

NEW ASPECTS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF DISASTER: A THEORETICAL NOTE

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If a sociologist speaks of a “disaster” he inevitably means its social causes and effects, regardless of whatever concept of society he consciously or covertly bases his thinking on. In other words: while an earthquake in the uninhabited Sahara may well be a “disaster” to a geologist, such a classification would not be relevant to a sociologist. In general he would claim that a disaster is only interesting to a sociologist to the extent that it entails social implications. Hence the question of social (more specifically, collective) behavior in such a disaster-situation becomes vitally interesting. Consequently, the phenomenon of “disaster” can never be studied detached from collective behavior theory.

THE CONCEPT “DISASTER” IN SOCIOLOGY

It seems significant to us and well worth mentioning that recent West German sociology (i.e. post–1945) is unfamiliar with an equivalent of the American “sociology of disaster”. This fact may be symptomatic of that repression of historical memories of events prior to the defeat of Nazism which has been characteristic for post-war society in the Federal Republic and from which its sociology has been no exception. Thus it is easy to understand that – due to a lack of domestic research – theoretical and empirical work done in this field in the Federal Republic first built upon American “sociology of disaster” and has

only now (with the work of Wieland Jäger, 1977a, b) begun to take critical issue with it.

Previous definitions of “disaster,” whether products of everyday thinking or of the “sociology of disaster,” contained revealing and hence highly significant elements. To begin they construed disasters as something “sudden”; a break in the continuity of normal events. They proceeded from the premise that disasters (crises) were “events” which elicited social behavior only in crisis situations (i.e. are “reactions to events,” cf. Jäger 1977a, b). Even if one could thereby establish a connection between disaster and social behavior (“reaction”), the disaster took on a superordinate and thus not exactly social character. By perceiving a “disaster” as a sudden event which occurs independently of, and in a certain sense isolated from, normal social processes, this type of sociology came to an analytical dead-end. Those affected by the disaster could only react. Taken to its ultimate consequences, this undialectical way of looking at things led to a defensive approach to the problem. A system which had “suddenly” been disturbed must be protected. The disaster itself remained on the level of an “act of God,” against which human action was obviously incapable of accomplishing anything.

Two lines of reasoning decisively influenced this way of thinking. For one thing, an event which could be described in terms of the natural sciences was confused with those of

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its effects which unfolded in a coherent process and which could therefore be described by the social sciences. This resulted in misleading analogies from the realm of the natural sciences. The disaster then became a type of experimental interference from without, against which a system-bound process simply reacts. Secondly, the influence of a "mob-psychology" perspective (in the tradition of Le Bon) made its baneful presence felt in analyses of collective behavior.

"The tradition of European social and cultural criticism combined the phenomenon of collective behavior with the vision of a whipped-up uninhibited mass of hoi polloi, a vision which could only be tackled with the categories of a peace-and-order-psychology" (Heinz/Schöber 1972). Nowadays one operates with such concepts as "panic," "melee," "hysteria," etc. This suggests behavior on the part of those collectively affected which breaks loose from all social rationality, such as during a disaster.

As one can easily recognize from these two ways of thinking, the sociology of disaster was and still is basically molded by concepts deriving directly from the system, concepts which are therefore blatantly apologetic. In accordance with the character of the social "systems" which these ways of thinking favor, the latter expose themselves to charges of being "capitalist" sociology. For the predominant conditions, the political, economic and cultural spheres are not called into question, but rather declared as the not-to-be-disturbed order of things. The result of this shortsightedness, however, is that with these points of departure neither the disaster itself nor the behavior of the participants can ever be explained as anything but "deviance" from "normal" behavioral modes set off by "unstructured lack of clarity". This is Smelser's own expression when he says: "The clearest cases of unstructured lack of clarity occur in situations of 'completely incomprehensible disasters'...." (1972).

