Disaster Politics: Surviving End Times

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/03/27/disaster-politics-surviving-end-times/

STEVE MATTHEWMAN, MAR 27 2023

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists created the Doomsday Clock to warn the world of existential threats. Midnight symbolises the apocalypse. In January 2023, Rachel Bronson, the organisation's president, said: 'We are living in a time of unprecedented danger, and the Doomsday Clock time reflects that reality. 90 seconds to midnight is the closest the Clock has ever been set to midnight' (quoted in Spinazze, 2023). Their dismal prognosis is informed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the associated rise in nuclear threats, and by the climate crisis and the connected failures in global governance to deal with it. We are also plagued by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and by an 'infodemic' of conspiracy theories and post-truth political pronouncements.

This organisation is no hysterical outlier. The University of Oxford has the Future of Humanity Institute which, amongst other things, assesses the extent to which we even have one. The University of Cambridge hosts the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk. Similarly, France's Momentum Institute studies 'Collapsology', a neologism referring to the risks generated by industrial society, and the prospect that they may lead to its undoing (and see: Diamond, 2005; Servigne & Stevens, 2020; Jensen & Jackson, 2022). António Guterres (2021) has called code red for humanity. In his address to the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly, the Secretary General stated that wealth disparities, cascading disasters, the climate emergency and COVID-19 have taken us to 'the edge of an abyss — and moving in the wrong direction. Our world has never been more threatened. Or more divided. We face the greatest cascade of crises in our lifetimes'. Indeed, 'permacrisis' was declared 2022's word of the year (Spicer, 2022).

Doubtless we live in times of disaster glut. There are many reasons why this is so. We can point to the growing potency and complexity of the socio-technical arrangements that enframe our existence, and to the growing connectivity of the world's various territories and populations. We should also acknowledge two great drivers of risk: concentrations of population and concentrations of wealth. Three things are worth signalling. For the first time in human history, we live on an urban planet. Second, ours is an era of unprecedented inequality. While redistribution of resources would doubtless protect populations from the worst-case impacts of disaster, decades of neoliberal policies have seen resources redistributed in the wrong direction: from poor to rich (World Inequality Lab, 2022). Our political economy is hostile to life and living conditions such that we must introduce a third novelty, an epochal change from the Holocene, which has contained almost all human history, to the Anthropocene.[1]

Disasters define the times, yet there is deep dissatisfaction amongst social scientists who make them the object of their studies. Historically bankrolled by the world's largest military, intellectual attention first focussed on community responses after disasters because they were seen as proxies for behaviours in a nuclear war. The field is fragmented by the fetishization of case studies, which means that they are typically mistakenly viewed as singular events, rather than as concatenating processes. Disaster studies are in the thrall of a select number of masters, and still showing obeisance to a handful of metropolitan intellectual centres. Western epistemologies are the default lens through which disasters are studied, irrespective of locale (Gaillard, 2019). Such studies also languish in a state of theoretical stagnation. For Kathleen Tierney (2010: 660), the only 'progress' of note has been a move from functionalism to mid-range theory. Tierney is no outsider, she is a leading figure in the mainstream (and see Alexander, 2013).

While a new terminology has developed to make sense of the climate emergency – ARkStorms, atmospheric rivers,

bomb cyclones, derechos, firenados, heat domes, megadroughts, polar vortexes, snowmageddon, sting jets, super storms, thundersnow, weather whiplash – it would seem that disaster studies has not moved with the times.[2] Much of the problem rests with working definitions of disaster within the field. Disasters are typically seen as events that are concentrated in time and space, as spectacular ruptures which prevent the normal functioning of society. Several criticisms can be made about this formulation.

First, many of today' s disasters are 'uncontained'. Global warming, air pollution, and the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, respect no borders. Instead, they appear to be ambient. 'In recent decades', the IPCC wrote, 'changes in climate have caused impacts on natural and human systems on all continents and across the oceans' (IPCC, 2014). The World Health Organisation has stated that nearly the entire planet's population (some 99 per cent of us) breathe unclean air (World Health Organisation, 2023). Similarly, COVID-19's impacts are felt at all scales, from micron to the world itself (Matthewman, 2021: 81).

