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Disasters and catastrophes
Laura Centemerri (CNRS, Paris) and Isabella Tomassi (ENS, Lyon)

Introduction and genealogy
Since its emergence in the 1950s, disaster research has been concerned mainly with the development of operational tools for crises management and intervention, resulting in a prevalence of inductive approaches and a limited interest in more general theoretical issues (Calhoun 2004; Quarantelli 2005; Tierney 2007, p. 504). As a research field, disaster studies are still dominated by approaches (mostly North American) that scarcely dialogue with developments in social theory and critical theory. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the theoretical–empirical research on disasters produced in non-English-speaking countries in either the global south or Europe. Gaillard (2019) denounced the persistence of a form of hegemony from the global north perspective in terms of both concepts and practices, despite the progressive centrality of the ‘vulnerability’ approach, which has sustained a critical turn in disaster research since it first appeared in the 1970s. In spite of this mixed picture, critical disasters research is today a field of increasing relevance for understanding the socioeconomic dynamics of the globalized world.

The notion of ‘disaster’ first emerged as a specific social sciences category in the United States in the historical conjuncture of the Cold War. Research on disasters was strongly influenced in the early days by governmental and military needs connected in particular with nuclear issues. More specifically, disasters were conceived by public authorities as laboratories for studying social and organizational behaviour in stressful situations. In this sense, disasters were seen as ‘a duplication of war’ and human communities as ‘organized bodies that have to react organically against aggression’ (Gilbert 1998, p. 4). In this view, the causes of disasters are situated either on the outside in the form of an external aggression or (less often) on the inside as an internal threat, as in the case of social unrest. As pointed out by Perry (2018), authors during this ‘classic period’ of disaster research would define disasters as ‘rapid onset events’ in which the impact or threat of an agent causes social disruption that requires readjustments. Early disaster studies thus focused on organizational and emergent social behaviour during and immediately following such disruptive events. Claude Gilbert (1998) distinguished this ‘disasters as war’ paradigm from two successive frameworks in which the definition of disasters was gradually reframed as ‘social
phenomena’ (Perry 2018). An important step in this direction was the ‘Hazards–Disaster Tradition’, which paid increasing attention to the socioecological preconditions, or drivers, of disasters (Oliver-Smith 1986). An understanding of social systems is crucial when defining and studying disasters ‘since they (not the agent) are the real locus of disruption and vulnerability’ (Perry 2018, p. 10).

In the 1970s, there was a shift away from the ‘realist’ techno-engineering and natural sciences approaches when geographers and anthropologists began to study disaster situations, especially so-called ‘natural catastrophes’, as political and cultural phenomena. In particular, critical perspectives from political ecology, environmental justice, feminism and postcolonial thought were progressively included in their studies (see Wisner et al. 1977; Cutter 1996; Fordham 1998; Gaillard 2019).

This has been especially true of the so-called ‘vulnerability approach’ to disasters, which holds that it is critical when discerning the nature of disasters to appreciate ‘the ways in which human systems place people at risk in relation to each other and to their environment – a relationship that can best be understood in terms of an individual’s, a household’s, a community’s or a society’s vulnerability’ (Hilhorst and Bankoff 2004, p. 2). This implies that disasters research should take into account a temporality that goes beyond that of the event.

Despite the existence of diverse theoretical and operative definitions of this ‘vulnerability’ notion, this approach to disasters implies that attention is paid to the observable variability in capacities to cope with damages (at the individual and collective levels) and to the sources of inequalities and social exclusion that heavily impair these capacities (Cutter et al. 2000). The vulnerability paradigm has also introduced an interest in ‘local knowledge’ and a critique of the coupling of development policies with top-down processes that increases the vulnerability of entire regions (Cuny 1983). However, it is also true that the notion of vulnerability, as we are going to discuss, has been progressively ‘emptied of its political and social essence’ (Gaillard 2019, p. 10).

