

Cultures of Disaster. Concepts and Research

Veranstalter: Junior Research Group „Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures, and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective“, Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context. Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows“, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg

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Bericht von: Julia Itin / Kristine Chalyan-Daffner, Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context. Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows“, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, University of Heidelberg

The first workshop of the Junior Research Group (JRG) „Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures, and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective“ took place at Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies in the framework of the Research Area A „Governance & Administration“ of the Heidelberg Clusters of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“. The main goal of the workshop was to gain insights into the wide field of research findings of the experts who have been working on diverse aspects of „disaster“ in different historical and cultural contexts and to discuss relevant conceptual issues.

According to GREG BANKOFF (Hull), who coined the concept of „Cultures of Disaster“, a disaster should not be examined as an event in the history, but as a process, a continuum which embraces past, present and future. Correspondingly, the subject matter needs to be treated holistically, using cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach. The main focus of the lecture was placed on the assumption that for Western cultures natural hazards and their consequences are ‘abnormal’ situations, since they inhabit less hazard-prone zones of the world. Whereas for the societies like that of Philippine or of other developing countries, natural hazards and disasters are accepted as ‘normal’ aspects of daily life to which they

have to adapt. This ‘normal’ attitude to disasters shapes their culture and mechanisms of coping, which makes Bankoff call them „cultures of disaster“ / „cultures of coping“ — these two concepts being opposite sides of the same coin. He highlighted the concept of „cultures of coping“: how Philippine communities deal with natural hazards, what kind of impact they have on the communities’ daily life, and what makes people resistant to the constant threat. Bankoff termed the different ways of coping as „cultural manifestations“ which comprise physical, behavioural and conceptual mechanisms. The physical manifestation involves architectural adaptation to environmental conditions, agricultural practices as well as resettlement patterns or even migration overseas and is regarded as preventive and impact-minimising mechanisms. The behavioural manifestation refers to the aspects of reciprocity and solidarity as well as other ways of coping with a crisis such as mass hysteria, psychosis or presence of sense of humour. The so called conceptual manifestation incorporates various social attitudes to natural hazards like fatalism, resignation, sense of risk-taking, mysticism, prayers, rituals, purification ceremonies etc.

STEFAN KNOT (Beirut) presented the complex legal and economic effects of the destruction caused in the aftermath of the 1822 earthquake in Aleppo/Syria. The seismic ground motions allegedly lasting for 40 days carried off 15 to 30 percent of the population and destroyed a quarter of the constructions. There is hardly any narrative literature known about this event itself and its aftermath with the exception of one poem. But there are administrative sources which Knost has processed and analyzed systematically. By taking the local administrative archive materials as an example, he succeeded in tracing the development in the administrative and legislative decision-making process such as awarding of the Islamic religious endowment (Waqf) or the long-term rent contracts such as Iğāra tawīla or Hikr. It was possible to see what changes could come about in law, governance and administration as a result of natural hazards. Hence, the productive research findings suggest that the Islamic institute of law (Waqf) can be interpreted as an

instrument of „coping“. It funded the reconstruction, served the social-charitable purposes and family interests which were not limited only to Islamic groups. The disaster could serve as a chance of social rise for the transcultural groups which for example was the case with the Jewish families who had moved there just before the earthquake. It also led to changes in the architecture by embodying the Italian origin of this group.

FRANZ MAUELSHAGEN (Essen) spoke about the interrelation of natural disasters and political system. Here also the diversity of human interpretation- and reaction models of extreme natural events is clearly noticeable, from the basic idea of the capitalism and a constructive power of destruction to the possible collapse of political power during a natural disaster. Political voices also emerge along with religious voices, administrations are held responsible for the good or bad handling of the disaster. One could possibly speak of a causal interrelation between the collapse of normality, the state of emergency in the aftermath and this critical moment as a weak point in the political system. The disaster as a concept could even have a political origin as the disaster is declared as such by the political authority or the administration. Hence, it could be a part of statehood as it demonstrates the government. To support his assumption, he talked about anthropological-social changes caused by the disasters such as the perception of the mass mortality caused by disasters without a memorial – of the „death without the future“ (Emanuel Levinas) – compared to the individual death which is considered ideal. Thus a state of emergency that is postulated by the government can contribute to a collective - if not a national - identity (French Revolution).

