Ute Luig (ed.)

Negotiating Disasters: Politics, Representation, Meanings

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I. Introduction

Negotiating disaster: an overview

Ute Luig

1. Introduction[1]

1.1 Prolog

On 11 March 2011, at 14.46 p.m. local time, an earthquake which reached grade 9 on the Richter scale exerted its terrible impact on the east coast of Honshu, Japan. Minutes later it was followed by a tsunami which destroyed the nuclear power plants in Fukushima and devastated the surrounding area. When, after some days of anxiety the feared nuclear explosions happened, Fukushima became the very symbol of the maximum credible accident (*supergau*), to be paralleled only by the events in Tschernobyl in 1986. The term *supergau* implies that radioactive substances are set free and become a threat to humans and the environment. In the case of Fukushima, the exposure to radiation was very high and led to the evacuation of 100,000 to 150,000 people. The enormous destruction of lives, the pollution of the land and sea for many years to come and the following estrangement between civil society and the government turned Fukushima into an archetype of disaster.

Although Fukushima occurred locally, its impact was perceived and interpreted globally, sending shockwaves to the outside world. The devastated landscape appealed to the emotions of the world community, and sparked new discussions about humanity's relationship with the environment. The atmosphere in Europe after Fukushima in many ways resembles the period of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. Susan Neiman (2006: 353ff.) has convincingly described how the destruction of this rich and important city deepened the ideological battles between representatives of the Enlightenment and their religious counterparts. The Lisbon earthquake not only destroyed one of the world's leading cities but also shook the philosophical convictions of the time. Similarly, Fukushima destroyed the belief of many people in the control of technology and aggravated the controversies between supporters and opponents of atomic power. That such

a disaster of almost apocalyptic dimensions could happen in one of the most highly industrialised countries in the world undermined belief in unbounded progress.

Like the Lisbon earthquake, Fukushima also represents a mental crisis. This time the subject is not religion or morality but humanity's accountability for nature and its control of technology. As the very symbol of human vulnerability, Fukushima engrossed the disputes about ethics and technology; it intensified feelings of anxiety which Hoffman (2002: 136f) argued are more pronounced with regard to technological risks than to natural ones.

This profound shock had worldwide repercussions in countries that rely on nuclear power, especially in Europe, but also in Japan and Russia. Although Germany was the only country where the government revised its nuclear power politics by seeking to end its reliance on atomic energy, critical discourses in other countries opened up debates about the control of technology as well. These discussions are coinciding with the ongoing debates on climate change, perceived as another global threat. The insecurity and uncertainties resulting from climate change further support scenarios of a world in danger which is threatened by environmental migrations, hunger and deaths due to droughts and endless wars over resources (see Welzer, Soeffner and Giesecke 2010, Hastrup 2009). Many social scientists are aware of these challenges, in which the twin threats of technology and of disasters overlap. Ulrich Beck (1986) has already drawn attention to this problematic in his *risk society*, which was theorised later by Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002: 18) and others (see Paine 2002: 67). The (pre-modern) relationship between a dominant nature and the social world of humans has been turned upside down in the period of (postmodern) global capitalism. It is human activity which threatens the existence of nature: examples like the Exxon-Valdez disaster, the explosion of an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico and the *supergau* of Fukushima, to name but a few, prove the immense devastation of natural resources through human activity in the era of global capital.

The actuality of climate change and disaster politics has already changed the scientific discourse on 'natural' disasters in fundamental ways. Since Fukushima the long-debated question whether 'nature' or 'humanity' is responsible for disasters (see Alexander 1997) has finally been settled. 'Natural' disasters cannot be perceived any longer as solely natural,[2] but as the complex intertwining of human interventions and environmental vulnerability. Due to the dynamics of globalisation social and natural forces are so closely entangled with one another that the old divide between culture and nature, originating in Western philosophy of the eighteenth century, has lost its foundation. The relentless technological progress as a powerful sign of modernity reveals its very ambivalence, which

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2   Alexander (1997: 289) even speaks of this as a misnomer.

is characteristic of an increase in wealth, mobility and technological potentialities, but is at the same time also responsible for environmental destruction, famine, wars and an ever growing difference between access and entitlement to resources (see Sen 1981). Many social scientists are aware of these challenges and conceive the present situation as the necessary beginning of a new theoretical era for the social sciences (see Hastrup 2009). It may still be too early to propagate a turning point in history, but some of its foundations are laid by the present discussions. This volume aims to contribute to these challenges by offering some new perspectives for research. It takes up the idea of closer cooperation between the social and cultural sciences by offering a transdisciplinary approach. In order to understand the ever more complex changes, it has seemed necessary to leave the anthropological looking glass aside, though without abandoning it, for a widened perspective using new theoretical concepts. In contrast to interdisciplinary research, a transdisciplinary approach takes multiple perspectives on common problems which allow for more comprehensive answers. In an edited volume such an approach is only possible in a very rudimentary fashion, but it can nonetheless lead to interesting results, as the contribution by Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono demonstrates.

