaluating the risk of dioxin contamination, partisan readings of the tragedy as a capitalist crime, or the conservative Catholic representation of the accident as an ordeal to be endured. In each of these cases, the inhabitants chose to confine their experience within the contours of a discreet memory.

This book thus does not outline the schema of institutional dispositifs leading, on the one hand, to depoliticization or, on the other, to the mobilization of populations as an indication of attempts to repoliticize the management of these collective threats. Instead, it focuses on the multiple intermediary levels that allow one to move from one to the other: private reactions, individual practices, local mobilization, external exploitation for political ends, and expert dispositifs. As soon as one takes a detailed look at the choices and decisions that issue from dynamics of depoliticization/repoliticization and ultimately determine the construction of systems of intervention or the structuring of local

mobilizations, one finds that these dynamics cut across each of the above-mentioned levels.

Disaster management dispositifs (prevention, assistance, reconstruction) can thus not be rendered “apolitical” via reduction to purely technical objects or mere administrative or health measures. On the one hand, this is because the ideas and values driving these dispositifs do indeed have political foundations. The manner in which population transfers or behaviors are managed in case of risk, victims are chosen (or not chosen) as deserving assistance and the very decision to describe a situation as a “disaster” are indubitably political in nature. On the other hand, it is because a close examination shows that these situations are the object of a constant process of politicization at the hands of many different actors. Whether they are local elites who exploit the catastrophe or self-mobilizing disaster victims, none of these actors can lay claim to already established legitimacy vis-à-vis the collective tragedy.

Organization of the Work: A Thematic Reading Inviting Comparison

Despite the diverse array of fields, contrasting contexts, and variety of risks, threats, and disasters they address, the contributors to this volume are united in their ambition to collectively explore the theme at hand. Indeed, one of the more salient findings advanced by the present work concerns the great heuristic value to be had from practicing comparison in connection with this type of object. This collective work is of course based on the particular contribution of each of its authors; in the interests of comparison, however, we have also sought to reprob-lematize each field on the basis of a shared framework. This method, which demanded a redoubled effort on the part of the authors to revisit their empirical data so as to contribute to collective discussion, supplies the book’s thematic structure but also encourages comparative reading. This is why each section of the book consists of two texts addressing a common theme, a theme that may itself be considered from the point of view of a comparative reading of the two contributions.

Anticipation and Preparation

In the first of the book’s three sections, Marc Elie discusses the monumental construction project to protect against the glacial flows

threatening Alma-Ata in the 1960s and Frédéric Keck addresses the recent implementation of a surveillance and biosecurity policy in anticipation of a global flu pandemic. Major uncertainty concerning the materialization of what is nevertheless taken to be a near-certain threat characterizes these two fields. Both address the development of technoscientific controversies concerning the relevance of implemented measures of anticipation and preparation. In these fields, the prospect of disaster recedes somewhat, opening the way for a time and space dedicated to protection and preparation. In regards to a possible collective tragedy, which debates and discussions take place concerning the measures to be taken, which are at once disproportionate relative to normal, everyday life and incapable of guaranteeing that the worst will be avoided?

The “Local Community”

The second section of the book focuses on the involvement of the “local community” in humanitarian interventions and the place accorded it in the framework of consultation dispositifs by public policies of prevention. Two ethnographic projects carried out by Mara Benadusi in Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami and Julien Langumier concerning flood prevention efforts following the 2003 flooding of the Rhône in France are brought together in order to examine the manner in which the participation of the local population has been predefined at the international level or by institutional actors. In such contexts, field studies shed precious light on the strategic positioning of local actors, who must come to terms with externally defined representations of themselves. The ethnographic approach thus allows the researcher to study in precise terms the status of disaster victim, which is a matter not only of one’s personal experience of tragedy but is also overdetermined by external interventions. Given this game of distorting mirrors, with administrators claiming to intervene through and for the population, and inhabitants adapting their practices and discourses to administrative expectations, how is the ethnographic field itself to be redefined?

The Memory of Past Disasters

The book’s final section explores how the memory of past disasters sets in motion a perpetual reconstruction of the past from the perspective of present issues at both the private—nay, intimate—level among the

inhabitants as well as in terms of public and institutional recognition. This part of the book brings together the texts of Susann Baez Ullberg, who examines the manner in which the Santa Fe floods in Argentina were memorialized on the basis of an analysis of the spatial inscription of past disasters, and Laura Centemeri, who adopts a diachronic approach to explain the discreet memory of the inhabitants of Seveso concerning the contamination of their territory by dioxin. Examining disaster's memory as an identity-based political resource of legitimation opens the way for a discussion of the social uses that are made of it. By abandoning the idea of an exclusive, singular memory, one may shed light on the manner in which the memorial dynamics found at both the individual and collective levels, whether locally inscribed or externally exploited, cohabit and interact.

