

DISASTERS IN POPULAR CULTURES

Giovanni Gugg - Elisabetta Dall'Ò - Domenica Borriello
Editors

Preface by Joël Candau



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12. Unnatural Disasters and the Anthropocene: lessons learnt from anthropological and historical perspectives in Latin America¹

Virginia García-Acosta²

Abstract

Historical and anthropological research associated with natural hazards, whether geological or hydro meteorological, has shown that the occurrence of “natural” disasters has increased as time goes by throughout centuries. But it has also shown that it has not been the result of a parallel increase in the presence of natural hazards. A continuous and persistent social construction of risk remains in its origins, as examples coming from different regions of the world can demonstrate. Observe them carefully in the *longuée-durée* and comparatively has allowed approaching conclusions related to questions like: do human beings have constructed risks that have really changed the planet? Have societies designed strategies to cope with natural and socio-natural risks and have left lessons learnt?

Keywords: Natural hazards, Unnatural disasters, Anthropology & History, Latin America, Lessons learnt

1. Introduction

The Anthropocene has been conceived as a new geological era, marked by the weight of human activities on the geophysical phenomena, an idea launched in the 19th Century by the remarkable but little known Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani (1824-1891) named the “Anthropozoic era”, recently recovered and popularized as Anthropocene. In a broader sense, as some experts claim it is now used “to describe the overall impact of humankind on the Earth System taken as a whole” (Hamilton, 2015:14).

¹ A first version of this article was published in French in: R. Beau & C. Larrère, dir., *Penser l'Anthropocène*, pp. 329-342, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2018.

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One of the compelling demonstrations of this weight, this impact and its effects is, precisely, the occurrence of disasters associated with natural hazards, whether hydro-meteorological or geophysical, which have increasingly provoked higher number of victims worldwide. If the “core thesis” of the Anthropocene “is that humanity has affected nature [...] in such a way that a new, human-made stratum has emerged in the geological record (Trischler, 2013:5), the study of disasters in historical perspective becomes essential as it confirms that core thesis.

Without denying that the “Anthropocene thesis demands transdisciplinary [as] it permeates disciplinary boundaries” (Trischler, 2013: 6), in this article I will refer to the contributions that History and Anthropology have done in this field, emphasizing the case of “natural” disasters that are increasingly not natural but socially constructed.

The historical and anthropological perspective for the study of disasters has shown, thanks to research carried out through documents and fieldwork, that society, that humankind is primarily responsible for the increased vulnerabilities and as well for the amplification and intensification of disaster risk. But it is also in and through these societies that we have to find ways that allow to minimize those impacts and effects to work with better results in what is called disaster risk reduction (DRR).

This article has two parts. In the first one I will refer to this growing social construction of disaster risk worldwide, to the alternative approach (better known as vulnerability approach in disaster research), that has allowed us to identify the central role that vulnerability plays in disaster processes.

In the second part I will address the prevention approach, that is to say the possibilities or alternatives societies have dealt with in order to cope with natural hazards and potential disasters. What I call positive lessons learnt throughout history and identified at the local scale.

In my conclusions, I will refer some ideas about possibilities of linking basic research with public policy in an effective manner.

The information I will present comes from research focused on the study of disasters from a historical and anthropological perspective over the last three decades. This research has been carried out mainly on Mexico and Latin America about earthquakes, floods, droughts, and particularly in recent years, about hurricanes. It has produced a wealth of results. We have developed catalogues that account for the presence of these hazards over more than 500 years. Those catalogues not only describe the presence of the natural phenomena themselves, their effects and impacts from the 15th century until today, but also and particularly what we call the "social

memory": what social groups, communities, families, did and do to cope with those natural hazards. Most of what I will refer is based on that information obtained both directly and indirectly.

2. Social constructions of risks

In the last few decades, the concepts of vulnerability and social construction of risks have been at the core of the evolution of disaster studies, especially in the so-called “alternative” approach (Hewitt, 1997), alternative to the hazard centered paradigm or technocratic paradigm in which disasters were viewed only as physical phenomena.

Previously and up to the eighties of 20th Century, it was basically either the natural phenomenon or the post-disaster response of the communities affected by it that were analyzed and monitored. The approach focusing on social vulnerability and risk, considering the latter as “a latent condition for society [which] represents the likelihood of damages [and which] is made up by the interaction, within a specific time and place, of two factors: hazards and social vulnerabilities” (Lavell, 2000: 19) allowed scholars to analyze their dialectical and dynamic relationships and, therefore, to link the hazards to the specific circumstances of communities. Vulnerability is a feature of individuals or social groups in the face of specific circumstances.