1.2 An overview

The idea of this publication sprang from a colloquium at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2010. It aimed at acquiring an overview of the state of the art in disaster research, which had seen a tremendous intensification in recent years. Although this publication was conceived before Fukushima, some of the most salient questions and problems deriving from it are discussed by its authors. Some texts are a kind of stocktaking, reflecting earlier research results, comparing them with new empirical findings and questioning their empirical validity. Others open up new debates which reconcile social science approaches with the humanities. Topics like the politics of disaster, culture change, memory, rituals of mourning and good and bad deaths are covered in this book, while others, such as resistance and violence, spaces of death and the analysis of the emotions, will be just delineated in order to provide a trajectory for future studies.

A wide range of extreme events are nonetheless considered in this volume. The spectrum reaches from processes of environmental degradation, whether of pastures (Bollig) or coastlines (Harms), to sudden, incalculable events like lightning, hail (Schröder), earthquakes (Schild, Simpson, Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono), landslides (Sökefeld), floods (Schulz, Macamo and Neubert) or the tsunami in 2004 (Vettori). With one exception, all the analyses are based on long-term fieldwork and accordingly on dense case studies. The events described outline the close entanglement between climate change, increases in vulnerability or resilience and a great variety of coping strategies and interpretations. The examples range from single and/or chronic crises (see Vigh 2008) to

'classical' disasters which, in contrast to crises, are experienced as shocking, overwhelming events which necessitate immediate help. Although some disasters are foreseeable, and in some cultures even prophesied in calendars and in notions of cyclical time, the possibility of their occurrence is quite often suppressed and then comes as a shock. In order to improve our understanding of their particular dynamics, which unfold over time and space and turn them into processes rather than punctuated events, it is necessary to analyse their specific (historical) conditions as part of a transnational context. This space-time-oriented approach also allows us to analyse a processual chain that divides the development of a crisis or disaster into a state before, during and after the event. This time frame is of particular importance when a crisis turns into a disaster (see Macamo and Neubert, Sökefeld this volume) or changes into a catastrophe, as in Fukushima.

The term 'disaster' is used in this introduction in a rather colloquial manner. The reason behind this 'loose terminology'[3] was the idea of taking up important discussions in recent years advocating the holistic analysis of disasters. This approach implied on the one hand showing the intertwining of risk perception, vulnerability and coping strategies which do not always focus on disasters but describe mere or chronic crises as well. On the other hand, since it was necessary to document how social practices and cultural meanings are inscribed on to a material environment over long periods of time, it seemed important to discuss the interconnectedness of risk perception and vulnerability and then to link them to interpretation and coping strategies from an emic point of view. Problematizing emic and etic perceptions of disasters is important in order to open up discussions that critically rethink our use of categories. Most of the case studies in this book bear witness to this problem since they are concerned with problems of classification and method. What is a disaster, how is it differentiated from a mere crisis and under what condition does one turn into the other are salient questions for some of the authors in this volume. Others (Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono, Schulz) reflect on methods in order to understand how people can make meaning of their experiences in the face of disastrous events. They question Western scientific theories in comparison with local perceptions and interpretations. It is in these sections where the differences between different disciplines in accessing the same problems are most obvious and thus enrich the spectrum of theoretical trajectories in disaster research.

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3 For an interesting discussion of possible definitions of disaster, see Oliver-Smith (1999a: 20). His conclusion "that disaster is a contested concept, with blurred edges, more a set of family resemblances …rather than a set of bounded phenomenon to be strictly defined" (ibid.: 21) is good to think with.

2. Engaging with theories

2.1 Thinking about risk and risk management

Discussions in disaster research during the last twenty years have brought four terms to the fore to theorize about: risk, risk management, vulnerability and resilience. Most of these terms originated from other disciplines, like ecology or cultural psychology, and it was some time before they were introduced into anthropological discourses. **Michael Bollig** addresses the history of these terms in his introduction and shows how they can be fruitfully adapted by anthropological theory building. Bollig selects and differentiates three traditions in analysing risk and risk management: actor-oriented, ethnographic and interpretative approaches, and he discusses their merits and shortcomings. According to his reading, the actor-oriented approach mainly discussed this problematic with regard to risk management either in the form of rational choice models or as structuring social institutions and territorial behaviour. Institutions like food-sharing were and are the key strategies in foraging societies in minimising natural risks. Bollig criticizes the fact that, although these studies had clear hypotheses, they did not produce models of general applicability. The same criticism also applies to what he calls the ethnographic approach that focused on African drylands. Problems of desertification, food shortages and social marginalization have frequently arisen in the Sahel since the 1970s and require strategies of survival and community building. But despite fine-grained descriptions of "historically changing modes of risk management" (Bollig: 33) these studies were not embedded in any theory of risk perception, nor were they related to local belief systems. He is also critical of Mary Douglas's publications, which are considered the major anthropological contribution to risk perception by neighbouring disciplines, although their impact on anthropology has been limited. Douglas made the perception of risks the key aspect of her theory, which she discussed with reference to a vast range of case studies. Her main thesis that "risk perception is encoded in social institutions" (Bollig: 34) fits well with her analysis of its many dimensions, but as Bollig suggests it remains analytically diffuse. In his own approach he defines risks as "the culturally and socially embedded perceptions of future possible damage resulting from a variety of hazards" (Bollig:36), while risk management either reduces negative impacts by decreasing vulnerability or limits the impact of damage through a conscious decision. Bollig proposes an analysis that relates risks and risk management to a time- and space-specific structure of resources which is accordingly embedded in historical circumstances.

