

*Call for papers*  
**Disaster and risk: from empiricism to criticism**

International symposium – 17<sup>h</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 in Paris (CERI-EHESS)

The widespread media coverage of disasters and our growing and unavoidable awareness of their increasing frequency and intensity under the influence of global warming have been prompting social science to treat disasters and “at risk” situations as research questions during the last two decades. Besides, a lot of studies – from the sociology of politics to the sociology of rights through the sociology of sciences or organisations – have developed in France during the last decade in order to understand risks generated by technological and industrial progress (GMO, mobile phones, nuclear...) and the social and political processes appearing in their wake on the public scene (“framing a public problem into collective risk”, mobilisations, formation of “victim groups”...). However, despite the relevance and importance of these studies, the angles chosen sometimes lead to a reduction of the analysis of disasters to presuppositions such as an exception or an emergency, and confine the understanding of risk to the practical categories of vulnerability/resilience/prevention. Moreover, the approaches focusing on the representations elaborated by the populations are sometimes used to propose a culturalist analysis that relies on a dichotomy between experts and laypeople. In order to go beyond these reductions and frontiers, this symposium proposes to consider disasters and risk as a continuum of construction (the disaster being presented as the horizon of risk), by dealing with the local processes that arise during such situations, and by highlighting the complexity of involved dynamics. The “local” is here considered in a permanent interaction with other scales (global or national through the post-emergency assistance world and the operational systems of prevention, care or reconstruction...).

It is still common to notice, in some studies on disasters, that attention focuses first on the emergency and then on the first aid and immediate assistance activities, underlying the exceptional attributes of the situation and the freezing of crisis time. In the same spirit, a lot of studies focus on the prevention activities that follow a disaster, thus also defining the time frame as exceptional and often failing to recognise the ordinary time and daily routine involved. However, the notion of a “frozen time” before a “return to normal life” should be questioned in the light of field research and empirical bodies (contemporary or historical) that beg to integrate disasters into longer time frames and deal with the daily life recreated by local actors. Thus, emergency situations caused by disasters of any kind give birth to a specific time frame during which many issues and social dynamics emerge and new configurations arise between groups. Notably, the interventions of States and charitable or humanitarian actors on behalf of populations, as well as the implementation of prevention plans, modify local context. The interaction between the practices of populations and those of the aid or risk prevention institutions involve a confrontation between different worlds, between institutional actors and inhabitants, between humanitarian actors and beneficiaries, between media stories and experience, between local and global. From that perspective, the “return to normal life” may appear as the first fiction of disasters.

“At risk” situations and disasters also often involve culturalist interpretations that rely on the generic and opposing concepts of victim and rescuer, fatalism and management, rational and irrational. We can also find this dichotomy in the studies that deal with interpretations of disasters and contrast the concept of “calamity” to the post-modern concept of “risk”. However, the concepts of “risk culture” and “disaster sub-culture” are not sufficient to interpret all the empirical data. On the contrary, ethnographic investigations or, in a historical perspective, archive research, reveal hybrid processes between different logics and ancient practices of risk management relying on know-how born from an empirical knowledge of the environment as well as complex belief systems. The logic of “coping with” risk and disasters leads all the actors (inhabitants, institutional authorities, managers...) to perpetual compromise, questioning the boundaries some studies draw in terms of “culture”, thus participating in a kind of ideal invention of the collective drama.

Finally, the disaster is often considered as an event that puts the vulnerability of a system to the test or reveals the resilience potential of a society or a social group. However, the notions of resilience and vulnerability seem unlikely to convey the proliferation of these local reconfigurations, of the many definitions elaborated by the inhabitants of territories affected by disasters or qualified as “at risk”. The issues of resettlement, reconstruction and housing; the uses of identity resources and disaster politics by the “victims”, or of the resources of prevention plans by the “vulnerable populations”; the normative and competitive interventions of humanitarian actors, rescue organisations and prevention actors; the entry on the political scene of different groups; the reconfiguration of collective memories through a renewed relationship with the past; the quest for explanations through logics of blame attribution and the search for people responsible for the drama represent so many complex dynamics that are fundamental to understand. All these issues must be put into perspective with larger dynamics that can be observed in interactions with the sphere of international actors that intervene in risk and disaster situations, unveiling the contemporary transformation of the notion of security. Thanks to empirical bodies, social science provides vital knowledge about these rich and complex contexts.

The symposium thus calls for social science research (contemporary and historical) that relies on empirical studies (fieldwork, research in the archives...) to study the social and political dynamics involved in these situations and more specifically analyse the interactions between populations and the different actors that intervene to prevent or manage collective drama. The reflection will be organised along three main lines:

**1. From the event to the research object**

Research will be presented that aims at restoring the density and depth characterising disasters and risk situations by reinserting them inside dynamic and heuristic scales, that is, by analysing these events and situations from perspectives that articulate micro and macro, local and global, long time frames and emergency, small disasters and big catastrophes, etc.... The methodological reflections on corpuses, on the practice of fieldwork in these specific contexts, or on the archives chosen to investigate these topics also help to understand how a research object is constructed from the themes of risk and disaster.

**2. Beyond the “risk culture” : confrontation and circulation of knowledge and practice**

We will introduce studies that analyse hybrid practice, reconfiguration and adaptation born from disaster and risk situations. Hoping to go beyond a certain form of “culturalism” that leads to simplistic dichotomies between “expert” and “profane” knowledge and practices, we encourage papers that investigate confrontation between different types of knowledge and analyse the circulation of tools, actors or practice between the different interacting social worlds.

**3. The politics of disaster and risk**

By reintroducing the analysis of the dynamics that are born within risk or disaster situations, we want to understand the political use of these situations by different actors. Notably, what are the resources they use to elaborate critiques, rally together and develop forms of appropriation or of resistance against “governance” operations, often presented, by their instigators, as outside the political field, or analysed by social sciences in terms of “biopolitics”? By observing, from local fields, the interventions of different national and international actors (States, International Organisations, Non Governmental Organisations) we will question the transformations of the concept of security these interventions – and their legitimization processes – contribute to.

**Organisation of the Symposium:**

Association for the Research on Catastrophes and Risks in Anthropology (ARCRA):  
<http://www.arcra.fr/>

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### **Scientific Committee**

Olivier Borraz, sociologist (CSO, Sciences-Po-CNRS)

Thierry Coanus, urban engineer (RIVES, UMR CNRS EVS)

Nicolas Dodier, sociologist (GSPM, EHESS)

Virginia Garcias Acosta, anthropologist (CIESAS, Mexico)

Claude Gilbert, politologist (PACTE/MSH-Alpes, CNRS)

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Anthony Oliver-Smith, anthropologist (University of Florida)

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Sandrine Revet, anthropologist (CERI, Sciences Po-CNRS)

Françoise Zonabend, anthropologist (LAS, EHESS)

### **Practical details and schedule**

Paper proposals, in French and English, must be sent to the symposium organisers before the **30<sup>th</sup> of June 2009**. They must imperatively mention:

1. The title of the communication
2. A summary from 300 to 600 words maximum
3. The last name and first name of the author or of the co-authors
4. Their position
5. Their discipline
6. Their institution
7. Their electronic mail

The proposals must be sent to:

[langumier@yahoo.fr](mailto:langumier@yahoo.fr)

[quesada.moaeteau@gmail.com](mailto:quesada.moaeteau@gmail.com)

[revet@ceri-sciences-po.org](mailto:revet@ceri-sciences-po.org)

The scientific committee will select the communications and announce its choice no later than the 15<sup>th</sup> of October. The final papers must be sent before the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2010. The symposium will take place in Paris on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2010.