

Disasters and Risks: from Empiricism to Criticism, Paris, France

Organized by the Anthropological Research on Disasters and Risks Association (ACRA, <http://www.arcra.fr/>), the international symposium Disasters and Risks: from Empiricism to Criticism, was held in CERI Sciences Po Paris on June 17-18, 2010. 16 participants (sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, historians) from different countries of Europe (France, Italy, Sweden, Portugal) and Latin America presented their work. Around 50 people assisted the two day event and discussions were held by the international scientific committee¹.

Why empiricism and criticism? The aim of the symposium was to go forward the classical world tour of risks and disasters that builds up accounts from emblematic places and noted dates. The symposium was organized around three main themes:

1. Methodological reflections on corpuses, on the practice of fieldwork in specific contexts, and on the archives chosen to investigate disasters and risks. The purpose of this methodological entry was to understand how the research object of risks and disasters is constructed.

2. Studies that analyze the hybrid practices, reconfigurations and adaptations provoked by disaster and risk situations, and works that investigate the confrontation between different types of knowledge, circulation of tools, actors or interacting social worlds' responses.

3. Analyses of the political figurations of disaster and risk situations, and of the resources used by the different actors to elaborate critiques, and develop forms of appropriation or

¹ Olivier Borraz, sociologist (CSO, Sciences-Po-CNRS, France); Thierry Coanus, urban engineer (RIVES, UMR CNRS EVS, France); Nicolas Dodier, sociologist (GSPM, EHESS, France); Virginia Garcias Acosta, anthropologist (CIESAS, Mexico); Claude Gilbert, politologist (PACTE/MSH-Alpes, CNRS, France); Julien Langumier, anthropologist (RIVES, UMR CNRS EVS, France); Anthony Oliver-Smith, anthropologist (University of Florida, USA); Grégory Quenet, historian (Université Versailles Saint Quentin, France); Cécile Quesada-Moaeteau, anthropologist ('Atenisi Institute(Tonga)-CREDO, France); Sandrine Revet, anthropologist (CERI, Sciences Po-CNRS, France); Françoise Zonabend, anthropologist (LAS, EHESS, France).

resistance against foreign operations, often presented, by their instigators, as “humanitarian” or “technical” and therefore outside the political field.

The organizers proposed disasters and risks should be considered as “ordinary” subjects for social sciences, despite the extraordinary contexts they create for people and the researcher. They invited the participants to develop the empirical aspect of their studies. They also encouraged critical analysis, which means the observation of what happens within the risk or disaster situations more than finding out solutions or formulating recommendations. Through fieldworks and grounded observations, researchers proposed critical analysis but also analysis of the critiques developed by actors and people involved in the crisis management. The inaugural conference given by Professor Anthony Oliver-Smith made clear the recent evolutions of the risk and disaster research field and helped situating the contribution of the symposium following the orientation from empiricism to criticism.

The main result of these two intense debating days is, without doubt, the interest of the comparative perspective and the relevancy of trying to work around common questions despite the very different situations that are studied. Several participants agreed that the topics of risk and disaster should not be split. For instance, Frédéric Keck analyses the avian flu in Hong Kong through complex and structured constructions such as the sanitary risk, the food chain risk or the plague itself whose prevention is also a crisis situation. Working on Seveso disaster, Laura Centemeri studies the historicity from the explosion of the chemical factory in 1976 to the long term dioxin contamination. Juanita Lopez Pelaez focuses in Medellin in Columbia on “small disasters”, daily accidents which impact the daily lives of residents living in informal settlements. These damages are not considered as disasters by the inhabitants and neither are they solved by local authorities who don’t want to implement basic amenities in these districts. With these studies, what is at stake is the way some situations are qualified – or not – as risks or disasters.