The vulnerability approach usually maintains a link with a hazards perspective, but the idea that vulnerability is inherent in modes of social organization and their complexity has increasingly gained relevance. These developments have brought disaster research closer to
the sociology of risk and collective crises, with an emphasis on the relationship between disasters and uncertainty (see Gross, this volume)\(^3\).

In this third paradigm, disasters are defined as entirely social phenomena and are related to the shared perception of an inability to make sense of a situation that is otherwise seen as serious or worrying. Disasters are thus related to the loss of ‘key standpoints in common sense, and the difficulty of understanding reality through ordinary mental frameworks’ (Gilbert 1998, p. 9). This difficulty is considered to be generated by the growing complexity that characterizes the relationship, at the societal level, between human, ecological and technological systems. As shown by Perrow (1999), disasters are ‘normal’, unavoidable features of complex, highly connected technical systems.

The acceptance of non-anticipatable crises as inevitable features of complex societies explains the observable shift in disaster research from a discourse of prevention to one of resilience and preparedness. At the same time, an interpretation of disasters that incorporates sense-making activities emphasizes both ‘the intricate interaction between events, individual perceptions, media representations, political reactions, and government efforts at “meaning making”’ (Boin et al. 2018, p. 35) and an understanding of disasters as ‘windows of opportunity that competing interests can exploit for their advantage’ (Tierney 2007, p. 512).

This ‘constructivist’ interpretation implies that the ‘symbolisms of disasters’ and the diversity of social representations of risk and catastrophe need to be taken into account. It also calls for an investigation of the ‘social amplification of disasters and crises’ (Quarantelli et al. 2018) and of the production of ‘disasters as spectacle’ relating to the development of media coverage (Alexander 2005). In addition, it invites to extend the research on disasters beyond the temporality of the event to investigate ‘the decisions and actions of government, elites and their financial supporters, and global industries and financial institutions that make disasters inevitable’ (Tierney 2007, p. 509–510), linking disaster research with political ecology.

During the 1990s, an increase in the number of disasters and ‘emergencies’ was accompanied by the consolidation of an international field of activism and humanitarian organizations (see Calhoun 2004) and the professionalization of disaster planners and crisis managers. Influential scholars of the critical approach to disaster research (Ben Wisner and
Anthony Oliver Smith among others) were involved in the development of both these dynamics from their origins in the 1980s (Cabane and Revet 2015). More recently, new types of disasters have emerged from the interplay between the dynamics of global capitalism, the rise of the information society, the proliferation of transboundary crises and the emergence of ecological threats at the planetary level. They include climate change, pandemics, financial collapses and, after the events of 9/11, terrorism. According to Quarantelli et al. (2018, p. 61), ‘we are at another important historical juncture with the emergence of a new distinctive class of disasters and crises not often seen before’, a phenomenon defined by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck as the ‘world risk society’ (Beck 1999; 2006).

Cabane and Revet (2015) noted that this juncture is marked by a return to centrality of technical solutions and approaches to disasters that are dominated by the natural sciences, especially climate science, and a sidelining of social sciences, which are confined to the study of local adaptation and resilience capacities. Moreover, recent debates on the Anthropocene (see Domazet and Vukovic, this volume) have refuelled disaster scenarios that revolve around systemic collapse and global catastrophe and promoted a ‘climate catastrophism’ whose political consequences are the object of critical discussions (Chollet and Felli 2015; Jacobsen and Hunt, this volume).

