

Disasters and Pre-industrial Societies: Historiographic Trends and Comparative Perspectives

Monica Juneja* and Franz Mauelshagen**

The study of disasters in a historical frame is a relatively young field opened up in response to a contemporary awakening to the implications of such calamities across the globe, ever since they have become a subject of

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*Visiting Professor, Emory University, Atlanta. E-mail: mojuneja@hotmail.com

**Department of History, University of Zurich. E-mail: f.mauelshagen@access.unizh.ch

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intensive media reporting and policy-making at the international level. Concerns of the present have provided impulses to historians and social scientists in two directions: they have triggered off an engagement with the history of disasters during the past centuries, and they have drawn attention to the discursive framework within which the discussion of disaster takes place, both in the present and the past. It has been pointed out that the well-worn paradigm that once separated ‘salubrious’ areas of the globe from those which were more prone to disease and mortality has come to seamlessly merge into representations of those regions now construed as ‘unsafe’ because of their proneness to disaster.¹ Recent discussions of the extent to which disasters are ‘natural’ or induced by social factors—a question which will be taken up at some length further on—have in their turn dovetailed with international deliberations on ‘development’ and, implicitly, its absence, the latter held to be synonymous with backwardness, passivity and the inability to cope with the consequences of disasters. Any meaningful discussion of what makes societies and populations particularly vulnerable to natural hazards and of the role of local agency in devising measures of relief that may not necessarily conform to those envisaged by technocrats, calls for recovering the multiple and varied histories of communities and their ways of coping with natural disasters in the past. Linear theories of progress and the preconceived typologies that emanate from them end up de-historicising the notion of disaster and flattening the spectrum of human and social responses to it. The articles brought together in this collection are a step in the direction of restoring these histories to communities of the past and across cultures who have grappled with natural disaster, devised measures to deal with them and sought ways of inscribing that experience in collective memory.

This collection of articles is possibly the first attempt in the emerging field of historical disaster studies to investigate the adaptability and agency of pre-industrial societies on a global scale. *The Medieval History Journal*, with its transcultural and transregional orientation is an eminently appropriate forum to undertake this exercise. Dismantling of hegemonic discourses involves making place for social and cultural plurality, so as to come to grips with multiple understandings, interpretations and responses

¹ Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Bankoff, ‘Rendering the World Unsafe’; see also Astrid Meier’s contribution to this collection.

to disaster in a global context. Such an enterprise presents a series of methodological problems—beginning with the issue of language and conceptual categories. While the individual case studies discussed here move from one region to another, seek to recover the understandings and responses of European and non-European cultures, accommodating this plurality within a single linguistic and analytical frame raises the question of how to find a common conceptual vocabulary that would bridge the gap between the languages of sources and the analytical language of international research and communication. This collection addresses this problem as a first step towards writing multiple and shared histories within a common frame. It proposes that disaster studies transcend not only the boundaries between disciplines but also those between historiographies.²

Looking at the ways in which the experience of disasters has shaped societies and cultures in different regions also requires a flexible chronological framework. The genesis and impact of disasters, the latter themselves often ‘short-term events’, can often be measured only in long-term units: this involves straddling and moving between the three chronological frames in the Braudelian sense—that of *histoire événementielle*, the *longue durée* and the *histoire immobile*. The latter time dimension has been introduced by historical climatology, a field closely related to disaster studies and which investigates long-term climate change over several centuries. The examination of how recurrent disasters over centuries have sedimented into collective memories also takes us back and forth between past and present (see Kempe in this issue). The contributions to this collection therefore can hardly be confined within the strict chronological boundaries which the historiography of Europe has marked as signposts of the ‘medieval’. The common structural factor however is that the societies analysed here represent those of a pre-instrument age, one that lasted well into the twentieth century in certain regions of the world: all these societies have been designated as pre-industrial.

These issues will be handled in some depth in the following sections of our Introduction. We begin by charting the emergence of historical disaster studies as a sub-discipline within international historiography,

² The theoretical implications of globally-oriented histories that however marginalise certain historiographies have been discussed in depth in Juneja and Pernau, ‘Lost in Translation?’

examine the relationship of historical disaster studies with neighbouring disciplines, and engage in a discussion of analytical concepts and the methodological problems that a comparative and transcultural perspective throws up.

Emergence of Historical Disaster Studies

Disaster studies are a highly interdisciplinary field of research, one that has emerged as the site of important international debates. In view of the fact that the engagement of historians with this growing discourse dates to no longer than two decades, the development of *historical* disaster studies needs to be located and problematised within wider interdisciplinary contexts. Such an approach is justified also by the fact that historians working on disaster drew, and continue to draw, much of their inspiration from theoretical and methodological exercises outside of their own discipline.

James K. Mitchell has traced the interest of the social sciences (at least in the US) in disaster to the bombing surveys of World War II, as well as to pioneer research on flood assessment and risk analysis in the 1930s.³ Risk analyses in the insurance and reinsurance business may well extend the temporal frame of these origins. However, Greg Bankoff has suggested that,

the preoccupation with physical damages and statistics of all descriptions, both as assessments of loss and as measurements of recovery, probably owes its origins to these beginnings. The identification of disasters as purely physical occurrences (typhoons, floods, earthquakes and initially also bombings and explosions) that affect people who have the misfortune to be simply in the wrong place at the wrong time gave rise to a preoccupation with technological solutions for the protection of infrastructure and exposed populations.⁴

All in all, for three or four decades after World War II social scientists regarded disasters as unpredictable and, thus, unavoidable extreme events—as a divergence from normalcy that required a technocratic response. According to Oliver-Smith, ‘a new perspective’ has emerged since the

³ See also (for geography) Geipel, *Naturrisiken*; Hewitt, *Regions of Risk*: 3–4; Quarantelli, *What is a Disaster?*: 1.

⁴ Bankoff, ‘Time is of the Essence’: 24–25.

early 1980s ‘that views hazards as basic elements of environments and as constructed features of human systems’,⁵ though older views ‘have proven surprisingly enduring’.⁶

The new approach to the study of disasters may be characterised by at least two essentials framing a basic consensus. First, the premise that disasters are not natural, but social phenomena, even if triggered by extreme natural events. Extreme events may occur at any place, any time. They only turn into a disaster if societies are affected. The term *natural hazard* denotes the potentiality of disaster, triggered by an extreme natural event—a certain *risk* that may be assessed more precisely by statistical means (provided that requisite data are available). Disasters occur when potential factors, at least some of them, become real. Such occurrences are recorded in terms of material damage, harm or loss of lives. The second area of consensus that marks new perspectives in the study of disasters is the conviction that within societies affected by disaster the chain of causes leads back into complex economic, political and social configurations, which tend to place certain societies, or groups within a society, at higher risks than others. It is now a common practice to cluster these conditions around the term *social vulnerability*. Social vulnerability has become a key concept while accounting for the generally social character of disasters. The importance attributed to this aspect has made society’s exposure to hazards the core issue of research.

