

The Politics of Disasters - Fourth conference of the network „Historical Study of Disasters in Cultural Comparative Perspective“

Veranstalter: Network „Historical Study of Disasters in Cultural Comparative Perspective“

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Since August 2005 the network „Historical Study of Disasters in Cultural Comparative Perspective“, consisting of a fixed group of researchers, is supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, the German Research Foundation.¹ For the conference in Bern the organisers (Christian Pfister, University of Bern, Stephanie Summermatter, University of Bern and Franz Mauelshagen, University of Zurich) invited three guest lecturers, two from different scientific disciplines, in order to broaden insights into the field of study. James K. Mitchell is professor for Geography at Rutgers University, New Jersey and Kurt Imhof, the other non-historian, is professor for Sociology and Journalism at the University of Zurich. Elaine Fulton, the third invitee, is lecturer in Modern History at the University of Birmingham.

The temporal spectrum of papers presented at the conference ranged from the era of the Roman Empire to the 21st century with windows to the medieval and early modern period, as well as to the 19th and 20th century. Geographically, the contributions covered Europe, the US and China. Despite the obvious heterogeneity of presentations, visible parallels emerged in the course of the conference.

JAMES K. MITCHELL, dealing with „Collaboration as a Basis for Public Decision-making about disasters“, expounded the development of US disaster policy before and in the aftermath of 9/11

and hurricane Katrina. He pointed out the fragmentary and complex character of US disaster policy previous to 9/11 which had fostered collaboration between different levels (formal/informal) and spheres of society, namely, the public sector, scientific research, politics, economics and NGO's. After the events of 9/11 and hurricane Katrina a discernible narrowing of public perspectives on disaster had taken place, a development which was going hand in hand with civil society and the scientific community losing ground. Consequently, collaborative initiatives had started drying up and were pushed aside by the policies of an increasingly security-focussed national government on the one hand and the intervention of global investors on the other hand. Mitchell stressed the current pressing need to return to a wider range of alternative strategies in dealing with disasters which he sees flourishing under the principle of collaboration.

Although dealing with a different geographical and social context, collaboration on an informal level was also the focus of GREG BANKOFF's (University of Hull) presentation about „Leadership, Local Politics and Community Resources in the Philippines.“ As Mitchell's, Bankoff's research referred to very recent events. Bankoff introduced the geographical vulnerability of the Philippines, a small landmass with one of the highest frequencies of natural hazards in the world. The archipelago's social vulnerability has partly resulted from the high number of people living beneath the poverty threshold. Disaster mitigation is decentralised because Filipinos have had an ambiguous relationship with the official government and have trusted in informal and non-governmental associations. Bankoff pointed out the importance of effective leadership for communities and their organisations as they had often been left to their own devices in dealing with disasters.

Two major parallels emerged from Mitchell's and Bankoff's contributions. Firstly, both mentioned the fragmentary character of governmental organisation or policy with respect to disaster management (albeit in two geographically, economically and socially differently structured cultures) and the ensuing multiplicity of unofficial groupings at different levels of society. Secondly, a crucial factor seems to be the comparatively small scale of those associations and their versatile networks.

Also, CHRISTIAN PFISTER's presentation, „Learning from Catastrophes“, connected to Mitchell and Bankoff in similar respects. Pfister first

¹ For a detailed discussion of the term *disaster* and *natural hazard* cf. Groh, Dieter; Kempe, Michael; Mauelshagen, Franz, Einleitung, Naturkatastrophen - Wahrgenommen, Gedeutet, Dargestellt, in: Groh, Dieter; Kempe, Michael; Mauelshagen, Franz (Hrsg.), Naturkatastrophen. Beiträge zu ihrer Deutung, Wahrnehmung und Darstellung in Text und Bild von der Antike bis ins 20. Jahrhundert, Tübingen 2003, S. 11-33; Oliver-Smith, Anthony, Theorizing Disaster. Nature, Power, and Culture, in: Hoffmann, Susanna M.; Oliver-Smith, Anthony (Hrsg.), Catastrophe and Culture, Santa Fe 2002, S. 23-47, bes. S. 25; Pfister, Christian, Naturkatastrophen und Naturgefahren in Geschichtlicher Perspektive. Ein Einstieg, in: Pfister, Christian (Hrsg.), Am Tag Danach, Bern 2002, S. 11-25.

introduced relevant theories of learning, differentiating between the „cognitive school“ which claims that only individuals learn and the „behavioural school“ which argues that the concept of learning can also be applied to learning communities and underlines the aspect of learning within networks.