Summing up, we can now say that in the sociology of disaster up until now, the disaster has (a) been a sudden, unexpected break in the continuity of events (in a normal situation, in normal times), an intrusion of something alien, hence (b) something not to be derived from scientifically determined social processes but which (c) stems from seemingly obscure symbolic contexts (out of the realm of "nature" or "technology"). The mystification of disaster and of collective behavior entailed by it could thus be retained, even if sociological assertions of limited scope, such as H.E. Moore's "disaster culture" (1956), were now nonetheless possible.

For various sociological disasters, strategies (practical as well as theoretical) have been developed from these preliminary theoretical or pre-theoretical efforts. In general we can clearly see that the goal of all of these strategies is to repress the disaster as an event and to camouflage its causes and effects at decisive points by trying to re-establish a previous "normal" state of affairs once again. In practice the conviction has established itself that one should "return to the normal routine," in other words, that a disaster can only be effectively combatted with bureaucratic (administrative and organizational) measures, something which can all too easily be squared with a structural-functionalist sociological approach. Accordingly, collective behavior on the part of the disaster's direct actors is defined as quasi-uncaused, as "spontaneous," and is therefore only tolerated as long as organized relief is not available because this will then re-establish the normal state of affairs. Finally intervention on the part of the public in a disaster is perceived by the "competent authorities" as an undesirable disturbance. It is ironic, that the most disturbing behavior is often that of those sections of the public who most uncritically and compliantly adopt the view that the disaster is an exotic event, for example, the uninvolved gaping onlookers at the scene of the disaster,

Organizationally this basically publicophobic attitude is revealed especially in the development of disaster defense in the German Federal Republic which, for the time being, has been finalized in the "Act for the Extension of Disaster Defense" (Gesetz über die Erweiterung des Katastrophenschutzes, KatSG). In addition, the linking-up of disaster-defense and civil-defense organizations with the military precautions of civil defense and civil-defense planning makes intervention on the part of the public even more of a disturbance to the competent authorities. What then would be the reaction of a population living in an area predicted to be a scene of operations but which has few or no shelters at its disposal? Will it simply "remain at home" as NATO with its "stay-put-policy" requires, and as the Federal legislator tries to ensure in section 12 ("Regulations on where to stay") in the Act on the Extension of Disaster Defense of 1968? " (Dedekind).

NEW PATHS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF DISASTER – THE ANALYSIS OF ANTAGONISMS

A "disaster" must at least be seen as a social process whose evolutionary regularities have already been predestined in the regularity of the foregoing unfolding of other social processes. These evolutions are propelled and characterized by social antagonisms (conflicts of interest). Therefore we must, in addition, investigate whether or not, and in what manner, the theory of historical and dialectical materialism may be made the basis of an analysis of disaster events and their ensuing collective behavior. As Heinz and Schöber put it: "Such a procedure means that the analysis of collective phenomena begins with an analysis of the mode of production of the society in question and of its development" (1972). For an investigation in the German Federal Republic this means that we must include the social conditions of an advanced capitalism in the analysis. Therefore the

entire social structure (not just the formal state structure), all classes and all groups must be taken into consideration. And for the student of disaster this implies that "access to social reality cannot be achieved in a completely detached contemplative manner" (Heinz/Schöber 1972), a view which is held by many sociologists of disaster. But what follows from this? Precisely this: practical action; and not only on the part of organizations, but collective action on the part of those affected, "in the course of which the theory must stand the test and practical experiences must be integrated into the theory" (Heinz/Schöber 1972).

According to Blumer, "social problems must be seen as a product of a process of collective definitions," (1970) and definitions reflect social interests. Once this basic assumption is made, our preliminary efforts in the sociology of disaster will clearly indicate the impossibility of a valid definition of disaster for an entire society. In societies which are characterized by antagonisms, let us say, between the two protagonists on the labor market (capital and labor, – in Marxist terms the two basic classes of a capitalist society), it would be superficial to try to employ as one's starting point a definition common to all classes. This would also fail to recognize the historical dimensions, as it does not take account of the fact that those who rule bring their point of view to bear in the definitions which they construct and utilize as instruments of domination. Speech and thought are just as partisan as actions. (Let us just consider the word "strike," in order to recognize at once with what diametrically opposed concepts this concept is associated according to one's position on the labor market or, according to one's class position.)