Idle as the question whether the historical sciences are on the threshold of a geographical turn may be, there is no doubt that the results, methods, and concepts developed by geographers and social scientists could be usefully applied within historical disaster studies. Research by historians, important examples of which are present in this collection, has begun to address several questions which could be summarised as follows. The first step involves basic research in order to reconstruct extreme events triggered by natural factors (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, extreme weather, climate change, etc.). Historical records—written sources in particular—are often the only evidence that allows us to draw conclusions on the frequency and severity of such events in the pre-instrumental period, which lasted into the nineteenth century in Europe and well into the twentieth century outside Europe. Following from this exercise in

⁵ Oliver-Smith, ‘Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters’: 304.

⁶ Again Bankoff, ‘Time is of the Essence’: 25.

reconstruction is an investigation of the historical conditions that produce social vulnerability. All disasters have a temporal dimension and may be understood as the result of complex, historically induced causal connections. Which are the social, economic or cultural factors that expose societies to natural hazards or motivate them to take risks? How are these factors to be assessed? And how important is time for each of them? How deeply are these factors rooted in the histories of societies?

A third dimension which the investigation of disaster has begun to address in order to understand agency in historical perspective is that of strategies to cope with disaster—its mitigation and prevention—in the past and their meaning for the present. How do societies succeed in dealing with natural hazards in their environment and how sustainable are these efforts? What kinds of interpretive models (for example, religious or scientific) are involved in such processes (cultural construction of disasters)? Do societies learn from experience? Which adaptive processes can be identified at the intersection of culture and nature and how can they be described? Closely connected with these questions is the investigation of typical regions of risk, characterised by certain natural hazards. Disasters can no longer be regarded as single exceptional cases. Repetitive events are at the centre of interest because they allow the study of social risk management in a long-term perspective. Experience, knowledge, cultural and institutional practice—including organisational measures of disaster management and prevention, civil defence or the invention of insurance systems—are based on the expectation of repetition drawn from the experience of repeated disasters.

The historical study of disasters continues to occupy a marginal position within the discipline of history, though this has changed somewhat in the recent years. Till 1990 there existed but a handful of studies focusing on single outstanding disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or London's Great Fire of 1666.⁷ Most historians assigned (natural) disasters to the domain of fate, as exceptional incidents within the course of human history—something destructive that might interrupt social normalcy and which could not be grasped through recourse to socio-cultural concepts of historical change. Such a view was questioned as early as 1981 by the

⁷França, *Une ville des lumières*; Reddaway, *The Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire*.

German medievalist Arno Borst in an important article, which however found little resonance.⁸ The exploration of historical dimensions of geographical risks, or a study of the interaction between ‘uncertain environments’⁹ and societies were subjects that had yet to make an appearance on the agenda of historians. In the wake of severe earthquakes in the 1980s, research in Italy and Mexico entered a new phase. It may well be that historians in Japan or elsewhere should be added to a list of pioneers. But, for whatever reason, they have so far refrained from entering the international field of disaster studies. It was after the Friuli earthquake of 1981 that historians in Italy began cooperating with geophysicists to reconstruct historical earthquakes.¹⁰ Similarly in Mexico, the 1985 earthquake marks a caesura in historiography. ‘Before this turning point there was no specific literature dealing with what can be generally termed “disaster studies” in the historical Mexican perspective,’ wrote Virginia García-Acosta in 2002.¹¹ The situation improved quickly after 1985 with the Research and Higher Education Center in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) providing an institutional framework for cooperation between social anthropologists and historians. Cooperation quickly crossed national borders when, in 1992, a Social Studies Network for Disaster Prevention in South America (LA RED) was launched.¹² García-Acosta concluded that ‘the recent series of contributions based on a historical approach emerged in Mexico and was extended to Latin America precisely as a consequence of the disaster associated with the 1985 Mexican earthquake’.¹³

Indeed, both the Italian and the Latin American examples suggest that contemporary experiences of major disasters inspire innovation in the field of disaster research, which reflects a modern constellation between disaster and society wherein societies rely on scientific or scholarly expertise. Thus, correlation between disaster studies and the number of

⁸ Borst, ‘Das Erdbeben von 1348’.

⁹ This term has been borrowed from a Call for Papers for a conference in Washington DC (September 2007), organised by Christoph Mauch and Uwe Luebken.

¹⁰ Boschi, *Catalogo dei forti terremoti in Italia dal 461 a.C. al 1990*; Figliuolo, *Il terremoto del 1456*.

¹¹ García-Acosta, ‘Historical Disaster Research’: 51.

¹² *Ibid.*: 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 56.

disasters that occur is understandable. It was a growing number of catastrophes, particularly in ‘developing countries’, that prompted the United Nations (UN) to announce an International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) for the 1990s.¹⁴ Furthered by this initial focus on ‘developing countries’, historical disaster studies seem to have gained initial ground outside of Europe and the Western world. This remains true when the geographical focus of studies—rather than the origin of scholars—is taken into account. Greg Bankoff’s book *Cultures of Disaster*, published in 2003, provides a model example. It focuses on the Philippines and covers a period ranging from the mid-sixteenth century to the late 1990s. The Philippines is statistically (going by the number of incidents per year) the one region most prone to natural hazards worldwide, which makes it an ideal case for a long-term study of the interaction between nature and culture—and indeed a central subject of historical disaster studies. Bankoff’s book is a milestone of historical research on disasters, already on the way to becoming a classic.¹⁵

Given that, clearly, one of the basic ideas behind announcing the IDNDR was to treat disaster as a development issue, Europe and most of the Western world was missing from the UN’s map, at least to begin with. A period since the 1960s, in which Europe had largely been spared major disasters, seemed to sustain the belief that there was nothing to worry about on the Western ends of Eurasia. That changed, with the millennium, when a series of major catastrophes occurred: floods in Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany in 1997 (Odra) and the much more severe flooding of the Elbe in 2002. Earlier, the typhoon ‘Lothar’ in 1999 had shattered hopes that Europe might escape from the unpleasant side effects of global warming. In fact the millennium summer of 2003 was an anomaly that amounted to a disaster in terms of the exceptionally high mortality rates. Though direct links between climate extremes and the greenhouse effect remain scientifically controversial, the experience of calamity has pushed the issue of global warming to the forefront of public concern.

Historians ready to respond to these trends came from a variety of fields from within the historical discipline. Climate historians started to

¹⁴ Resolutions of the General Assembly 42/169 of 11 December 1987 and 44/236 of 22 December 1989.