As an illustration of learning processes, Pfister gave an overview over several case studies mainly from the eighteenth century covering flood catastrophes in Switzerland, France and Germany. He showed that learning from disasters did not happen quickly but could sometimes take several generations.

In his conclusive remarks Pfister highlighted prominent aspects that influence learning. He stated that learning depended on small groups or individuals and that within those groups reciprocal help in case of adversity was a basic principle. Also, Pfister stressed that whether and how learning processes were initiated depended on the social structure and cultural tradition of a society or community. Connecting to his statement about learning processes being time consuming achievements, he added that mitigation strategies could have long implementation periods as novel solutions would not always coincide with the interests of all parts of a society. Lastly, Pfister underlined the need for researchers focussing on learning to investigate the „function“ of disaster; in other words, the social, economic, and political exploitation of such events.

Although Pfister's research focus, time-frame and geographical location differed from Bankoff's and Mitchell's studies, a recurring theme in all three presentations were small-scale (informal) groups, associations or communities and connected with them the aspect of collaboration and reciprocity. Additionally, these aspects point to the concept of resilience, mentioned by both, Bankoff and Pfister in their contributions.

Though quite far removed from the present, in the era of the Roman Empire, MISCHA MEIER's (University of Tübingen) presentation, „Kaiser und Katastrophe“ (Emperor and Catastrophe) proved the actuality of historical research on disasters. Concentrating on the 1st century AD, Meier investigated the role of Roman emperors in connection with natural hazards. His thesis was that the generous help emperors provided for victims and affected cities was mainly a means to confirm and strengthen their own position. In the

pre-monarchic phase, the era of the Roman Republic, natural hazards were perceived as a temporary disturbance in the relationship between the population and the gods and called for collective acts of repentance. This tradition changed with the rise of the Roman emperors who became the representatives of the Roman people and thus, monopolising former collective duties, acted in its place. In other words, in becoming the prime correspondents of the gods, the focus of culpability shifted from the population to the emperors who could now be made personally responsible for natural hazards as *their* relationship with the gods appeared to be impaired.

In rising to power, the Roman emperors acquired much of the gait of the Hellenistic kings which included demonstrative generosity to victims of disasters. However, this characteristic was also expected of the Roman rulers since Augustus had adopted the title of *pater patriae* in 2 BC. Therefore, the provision of support (monetary as well as with man-power) in case of a natural hazard showed strong legitimising and communicative aspects in relation with the emperor's subjects. The centre of attention in providing disaster-relief was not the disaster-stricken population or location, but rather the emperor himself and the strengthening of his position. Hence, centrally coordinated measures of disaster-relief appeared as an epiphenomenon of the monarchy.

In the discussion following Meier's contribution parallels between Roman emperors and today's politicians in facing disaster were pointed out. In both cases it would be felt as an affront by the respective population if the leaders of their nations didn't react appropriately and show concern in verbal and material form.

A 1200-year leap forward from the Roman Empire, GERRIT SCHENK (University of Stuttgart) presented his „Vermutungen über Wechselwirkungen zwischen gesellschaftlichen Strukturen und dem Umgang mit Naturrisiken am Beispiel von Spätmittelalterlichen Städten“ (Suggestions on the interdependency between social structures and ways of dealing with natural hazards. The example of late medieval towns). Schenk's central research question is already wrapped up in the, in his own words, complicated title. Taking 14th century Florence as a first example, Schenk illustrated how the medieval republic dealt with the frequent floods of the river Arno. He discerned several phases in the development of risk-management insti-

tutions, moving from improvised *ad hoc* associations to permanent institutions and, later, becoming part of country and city government responsibility. Schenk concluded that in medieval Florence natural hazards were a driving force in the formation of the territorial state as frequent flood disasters triggered the (bottom up) interaction of the affected population with the (top down) city government.