   Ingo Haltermann, a social geographer by profession, shares this historically oriented, contextualised approach with Bollig, but differs from him in that he explicitly orientates his discussion of risk and risk management around the conceptualization and individual appropriation of space. His approach to space is based on a constructionist view of environment which is not limited to a geo-

graphical or spatial relationship but defined by human needs and desires that are historically and culturally constituted. He conceives of the environment as a system "representing a certain section of the external world to which the actions and perceptions of a subject give significance" (Haltermann: 64). These perceptions, together with former experiences, also shape subjective evaluations of risk. They have to be taken into account in order to make assumptions about the feasibility and extent of the dangers which may threaten in the future. The author stresses the concept of bounded rationality favoured by risk research in geography because of its findings that individual actions are not orientated towards cost-benefit factors, but are instead determined by individual interests, cultural values and trust in one's own ability. This psycho- cultural conceptualization of space recalls in certain ways Soja's redefinition of space as active and dialectical (see Keith and Pile 1993: 4). Haltermann goes on to question the ways of individual (and household) risk-taking by introducing the differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable risk-taking, which are discussed in terms of risk acceptance or damage acceptance. Decision-makers have to weigh several risks against several chances, and even risks against risks and chances against chances. Besides this balancing of reasons, the control of resources plays an important role in confirming safety, which is conceptualized as freedom from want and freedom from fear according to a UN convention. Despite this psychological argumentation, he stresses the direct connection between safety and control over wealth, knowledge and power. Social inequality thus becomes a key variable in explaining the unequal distribution of risks that manifests itself in limited possibilities to guarantee (human) security (see also Beck 1986: 55). Under precarious living conditions without access to security, "even extreme natural events lose importance and represent only one further aspect in a general state of continuous crisis" (Haltermann: 77). Later in his text, however, he revises this somewhat deterministic perception. Under situations of increasing danger, so his argument, people will change these limits of adaptation and restructure their culturally determined behaviour, provided that the structural disadvantages of their local households have undergone change. Along with their changing situations, their perceptions of risk will change as well and will lead to changes in risk management.

2.2 Vulnerability and resilience

Haltermann's argumentation in some respects comes close to the so-called risk and vulnerability discourse, which, due to the work of Wisner et al. among others, is one of the most frequently discussed in disaster sociology (see also Bollig, Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono, Schulz this volume). Alexander (1997: 291) has pointed out that risk and vulnerability are different sides of the same coin. Risk is an active concept, whereas vulnerability is more passive. Risks can be taken, but vulnerability has to be endured, though it can also be

changed (see Haltermann, above). According to Alexander it is therefore more appropriate to relate vulnerability to the susceptibility of damage or injury or, in Wisner's terminology, to "correlate it with past losses and the susceptibility to future losses" (quoted from Alexander 1997: 291). In order to avoid discussing vulnerability only in quantitative terms, as a form of material damage or loss of human life, Blaikie et al (1994) have added political factors as well. Alexander's own efforts to unpack this rather blurred category seem interesting enough to be cited in a much shortened version. He differentiates between 1) the total vulnerability of the poor and dispossessed, 2) the economic vulnerability of the marginally employed, 3) the technological or technocratic vulnerability of the rich, 4) newly generated vulnerability, that is, risks to property or other capital assets, 5) residual unameliorated vulnerability that includes risks to modern safety standards, and last but not least 6) delinquent vulnerability, which also refers to breaches of safety norms (see Alexander 1997: 292). Although these ascriptions consist mainly of references to social inequality and a lack of safety standards, they provide insights into the further differentiation and ramifications of the concept.

In their contribution to this volume, **Elísio Macamo and DieterNeubert** take issue with the widely accepted notion (see Wisner et al. 2004) that the greater the vulnerability of local people, the greater their exposure to risk and the "lesser are their chances to recover" (Macamo and Neubert: 83) by introducing two new categories into the debate: the notion of ordinary management expectation, and local relief management capabilities. These two characteristics allow them to understand disasters not from an individual or social-psychological point of view, but as a social phenomenon (ibid.: 85).

Their field of enquiry is the comparative study of coping with floods along the Limpopo (2000), Odra (1997) and Tennessee rivers (2003 and 2004), the latter being part of the so-called Bible belt in the USA. Their main aim is to understand the logics behind the different classifications of these events through an emic perspective which includes analysing local perceptions and religious beliefs, as well as the organization of support by social institutions.

Their interest in risk management is closely linked to the precision and refinement of existing categories to describe hazardous events, the differences of which have to be outlined for scientific reasons, but also for practical purposes. Only if planners and disaster experts understand the assessments of local populations are they able to offer improved measures of support in case of need. The centre of Macamo's and Neubert's endeavour is therefore a critical rethinking of the 'all-purpose metaphor' disaster, deploring its heterogeneous usage in very different contexts. They propose a kind of ranking between extreme events, threats or hazards, disaster and catastrophe, which they link to the functioning of the social order. Threats or hazards are characterized by a breakdown of normality within a certain time window, whereas in a disaster normality is perma-

nently destroyed, but differs from the complete breakdown of the social order that characterizes a catastrophe.