¹⁵ Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster*.

inquire into the connection between climate change, weather anomalies and disasters in a long-term frame.¹⁶ Urban historians explored the city as a region of risk.¹⁷ And a small group of historians of culture investigated perceptions and strategies of coping with catastrophes, going back into the pre-modern past.¹⁸ Surprisingly, environmental historians—with the exception of historical climatologists—showed little interest in the subject of disaster, in spite of its potential to provide illuminating and dramatic examples that might have resulted from human impact on the natural environment. Panels on the theme of disaster in various international conferences on environmental history were generally organised by outsiders to the field.¹⁹ In the meantime, several books and articles have been written showing that disaster studies attract historians from all branches of specialisation: among these, studies of pre-modern times clearly predominate as compared to investigations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁰ A panel organised by historians—Natural Disasters and How They Have Been Dealt With—at the 20th International Congress for the Historical Sciences (CISH) in Sydney 2005 was an important step towards general acceptance of a new branch of research within the historical discipline.

Evidently, disaster and disaster studies have correlated histories, in the course of which the understanding of disaster has gone through significant shifts with regard to the (inter)disciplinary composition of knowledge. While natural sciences dominated the understanding of disaster for most part of the twentieth century, the social sciences have gained ground since the 1990s. Outside the historical discipline, however, historical

¹⁶ Glaser, *Klimageschichte Mitteleuropas*; Pfister, *Am Tag danach* (French edition: Pfister, *Le jour d'après*); Pfister et al., *Wetternachhersage 500*.

¹⁷ Körner, *Stadtzerstörung und Wiederaufbau*; Massard-Guilbaud et al., *Cities and Catastrophes*; Ranft, *Städte aus Trümmern*.

¹⁸ Groh et al., *Naturkatastrophen*; Rohr, 'Man and Natural Disaster'; Quenet, *Les tremblements*.

¹⁹ For example, disaster panels were organised for the congress meetings of the European Society for Environmental History in St. Andrews 2001, Prague 2003 and Florence 2005. Some of the contributions have appeared in Jeleček et al., *Dealing with Diversity* and Kempe and Rohr, *Coping with the Unexpected*.

²⁰ See most recently Schenk and Engels (eds), *Historische Katastrophenforschung*, which brings together the latest research findings of the international project network *Historical Study of Disasters in a Comparative and Transcultural Perspective*, supported by the German Research Foundation.

disaster studies have not yet received the attention they deserve. Oliver-Smith's study of the historical trajectory of the 1970 Peruvian earthquake was a pioneer study, written by a social anthropologist, but has remained a singular exception in analysing disaster as a long-term social process, tracing the vulnerability of Peruvian society to earthquakes back to colonial roots.²¹ The historical dimensions of vulnerability are still underestimated and therefore not adequately investigated. Till now only few historians have made theoretical contributions to the interdisciplinary debate on social vulnerability,²² or even worked with the concept in their case studies.²³ As long as this situation persists, historical disaster studies will remain insignificant within the interdisciplinary discourse of the social sciences. Typically enough, a recently published survey on 'issues and trends from the research literature' on disaster and emergency management, arranged according to disciplines, does not contain a chapter on 'History'.²⁴

Historical Climatology and Disaster Studies

Historical climatology, as mentioned earlier, has been a force behind establishing an international field of historical disaster studies. It might therefore be useful to discuss the relevance of disaster studies to historical climatology.

In a recent article, Rudolf Brázdil, Christian Pfister and others have defined historical climatology as 'a research field situated at the interface of climatology and (environmental) history, dealing mainly with documentary evidence and using the methodology of both climatology and history.' They further described its main objectives as follows: (1) reconstruction of past climates and climate change, focusing on the last millennium; (2) investigation of the 'socio-cultural impacts' of climate and climate change; and (3) research on past discourses on and concepts of climate, which may be labelled a 'cultural history of climate'.²⁵

²¹ Oliver-Smith, 'Peru's Five Hundred Year Earthquake'.

²² Greg Bankoff is indeed the only name that can be cited here: see Bankoff, 'Time is of the Essence'; Bankoff, 'Rendering the World Unsafe'; and, Bankoff, 'Vulnerability as a Measure of Change in Society'.

²³ For example, Pfister and Brázdil, 'Social Vulnerability to Climate'.

²⁴ See the Table of Contents in McEntire, *Disciplines, Disasters, and Emergency Management*.

²⁵ Brázdil et al., 'Historical Climatology in Europe': 365–66.

Given that the reconstruction of past climates today is a highly competitive, interdisciplinary field of research, it is important to point out that historical climatology differs methodologically from other climate research in that it draws quantifiable data following from a complex procedure of interpreting documentary sources, one which depends on some core competences of the historian.²⁶ This is equally true of the aforementioned other two main objectives of historical climatology—the investigation of the historical consequences of climate change and the analysis of cultural constructions of climate. Nevertheless, the number of professional historians engaged in the sub-discipline of historical climatology is small. The field is clearly dominated by geographers, which helps explain why studies dealing with socio-cultural impacts of climate (and climate change) or with the cultural history of climate are comparatively sparse.

Despite impressive progress over the last three decades in reconstructing historical climates from documentary sources, which has helped historical climatology to hold its own on a territory that continues to be dominated by the natural sciences, the status of this field within the historical discipline has always been precarious, both institutionally and intellectually. The number of historians who have specialised in historical climatology and hold a permanent academic position is so small that research on climates of the past may well disappear from the scene in the next generation. But as historical climatology requires the special skills of professional historians, historians ought not to let slip this opportunity of contributing to the field. Institutional uncertainty is compounded by an intellectual gap—between historical climatology and the rest of the historical discipline—that has opened up since the practise of history has come to be increasingly governed by the ‘cultural turn’. Rooted in quantitative approaches, introduced decades back by a group of French *Annales* historians, historical climatology accorded well with major trends of the discipline up into the 1980s, but then lost its grip, when ‘culture’ came to be a dominating concept in the 1990s. At the present juncture, environmental history seems to offer a good opportunity to embed historical climatology institutionally. Nonetheless, it would be necessary for this field to open up to cultural themes, if it is to make its way from the margins of the discipline to the centre.

²⁶ This method is explained by Brázdil and others in *ibid.*: 370–77.