In acknowledging that disasters associated with natural hazards constitute the product of a multiplicity of factors, among which social and economic vulnerability play a crucial role, the interest of social scientists for this field of study focused specifically on identifying, describing and analyzing vulnerability, a fact that made a decisive contribution to better understand the processes associated with it. (García-Acosta, 2009: 117). The social construction of risk, which is still taken in certain quarters—even in academic ones— as a synonymous of perception of risk, is a concept that derives from the aforementioned analyses (García-Acosta, 2005). It has been defined as a process developed by groups or communities, which places them at different stages or levels of vulnerability.

Beyond identifying social and economic vulnerability as a determining factor in the occurrence of disasters, research made it necessary to distinguish between its different features and dimensions. New concepts were born in order to analyze the information we were finding, concepts like differential or differentiated vulnerability, accumulated vulnerability and global vulnerability. We also learnt to differentiate those several dimensions that characterize the vulnerability itself. And identified, as well, what we

have called the “vulnerability with a name and a last name”, which has helped in avoiding confusion when the need inexorably arose to specify what hazard a community or a social group is vulnerable to, as it is not the same to be vulnerable to hurricanes or to earthquakes or floods. Now we have realized that both for research and for framing public policy it is absolutely necessary to distinguish if a community is vulnerable to floods or to droughts, to earthquakes or to hurricanes.

From that position, attention shifted from an exclusive focus on the hazard and subsequently on the emergency, to a focus on prevention, with risk and vulnerability at the core. This was associated with “an agenda that was not just academic in nature, but also political, by recognizing that risks are generated by and within processes linked with development and environmental management” (García-Acosta, 2009: 118).

Further empirical studies of disasters, developed mainly in the southern part of the planet, and the considerations induced by their results, have allowed reconsidering the concept of vulnerability. It must be pointed out that vulnerability was by then intimately associated with poverty and marginalization. Some authors have analytically unlinked it not only from poverty but also from nearby concepts as marginalization, and have related it to the diversity of risks generated within the interaction between local and global processes, and the way they are faced every day. Vulnerability is thus conceived as a more precise measure of exposure to disaster risk than poverty, by incorporating under-development's processes and impacts. In this sense, the assertion is made that not all those that live in poverty are vulnerable to disaster, and neither are the poor exposed in the same measure, as some non-poor people are also vulnerable (Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004: 2).

Unlinking the condition of poverty from vulnerability constitutes a relevant issue. Studies of disasters have justifiably established a link between poverty and high vulnerability to climate-associated disasters. Recently, empirical studies have led to the conclusion that it is necessary to consider in more depth the relationship between high vulnerability and poverty because, while not denying there is a correspondence, this is not always linear. In particular, it would appear that the capacity to recover and to prepare against hazards developed by communities is a more critical element than the level of poverty. This is relevant in order to focus adequately the assistance given to the poorest groups.

The originally named “alternative approach”, later baptized as the “vulnerability approach” has lately been distinguished as the socio-

constructivist approach. Indeed, vulnerability and social construction of risk are intimately linked concepts.

Social construction of risks refers to the forms in which society creates vulnerable contexts that bring about maladjustments and maladaptation in the environment, that can escalate to levels in which the very environment becomes a hazard and a generator of risks. “Societies themselves, when interacting inadequately with the environment, have constructed new risks” (Lavell, 2000: 19). Isn’t this a feature of the Anthropocene?

The UNISDR Global Assessment Reports, that have been biennial since 2009, emphasize the need to identify and address the underlying risk drivers, and support with an enormous amount of data coming from all over the world, how disasters linked to physical hazards are socially constructed (Maskrey and Lavell, 2013).

Before moving forward on to the second part of this presentation, I will mention an specific example that gives a vivid account of the social construction of risk: a comparison between the effects and impacts of two biggest ENSO or El Niño phenomena that occurred late in the 20th Century. Based on the results of a research project sponsored by LA RED (The Latin American Network for the Social Study of Disaster Prevention) and IAI (Inter American Institute for Global Change Research) entitled “Disaster Risk Management and ENOS in Latin America”. The results coming out from the research that was held in eight Latin American Countries clearly demonstrated that even the ENSO that occurred in 1982-1983 was considerably more intense, the effects and impacts of the 1997-1998 one were much more devastating. Moreover, it was due precisely to the social construction of risks during the 15 years that separated both, risks associated mainly with deforestation, erosion, and desertification.

3. Social construction of prevention

Social research concerning disasters has evolved and shifted from a focus on studying the hazards and the reactions of affected groups, to a point of view that increasingly addresses prevention. This was possible by incorporating the concepts of vulnerability as a feature of social groups, and of social construction of risk as community processes associated with the likelihood of disasters happening.