Disasters are 'uncontained' in a second sense. There can be vast social and spatial distances between those who cause disasters and those who experience their consequences. Environmental risks are particularly liable to problem displacement in that they are 'solved' by shifting them to different times, spaces and media. Thus displacement can go from the present generation to future ones, from one country to another, or, say, from soil pollution to water pollution (Bovenkerk, 2003–4: 25). The disaster literature also discusses these as 'JARring' activities which jeopardize assets that are remote (Tierney, 2014: 57). For example, the draining of wetlands for commercial agriculture can cause flooding much further away. This means that the manufacturers of hazards are not necessarily the victims of them, which also complexifies issues of responsibility and response. Take global warming, whose primary causers are those resident in North America, Western Europe, and parts of the Middle East (and particular industries therein).[3] The main sufferers include populations in sub-Saharan Africa, South-East Asia, and the Pacific Island states. Here is an important qualifier to our point about ambient disaster. People inhabit vastly uneven riskscapes. Some regions are hit far harder than others. Misfortunes are also social patterned. Suffering usually fractures along the familiar fault lines of ability, age, gender, ethnicity and social class.

Third, while non-spectacular disasters like heat waves may fall outside of the 'preferred disaster paradigm' (Klinenberg, 2003: 17). in that they do not destroy property or kill people who matter, they nonetheless have far higher fatality rates than most spectacular disasters.[4] In thinking about what comes to be called a disaster, then, a new generation of Critical Disaster Scholars urges us to see them as 'an analytical conceit' or an 'interpretive fiction' (Remes & Horowitz, 2021: 1-2). They do so as disasters have no objective basis. Some are denied and supressed. For Indigenous People, the disaster has already happened. 'Colonisation was our apocalypse', Nayuka Gorrie noted, 'and we are already living in a dystopian future, so we are ahead of the game' (quoted in Yunkaporta, 2017).

Fourth, while mainstream scholars of disasters see them as temporary deviations from a functional norm, it is more appropriate to see disasters as systemic productions. The 'normal' functioning of society will be a catastrophe for many, which is why we also need terms like colonisation, environmental justice, institutional racism, structural violence, and transphobia in our conceptual repertoire. As the Tūhoe disaster scholar Simon Lambert (2022: 74) put it, '[w]hen Indigenous People suffer, the system is not broken but merely functioning as it was intended. Indigenous communities have had their sovereign status, including the right to identify and manage their own emergencies, systematically and violently taken from them'.

Fifth, this leads us to thinking about disasters in a different way. Not as singular events concentrated in time and space, but as concatenating processes that may operate over the longue durée. Anthony Oliver-Smith (1994) made a pioneering intervention here with his account of a South American earthquake. Pre-Columbian Andean societies were cognisant of seismic hazards, and they had coping strategies to deal with them, including the use of multiple micro-environments (coastal and highland) as a means of spreading risk, sharing resources, diversifying diet and keeping population densities down. They built with earthquake risk in mind.

With the arrival of Spanish colonists in the sixteenth century everything changed. New towns were built, many in hazard-prone areas. Forced migration and planned settlement gave the novel urban developments much greater population densities. They were also constructed in hazard-prone ways. Narrow streets replaced the scattered

constructions of old. They were built less securely and with heavier materials. Emergency storehouses were eradicated. Vulnerability increased with the imposition of European modes of production which were market-oriented rather than undertaken for the social good. Cash crops and extraction industries came to dominate. Agricultural surpluses were exported. Riches left the country and Indigenous groups were alienated from their lands. When the earthquake struck on 31 May 1970 it killed 70,000 people, injured double that number, and left half a million homeless. For Oliver-Smith, disasters are not simply terrible events, they are processes, and their causes are to be located within the social order. He called his analysis 'Peru's Five Hundred Year Earthquake'.

We have painted a dismal picture thus far. Yet there are resources for hope. Disasters reveal something important about the human condition. Instead of the venal self-interested subjects of neoliberal orthodoxy, we find that 'human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful, and imaginative after a disaster' (Solnit, 2009: 18). Those in peril get rescued, the hungry are fed, the homeless sheltered and the lonely cared for. There is a kindness to strangers. Individuals band together for the collective good and new forms of social capital are generated. People risk their lives to save anonymous others. Over a century's worth of research confirms that 'disasters bring out prosocial and innovative behaviours in communities' (Knowles, 2011: 213).

Disasters can also act as generative moments. They can show the operation of power in its clearest possible light, including whom power works for. And they give rise to questions of accountability (*who should be blamed?*), entitlement (*what do we deserve?*) and normality (*how should we live?*) (Trentmann, 2009: 69). As Thomas Homer-Dixon notes, a disaster can 'shatter the forces standing in the way of change and the deeply entrenched and too-comfortable mindsets that keep people from seeing exciting possibilities for renewal. It can, in short, be a source of immense creativity – a shock that opens up political, social, and psychological space for fresh ideas, actions, institutions, and technologies that weren't possible before' (Homer-Dixon, 2007: 23). Responses to the COVID-19 demonstrate precisely this.