Only few historians are willing to take notice of and work with the results of historical climatology.²⁷ The greatest obstacle continues to be a general suspicion of natural or climatic determinism. Positing causal links between natural and socio-cultural ‘facts’ is considered a ‘risky undertaking’, as Erich Landsteiner has put it.²⁸ Such scepticism is widespread, though it may well be attributed to the force of habit within the historical discipline. Restricting historical causality to self-referential socio-cultural models is no guarantee against determinism. Even here, historians often overrate single links within a causal chain and run the risk of falling into oversimplifications. A better alternative to methodological anxiety would therefore be to develop models that avoid determinism by laying more emphasis on the social dimensions of the relationship between climate and society. Current models of how societies interact(ed) with climate (or rather elements of what we nowadays call ‘climate’) often underrate knowledge and intent, in other words, they pay inadequate attention to the importance of socio-cultural constructions of climate. This is where climatically-induced disasters come in as an important subject of research, one that may inspire and strengthen a greater socio-cultural orientation within historical climatology, not least because disaster studies provide an elaborate conceptual frame to carry out such investigations. In other words, though historical climatology has been a driving force behind the establishment of historical disaster studies, historical research on climatically-induced disasters provides an important input for historical climatology and a way of more effectively transmitting its astounding achievements in reconstructing climates of the pre-instrumental past from documentary sources.²⁹

Christian Pfister’s study of climatic extremes, recurrent crises and witch hunts (in this volume) seeks to bridge the gap between natural determinism and economic distributionism and clearly steps onto ‘cultural territory’ in arguing that European witch hunts in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries should be seen in the context of climatic stress in rural societies. The hypothesis—first developed by Wolfgang Behringer—is based on chronological coincidence and buttressed by early modern notions of sorcery which included weather magic.

²⁷ Pfister, ‘Weeping in the Snow’: 36–38.

²⁸ Landsteiner, ‘Wenig Brot und saurer Wein’: 87.

²⁹ The most recent publication pointing in this direction is Behringer et al., *Kulturelle Konsequenzen der ‘Kleinen Eiszeit’*.

Chronology is an old, if not old fashioned, and nowadays underrated methodological mode. It was, till the emergence of historicism in the nineteenth century, even a historiographic genre in its own right. Today the disappearance of chronology from the canon of modern historical methods, as laid down by handbooks and introductions to the discipline, is conspicuous. Though as a factor by itself perhaps not sufficient to establish causal links, chronology is nonetheless a highly useful indicator while searching for causality. Richard Grove's approach to reconstructing the 1789–93 El Niño as a global event with its far-reaching social consequences is largely based on a chronology of crises that encompassed all continents of the globe (see Grove in this volume). What still remains a controversial question in this context is the geographical impact of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and its teleconnection with the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO). Global studies of climate impacts and change are desperately needed, not least to prove whether the Little Ice Age, characterised as a period of lower average temperature (compared with instrumentally measured temperature in the twentieth century and estimated temperature in the so-called medieval warm period), was a global phenomenon. Georgina Endfield's important work on Mexico (contribution to this volume and several other articles³⁰) belongs to a growing number of studies that transcend the European and North-Atlantic framework. For the northern hemisphere it has been proved that a significant change of climatic patterns sets in around 1300. How this may have affected regions around the equator and the southern hemisphere continues to be debated among historians of climate.³¹

Blaming Nature

Historians have long been used to speaking of 'natural disasters' when dealing with calamities triggered by extreme events or hazards that are considered 'natural'.³² Commenting on this little reflected choice of label, David Alexander has summarised the state of debate in the social sciences

³⁰ Most recently: Endfield, 'Archival Explorations of Climate Variability'.

³¹ For a short summary of research see Richards, *The Unending Frontier*: 58–61.

³² For example: Berlioz, *Catastrophes naturelles et calamités au Moyen Age*; Bennisar et al., *Les catastrophes naturelles*; Olshausen, *Naturkatastrophen in der antiken Welt*; Sonnabend, *Naturkatastrophen in der Antike*.

on the question of definition by saying that ‘it is now widely recognised that “natural disaster” is a convenience term that amounts to a misnomer. Neither disasters themselves nor the conditions that give rise to them are undeniably natural’.³³

Whether historians adhere to the attribute ‘natural’ or prefer to leave it out seems to depend on their perspectives and familiarity with recent debates in the social sciences. Going through the articles collected in this volume will make it evident that both alternatives have been adopted by our contributors. While many of them use the term ‘natural disaster’ without much theoretical or definitional consideration, others explicitly reject it. Virginia García-Acosta, in particular, spares no effort while arguing that disasters are *not* natural. Greg Bankoff has been supporting this view for a decade or longer. In a most recent article he states outright that,

there are no such things as “natural disasters”. [...] There are certainly disasters but for one to take place two forces with their own separate trajectories have to come together at the same time and place to create an event. On one side, there is the hazard that can be purely natural like an earthquake, volcanic eruption and typhoon or increasingly more human-induced as in the case of fire, chemical releases and ozone depletion. On the other side are human populations whose social, economic and political organisations are largely culturally determined.³⁴

In other—i.e. Anthony Oliver-Smith’s—words: ‘Disasters occur at the intersection of nature and culture and illustrate, often dramatically, the mutuality of each in the constitution of the other’.³⁵

In the natural as well as the social sciences it is now usual to distinguish between extreme events or hazards, which may be natural, and disasters, which are not, even if natural forces are involved, meaning that disasters are never *purely* natural. Having said that, it should be added that most historians who continue to speak of ‘natural disaster’ would agree but, at the same time, argue that for them the adjective ‘natural’ simply denotes that certain types of disaster are triggered by natural hazards, as opposed to others, for example, ‘technological’ disasters, that are not. Obviously, lines of distinction are drawn differently. While for those rejecting it,

³³ Alexander, ‘The Study of Natural Disasters’: 289.

³⁴ Bankoff, ‘Comparing Vulnerabilities’.

³⁵ Oliver-Smith, ‘Theorizing Disasters’: 24.

the attribute ‘natural’ would suggest an inappropriate reduction of disaster causality to nature, others adhering to it use ‘natural’ to mark a *specific difference* within a wider spectrum of calamitous events they have in mind, without denying that economic, political, or cultural causes are always involved.³⁶ Contrary terminologies, as will also be encountered in this collection, do not necessarily indicate that the views behind them are entirely incommensurable.

At the same time this is not to suggest that the difference between positions is reducible to terminologies and definitions. What speaks in favour of the position of historians who prefer doing away with the term ‘natural’ is, in the first instance, a *theoretical consciousness* which connects their approaches to other disciplines, and so contributes to making a historical perspective visible within a highly interdisciplinary and international discourse. Further, to speak of ‘natural disaster’ implies that a clear distinction can be made between what is ‘natural’ and what is not—or rather, between the natural and the social. Such a distinction has been called into question by the notion of *anthropogenic causation*, best known from the current debate on carbon dioxide emission and the greenhouse effect. But while the conceptual term is a modern one, the idea is much older. The entanglement of human agency with the natural trajectory of catastrophe has long been a matter of public controversy in the aftermath of disaster. In such contexts, the attribute ‘natural’ may take on a *political meaning*. There is a long history of political leadership and other lobbies seeking to conceal human failure behind nature—a strategy which, time and again, has provoked criticism. An example of the latter tendency is problematised in an article published by Laurie S. Wiseberg in 1975:

The famines that struck the Sahelian region of Africa these past years, climaxing in the 1972 drought, are frequently described as “natural disasters” or “Acts of God” (just as are other recent famines, in southern Asia, southern Africa, or Central America). Yet, in the 1970s, to talk about famines in such terms is what George Orwell called *newspeak*; it is intended to absolve us of responsibility for the death and suffering that accompanied the failure of the rains. Specifically, the reference to natural disaster deliberately obfuscates critical socio-economic and political dimensions of the famines.³⁷

³⁶ See Mauelshagen, ‘Disaster and Political Culture in Germany’.