Because of the clarity contributed by the vulnerability approach, and of the interest in understanding other aspects of social and cultural dynamics regarding recurring exposure of communities to certain hazards, we began

working on the concept of adaptive strategies, starting from the ones we had detected in historical documents as well as through fieldwork in disaster prone areas. We were interested specifically in strategies, practices and actions developed by the communities subjected to the effects and impacts associated with certain hazards, such as hurricanes or other recurrent extreme manifestations of climate. Both historical and contemporary studies that have been carried out in Mexico and in other Latin American countries, and lately also in Europe, have confirmed assertions that we made some years ago, in the sense that it is precisely the periodic presence of certain natural phenomena, such as hurricanes, has allowed certain human groups to achieve cultural changes with regards to their material life and organization which, in some cases, has led to the application of certain survival and adaptation possibilities (García-Acosta, 2009: 115).

With the data obtained it is clear that successful adaptive strategies were built atop community organization structures, after a conscious or unconscious evaluation of the affected group's experience, which required a well-structured network system that was later transformed into a transmission of knowledge to the generations that followed. That is why we put forward the hypothesis that social capital, inasmuch as it is an attribute of a collective, may represent an essential element in constructing adaptive strategies in the face of recurring natural hazards. The more developed the social capital of a group subjected to recurring hydro meteorological hazards, the better and more effective the transmissible prevention alternatives will subsequently be, both within a generation and from one generation to the next.

The trust and solidarity of a certain collective and the construction of networks within it and linking it with the outside world, allow evaluation of both the impact on all the members of the group and on other areas of the same region and, consequently, to collectively opt for the best practices in face of the cyclical presence of certain hazards and the effects and impacts produced by them.

The concept of social capital is still the subject of various discussions, and has not yet reached uniform definitions. These definitions underline specific aspects, among which the importance of networks and of solidarity and their resulting cohesive force, ethical values as factors of encouragement of virtuous circles in community performance, and the importance of their presence in economic growth. Social capital is even considered as a collective asset by virtue of the connections or interrelationships it generates between social stakeholders. We shall here understand social capital as the product of the development of capacities

allowing the emergence, within the collective, of certain adaptive strategies that are the result of experience in the face of recurring natural hazards.

Perhaps, in a certain way, the concept of resilience is the one that opposes and supplements the concept of vulnerability in the face of concrete hazards. If we first describe vulnerability as a circumstance or context of certain groups which found themselves in a situation of fragility facing a certain hazard, due to the persistent social construction of risks, resilience would be the capacity developed by a certain group or community, in order to resist, adapt and if possible improve their circumstance or context in the face of specific recurring hazards. In other words, resilience refers to the development of abilities to deploy processes with incidence on the practices of communities, for reducing vulnerability in the face of certain hazards.

This concept, which has been seeking academic recognition for over 50 years, has already had an impact on international agencies specialized on the subject. About it, there are several examples to which I have referred in various publications (García-Acosta, 2014, 2015). Some of those examples show that focusing the local-communitarian scale, we find that communities display resilience through performance, through communication and through cooperation; we find that communities display resilience through a governance based on identity and solidarity, that is to say implementing elements that account for an accumulated social capital.

The crucial question concerning the concept of resilience would be this one: what does it mean to reinforce the resilience of families and communities in the face of shocks and disasters and how is this reinforcement achieved? What strategies, practices or actions have these families and communities deployed throughout generations and centuries?

The above reflections have allowed us to analyze the dynamics of disasters from a novel point of view: by linking processes with features, attributes and abilities developed by communities, societies or systems, in order to advance in the exploration and identification of actions for the prevention of disasters at the local and community levels. It is important to explore the dynamic interrelationship of these concepts for identifying the elements that constitute what I have called the *social construction of prevention*, a new ancillary concept for articulating practices and actions, goals, strategies and capacities for the prevention of disasters in the context of a community.

Societies or groups can display resilience as an ability developed in the course of their interaction with the environment that derives from successful adaptive practices; taking that as a starting point, they may build new contexts that reduce vulnerability in the presence of recurring hazards.

From the local perspective, the hypothesis with which we have moved forward in our research in this sense refers to the fact that we find cases of communities that have settled in regions which have historically been exposed to recurring hazards, within which it has been possible to identify elements of material culture allowing for the development of resiliency capabilities. In other words, collective practices and actions that reduce the risks deriving from the possibility of disastrous events happening, by way of generating adaptive strategies that allow said communities to protect better their property and their lives. That is, resistance to adversity has been collectively strengthened through several generations (Cuevas, 2012; Martins, 2006; McCabe, 2002; Ride and Bretheron, 2011).

Can these ideas be framed in what has been called the “good Anthropocene”? A concept coined a couple of years ago understanding by it “that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world” (Breakthrough Institute, 2015 in Hamilton, 2015:10). The “ecomodernists” who are beneath this proposal consider “that ‘human systems’ can adapt and indeed prosper in a hotter world” (Hamilton, 2015: 11).