**Problem-framing and key concepts**

As already mentioned, the notion of vulnerability emerged in the 1970s as a critical tool to counter the reductive understanding of disaster research that was focused exclusively on crisis management and disaster prevention. Methmann and Oels (2014) retraced the genealogy of this category. They highlighted three different interpretations of this concept in disaster research and disaster policies. According to the authors, the first use of the concept was the so-called ‘risk–hazard approach’, where vulnerability is a quantifiable condition that requires prevention measures consisting mainly in defining emergency plans. This approach prioritizes the technical–infrastructure perspective over political and socioeconomic perspectives. Policy measures inspired by this approach limit population participation and risk reinforcing a form of ‘environmental determinism’.
The second approach identified by Methmann and Oels was that of ‘social vulnerability’, which involves identifying groups that are ‘at risk’ (Blaikie et al. 2004) because of socioeconomic characteristics or other social determinants (age, gender, ethnicity) and reducing the gap that separates these vulnerable groups from the rest of the population. Crisis management measures are thus not sufficient to reduce social vulnerability, and structural interventions are needed. These interventions concern primarily the reduction of poverty and social exclusion, but there has been a progressive focus on gender issues in parallel with the development of feminist approaches to disaster research. According to Fordham (1998), disaster studies initially focused on women as invisible victims and then shifted towards issues of empowerment and empowerment policies (Fordham 1999). More recently, official programmes (like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015–30) have explicitly sustained female leadership in building resilience and coping with catastrophe.

At the same time, the social vulnerability argument can be used to justify top-down interventions that leave little room for participation, especially in countries in the Global South. The social vulnerability framework can thus sustain state interventionism, international development programmes and more recently ‘philanthrocapitalism’ initiatives (McGoey 2012). There is a form of continuity here, which is denounced, between the discourse of social vulnerability and the colonial gaze that inferiorizes the other either as an object of fear and a potential threat (and who therefore requires control) or as an object of compassion (who requires assistance) (see Giuliani 2017).

The third approach identified by Methmann and Oels is the most recent, having emerged around the 2000s. It links vulnerability and resilience and promotes a more active role of populations in disaster management, with a specific concern for gender minorities. The emphasis on resilience here leads to a focus on the specific characteristics of affected communities that help them respond ‘positively’ to disasters. As in the case of vulnerability, one of the main goals of disaster researchers in this approach has been to find a way to measure how resilient communities are and to design policy measures to increase resilience. When applied to disaster research, resilience is defined as ‘a system’s capacity to persist in its current state of functioning while facing disturbance and change, to adapt to future challenges, and to transform in ways that enhance its functioning’ (Keck and

Sakdapolrak 2013, p. 8). Social capital and a variety of other ‘capitals’ (including community and economic capitals) and capacities (such as improvisation and infrastructure resources) have been identified as quantifiable ‘elements of resilience’ (Kendra et al. 2018). The defining and measuring of capacities to persist, adapt and transform has led to a proliferation of ‘recipes’ that are based on implicit normative assumptions concerning what should be considered positive ways of responding to disaster. Against the proliferation of ‘recipes’, the alternative approach of the anthropology of dispositifs (Revet and Langumier 2015; see also Revet 2020) analyses how resilience concretely becomes a dominant framework and how this framework is contested or diverted.

The notion of resilience has the merit of drawing attention to the need for an interdisciplinary approach to disasters that takes into account the systemic intermingling of ecological, technical, socio-cultural and political factors at different scales. However, when approached from the perspective of ‘social resilience’, the community-based focus that this notion implicitly supports and the social morphology it encourages profoundly hinder its heuristic potential. In fact, the resilience framework has often been co-opted as a justification mobilized by neoliberal projects for withdrawing government support for universalistic welfare measures and more generally public infrastructure investments (Queneault 2016). Communities are then forced to compete for public, and increasingly private, funding to support resilience building. Consequently, the resilience framework in this form conceals the role of the structural factors that the social vulnerability approach had helped to highlight. For this reason, it has been defined as a ‘post-political’ framework (Swyngedouw 2010).