Disaster management here is not linked to vulnerability per se but to the organizing capacities of the local people, which are shaped by their knowledge and technical means. Whereas the population of the Limpopo valley was used to the seasonal flooding of the river – which, if it arrived at the right times is even regarded as beneficial – their delayed run-off in retrospect turned the 'normal' crisis situation into a disaster. Their inability to plant their fields at the right time resulted in widespread hunger. It was therefore not the floods but their unexpected consequences that were responsible for the breakdown of their emergency management and the ensuing deaths. Despite their social vulnerability, the communities in the Limpopo valley have low expectations of outside help, and instead trust in their own management capabilities. This includes a greater tolerance of material and human loss and a lower threshold for interpreting these events as disaster. Resilience in their case was strong due to their understanding of normality as beset by material problems and the struggle for survival.

In contrast to these perceptions, the better off population in the Odra valley, as well as those in the Tennessee valley, have a much lower tolerance of these kinds of losses. Not surprisingly their expectation of outside management capabilities is much higher, despite their own well-coordinated emergency management. Normality for them is expressed in effective management expectations, which in case of need are supported by the smooth working of the management support structures. Compared to the Limpopo population their resilience is less developed, despite greater material security and elaborate techniques of prevention.

These comparisons lead Macamo and Neubert to the conclusion that the contextualization of key terms like crisis, disaster, vulnerability and resilience refutes standard explanations of disaster anthropology which were predominantly measured in quantitative terms, like the amount of damage and the number of casualties. Although the most vulnerable are those most impacted by hazardous events, their resilience is higher due to different expectations of normality. Vice versa, better off societies in the industrialised world are (also mentally) more vulnerable and less resilient because of their high expectations of safety in everyday life.

The authors opt for a de-construction or substitution (livelihood analysis instead of vulnerability) of these terms in order to be able to contextualize their meaning in divergent surroundings.

The ethnographic research of **Michael Bollig** in north-western Namibia is a good example of such a nuanced discussion. He undertook one of the very few long-term studies in environmental research in describing in detail the reciprocal relationships between physical vulnerability and human interaction. Using a framework of long-term research he was able to reassess his own judgements

concerning the stability of the systems, which proved much more dynamic than expected. Comparing the impact of diverse socio-political situations on the environment enabled him to develop an understanding of resilience that points out the absorption of disturbances and reorganization through a constant process of learning and adaption to change.

The decisive factors in the functioning of the eco-system were local power relations, which regulated grazing patterns and access to water holes on a seasonal level. Colonial and postcolonial governments adapted them to varying political circumstances, but because of technological and political interventions the government itself became the greatest risk to a balanced ecosystem. It provoked a hunger crisis when it banned transnational trade, which was vital for the community in times of crises in the 1920s. The well-intentioned effort to improve pastures through a borehole drilling program in the mid-1950s led to a reversal of grazing patterns, overstocking and an increase in social conflicts. Although this alarming situation could be controlled for some time through the institutionalisation of chieftainships, some years later, under the postcolonial government, the dissolution of the system became obvious. The severe degradation of pastures as a result of the bureaucratization of grazing rules and ongoing modernization processes produced further conflicts which led to heavy outmigration. But the expected collapse of the system was prevented by its transfer to national conservancy units along the lines of traditional chieftaincies. Since they had the support of the traditional elites and the NGOs, these national conservancies became signs of hope for a sustainable future.

This long-term case study provides a detailed insight into the dynamic relationship between the eco-system, social and political configurations and the building up of resilience patterns. Bollig stresses that the alternate phases of stability and transformation[4] of the system required different forms of risk management and changing pattern of social resilience. He points to two different forms of resilience: social resilience as a form of communal investment in "collectively held social capital" (Bollig: 52), and the resilience of the eco-system, defined as a 'structural property' (ibid.). Both types of resilience are characterised by constant changes which impact on each other and lead to the overall dynamic of the system as a whole.

In contrast to Michael Bollig's presentation of social and ecological resilience, **Arne Harms** aims to liberate social resilience from its predominant employment in debates in ecology and political economy. He no longer understands the term as a personal or systemic capacity, but as a situated practice "related to culturally mediated interpretations of the present" (Harms: 108). The focus of his study is the squatters who populate the embankments of various islands in the Ganges Delta. They live under extremely vulnerable conditions due to a con-

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4   See also Holling 1973 for a similar characterisation of eco-systems.

stant process of coastal erosion, which forces them to shift their houses from the shores of the embankment to the hinterland in search of habitable land. Harms' central argument is that in this shrinking life world social resilience is expressed in an 'ethic of endurance' articulated by 'narratives of loss' in which social memory is encapsulated. Arguing against conceptualizations which narrow memory to the application or intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge (see Vettori, this volume), he opts for a culturally mitigated concept of memory in the sense of the remembered past defining the present (Harms: 109; also Antze and Lambek 1996).