³⁷ Wiseberg, ‘An International Perspective on the African Famines’: 293.

Wiseberg was right in detecting no functional distinction between describing disasters as either ‘natural’ or ‘Acts of God’ in the political discourse of the 1970s. However, she seems to have remained unaware of the fundamentally different traditions and models of understanding upon which these phrases are premised. As we shall see in the following section on religion and political agency, the ‘Acts of God model’ of catastrophe implied human responsibility in pre-modern (Christian) eyes, as opposed to an understanding of disaster wherein causality lay within ‘nature’, a model that emerged since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

To sum up the discussion over the adjective ‘natural’, it must be acknowledged that historians who speak of ‘natural disaster’ are not as naïve as to believe that the social trajectory of disaster could be disregarded. Yet, going without the adjective ‘natural’ is preferable at least in that it shows greater awareness of the current interdisciplinary discourse on disasters and avoids unwelcome implications of the attribute in wider political and public contexts. To put it the other way round, historians determined to give their research a place in the wider spectrum of the social sciences and ready to discuss its practical political meaning, are distinguishable by their avoidance of the term ‘natural’ when speaking of disaster.

‘Socialising’ Disaster

In an entertaining account of a dispute between weather associations on pro and con weather modification in Pennsylvania in the 1960s, Theodore Steinberg remarked that the understanding of

... natural disasters as objective events that simply happen is really a very recent creation, no more than one hundred years old. Before that time, droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural calamities tended to be understood as morality tales. It was far more common in the period from the seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth century to view such disasters as evidence of God’s displeasure with the wayward behaviour of human beings.³⁸

Steinberg correctly pointed out that in the colonial period of American history ‘acts of God’ had not been understood as

³⁸ Steinberg, ‘What is a Natural Disaster?: 35. Also, Steinberg, *Acts of God*.

... mere natural disaster. Yet it was not God alone who acted here, but God in response to the errant acts of the churchgoers themselves. Acts of God were a form of divine punishment for earthly sins, and thus the colonists believed that their own conduct was partly responsible for bringing on such disasters.³⁹

Indeed, divine punishment implied human responsibility. To view disasters as natural was adverse to such religious ideas and should be seen as part of a long-term shift within a modern (mainly ‘Western’) discourse on the relationship between disaster and nature that came with the Enlightenment.

According to the traditional Christian logic of divine punishment—as articulated in countless sermons, broadsheets and tracts published in early modern Europe—humans were responsible for their own misfortune. Michael Kempe has aptly coined the term *peccatogenic*⁴⁰ (derived from the Latin word *peccatum*, meaning ‘sin’) to circumscribe moral causation in analogy to the modern concept of anthropogenic causation. In fact when seeking to identify the human impact on the environment, societies of the present continue to be preoccupied with the question of guilt, which has led Joachim Radkau to suggest that the early modern discourse on moral causation may be regarded as a precursor of the more recent debate about anthropogenic causation (see Figure 1).⁴¹ Public debate is often moralising and self-accusative. Yet, it is premised on the condition of direct interaction between society and nature without a mediating instance, while moral causation in its pre-modern version does not imply any technological influence as an element within the chain of natural processes that result in a disaster.

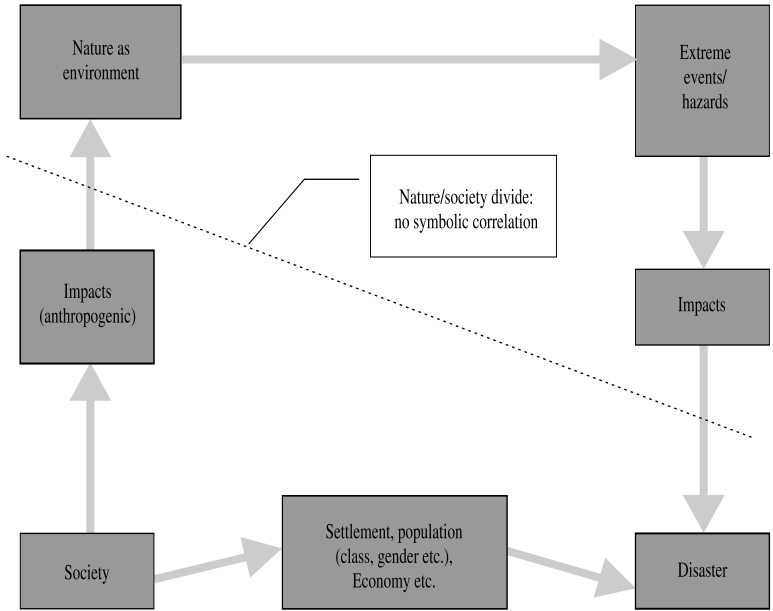
The most striking parallel between the idea of *moral causation* (sins leading to punishment) and the modern idea of *anthropogenic impact* is that natural hazard assumes the function of acting as a medium of society’s self-reflection in *both* cases. Once this point is reached, nature is no longer external or ‘environmental’ to society. European intellectuals of the past expressed this through the metaphor of the mirror. Disaster mirrored the defects of a community and, thus, nature reflected society. However, this is already a modern way of expressing this constellation. A clear-cut

³⁹ Steinberg, ‘What is a Natural Disaster?’, 42, where he refers to Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*: 71–116, on the colonists’ understanding of calamity.

⁴⁰ See the Introduction to Groh et al., *Naturkatastrophen*: 20.

⁴¹ Oral presentation; see also Radkau, *Natur und Macht*; English translation: Radkau, *Nature and Power*.

Figure 1
Modern Understanding of Anthropogenic Disaster Causation



distinction—implying opposition—between nature and society is only the result of the eighteenth-century critique of civilisation, which emerges from an older tradition of discourse on the ‘New World’.