In post-Chernobyl Ukraine (Petryna 2013), post-Fukushima Japan (Hasegawa 2013) and post-Hurricane-Katrina New Orleans (Adams 2013), both the communities and individuals had to compete to ‘prove’ that their victimized conditions justified state assistance or compensation and that they qualified for it by showing that they were learning to become ‘resilient’ as a community of (acknowledged) victims. Each of these three cases shows how the ‘social resilience’ framework (see also Hall and Lamont 2013) promotes a specific normativity that is sustained by neoliberal policies and narratives and is based on individual and collective capacities to cope and creatively adapt to unavoidable catastrophes, which are seen as opportunities for change.
Moreover, the resilience approach has in some cases led to the use of a psychological approach to disaster relief in order to partially conceal larger socioecological implications\(^5\). The mental health consequences of disasters are an important issue for a disaster research agenda as is the specific consideration of people with a mental disability caught up in disaster situations (Lovell 2013). However, as Ribault (2019, p. 4) pointed out on the subject of resilience narratives after the Fukushima catastrophe, the emphasis on training and psychologically assisting people ‘to act upon themselves hygienically [sic] to measure and mitigate radiation exposure after catastrophic levels of contamination’ highlights adaptability at the individual and psychological levels while also masking the radical transformations to forms of living and the irreparable damage from radiation that nuclear exposure brings from both a biological and an ecological perspective (see also Kimura 2017).

In the same way, ‘nuclearists’ in Chernobyl have been promoting a ‘radiological culture’ (e.g. the use of a Geiger counter on a daily basis to govern everyday activities so as to reduce exposure to radiation) aimed at turning radioactivity into an ‘ordinary’ feature of the everyday life experience, de facto producing a form of collective ignorance (Topçu 2013). Along with resilience, preparedness is now the dominant framework for dealing with disaster situations, as Revet discussed in her ethnography of ‘Disasterland’ (2020). These two frameworks reflect the increasing pervasiveness of the theme of catastrophe – which is considered inevitable but also unpredictable and exceptional – that has accompanied the emergence of the ‘world risk society’. They sustain the aforementioned ongoing process of re-technicization and de-politicization in disaster research.

In line with Lakoff (2006, p.1), ‘preparedness’ is ‘both an ethos and a set of techniques for reflecting about and intervening in an uncertain, potentially catastrophic future’. It is based on ‘simulations designed to identify points of vulnerability’ (Keck 2015, p. 60) but also on ‘stocks’ and ‘sentinels’ (Keck 2015; see also 2020), and it points to a ‘new form of knowledge about collective life’ (Collier 2008, p. 231) that Collier (2008) defined as ‘enactment’. In a shift away from ‘the archival-statistical knowledge of social insurance’ that played a fundamental role in the development of a modern welfare culture, enactment ‘comes to “know” collective life not through the regular processes of population or society, but through the uncertain interaction of potential catastrophes with the existing elements of collective life’ (Collier 2008, p. 244). While they may be unpredictable, catastrophes are
not ungovernable, and new forms of knowledge and assessment are developing. In particular, catastrophe insurance is turning into a key instrument in reshaping ‘our political and moral landscape’ (Collier 2014, p. 288).

**Contentious issues and standpoints**

In 2007, the author, film-maker and climate activist Naomi Klein introduced the notion of ‘disaster capitalism’, which has since gained currency among critical disaster researchers and social movement activists (see Gunewardena and Schuller 2008; Fletcher 2012; Schuller and Maldonado 2016). In fact, despite a growing number of international initiatives aimed at disaster risk reduction, including the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990–1999) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015), the number of catastrophes has been rising steeply over the last two decades. At the same time, there has been a worldwide increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty, which is a proven cause of vulnerability and an accelerator of risk and disaster (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2019).

Disaster capitalism is one way to explain this apparent contradiction. According to Klein, ‘shock’ is a modus operandi of ‘neoliberal capitalism’ and a key component of its ‘accumulation by dispossession’ strategy (see Harvey 2005). As discussed by Fletcher (2012, p. 102), ‘there are two distinct yet interrelated elements in Klein’s disaster capitalism concept: 1) the neoliberalization of structures for governing resources formerly within the public domain and/or creation of markets for trade in previously non-monetized commodities; and 2) the exploitation of disasters for financial gain’. This means that crises and post-disaster situations are exploited on the one hand to support political reforms that tend to increase social vulnerability through reducing public support for ‘reproductive labour’ (Bhattacharya 2017) and on the other to put the interests of powerful economic lobbies at the forefront of the recovery.