In contrast to disasters which occur suddenly against all expectation, the creeping destruction of the environment in the Ganges Delta is not remembered as a series of special events but taken as an act of a "contingently present normality" (Harms: 110). Memory under these conditions of "chronic crisis" (Vigh 2008: 9) becomes an act of identity empowering the squatters to cope with their surroundings not only in a technical and functional manner, but in the form of cultural history. This history relates to memories of marginalisation, loss of land and familial conflicts, which are the results of colonial land and settlement policy in the Ganges Delta. In this constantly shrinking world without any security or stability, economic strategies strengthen resilience patterns beyond processes of memory. Thus, onshore fishing of tiger prawns seedlings (*meen*), labour migration into the Indian hinterland and work in seasonal deep-sea fishing are important methods of survival, as are catering for and transporting the pilgrims who visit a nearby annual festival. These strategies become strengthened through relations of solidarity among neighbours, who not only share their memories of loss and destitution, but generate from them a collective identity as a "community of loss" (see Butler 2003). Despite their difficult living conditions, most settlers preferred to stay on because this kind of communal support, trust in one's neighbour and the memory of a shared past prove to be more powerful than the hope of a better life, which may be very short-lived.

When we compare these different forms of resilience from a transdisciplinary perspective, we acquire a close up of differentiated contexts and practices. Bollig stresses the twofold notion of resilience as a structural property that is also a systemic capacity, a form of collective agency represented by hierarchical structures and political networks. In addition, Macamo and Neubert draw attention to managerial capacities which either strengthen or weaken the social resilience of groups. Whereas resilience in these chapters is seen as a function of adaptation in changing ecological environments under specific historical conditions, Harms describes it as a means whereby to live through these conditions. Sharing with Bollig as well as Macamo and Neubert the idea that resilience is constitutive of collective identities, he underlines its notion as a culturally mediated practice that "is certainly also a situated practice. In the latter sense, it therefore draws on and is enacted through a range of material relations, eco-

nomic practices, social articulations and cultural interpretations" (Harms: 125). In Harms' understanding, resilience as a category no longer refers only to social or ecological processes but is embodied in a very dynamic understanding of culturally mitigated actions. The shared memory of the group, as a way to live through the past for a future present, plays an important role in his understanding of resilience. It therefore differs from notions of memory, which, as Harms labels it, have been incarcerated in the transmission of traditional knowledge. Although this critique is well taken, the concept of traditional knowledge is a complex one, especially with regard to what is understood as traditional. In his research on Indian fishermen, Hoeppe (2007) discovered that traditional knowledge draws its insights from many domains, science included, while for Stehr (1994) traditional knowledge means 'to do something'. Similarly, Lambek (1993) has drawn attention to this very close relationship between knowledge and practice. His differentiation of several layers of knowledge – sacred, objectified and embodied knowledge – is based on practice, not on knowing. The knowledge of an expert cannot be determined by asking him what he knows but only by analysing what he does (ibid.: 17). **Vettori's** interview (this volume) with a chief from the Nicobar Islands confirms this 'action side' of knowledge. Although when the tsunami set in he was able to save his group by remembering the advice of his ancestors, in the aftermath of the tsunami recourse to government relief operations was more important for his group. The situational selection of different knowledge systems is in his view decisive for the future of his people, traditional knowledge being an important means of upholding identity, which, however, is in a constant flux due to other influences. Since this context-orientated application of traditional knowledge comes near to what Harms described as situated practice, it is evident that knowledge in a 'liberated form' can be part of resilience in all its complexity, that is, not exclusively related to strategies of survival. This result confirms the polysemic aspects of social resilience, which, in addition to social memories and different types of knowledge, must incorporate religious beliefs as well (see the studies in 2.3 and 4).

2.3 Reflecting on methods: how can we make sense of disasters?

Disasters are, for the victims, a period of pain, loss and sorrow. After rescue, questions of why and how this has happened (see Macamo and Neubert: 99f.) are asked. In many societies the why questions are related to beliefs in transcendental powers, be they ancestors or God himself. It is the individual self as well as the community as a whole who have to make sense of the disaster. Why did God allow this, what does he want to tell us and what are the proper reactions? Whereas these questions were part of elaborate philosophies in Western languages and have been well researched by anthropologists, much less is known about how people make sense of the disaster for themselves. The cultural psychologists **Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono** posed this question as a meth-

odological problem during their research on the earthquake in Java in 2006. What kind of theory, they ask, is suited to penetrating into individual cosmologies of suffering – or, put differently, what insights do we gain when we refer to specific theories? Their interest concentrates on the analysis of "the retrospective psycho-spiritual processing of the direct consequences of the earthquake two to five years afterwards" (Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono: 135) and on the ways in which cultural meanings and practices mediate subsequent resilience and disaster preparedness. Their problematic is not far from Harms' intellectual pursuits, but instead of memory as cultural practice, they focus on spiritual coping as a means of social resilience. The very intricate process of coping and aid, which has not been well studied from an individual, psychological point of view, deems it necessary to unpack them in order to understand how strategies of external help can be integrated into local cultural logics. In order to understand this process, they discuss "how the risk and vulnerability approach in disaster research, research into psychological coping and knowledge of local and cultural specificity in cultural anthropology interrelate with each other" (ibid.: 134). The aim of this very ambitious program is the production of knowledge in the sense of the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the hope of improving coping strategies in disaster management.