National lockdowns showed that a supposedly unstoppable global economic system that should be privileged above all else – *There is No Alternative* – can be forced to a halt. Other 'impossibilities' were soon realised: homelessness was ended in Aotearoa New Zealand (albeit for a limited time during their first lockdown), free childcare was provided in Australia, hospitals were nationalised in Spain, basic income was granted in Canada, migrants and asylum seekers were given full citizenship in Portugal, and a number of countries trialled four-day working weeks (Matthewman, 2021: 90). Most Britons who were surveyed in a YouGov poll hoped that they personally, and their country generally, would change for the better following the pandemic. A mere nine per cent of those questioned wanted a return to the status quo ante (Binding, 2020). One of the most comprehensive surveys to date gathered the opinions of 21,000 adults in 27 countries. The results showed that almost 90 per cent of respondents wanted a fairer post-COVID world. And of those questioned, almost three quarters would like their life to change markedly rather than have it return to the pre-COVID normal. Moreover, 86 per cent would like to see significant positive transformation in the world, particularly in terms of social and environmental justice (IPSOS, 2020).

As The Salvage Collective (2021: 83) have noted, catastrophe is our central problematic, consequently, '[a]ll politics must become disaster politics'. But if we are to survive our disastrous times we require a revolutionary form of politics that has never been practiced before. Hitherto, politics has tended to be predicated on: i) prioritisation of the self and of fellow group members; ii) the demand for more, the petition for additional resources; and iii) a focus on the present and near future as the horizon of action. For instance, in liberal democracies the ultimate determinant is the electoral cycle. The climate crisis compels major transformation if our species, and indeed all others, are to prosper. For the privileged populations of the world this necessitates a radical politics of the other, prioritising those in entirely different spatial, temporal and social locations. And it entails a massive expansion of the democratic imagination, as it means that those in the Global North must cede to those in the Global South, who will suffer the most from climate heating. It means thinking about those yet to be born in order to enact inter-generational justice, and it means thinking about non-human others.

References

Alexander, David (2013) 'Talk no. 1: There is Nothing More Practical than a Theoretical Approach to Disasters',

Disaster Planning and Emergency Management, 17 May. Available: http://emergency-planning.blogspot.co.nz/2013/05/talkno-1-there-is-nothing-more.html.

Bernice Bovenkerk (2003–4) 'Is Smog Democratic? Environmental Justice in the Risk Society',*Melbourne Journal of Politics*, 29: 24-39.

Binding, Lucia (2020) 'Coronavirus: Only 9% of Britons Want Life to Return to 'Normal' Once Lockdown is Over',*Sky News*, 17 April. Available: https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-only-9-of-britons-want-lifeto-return-to-normal-once-lockdown-is-over-11974459

Bradley, James (2020) 'Terror, Hope, Anger, Kindness: The Complexity of Life as we Face the New Normal',*The Guardian*, 10 January. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/11/terror-hope-anger-kindness-the-complexity-of-life-as-we-face-the-new-normal

Brennan, Mark E. & Danielak, Silvia (2022) 'Too Small to Count? The Cumulative Impacts and Policy Implications of Small Disasters in the Sahel', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 68, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2021.102687

Diamond, Jared (2005) *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York: Viking.

Gaillard, J.C. (2019) 'Disaster Studies Inside Out', *Disasters*, 43(S1): S7-S17.

Guterres, António (2021) 'Secretary-General's Address to the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly',*United Nations*, 21 September. Available: https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/259283

Homer-Dixon, Thomas F. (2007) *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization* , London: Souvenir.

IPCC (2014) *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and, Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects* , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

IPSOS (2020) 'Around the World, People Yearn for Significant Change Rather than a Return to a 'Pre-COVID Normal'', 16 September. Available: https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-survey-unveils-profound-desire-changerather-return-how-life-and-world-were-covid-19

Jensen, Robert & Jackson, Wes (2022) *An Inconvenient Apocalypse: Environmental Collapse, Climate Crisis, and the Fate of Humanity*, Notre Dame: University of Indiana Press.

Klinenberg, Eric (2003) *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Knowles, Scott Gabriel (2011) *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America* , Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lambert, Simon (2022) 'Time Back! A Research Manifesto for Indigenous Urgencies,' in S. Matthewman (Ed.) *COVID-19: A Social Research Agenda*, Cheltenham: Elgar Research Agendas, pp. 61-84.