Although the analytical clarity of this ‘disaster capitalism’ category has been questioned (see Wisner 2009), Klein’s book had the merit of drawing attention to the instrumental use of catastrophes for ‘advancing the political, ideological, and economic interests of transnational capitalist elite groups’ (Schuller and Maldonado 2016, p. 62; see also Lowenstein 2018; Imperiale and Vanclay 2020). According to this perspective, there are
multiple opportunities to capitalize on disasters, not just during the recovery phase but also in relation to the activities of ‘imagining and planning’ for future disasters. Future disasters are opportunities to orient societies’ development in ways that often lie ‘outside political accountability’ (Fortun et al. 2017, p. 1011). In addition, the role played by new insurance schemes connected with financial instruments is also increasingly relevant (Keucheyan 2017).

According to Imperiale and Vanclay (2020, p. 2), it is important when researching disaster capitalism to pay attention to ‘(i) the institutional mechanism by which states enable disaster capitalism to become implemented at the local level; (ii) the social risks that enable it to emerge at all levels of society; (iii) the worldview that accompanies it; and (iv) the consequences it has on local communities’ capacities to collectively learn, transform and build community resilience’. This means that disaster capitalism can have many faces and that cultural and institutional dimensions play a crucial role in explaining how it becomes possible to capitalize on disasters in ways that can vary considerably according to context. If we take on the power to automatically ensure the alignment of actors’ practices and ‘normative expectations’ (Dodier and Barbot 2016), there is the risk we may overlook any frictions or ignore their importance, both in the making and unmaking of hegemony (Tsing 2005, p. 6).

In their case study of the post-earthquake reconstruction efforts in L’Aquila (Italy), for example, Imperiale and Vanclay showed how disaster capitalism exploited institutional and financial strategies, which were interwoven with the ‘mechanisms’ that states usually mobilize in disaster situations such as ‘the command-and-control approach, emergency powers and top-down planning’ (Imperiale and Vanclay 2020, p. 3).

In our view, research on disaster capitalism should be focused first and foremost on the long-term analysis of how upstream conditions of vulnerability can be related to the processes of exploitation that are the drivers of vulnerability. The emphasis on disasters and ‘shocks’ should not lead us to neglect other mechanisms that can, according to the local contexts of occurrence, propel neoliberalism. For example, as discussed by Woods (2017) in the case of New Orleans, the Hurricane Katrina disaster revealed long-standing structures of domination related to the plantation economy (see also Villanueva and Cobiàn 2019). In other words, even if the catastrophe capitalism ‘machine’ is increasingly globalized and
intertwined with a humanitarian purpose (Fassin, 2010), the context and its socioeconomic history are important. As Villanueva and Cobiàn (2019, p.1) pointed out, disaster capitalism is in many cases only ‘the latest rendition of a long legacy of colonial capitalism’.

Second, it is important that the disaster management phase, which can last for years, is examined in order to show how, while ordinary channels of profit creation are suspended, others emerge that are made socially acceptable by the way in which the disaster event and its consequences have been framed. Particularly important in this respect are the processes of sense-making concerning liability. Social blaming, corruption and the inadequacy of structures are all examples of liability frameworks that contribute to determining the course of the recovery phase.