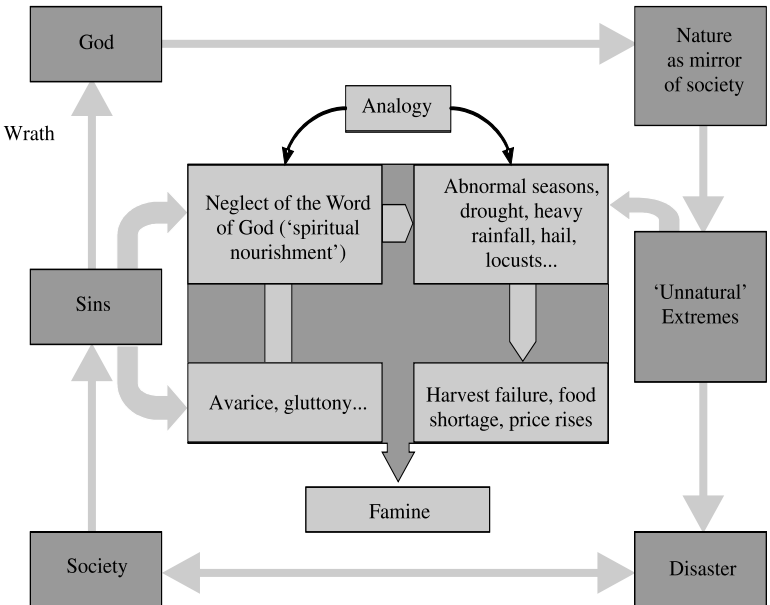
In medieval and early modern worldviews, God was the leading protagonist acting through his creation when earthquakes, floods, or famines threatened or destroyed human life and property. Nature itself was not seen as an independent source of calamity. Another important difference from modern views is that pre-modern understandings of ‘nature’, or what was regarded as ‘natural’, followed a somewhat narrower definition in a sense that irregularities, such as deformed births (or ‘monsters’), comets, earthquakes and the like, were seen as deviations from the natural, i.e. normal, course of events, something that contradicted the essence of natural things and, thus, was considered unnatural rather than natural. Nevertheless, such deviations from nature still had a place *within* nature as long as creation in its entirety was regarded as a sphere of divine control. In Christian cosmologies, nature and society were two realms within

the Lord's creation, one reflecting the other symbolically. Thus, deviations from the moral law within the community of believers that provoked divine wrath, were mirrored by deviations from the laws of nature which could lead to disaster, should God decide to carry out punishment.

One of numerous examples which seek to illustrate the logic of the mirror is a tract entitled *Hunger=Spiegel* (Mirror of Famine), published in 1691 by a certain Johann Georg Füllli, the vicar of a little village near the Swiss town of Zurich (see Figure 2). Füllli's book is an elaborate account of theological reasoning, typical of Protestant worldviews on the eve of the Enlightenment. The author quotes the aphorism 'Wo Hunger ist/ da ist Gottes Zorn' ('Where there is hunger, there lies the wrath of God') to further argue that sin is the foremost reason for God's wrath.

Though sin in general deserves and is followed by famine, there are, however, certain kinds of sin that one may particularly regard as causes, namely despising

Figure 2
Moral (peccatogenic) Disaster Causation: Disaster as Punishment
(Early Modern Christian Patterns Exemplified by Famine)



and abandoning God, who gives people their daily bread, neglect of the Word of God which is the food of the soul, injustice that is often committed with God's necessary blessing [i.e. superstitious rituals, blasphemy—comment by the eds], lack of mercy to the poor, but especially intemperance in making use of God's gifts, which causes Him to put us on short rations, as one is used to say.⁴²

Famine, as a divine measure to produce scarcity, appears as a logical response to avarice and gluttony in times of plenty. Füllli's argument illustrates thus the logic of cosmic analogy, to which our attention was once drawn by Michel Foucault in *Les mots et les choses*. While Füllli does not, at the same time, ignore other links in the causal chain leading to famine, he manages to integrate them within the traditional order of primary (sins provoking the divine wrath) and secondary causes. For Füllli, as for so many other representatives of the clergy in early modern Europe, climatic anomalies belonged to the latter. Characteristically, he describes the observed deviations from normal seasonal weather as 'unnatural'.⁴³ Other circumstances that may lead to harvest failure and famine would include scourges, such as of mice or locusts. Still, Füllli does not reduce 'secondary causes' to 'nature' (or rather, 'unnatural' conditions), for he does not neglect agricultural mismanagement and economic misbehaviour as possible reasons for, or aggravators of, famine.

It is important to note that the idea of moral causation of disaster suggests a much more immediate and complete impact of human behaviour on the course of nature and its reverse effects on society than the modern concept of anthropogenic causation. Moral causation implies even stronger ties between human failure and disaster than do modern environmentalist concepts of guilt. The notion is however dependent on a divine ruler who is believed to use nature as a medium of communicating moral disorder within a community. Thus, disaster points back to society, and moral

⁴² 'Wann aber die Sünd ins gemein den Hunger zuverdienen und etwann auch nach sich zuziehen pflegt/ so sind doch gewisse Gattungen der Sünd/ die man da ins besonder als Ursachen betrachten kann/ als namlich die verachtung und verlassenung Gottes/ welcher das tägliche Brot den Menschen gibe/ die verachtung des Worts Gottes/ als der Seelen-Speiß/ Ungerechtigkeit/ die da auch mit dem nohtwendigen Sägen Gottes getriben wird/ Unbarmherzigkeit gegen die Arme/ insonderheit aber die Unmässigkeit in dem Gebrauch der Gaaben Gottes/ die ihn etwann veranlasset/ daß er den Brot=Korb/ wie man sagt/ höher henkt'. Füllli, *Hunger=Spiegel*: 14–15. (Our translation into English.)

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 29.

causation results in what may be termed the *socialisation of disaster*, meaning that reason for calamity is socially internalised and calls for political management.⁴⁴

This aspect has been overlooked by Weberian models of modernity which, grounded in secularisation and rationalisation, imply that pre-modern notions of causality relating to disaster were confined to the domain of metaphysics owing to a lack of (appropriate) scientific knowledge. The problem with such a theory of religious understanding, grounded in the idea of compensation, of disaster is twofold: it argues somewhat anachronistically (they did not know what we know) and misses the immanent rationality of religion which provided impulses for concrete worldly measures. One obvious consequence of moral causation could be found in efforts to improve the balance within the ‘economy of sin’⁴⁵ that characterised medieval and pre-modern societies. Though not undisputed by secular groups and political authorities, such efforts formed part of pre-modern strategies to cope with disaster. Religious cults and practices, such as processions or days of prayer and repentance, were deployed as means of both mitigation (in the aftermath of disaster) and prevention.⁴⁶ Moreover, religious groups were neither always willing, nor powerful enough to completely suppress technological or scientific ‘rationality’. Historians, often misled by a proportionately overweening representation of clerical positions in early modern pamphlet literature—a factor easily explicable through the privileged access of the clergy to the medium of print—have tended to overestimate the significance of religious domination.

⁴⁴ The use of this term owes its inspiration to Klaus Eder: the title of his book *Die Vergesellschaftung der Natur. Studien zur sozialen Evolution der praktischen Vernunft*, may be translated as *The Socialisation of Nature*. In the context examined by Eder, ‘socialisation’ means that something ‘external’ to social systems (nature) becomes ‘internal’, whereas in our case the term refers to a linking of causal chains considered natural with others considered social.