I will mention an eloquent Mexican example of social and cultural adaptation to climate variability and, even, to climatic extremes. Vernacular housing is the product of different adaptation processes to climate. The so-called “traditional” communities have produced their habitat from their cultures, beliefs and myths in a constant dialogue with nature from ancient times. Vernacular housing that remains until today requires planning and organization, a systematic knowledge of climate and technology and also a network of skilled craftsmen in different fields. It involves invention, innovation and adaptation as well as the oral transmission of knowledge to locate and guide the house, to find and prepare materials for construction. Several forms of adaptation include shape, design, materials and technology used which vary depending on whether it is an area prone to hurricanes or droughts, to floods or landslides (Audefroy, 2012).

Similar examples were published in the book entitled “Social Strategies for Prevention and Adaptation, as one of the outcomes of the project held between the European Union and CONACYT (Mexico) called “Risk and vulnerability Network: Social Strategies of Prevention and Adaptation”. Its main objective was to recuperate ancestral and vernacular knowledge culturally developed and associated with risk prevention in face of recurrent hydro-meteorological hazards, both in Mexico and Europe. The publication includes case studies on America (Colombia, Costa Rica, and México),

Europe (Finland, France, Italy, and The Netherlands), Asia (Philippines, Vietnam) and Burkina Faso in Africa.

4. Final remarks

The information presented up to now shows clearly that the title of the first publication of LA RED (The Latin American Network for the Social Study of Disaster Prevention) is increasingly evident.

I have emphasized on two core concepts: the social construction of risks and what can be called its counterpart: the social construction of prevention. The two faces of Janus, as I have named this opposed confrontation.

Much of what I have presented to you can be framed within the study of nature and culture, climate and culture in a historical perspective. About it more and more reflections are made. Starting by the classic book written by Philippe Descola *Par de-là nature et culture* (2005), followed in the last years by very interesting works as the one shared by Anderson, Maasch and Sandweiss *Climate Change and Cultural Dynamics. A Global Perspective on Mid-Holocene Transitions* (Elsevier, 2007) geographically covering almost the whole planet, or W.J. Burroughs: *Climate Change in Prehistory. The End of the Reign of Chaos* (Cambridge, 2005) that weaves together studies of climate with anthropological, archaeological, and historical studies and explores the challenges that faced humankind in the glacial climate and the opportunities that arose when the climate improved dramatically. On the other hand, the fantastic new series coordinated by Carmen Meinert about “Climate and Culture” that published by Brill (Leiden) offers now three volumes covering a very broad time spectrum in three major regions of the world. Two of them in the South: East Asia (volume 1, coordinated by Meinert herself, and published in 2013), South and Southeast Asia (volume 2, edited by Barbara Schuler, and published in 2014) and the volume 3, recently published, on Northern America and coordinated by Bernd Sommer (2015). Latin America is still missing in this series...

Certainly, there have been significant advances in these fields, but still with little relationship with “thinking the Anthropocene”.

I hope that the ideas and reflections I have presented can stimulate the debate about the Anthropocene and its relation with disaster risk reduction, mainly to inform disaster risk policy, and to help framing policy formulation and implementation locally informed. Let us avoid importing to the South solutions coming from the North.

Using the study of historical and contemporaneous cases of local-community adaptive strategies concerning recurring natural hazards as a starting point, the comprehensive approach that we strive for seeks to throw light on the process of producing innovative ideas and proposals that allow identification of the best practices aiding in the proposal, design and execution of adequate public policies for disaster prevention. Profiting from local knowledge and experience regarding hazards to collectively work towards a more promissory and less disaster-prone future.

The key to future research work is identifying the reasons why certain communities attain success and achieve changes in the way they act, while others repeat the old patterns. Identifying when and how risk is socially constructed, as well as when and how community social capital is used and resilience abilities are developed in communities. If we gather several cases of this kind around the world we may speak of “good Anthropocene”, which is a general and global concept, and think of it as a possible conclusion of several cases of skills and practices coming out from local experiences in face of natural hazards.

At the end, we have to return to the beginning of this paper: Is History and Anthropology research responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene? What have they done related to solving the problems the Anthropocene poses?

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Generations pass on to each other a specific selection of memories, which is a “memory of the lived experience”. Through that narrative, the story of the present is measured day by day with forms of existential precariousness, in a vision of risk which is conceived as a perennial societal state. By investigating popular and oral literature, focus on narratives related to risk and disasters, as described in the social imaginary, from the most remote eras to the most stringent current affairs, this book is a precious element for a comprehensive reconstruction of cultural resources have allowed to face and manage material and spiritual concerns and problems arising from disasters.

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