After a short discussion of the risk and vulnerability approach by Wisner et al. (2004), which focuses on the socio-economic, political and ecological aspects of coping but is mute on how different groups of people experienced the disaster and how it altered their well-being, the authors introduce the different conceptualizations of psychological coping research. The various appraisal-based approaches are presented and evaluated with reference to their explanatory value in reducing stress. They dismiss the acclaimed differentiation between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping because they often overlap. Instead they favour a meaning-centred coping within appraisal-based approaches, which "is seen as positive cognitive restructuring, examining beliefs and values, reordering life priorities, infusing new meanings and finding benefits in adversity" (Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono: 138). In this way, the contents of spiritual and religious beliefs are not discarded and can be integrated into universal models of coping. From the various appraisal-based approaches in the field of religious psychology, Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono mention among others Hobfol's theory of resource conservation (COR) and the neuro-culture-interaction model advanced by Kitayama and Uskul, who stress that "cultural influence [on the brain] is mainly exerted by doing and practising what is relevant in the cultural context" (quoted in Zaumseil and Prawitasari Hadiyono: 140) In contrast to trauma theory, which they criticize as being dominated by Western assumptions, they conclude that the cultural psychology of religion offers a rich perspective for understanding coping strategies in specific cultural contexts. The decisive question is thus to specify what is culturally specific about Java? Is

there a Javanese culture, and what are its characteristics? Turning to anthropological theory, they opt for the deconstruction of the notion of culture, as well as for de-essentializing the image of Java. It is not only religious plurality in Java which makes it difficult to make statements about Javanism, but also the dynamics and inner variety which are constitutive for this society.

Their very complex theory-generating method, based on insights from Clarke's *situational maps*, which are an enhancement of the methods propagated by Glaser and Strauss, enables them to confront these different theoretical approaches, which all originate from Western scholarship with the interpretation of the local people. Through intensive participatory methods, including village theatrical performances, they obtained a wide range of answers regarding the local interpretation, which they then projected on the theoretical explanations just mentioned. These newly generated theory blocks are then superimposed again on the findings of the various appraisal-based approaches they formerly discussed. As a result, they gain an analytically saturated insight into their own findings by looking at them from different theoretical perspectives and local semantic fields.

3. The politics of space: negotiating reconstruction

Disasters symbolise social disorder, representing a time of chaos, sometimes of upheaval, but also of hope for a better future. Many local people want to reconstruct the status quo ante. Others hope for a new beginning, for the opportunity to have a second chance in life (see Hoffman 1999: 150). Bureaucrats and entrepreneurs dream of creative destruction, that is, of building new cities and enforcing radical concepts of modernization. Ashkabad, Algiers and Tashkent are examples of such a rigid top-down approach which in many ways offended people's wishes to protect their homes and neighbourhoods. Phases of reconstruction thus implicate the politics of space and identity. They are arenas of negotiations, of cooperation in forging new alliances, but also of conflicts and bitter struggles.

Disasters reveal structures of hierarchy and inequality in societies which are based on class, gender or age, on social ascription or achievement. It is in these situations that social vulnerability can best be studied with regard to access to resources or its frustration. To achieve normality again can become a long drawn out process, taking months or even years. The phases of reconstruction are stretched out and fragmented into times of rescue, relief and reconstruction. On the occurrence of the event follow phases of consolation, of mutual support and solidarity, which come close to the idea of Turner's *communitas*. Social differences are ignored, feelings of unity and comradeship celebrated (see Hoffman 1999, Schlehe 2006). Oliver-Smith (1999b) has named this transient period the 'brotherhood of pain', which, however, gives way to rivalry and envy, often

when outside support comes in. These feelings dominate the phase of recon-
struction in many, albeit not in all societies, leading to the social isolation of the
victims, their psychological estrangement and to their possible fragmentation.
Negotiations between the local population and different strata of government
personnel may become as conflict-ridden as the relationship between the various
NGOs and the government, as is the case in many societies.

Martin Sökefeld gives a detailed account of the phases of relief and recon-
struction that focuses on the negotiation between local communities, their re-
spective local and national government representatives and outside aid workers.
Although the landslide in Attabad had made itself known some time previously,
people did not pay attention to the first signs and cracks in the mountains. They
ignored this warning and were taken by surprise by the landslide, the debris of
which "created a huge barrier of more than hundred metres height and one kilo-
metre width which completely blocked the flow of the Hunza-River and also
buried the Karakorum Highway (KKH)" (Sökefeld: 178). The demolition of this
part of the highway destroyed the north's lifeline to the rest of Pakistan and
neighbouring countries like China. Through the slow, but continuous expansion
of the lake which resulted from the blocked Hunza River, the population of Go-
jal was cut off from food, trade and communication. The lake flooded several
villages, destroying houses, fields and plots. It shattered the basis of the local
economy, which, in addition to agriculture, rested on tourism and led to a dra-
matic setback of the well-developed system of education. This 'man-made dis-
aster' whose end was incalculable brought unrest to a region that was already
characterised by 'political marginalization because it is affected by the Kashmir
dispute'.