The discussion on methods and especially ways of investigating in ethnographical field work was also very detailed. The majority of the participants focused on local scale in order to show the major role played by context to explain the post-disaster social and historical dynamics. Some anthropologists proposed different ethnographical methods for carrying out the field work. Susann Ullberg, for instance, works on the recent floods of Santa Fe in Argentina through a “translocal” ethnography of the city guided by the disaster and its “memoryscape”. On the opposite, Séverine Durand works on Lattes village in the South of France where flood risk seems to have disappeared from everyone’s mind after some huge

dike works. To study the presence or absence of risk in the daily life without interfering with it, she has chosen not to reveal the subject of her research to the inhabitants.

Another point appeared to be common to various contributions. It concerns the fact that risk and disasters situations contribute to constructing in some way a “fictional space”. First of all, the “back to normal” injunction of disaster managers appears to be a fiction, since the observation of social practices shows instead many transformations, reconfigurations, repositioning etc. Other fictions appeared in the presentations: Mara Benadussi for instance shows through her study of the intervention post tsunami in Sri Lanka that the construction of the victim’s identity is a response to the demand of the international reconstruction programs. The “good victim” fiction and the “victims’ community” fiction authorize both the inhabitants and the organizations to elaborate new practices and discourses that contribute in return to the construction of a new reality. The fiction is also at the centre of the risk concept, since the temporality of risk is of a not yet occurred event. Planned, measured, modelled, estimated, the risk management leads to the construction of scenarios that contribute to construct reality. The study of Seveso by Laura Centemeri, the simulations of pandemic flues by Frédéric Keck, the public meetings on The New-Orleans Masterplan after Katrina analyzed by Samuel Bordreuil and Anne Lovell or the simulation of floods in Alma Mata in the historical studied by Marc Elie all pointed this construction of a fictional space and time.

Most of the presentations participated to the criticism of the idea of “risk culture”, which is currently a powerful paradigm of risk analysis. Actually, through this expression technicians try to educate people to “rational way” of facing disasters and risks – which corresponds to their technical rationality. As a consequence, the expression points also out the field of investigation dedicated to social sciences, focusing only on populations and not scientific, technical or political actors. Anne-Marie Granet Abisset presented a personal experience of collaboration with researchers from hard sciences and the difficulty for her, as a historian, to make investigations beyond local people. Fabien Nathan criticized the risk perception approaches through the analysis of the strategies of the inhabitants of informal quarters of La Paz in Bolivia. The French researchers group Zwarterook noticed the lack of participation of the inhabitants in consultation meetings for industrial risks prevention which are supposed to be the place of a shared “risk culture”. Théo Blanchard rejected the idea of fatalism and referred also to local strategies developed in the 18th century in France to obtain help and assistance from the royal authorities. In her study of a Mam community of the south-western Guatemalan Altiplano, Julie Hermesse highlighted hybrid representation’s systems (Maya traditional, evangelic millenarian and scientific) of the 2005 tropical storm Stan. The coexistence and the combination of different symbolic systems demonstrate the difficulty to

identify a single “risk culture”. 40 years after the earthquake of 1968 in the Valley of Belice in Sicilia, the documentary film of Maria-Anita Palumbo and Elia Romanelli focused on the evolutions of urbanisation and memory across time. These temporal dynamics make once more the idea of a fixed and stable “risk culture” a fiction.

The symposium was a very rich and dense event that showed the importance of crossing disciplines and fieldwork observations on disasters and risks situations. Some research directions could have been deepened even more. For instance, the organizers wanted to encourage reflections about the way practices and discourses circulate from the international level to the national and the local ones and between expert and lay spheres. Some communications such as the work of Pascale Metzger about the Chikungunya epidemic in La Reunion, or the study of the use of expert knowledge by the inhabitants of a flood prone zone in Costa Rica by Cloe Vallette gave some information about this circulations process, but the theme would deserve more specific consideration. More attention should be paid to the way local and global connect today through disasters and risks situations. Future events should, we hope, allow advancing this perspective! The program of the symposium can be found in the ARCRA webpage: <http://www.arcra.fr/spip.php?article36>.

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