Lastly, in the recovery phase, decisions are taken that heavily impact on future capacities to cope with disasters and that usually create lucrative opportunities, including for criminal groups. The ‘Build Back Better’ (BBB) paradigm is today dominant in addressing reconstruction after disasters. This catchphrase was coined by the former US president Bill Clinton in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and was developed into a list of ten propositions conceived as operational guidelines for the humanitarian post-disaster intervention. As shown by Benadusi (2015: 93) for the case of Sri Lanka, however, the direct importation of this idea, with no public discussion of its assumptions and aim, can encourage the proliferation of conflicting interpretations of the slogan. In fact, the presumed neutral, technical nature of the BBB paradigm masks the normativity that is implicit in what ‘better’ means. As Fernandez and Iftekhar discussed (2019, p. 2), ‘better’ can have multiple interpretations: ‘more modern, more environment-friendly, more aesthetically appealing, more oriented towards livelihoods, more resistant to natural hazards, faster, stronger, more equitable, etc.’. There is therefore no point in trying to set generalised indicators to ‘measure’ change in terms of BBB. Many researchers in the field of disasters, as well as working on measuring resilience capacity, are nevertheless preoccupied with creating just such a measure. In fact the definition of what ‘better’ means is (or should be) a political choice made with the involvement of those directly concerned with the reconstruction process. This example reveals how concepts of failure and success, which are used as interpretative categories with a strong performative character, still heavily influence current academic research on disasters.
Open questions and transformative potential

As we write, the world is facing the consequences of a pandemic disease known as Covid-19, which is caused by a new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), whose outbreak was first reported in the city of Wuhan in central China’s Hubei Province in December 2019.

Unprecedented measures – including approximately one third of humanity confined to their homes – have been put in place to respond to the emergency. Our societies appear to have been ‘unprepared’ to face this global threat, which was nevertheless largely predictable and predicted (see Lakoff 2017). The global economy is heading towards a crisis of unprecedented gravity. There is no doubt that the response to this crisis will mark a major turning point for the future of our societies and indeed our planet in an increasingly globalized world.

From the point of view of disaster research, the evidence is now overwhelming. Ecological degradation together with injustice and social exclusion are the issues that need to be urgently addressed for effective disaster risk reduction. Structural measures directed towards reducing social vulnerability must go hand in hand with a collective building of systemic resilience capacity, which is quite different from the moralizing use of the injunction to individual and community resilience.

The present situation highlights issues that remain open for further investigation in disaster research. First and foremost among them is the relationship between disasters and law. We owe to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, p. 20) the idea that ‘in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule’. Here is not the place for an in-depth discussion of Agamben’s concept of the state of exception (see Huysmans 2008; Goupy 2017), however, as noted by Illner and Holm (2016, p. 57), the generalized use of the state of exception ‘jargon’, especially after 9/11, to describe a world increasingly confronted with disasters can be problematic, since its ‘elevation’ to ‘a general social condition can also make it seem unspecific and inept at analysing specific disaster situations’. Following Goupy (2017), we should focus on the question of ‘exceptionality’ as an argument mobilized by a variety of actors in governments, administrative structures, the administration of justice and
social movements to define different things (norms and political practices) for a variety of purposes while also questioning the reasons behind the centrality gained by this discourse. Another important issue related to law and disasters is what Lauta (2016) called the increasing, observable ‘juridification’ of disaster, that is, recourse to legal actions in order to claim reparation for disaster victims. The growing complexity of disaster torts that law is called on to redress requires innovative legal ideas (e.g. ecocide). The same is true if we consider the increasing reliance on technology in disaster management and recovery. In both cases, there is the need for a critical investigation of the relationships between law, science and technology.

The growing interconnectedness between disaster and technological innovation is particularly clear in the way disaster risk reduction and disaster recovery are becoming an opportunity to radically transform the urban space in ways that are influenced by the ‘smart city’ paradigm (for a definition see Kondepudi et al. 2015; see March, this volume).

From the smart-city planning perspective, post-disaster reconstruction and disaster prevention are conceived as opportunities to transform public spaces and services so as to create new market opportunities through technological solutions provided by private companies such as IBM, Cisco and Amazon. Case studies are needed in order to clarify the degree to which the smart city, rather than providing a response to the risk of catastrophe, is in fact the completion of a historical process of privatization and tertiarization of the urban space, which actually increases its vulnerability through sustaining the production and reproduction of inequalities. In particular, the smart-city model implies the assumption that the solution to social problems is mainly technical and that the regulation of ecosystems is based on the control of individual behaviours. Ecological concerns thus become the justification for control apparatuses that in turn become acceptable because of the need to implement efficient risk management tools. The impact of the ‘digital revolution’ on urban planning, as the technical fix for the ecological crisis, is thus not just a research topic, it is also clearly a political problem when we consider the power already acquired by private companies in shaping urban life and space.