Since the area belongs to neither Kashmir nor Pakistan because it lacks con-
stitutional status, its politically marginalized positions have given rise to a long
history of political strife. Questions of ethnicity, which were directly linked to
the former feudal system of the Mir, as well as to religious tensions between the
Ismailiyya, Sunni and Shia Muslim communities, came as much to the fore as
different loyalties to rival political parties which either favoured independence
or constitutional integration into Pakistan. Government became the common
enemy. The deep-seated mistrust of the ruling establishment expressed itself in
rumours, public criticism and accusations of corruption. Despite the politician's
visits and (small) donations, most of the locals were not satisfied with these
politics of symbols but wanted practical action. Because their own resources
were insufficient to deal with the challenges of the lake, they insisted on outside
help from China, which they considered technologically more advanced. But
before this could be organised, past tensions among ethnic and religious groups,
as well as between different generations, broke out and complicated the situation
further, which culminated in protest demonstrations and mass rallies. The newly
created spaces of resistance brought into being new symbols which celebrated

the memory of the disaster's anniversary, like the so-called Black Day. Accompanied by intense media coverage, this symbolic commemoration 'culturalized' the 'natural disaster', which seems to be a typical reaction of survivors (see Hoffman 1999: 143). At the same time, it was a political demonstration of the seriousness with which a fraction of the local population fought for the re-appropriation of their living space and right to belong. This politics of space turned more violent in the course of events. Not only have protesting youngsters been arrested under §144 and turned into 'terrorists', but the rallies, agitation and protest demonstrations culminated in the shooting of two protesters, both internally displaced persons who were fighting to return to their homes.

The occurrence of violence during the phases of reconstruction is not altogether new. The aftermath of hurricane Katrina, when racial conflicts were sparked off, exposing long-established relations of inequality and superiority, is a case in point. The increase in vulnerability and suffering apparently activates old conflicts, and memories of loss and deprivation under certain historical and political conditions. Coping strategies in Gilgit and Baltistan are thus determined – as in the Ganges Delta – by social memories which, albeit under different conditions, refer to former histories of inequality and political conflict.

Pascale Schild's description of the earthquake in Azad Kashmir, which caused at least 80,000 deaths and left over three million people homeless, is another example of the intricate relationship between the state and local survivors. In her research in Muzzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Kashmir, one object of enquiry was the negotiations over the compensation for destroyed houses. Since the earthquake was considered one of the most severe in Asia during the last hundred years by the US Geological Survey, the enormous impact on the social fabric had to be mitigated by government aid. Supported by international donors, the Pakistani government created a new bureaucratic organisation (ERRA), which actively provided a form of compensation according to the principle of one house, one family. Despite the small payments involved, competition for these financial resources aggravated existing tensions. But in contrast to the public conflicts in Gojal, these conflicts were not openly discussed, but rather resembled hidden transcripts. What is of special interest is that they were framed in idioms of ideal kinship relations. Due to the patrilineal ideal of joint families in this area, a house can include several households or nuclear families. However, as rumours had it, many families no longer fulfilled this ideal but people had moved away when their fathers had died and established households of their own. This practice had already begun before the disaster but became more common after it due to the scarcity of houses and rooms. Schild argues that government policies not only neglected the complexity of social realities and their ever-changing forms but that they increased social hierarchies by creating winners and losers. Furthermore, this interference of the state "in the minute texture of everyday life" (see Gupta 1995: 375) raised people's awareness of the im-

portance of place as an integral part of their identity. This politics of space is well documented for disasters in other societies as well (see Bode 1989; Hoffman 2002), since most victims want to stay near their old homes.

Schild's contribution is an intriguing analysis of the re-negotiations of the social fabric which articulated itself in the dialectical relationship between houses and homes. The materiality of the house and its close links to a location coalesces with the sociality and emotional belonging of the home. Spaces turn into places which convey feelings of trust and security under the conditions of severe suffering.

To analyse the symbolic and emotional meanings of material objects, which embodies a somewhat new trend in anthropology, opens up new paths in disaster research to understand better the complexities of identity which are salient for the successful process of reconstruction. How these changes are mastered depends on the relationships between the state, the different strata of civil society and to a great degree on national and international capital. An outstanding example of the hubris involved in such efforts of modernization is described by **Edward Simpson** in his discussion of the earthquake in Kutch in 2001. He vividly describes a process of "creative destruction" (see Schumpeter 1994: 81ff.) as a combined form of political and economic interventions by insiders and outsiders. The reconstruction of the greatly destroyed city of Bhuj represents a tour de force on the part of several government agencies and economic entrepreneurs who, by distributing of money and promises to the poor, fought for their idea of a modernized city. In order to change the old city into a modern capital, politicians and planners alike did not hesitate to ignore social and religious rules. They disregarded caste regulations, bulldozing Muslim graveyards and other religious sites. The aim was to create a capital like Singapore dominated by vast alleys, traffic lights and empty spaces, which according to Simpson became the very symbol of a fake city, de-humanised in its construction of space and estranged from its inhabitants. Resistance to these policies of 'forced modernity' took manifold forms, including intense negotiations and struggles between bureaucrats and local residents and ended in some cases in such desperate acts as suicide. But not all the city's inhabitants shared a nostalgic view of their home town. Others welcomed the possibility of seemingly unlimited consumption. Instead of using their money to rebuild their houses or buy new plots, they invested it in short-lived consumer goods.