As a second example, Schenk presented the founding of flood-managing cooperatives in the Rhine region in the 14th century. Although the society inhabiting Strasbourg and the surrounding territories was faced with the same kind of natural hazard as the population in Florence, it developed different strategies and institutions in order to deal with adversity. As Strasbourg was connected by trade with Switzerland, Italy and the Netherlands, dependence on traffic routes fostered attempts at balancing interests with neighbours. Thus, social structure combined with economic factors lead to the formation of cooperative flood-management organisations in the Strasbourg region.

In highlighting aspects of communication and cooperation, Schenk's contribution tied up with Mitchell, Bankoff and Pfister. Again, though this time based on a study located in 14th century Europe, viable disaster-management strategies seemed to arise from collaboration between different levels of society.

ANDREA JANKU (School of Oriental and African Studies, London) introduced „Hunger and war in Early Twentieth-Century China“ opening up a new spectrum of „natural“ hazards. That is, to define hunger as a natural hazard does not immediately feel comfortable, due to the ambiguity of its „naturalness“ as well as of its seeming „non-hazardousness.“ As Janku showed in her presentation the problem of definition is not just an issue in contemporary disaster research but was a highly political question for the rulers in 20th century China. After the Northern Expedition of 1928 lead by Chiang Kai-shek, north China was devastated by the effects of the war as well as by a prevailing drought. Both events lead to widespread famine. Janku pointed out the importance of political affiliation in relation to disaster relief. That is, political leaders who sought relief in other parts of the country had to accept the supremacy and policies of the respective ruler. Thus, many communist leaders turned into nationalists in order to receive help. Furthermore, as war and drought occurred simultaneously, politicians did not agree on whether

the famine was caused by the former or the latter. Hence, the discussion of whether hunger should be perceived as a natural hazard became an important political issue when it came to disaster relief.

In both, Schenk's and Janku's presentations political structures of the respective countries played a crucial role in dealing with disasters. While in Schenk's case natural hazards appeared to be driving forces in state formation (Florence), in Janku's study they changed the face of the political map of China, at least temporarily.

The role of religion and politics in connection with disasters in early-modern Europe was elucidated by ELAINE FULTON who spoke about „The Confessionalisation of Disaster.“ Fulton pointed out that for, both, 16th century Catholics and Protestants disasters were signs from god. However, Catholics did not expect punishment in earthly life but rather after death; whereas, for Protestants, disasters were an earthly punishment. Furthermore, Fulton explained, that the religious sphere could not be separated from the political in early-modern times: religious explanations of disasters were always highly political.

In order to illustrate the connection of confessionalisation and disaster, Fulton presented a case study about the Swiss city of Lucerne, which was struck by an earthquake in 1601. This first disaster, the magnitude of which has been reconstructed as 6.8 on the Richter scale, was followed by a Tsunami-like wave flooding the river Reuss which flows through the city. At that time, the city stood under the reign of the catholic patrician Pfeiffer family who decreed a 48-hour mass as an immediate emergency-measure. This mass was a relatively new kind of religious devotion and was first used in Milan, Italy. Therefore, Protestant territories and communes regarded it a militant and popish ritual. As disasters were perceived as presenting windows for public upheaval, the 48-hour mass can be understood, besides its obvious religious function, as a measure to restore calm and control over the population of the city. Regaining control was also motivated by economic factors since the river Reuss was an important route of trade for the city of Lucerne.