This is the comparative journey on which the present work invites its readers to embark. Our hope is to provide them with an introduction to the many dimensions of the government of disaster as well as to the critiques that are made of the government by disaster and its watchwords: anticipate, prepare, cooperate, commemorate, mobilize memory.

Notes

1. Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin, "Les sciences sociales face à l'événement," *Terrain*, no. 38 (March 2002): 5–20.
2. For recent studies, see Sandrine Revet and Julien Langumier, "Une ethnographie des catastrophes est-elle possible? Coulées de boue et inondations au Venezuela et en France," *Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale*, no. 7 (2011): 77–90; Sandrine Revet, "Penser et affronter les désastres : un panorama des recherches en sciences sociales et des politiques internationales," *Critique internationale*, no. 52 (2011): 157–173.
3. Violaine Girard and Julien Langumier, "Risques et catastrophes. De l'enquête de terrain à la construction de l'objet," *Genèses*, no. 63 (2006): 128–142.
4. Sandrine Lefranc, "La 'juste distance' face à la violence," *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, no. 174 (April 2002): 505–513.
5. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage, 1992; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.
6. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 244.
7. Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

8. Eric Lepointe, “Le sociologue et les désastres,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, no. 90 (1991): 166. Our translation.
9. Greg Bankoff, “Cultures of Disaster, Cultures of Coping: Hazard as a Frequent Life Experience in the Philippines, 1600–2000,” in Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister (eds.), *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies Toward a Global Environmental History*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 265–284.
10. Bruno Latour, “Comment redistribuer le grand partage,” available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/15-GRAND-PARTAGEpdf.pdf> (accessed on February 13, 2014).
11. There has been some debate concerning the proper English translation of the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif* (French). Though *assemblage* and *apparatus* have been used in the past, a consensus seems to have emerged around “dispositif” in current Anglophone scientific literature. We have thus chosen to retain the French term *dispositif* in the text, as neither *assemblage* nor *apparatus* fully capture the various meanings and concepts involved in Michel Foucault’s term.
12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1. An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1990) (first English edition, Penguin, 1984).
13. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1998.
14. Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirable. Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010; Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (eds.), *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, New York: Zone Books, 2010.
15. On the importance given this question in anthropology and sociology, see among others: Marc Abélès, *Politique de la survie*, Paris: Flammarion, 2006; Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006; Zygmund Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006; Didier Bigo, “La mondialisation de l’(in)sécurité,” *Cultures et conflits*, no. 58 (Summer 2005): 53–101; Frank Furedi, *Politics of Fear*, London, Continuum, 2005; Frédéric Neyrat, *Biopolitique des catastrophes*, Paris: Musica Falsa Editions, 2008.
16. In particular, the Seveso chemical disaster in Italy (1976) studied by Laura Centemeri in this volume, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in the United States (1979), and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.
17. Beck, *Risk Society*.
18. Andrew Lakoff, “Preparing for the Next Emergency,” *Public Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2007): 247–271.
19. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification. Economies of Worth*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
20. Ibid.
21. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.
22. See Romain Bertrand’s work, in particular his discussion of the concept of “indigenous appropriation,” in “Politiques du moment colonial. Historicités indigènes

- et rapports vernaculaires au politique en ‘situation coloniale.’” *Questions de recherche*, vol. 26 (October 2008), available at <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/papier/qdr?page=2> (Accessed on February 14, 2014)
23. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
 24. Michel Agier, “Ni trop près ni trop loin. De l’implication ethnographique à l’engagement intellectuel,” *Gradhiva. Revue d’histoire et d’archives de l’anthropologie*, vol. 21 (1997): 69–76 ; Didier Fassin, “L’anthropologie, entre engagement et distanciation. Essai de sociologie des recherches en sciences sociales sur le sida en Afrique,” in Charles Becker, Jean-Pierre Dozon, Christine Obbo, and Moriba Touré (eds.), *Vivre et penser le sida en Afrique*, Paris: Karthala, 1999, pp. 41–66.
 25. George Marcus’ work insists on anthropological knowledge as *disinterested* when anthropologists are confronted with the new characteristics of their fields, which are often dominated by various forms of intervention (in particular, humanitarian). See George Marcus, “Experts, Reporters, Witnesses: The Making of Anthropologists in States of Emergency,” in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (eds.), *Contemporary States of Emergency*.
 26. Anthony Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City: Death and Rebirth in the Andes*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986.
 27. “Living,” as per Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life. Vol 2. Living and Cooking*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 (3rd ed.)
 28. Didier Bigo, “Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease,” *Alternatives*, no. 27, Special issue (2002): 63–92.
 29. Jean-François Bayart, *Le gouvernement du monde. Une critique politique de la globalisation*, Paris: Fayard, 2004.
 30. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification. Economies of Worth*.
 31. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vols. 1–3, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

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