GERRIT JASPER SCHENK (Heidelberg) presented the conception of the JRG¹: The time frame of the comparative historical research which aims at the analysis of the transcultural elements in their results would stretch from Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period. The thematic focus would lie on the interplay between nature and the society which would have been thought of as ideal type of constructs. To perceive natural extreme events as disasters could be a social construct

that has been significantly culturally formed. One should turn the attention particularly to the reaction- and coping mechanisms with regard to civilization. Attention should be paid to cultural changes in the local knowledge, institutional as well as political implications of disasters. Thus his comparative structured study aims at the analysis of structural changes after natural disasters with the example of floods and earthquakes in the cities Florence and Strasburg and their surroundings from Late Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period.

KRISTINE CHALYAN-DAFFNER (Heidelberg) presented her research in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, a project launched within the framework of JRG. She gave a general overview of her research dealing with the socio-cultural history of natural hazards such as floods, earthquakes, droughts and famines which befell Egypt during Mamluk era (1250-1517). For Muslim authors the occurrence of such emergencies was a phenomenon to be dealt with on many different levels. However, the aim of her research is to explore the supposed cause of natural hazards and their effect. Accordingly, the main issues addressed were: How were cataclysms perceived and interpreted? What kind of impact did such emergencies have on society and culture? And how did ordinary people, the authorities, public institutions and pious endowments participate in response to such crises?

MURARI KUMAR JHA (Leiden) presented his ideas on the research project „the natural calamities in Mughal State (ca. 1600-1750)“. According to Jha, the natural phenomena such as floods, earthquakes and famines in this period are suited for this research because there are abundant European sources available in this time frame which would facilitate the comparative external objective view. One can analyze the corresponding sources in view of reactions to the disasters, especially at the social, economical and government level. A comparative approach, which uses Europe as the touchstone, is worth pursuing.

In the discussion following the presentations, future plans of the research group were

¹ For further information see <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/research/areas/a/projects/a6-cultures-of-disaster/> (20.04.2009).

re discussed, e.g. a conference “(Hi)stories of Crises” in cooperation with the university of Heidelberg (23rd to 25th July 2009), further workshops about the possibilities of learning from the disasters, the hybridity and transculturality of disasters and an exhibition of transcultural iconography of disasters. The workshop was very productive, particularly with regard to the theory of „Cultures of Disaster“ which one could listen to from Greg Bankoff who coined this concept. Its transcultural approach proved certainly fruitful. At the same time the Eurocentrism of own perspective became apparent which appears difficult to escape. Therefore it pays off to test this concept heuristically while passing through different cultures.

Conference overview:

GREG BANKOFF (Hull, England): Cultures of Disaster

STEFAN KNOT (Orient-Institute, Beirut, Lebanon): The legal and economical effects of the 1822 earthquake in Aleppo/Syria on the Islamic religious endowments

FRANZ MAUELSHAGEN (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, Germany): Natural Hazards to Political Order? Disaster and the History of State Power in Europe

GERRIT SCHENK (Heidelberg, Germany): Presentation of the Junior Research Group

KRISTINE CHALYAN-DAFFNER (Heidelberg, Germany): Natural Disasters in Mamluk Era (1250-1517): Perceptions, Interpretations and Human Responses

MURARI KUMAR JHA (Leiden, Netherlands): Natural Calamities in South Asia: Earthquake, Flood and Famine. The Mughal State and Natural Disasters, c.1600-1750

Discussion about the concept of the Junior Research Group „Cultures of Disaster“, the subprojects, planned workshops, conferences, publications and further activities.

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