Thematically connected with Fulton's presentation, though not dealing with early-modern but modern society was KURT IMHOF's contribution about „An eternal history: The trials to rationalize catastrophes in the modern society.“ Imhof researched 20th century Swiss media-discourse aiming

at working out the rationality of perceptions of disasters. In order to give an overview over the development of the interpretative discourse of disasters, Imhof began by stating that in early-modern times a magical view of disasters along with aspects of fate and divine providence had prevailed. However, the use of religious vocabulary in the media started to decline after 1910 and since then a secularised interpretation of catastrophes can be discerned. During the second half of the 20th century a change in the relation of humans and their environment in the form of an increasing victimisation of nature can be observed in the media discourse. Another important shift in the media perception of disasters happened during the last decades of the 20th century, when the media discourse on disaster became more emotionalised and personalised. Still, modern catastrophe-communication was based on the cognitive and did not seek to make sense of catastrophe with religious argumentation. Conclusively Imhof pointed out that the rationalisation of discourse was not linear and that phases of regression could be discerned, too.

Juxtaposing Imhof's view on early-modern perception of catastrophes with Fulton's analysis of the seemingly religiously motivated reactions to the earthquake in Lucerne, Imhof's notion appeared too simplistic, following the widely acknowledged idea of „magical belief“ in the early-modern epoch.

Not presenting a case study but moving on a meta-level, FRANZ MAUELSHAGEN brought together „Climate Change, the Historical Discipline, and Politics.“ His presentation was aimed at assessing the role and potential of the field of historical climatology in contributing to the ongoing political debate on global warming. Examining the position of historical climatology, Mauelshagen additionally reviewed the preparedness of the discipline of history to place itself within this debate. Historical climatology has been paramount in establishing an international field of historical disaster studies. Though requiring key-skills of historians, historical climatology is a field dominated by geographers. Consequently, non-deterministic studies focussing on socio-cultural impacts of climate change are relatively scarce, even though a recent definition of historical climatology by Brázdil and Pfister mentions the investigation of socio-cultural impacts as a central aspect of the field.

Turning to the placement of historical climatology within the historical discipline, Mauelsha-

gen highlighted the precarious standing this field of study currently has. As only few historians specialise in historical climatology, the subject might easily be lost for the historical discipline after the next change of professorial generations. The reason for many historians' reservations against historical climatology appears to be the underlying suspicion of climatic determinism. However, Mauelshagen pointed out that historians do not necessarily save themselves from oversimplification by strictly adhering to socio-cultural models. Thus, in order to avoid bias, it would be important to extend views to the social dimensions of the connection between climate and society.

Mauelshagen stressed the importance of historical climatology for the historical discipline as it provided a link and opportunity to contribute to an ongoing political debate connecting all levels of society. Although it did not deal with a specific case of disaster but rather investigated the 'politics' of the historical discipline, Mauelshagen's presentation links to Mitchell's statement about the scientific community losing ground in the current narrowing of perspectives on disasters. Even though Mitchell was referring to the US, his statement might serve as a general call for caution.

Conference overview:

„The Politics of Disasters“

1. James K. Mitchell (Rutgers University):
Collaboration as a Basis for Public Decision-Making about Disasters
2. Greg Bankoff (University of Hull):
Preparing Communities to Deal with Misfortune: Leadership, Local Politics and Community Resources in the Philippines
3. Kurt Imhof (University of Zurich)
An Eternal History: The Trials to Rationalize Catastrophes in the Modern Society
4. Christian Pfister (University of Bern):
Learning from Catastrophes
5. Franz Mauelshagen (University of Zurich):
Climate Change, the Historical Science, and Politics: Historical Climatology in Context
6. Andrea Janku (School of Oriental and African Studies, London):
Hunger and War in Early Twentieth-Century China: From Natural to National Disaster
7. Mischa Meier (University of Tübingen):
Kaiser und Katastrophe. Zum Umgang römischer Principes mit 'Naturkatastrophen' in iulisch-claudischer Zeit (1. Jh. n. Chr.)

8. Gerrit Jasper Schenk (University of Stuttgart):
Vermutungen über Wechselwirkungen zwischen
gesellschaftlichen Strukturen und dem Umgang
mit Naturrisiken am Beispiel von spätmittelalter-
lichen Städten

9. Elaine Fulton (University of Birmingham)
The Confessionalisation of Disaster: Religion,
Politics and the Wrath of God in Early-Modern Eu-
rope

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