Even if disasters management continues to be seen by many as a technocratic issue, disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery are highly political matters that call, among other things, for an increased reflexivity in the way we as researchers approach
fieldwork. As Schuller and Maldonado (2016, p. 67) asked, ‘Are we “capitalizing on catastrophe”, like the entities that we analyse and sometimes critique?’ According to the anthropologist Mara Benadusi (2017, p. 15, translated from Italian), in order to contribute to the development of publicly relevant and politically aware disaster research, it is necessary to pay attention to the diversity of ‘languages, positions, actors and publics in the hope that this polymorphism (...) will help to develop knowledge and practices that are useful to promote not only (...) academic essays but also social interventions that are truly capable of “undoing” the increasingly meaningless public decisions that are taken in the name of disasters’. In contrast to the ‘extractivist’ forms of research on disasters, there have been independent ‘public collective research’ initiatives to support social transformative processes and the self-organization of local communities. Moreover, the engagement of local researchers with direct experience of the disaster situation in question (see also Tomassi and Forino 2019) echoes Gaillard’s invitation (2019, p. 9) to ‘encourage local researchers who know best local contexts to study local disasters’.

Critical disaster researchers should also develop a stronger connection with social movements, given the importance acquired by the systemic collapse scenario in contemporary environmental movements like Extinction Rebellion and the collapsology movement in France. Such transdisciplinary collaborations are of great importance in the effort to reclaim the positive and democratic significance of uncertainty and avoid the (scientifically unwarranted but interest-motivated) reduction of possibility to probability, where uncertainty becomes a calculable risk that is open to capitalist investment (see Chollet and Felli 2009). In a ‘ruined world’, we need disaster researchers to engage in the collective quest for liveable ways to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016), while ‘repairing’ (see Centemeri et al. 2021) injustices and socio-technical and ecological interdependencies.

Notes

2 For a more detailed reconstruction, see Tierney (2007), Cabane and Revet (2015), Dahlberg et al. (2016) and Fortun et al. (2017).
4 For a review of the now extensive literature on resilience, see Alexander (2013). For a discussion of the ‘genealogies of resilience’, see Walker and Cooper (2011).
On the interlinking of psychological and social dimensions in the thinking on welfare, see Stenner and Taylor (2008). On the category of trauma and its increasing centrality in crisis situations, see Fassin and Rechtman (2009).

See the case of the research group ‘Emidio di Treviri’, which was set up in the wake of the August 2016 Central Italy earthquake (Olori and Menghi 2019).

On the case of ‘collapsology’, see Allard et al. (2019). See also Centemeri (2019).
References


Abstract
The chapter retraces the birth and development of disaster research in the social sciences and critically discusses the main frameworks that have emerged and driven disaster studies over the past 50 years: vulnerability and, more recently, resilience and preparedness. Where the vulnerability approach revealed since the 1970s the role of social inequalities in explaining disasters, the paradigms of resilience and preparedness reflect the increasing pervasiveness of the theme of the catastrophe that has accompanied the emergence of the Anthropocene. They sustain an ongoing process of re-technicization and de-politicization in disaster research. Against this tendency, critical approaches to the study of disasters investigate the structural link between disasters and capitalism and between capitalism and the ecological crisis. The final section identifies some emerging issues: the growing intertwining between disasters and technological innovation, the generalization of the argument of exceptionality and the emergence of forms of mobilizations motivated by 'climate catastrophism'.

Keywords
vulnerability, resilience, preparedness, disaster, recovery, catastrophe

Bio
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