⁴⁵ The term has been borrowed from Wolfgang Behringer—‘Sündenökonomie’. Behringer’s study of the crisis of 1570, however, takes a limited view of the role of religion; it draws upon a somewhat outdated variant of the paradigm of social disciplining, in itself a subject of controversy. See Behringer, ‘Die Krise von 1570’:114 and 116 ff. See also Behringer et al., *Kulturelle Konsequenzen der ‘Kleinen Eiszeit’*:15.

⁴⁶ For example, the introduction of a day of fasting and prayer in Basel following the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War; see Sallmann, “‘Innerlichkeit’ und “‘Öffentlichkeit’ von Religion”.

Closely connected to the Weberian model and its reductionist perception of religious dominance in pre-modern Europe is a widespread prejudice that in times of calamity, communities were trapped into fatalism and fear. This finds expression in the oft-repeated legends that abound within writings on pre-modern European religious mentalities, and which Philip Soergel calls into question in his contribution to this volume. Though Soergel focuses on Protestant Germany in the sixteenth century, his absolutely original approach, drawing on the insights of recent research in psychology, raises principal doubts about the argumentative validity of a modern classic, Jean Delumeau's *Le péché et la peur* (1983).

An important historiographic consequence of the adherence to notions of fatalism and fear, while interpreting modes of coping with disasters in pre-modern societies, is that concrete disaster relief and the institutional structures and practices sustaining this in pre-modern times have rarely been adequately described. Gerrit Schenk's research on fourteenth-century Florence (in this volume) is an important step towards filling this lacuna. His impressively detailed study of the 1333 flood shows the multiple facets of relief and strategic measures carried out by the political establishment of the city, including those to meet emergency and technological steps for future prevention.

Interpretations of disasters that draw upon religious models of understanding suggest surprising similarities at a theoretical-cum-theological level between Islamic and Christian societies during medieval and early modern times. This is made evident by Anna Akasoy in her article in this collection. In China too, as the article by Andrea Janku included here shows, an important interpretive strain can be detected in chronicles up to the nineteenth century, that offers remarkable parallels to Christian theologies of punishment as well as to Islamic conceptions. While the understandings of disaster in these cases appear to be similar, there were nonetheless major cultural differences that need to be taken into account, and for which it is not sufficient to look at theological-cum-metaphysical ascriptions alone. Rather, the sphere of social practice needs to be drawn into the frame of enquiry, a plea explicitly formulated by Astrid Meier (in this collection) with reference to Islam. She rightly questions the notion of 'Islam' conceived of as a unitary normative essence and held to prevail uniformly as a cultural force over a vast geographical area and over a time span of a thousand years. In addition, theological interpretations open up a broad area of political arguments and, following from this, space for multifarious

forms of strategic uses. A significant motif, for instance, is that of unjust rulership: disasters came to be interpreted as indicators of political misrule and unjust practices. Several movements, termed as *jihad*, in pre-colonial African societies are a good example of this understanding.

Another example of the relationship between disaster and rulership, drawn from early Christian context, can be observed in the chronicle of John Malalas dating to as early as the sixth century, discussed by Mischa Meier in his article. Meier argues that Malalas' objective was to characterise the reign of the emperor Justinian as an age of fear. Here too, disasters were primarily conceived of as punishment, but also in a positive sense as catharsis and judged at the same time as a mirror of imperial agency. There appears to be a striking parallel between divine agency understood as punishment and imperial actions seen as mitigating the effects of disaster. There is, further, the suggestion of another motif—that of greater solidarity within the populace of an area or a kingdom when faced with disaster—which is one more index of the complexity and innate flexibility of religiously coded explanations within a political context.

Comparing World Regions, Crossing Historiographic Boundaries

Historical disaster studies, as we have seen, have made conscious efforts to transcend the boundaries between disciplines, to draw upon the impulses generated by the methodological insights of neighbouring disciplines for historical investigations of disaster. Young as the field of historical disaster studies may still be, it possesses a global reach in that its practitioners, engaged in investigating natural disasters for several regional contexts, are located across the world and are rooted in distinct historiographical streams. Such a constellation throws up its own set of challenges, as became evident in the course of the Zurich conference of 2006, whose proceedings this collection records. The conference was a site of exchange between participants from different disciplines and locations that brought to the forefront the need for self-reflexive communication between historiographies or, to voice this more programmatically, the need for interweaving historiographies with a view to creating a common international conceptual framework for discussing the histories of disaster.

One of the issues the emergence of a global framework for historical scholarship throws up is the question of language and conceptual categories

we deploy in our narratives.⁴⁷ Writing about or discussing two or more regions in one language by its very nature involves comparison, even if the latter is not being explicitly undertaken. The linguistic turn has sensitised us to the close connection between experience—social and cultural—and the language—conceptual terms and categories—used to transmit that experience. So that the language of communication and writing, premised in the particularity of a given culture, can come to claim universal significance, when it imposes its particular meanings on those cultures whose experience it articulates. Given the asymmetrical relationships in the field of international scholarship, the bulk of writing, communication and exchange takes place in one of the major European languages—in our case too, in an evidently pragmatic move, English was the language in which the discussion of disaster, from European and non-European regions and cultures, took place. One problem that often arises from such an initially pragmatic approach to an alien region or culture through the medium of familiar (often European) concepts is that it can lead to an anomaly born of Eurocentrism that Dipesh Chakrabarty pointed out some years back.⁴⁸ For instance, any theorising of disaster involves taking a close look at the understandings of nature and society in a given context. While the juxtaposition of violence/disorder in nature and the orderliness and control that mark civilisation is to be found in several cultures, within and outside of Europe, the particular association of rationality and progress with the degree to which nature can be domesticated, remoulded, rendered productive, is an ideological premise of Western modernity that gets transported through conceptual categories originally coined in European languages. Not recognising this particularity could lead to measuring societies across time and space by this yardstick and thereby to judging them as not having yet attained this stage of development, as being ‘latecomers’ to modernity. Their history would be written, according to Chakrabarty, in terms of ‘incomplete transformations’ or ‘absences’.⁴⁹ This understanding, as pointed out in the beginning of our Introduction, indeed continues to animate much of the modern ‘developmental’ discourse on disasters and on the efficacy (or lack of it) of coping strategies in different regions of the globe.

⁴⁷ Rudolph, ‘The Imperialism of Categories’.

⁴⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 8–9.