Matthewman, Steve (2021) 'Social Science in the Time of COVID-19',*Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, 18(1): 80-102.

Moore, Jason W. (2021) 'Unthinking the Anthropocene: Man and Nature in the Capitalocene', *Global Dialogue*, 11 (3). Available: https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/unthinking-the-anthropocene-man-and-nature-in-the-capitalocene

Oliver-Smith, Anthony (1994) 'Peru's Five Hundred Year Earthquake: Vulnerability in Historical Context', in Ann Varley (Ed.) *Disasters, Development and Environment*, London: John Wiley and Sons, pp. 31–48.

Remes, Jacob A. & Horowitz, Andy (2021) 'Introducing Critical Disaster Studies', *Critical Disaster Studies*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

The Salvage Collective (2021) *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene*, London & New York: Verso.

Servigne, Pablo & Stevens, Raphaël (2020) *How Everything Can Collapse: A Manual for our Times* , Cambridge: Polity.

Solnit, Rebecca (2009) *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* , New York: Penguin.

Spicer, André (2022) 'If 'Permacrisis' is the Word of 2022, What does 2023 Have in Store for Our Mental Health?', *The Guardian*, 30 December. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/30/permacrisis-word-of-2022-2023-mental-health

Spinazze, Gayle (2023) 'PRESS RELEASE: Doomsday Clock set at 90 seconds to midnight',*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 24 January. Available: https://thebulletin.org/2023/01/press-release-doomsday-clock-set-at-90-seconds-to-midnight/

Tierney, Kathleen J. (2007) 'From the Margins to the Mainstream? Disaster Research at the Crossroads',*Annual Review of Sociology*, 33: 503–525

Tierney, Kathleen J. (2010) 'Growth Machine Politics and the Social Production of Risk',*Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, 39(6): 660–663.

Tierney, Kathleen J. (2014) *The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience* , Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Trentmann, Frank (2009) 'Disruption is Normal: Blackouts, Breakdowns and the Elasticity of Everyday Life', in Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann and Richard Wilk (Eds*.) Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 67-84.

World Health Organisation (2023) 'Air Pollution'. Available: https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

World Inequality Lab (2022) *World Inequality Report 2022*. Available: https://wir2022.wid.world/executive-summary/

Yunkaporta, Tyson (2017) 'I'm Part of the World's Oldest Living Culture, But Could I Kill a Zombie with a Boomerang?' *The Guardian*, 26 September. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/sep/27/im-part-of-the-worlds-oldest-living-culture-but-could-i-kill-a-zombie-with-a-boomerang

[1] This term refers to the idea that humanity will be the major geological force for millennia. It is contentious. Many object to the idea that the entire species is to blame for our predicament. Capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and our human/non-human relations have also been identified as the key drivers of environmental degradation. Hence a range of alternative terms to capture our reality: Capitalocene, Manthropocene, Plantationocene and the Chthulucene.

[2] It would be tempting, but altogether wrong, to use a phrase like 'to account for the new normal' here. As James Bradley (2020) rightly points out, 'this is not the new normal. This is just the beginning. The rolling disasters we are now experiencing are the result of 1C of warming above pre-industrial averages'. The atmosphere continues to heat.

[3] Jason W. Moore (2021) writes that since the middle of the nineteenth contury, 'ninety corporations emitted two-thirds of industrial CO2 emissions. Today, the richest one percent emit twice as many greenhouse gases as the poorest fifty percent'.

[4] Counterintuitively, 'small' disasters can also be far more destructive than supposedly large ones. See: Mark E. Brennan & Silvia Danielak (2022).

About the author:

Steve Matthewman (he/him/ia) is Professor | Ahorangi, in Sociology | Mātauranga Hapori, in the Faculty of Arts | Te Kura Tangata, at The University of Auckland | Waipapa Taumata Rau, Aotearoa New Zealand. He is a sociologist of disasters. His recent book projects have been edited collections on COVID-19 and the social sciences, a decade of disaster experiences in Ōtautahi Christchurch (with Shinya Uekusa and Bruce Glavovich), and the third edition of *Being Sociological* (with Bruce Curtis and David Mayeda). He is Co-Principal Investigator of a Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden grant, 'The Residential Red Zone (RRZ) as Futures Lab: Placemaking in the Anthropocene'. Theoretically, it explores the connections between Critical Disaster Studies and Critical Future Studies. Practically, it examines what happens after managed retreat.