If we proceed from the premise that the disaster is defined from out of a specific consciousness of class or group, and that this precise consciousness is essential to the

form of social (collective) behavior engaged in, then we can conclude from this that each social class brings to bear its own rationality of ends and means. In the extreme case, the rationality of one class would not be comparable to the rationality of the other class. Despite this, both classes may act rationally. Exaggerating somewhat, the question might be formulated something like this: Would it not be more proper and realistic in a disaster to speak of an antagonistic disaster-society with disaster-beneficiaries and disaster-victims?

What a benefit or a loss is, is something which is already grounded in the values of a particular society. In a disaster one does not forget one's family, one's place of business, nor does one forget one's possibilities of exercising power. What one does has already been learned – *no lens volens* – and what one fails to do is what has been learned but forgotten. This latter is important now: disaster action is not easily performed by many because previous social processes have, in regard to individuals, classes or groups, destroyed or inhibited knowledge or deliberately distributed it unevenly. "Disasters" are the results of the fact that "social secrets were continually produced. If dangers did not have secret causes, then the lightning could have struck 'out of the blue'" (Clausen and Jäger, 1975).

The disclosure of hidden dangers and of hidden behavior-options during the "disaster" is responsible for the fact that disaster-behavior can appear as "radical" and/or "innovative" compared with previous behavior. The broader, more comprehensive, the totality of roles which is activated in such behavior, the more radical will be the behavior. The less conjectured an act (conjectured in general or by a particular actor or collectivity), the more innovative it will be. But even the way in which radicalness and innovation act together must be studied again and again in each disaster, in each case in conjuncture with a study of previous historical processes.

Disasters are thus a "normal" (and often highly revealing) component of the social systems themselves. This depends on the regularity with which antagonisms in a particular society allot knowledge to different classes or groups. If one mentions a "disaster," then it can only mean that a potential for social conflict has become astoundingly acute and must simultaneously be blunted by a suitable redefinition of the situation: after all, it is "only a disaster," the system is all right. But through this, society in reality undergoes a metamorphosis. It depends upon the radicalness and innovation of the specific disaster-behavior "during the disaster" – a metamorphosis which is extensive in cases of greater radicalness and rapid in cases of greater innovation ("all too rapid" for those who define "disaster") (cf. Clausen 1978).

In analyzing "disasters" and collective behavior the following points should be studied.

(1) In which "languages" of which classes or groups is reality (the disaster) being defined? Who, therefore, is in command of the situation?

(2) How radical and/or innovative is collective behavior in "disasters"? And on the part of which classes or groups? This especially against the background of their position in the process of production, distribution and profit realization.

(3) Whether or not classes or groups also influence each other before, during or after a "disaster". Here the temporal dimension short, medium or long-term influence must be considered. For whom do things change rapidly ("too rapidly")?

(4) What are the special goals and tasks, the interests of institutions and organizations in case of a "disaster"? In this aspect the role played by propaganda must be included, as well as non-disclosure and misinformation about the various contexts and processes in a "disaster," in particular the role played by the mass media.

(5) In addition this applies more specifically

to “disaster defense organizations” and organization associated with them, most especially those that bear arms i.e., soldiers, border guards, police.

(6) Who profits or loses in and from the “disaster”? Here the question of an “antagonistic disaster-society” should be considered in particular, a society which – or so it is assumed – is subject to the same laws as antagonistic “normal society”, but here exposed to extreme conditions of profit realization or loss minimization, backed up by extreme social sanctions.

(7) How can suitable research tools be developed in order to encompass the specific collective behavior in those populations to be investigated? Behavior and attitudes before a “disaster” (the “normal situation”), during a “disaster” (the “exceptional situation”) must all be subjected to an equally rigorous investigation.

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