One way of avoiding the pitfalls of universally applying Eurocentric conceptual categories is the preference shown by many practitioners from the area studies to adhere to the terminology used in the language of their specific sources. This is part of a larger argument that seeks to safeguard the cultural and temporal specificity of a given society's understanding of 'natural disasters' against the 'risk of anachronism' (see article by Akasoy in this issue), by recovering its concepts from within its own cultural materials rather than forcing those concepts into the mould of European paradigms. In an immediate sense, using indigenous terms and seeking to recover autochthonic concepts would seem to ensure greater precision. On the other hand, to limit one's enquiry to such an exercise in 'recovery' would end up fixing an alien culture once and for all in unapproachable alterity. Studies of regions outside Europe often tend to remain confined within the prison of otherness rather than become part of a 'mainstream' academic discourse, which continues to be shaped by empirical investigations of Western Europe.⁵⁰ A further problem—indeed one common to the investigation of all societies of the past—arises from the necessity of analysing sources through deploying the methodological apparatus of a modern historical discipline. The specific cultural understandings of disaster that marked a society in the past comprise but one among a complex of factors that go into the making of a modern historical analysis of disaster. Reproducing the language of the sources with a view to creating more 'authentic' conceptual categories, rather than analysing this language too—as a component of and constituted by historical processes—would not only end up being a historiographically flawed exercise, it would bring through the backdoor the much-maligned Orientalist view of non-European civilisations as 'without histories' in a modern sense. Viewed in this perspective, a question to be posed would be whether the 'implicit notion of disaster' (Akasoy, this volume) that is to be found in normative texts of early Islamic societies was one way of coping with its effects on human society, effects that would need to be worked out through materials that are yet to be examined by historians.

To avoid a radical form of cultural relativism that, while appearing to restore to world cultures their authenticity, ends up sealing off their history from a shared, modern historiography, we would need to rethink our

⁵⁰The ideas outlined here are a summary of a more extensive argument on the subject discussed in Juneja and Pernau, 'Lost in Translation?'

conceptual vocabulary so as to make it more representative of plurality across the globe. An attempt at self-reflexivity has been made in the study of disaster in the Chinese county of Linfen (Janku in this volume), through its examination of multiple genres of sources, its efforts to dismantle the discourses that they transport, and to weave these into a historical narrative of coping strategies, as far as possible given the gaps in the sources. The study of this complex of actions—be it a popular legend or cult, be it a mode of political legitimisation—allows us to question whether notions such as ‘vulnerability’ or the idea of a ‘culture of disaster’ (Bankoff) can be re-conceptualised to form part of a common scientific language to write about disasters globally and on a coeval basis. The observation—drawn from the context of Sudanic Africa (see Astrid Meier in this volume)—that vulnerability itself can hardly be understood independently of adaptability or resilience, which manifested itself in a diversity of coping mechanisms, contributes one more layer of signification to the concept, if it is to be deployed globally.

The observation that disasters—their overcoming and the restoration of normalcy—were linked with forms of political legitimacy emerges from case studies across cultures. Here comparisons would be useful, provided we are able to build multiple perspectives into our framework. Some of the challenges involved in devising a comparative frame for studying disaster on a global scale have been discussed by Jürg Helbling in a postscript to this collection.

The discussion on ways of ‘socialising’ disaster in the previous section draws our attention to the problematic nature of a ‘transition to modernity’ approach which underlines a secularisation of perceptions of disaster: in modern Europe, so the argument goes, disasters, no longer perceived as otherworldly happenings, came to be assimilated to this very world.⁵¹ Not only does this paradigm disregard the ‘socialisation’ of disasters through moral-cum-theological discourses in pre-modern societies, it serves to buttress one more Orientalist stereotype that distinguishes the modern, ‘secular West’ from the ‘religious East’. Here too a comparison between regions is useful in drawing attention to many common trends, though articulated in different cultural modes and practices. Natural calamities, though perceived as an act of God, were an occurrence that belonged

⁵¹ See Imhof, ‘Katastrophenkommunikation in der Moderne’: 153–56, who refers to the classical Weberian topos of the ‘disenchantment of the world’.

squarely to this world, sent as an instrument to restore the divine ordering of the human domain. Such a perception involved agency, often political and institutional in nature, rather than passivity or fatalism (see articles by Schenk, Mischa Meier, this volume). This topos, though anchored within Christian thinking, had parallels in non-Christian cultures as well, generating cult practices of many kinds (see Pfister, Janku, García-Acosta, this volume).

A motivating methodological consideration while structuring this conference was the necessity of comparison carried out in a dialogical frame, so as to induce reflection about the ways in which our academic locations and practices structure our analytic procedures. The extent to which this was realised remains to be seen, though there is little doubt that a dialogue between historiographies has been initiated. The theoretical impulse for such an exercise comes from anthropology and, to an extent, literary studies, which have over the past years intensively discussed theories and practices of translation.⁵² To translate, they have pointed out, rarely involves a mechanical transfer from one language into another, one which ensures an equivalence of meaning. Rather, it involves a displacement from one cultural context into another, a ‘representation’ of one history by the practitioners of another. The act of ‘translating’ and ‘being translated’⁵³ is a constant element of anthropological fieldwork, a social act in which the representation of the self—both of the anthropologist and his partner in the field—and the representation of the other, again on both sides, intertwine and bring forth something new. Similarly, for historians, reciprocal exchange in a common language can go a long way in identifying hurdles to translation—from the language of one’s sources into a common language of the discipline, and from different languages of historiographic practice and exchange. It could help recognise the extent to which meanings of concepts across cultures overlap and the extent to which they are discordant. Unlike a translator of a literary text, it is possible for the historian to problematise his translational activity. Even if one takes as a starting point, concepts that are drawn from say European experience,

⁵² See Bachmann-Medick, *Übersetzung als Repräsentation fremder Kulturen*; Berg and Fuchs, *Kultur, Praxis, Text*; Renn et al., *Übersetzung als Medium des Kulturverstehens und sozialer Integration*.

⁵³ The terms are borrowed from Fuchs, ‘Übersetzen und Übersetzt-Werden. Plädoyer für eine interaktionsanalytische Reflexion’, in Bachmann-Medick, *Übersetzung als Repräsentation*: 308–28.

or the experience of one particular region—for example, the notion of cultures of disaster—and proceed on the basis of that to understand and compare another culture and society, one would soon reach a stage where historical evidence can no longer be accommodated within the skin of the original concept. While in a literary translation this would be a sign of failure, for the historian such discordance could be taken as an opening to pointing out different ways of conceptualisation and attempt to explain difference, without essentialising it, all within a framework of a shared history. Such an enterprise cannot be carried out from one academic location alone: it must necessarily be based on a dialogue between historians who represent different historiographical approaches, and at the same time embody forms of hybridity characteristic of the unprecedented mobility and exchange of the present. The global interest in recovering the histories of disasters is an ideal field to cross both disciplinary as well as historiographic boundaries. This collection of essays is intended as a tentative step in that direction.

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