The reconstruction of Bhuj and the neighbouring villages came close to what was locally referred to as a 'second earthquake'. It erased the familiarity of home and the values attached to it. The modern Bhuj was much more than the development of a postcolonial town which had shunned its colonial past, since "its effect was to demand a new type of citizen: a mobile suburban consumer" (Simpson: 253). This case study reminds one of Frederic Jameson's view of "the spatial logic of multinational (postmodern) capitalism" that "is simultaneously

homogeneous and fragmented" and creates "a kind of 'schizo-space'" (quoted in Keith and Pile 1993: 2). Simpson's own conclusion is rather more sociological, reminding "readers that post-disaster booms are old and regular features of catastrophe, and that these cannot simply be attributed to the universal expansion of capital but must be understood as parts of the moment of sublime destruction and the collective emotional and sociological responses of the beleaguered" (Simpson: 240).

4. Constructing local meanings

Cultural interpretations structure the understandings of natural disasters and impinge upon strategies of coping. Since disasters create spaces of death, they naturally demand questions and answers which go beyond technological or scientific reasoning. Macamo and Neubert call them the 'how' and 'why' questions. In their comparative analysis of the floods in three structurally different societies, they came to the conclusion that their importance depended on the technological know-how in these societies. 'Why questions', which are questions of causation, were of great importance in the Limpopo valley, with its less developed technological expertise, whereas in those societies with highly developed management capabilities, the 'how questions' dominated. Even in the Bible belt, both explanations were used according to circumstance. The simultaneity of moral/religious and scientific/technological explanations has been confirmed by many anthropological studies of the perception and interpretation of disasters. During the floods in Hamburg in 1962, religious interpretations were evoked side by side with technological explanations, although less frequently (see Engels 2003: 125). The complexity and multi-dimensionality of disasters is certainly one of the reasons for the varieties of causes mentioned. The differing constructions of nature are as much implicated as differences in social organisation, especially with regard to political configurations. Frömming (2006: 50ff), Schlehe (1996, 2010) and Bode (1977) have drawn attention to the widespread imagination that a punitive or revengeful God (or spirits) sends a disaster because of people's immorality or the bad political behaviour of the elite, which also triggers off discussions about tradition and modernity (see Schlehe 2010). In Bode's example, it was the abasing treatment of the local Indian population by the *mestizos* which was made responsible for the combination of earthquake and avalanche that caused between 50,000 and 100,000 deaths. These examples, which could be multiplied, highlight the moral ascription and highly symbolic meanings that are attributed to disasters under certain political constellations. They are read as a cultural critique of social and political relations and as moral agencies which are in a position to punish or to do justice.

The chapter by **Axel Schäfer** draws attention to a hazardous event which is typical for the Andean mountains: the deaths of people and animals by lightning.

He describes in detail such an incident in which the Andean mountain gods of lightning and hail killed the only two cows of a poor family. In the Andes, as in many other societies, nature is still imbued with religious meaning as an expression of invisible forces, like the ancestors, spirits or gods. In these "local topographies of meanings" (Hastrup 2009: 28), nature is in no way a natural given separate from culture, as Lévi-Strauss postulated, but rather a part of it (see Luig 2002: 2). Andean constructions of nature intersect with cultural values and moral evaluations. The perception of the mountains as the seats of powerful gods reflect their societies' vulnerability, which is expressed in disasters like earthquakes, avalanches and landslides (see Bode 1989), which always cause great numbers of deaths and great damage. In addition, lightning and hail, which most often kill individuals, are widespread threats in the mountains, surrounded by a rich folklore and embedded in old belief systems. Lightning can take different forms, ranging from bolts of lightning to 'left or right, male or female lightning strokes' which, according to context, are interpreted as punitive or as revelatory. Revelatory knowledge is empowering knowledge: it transforms the victim into a healer (see Rösing 1990). It is this very relationship between man and God which forbids the rescuing of victims of lightning or giving them medical attention. If the person survives he can either become a healer or pursue his normal life. In both cases, however, the question why this particular person was affected has to be resolved.

The example Schäfer describes is by no means a disaster since it caused the deaths of only two cows of a single family. However, under the conditions of extreme poverty in which the family lives, the loss of their cows threatens their economic survival. It is therefore necessary to find out the reasons why this individual family was hurt in order to placate the gods. In a ritual rich with symbols passed down from different Andean cultures (pre-Inca, Inca, Christian), the victims are purified and their relationship to the punishing God of lightning is transformed through different ritual acts. The aim of the ritual is to restore the balance between the gods and the humans, which include the safety of their animals, as well as the fertility of the land. These ritual practices are important contributions to the resilience of the family and the agricultural system as a whole. Being passed down even from before the times of the Inca, these rituals were only slightly transformed through Christian beliefs, and their practice continues until the present. They thus exhibit a surprising parallel with beliefs about lightning and hail in Europe, which were also thought of as embodiments of God in Germanic times. Only (slightly) changed during the Enlightenment, these beliefs are still reproduced in narratives and fables (see Bächtold-Stäubli 1987). They reveal a stability of structures despite consecutive waves of modernization. A case in point is the famous wayside shrines (*Marterl*) in the Bavarian and Austrian mountains consisting of crucifixes or Madonna statues. Reminders of past disasters, in which lightning plays a prominent part, they are symbols of

gratitude and of the fortunate rescue of the victim. The many prayers of thanks for escape from dangerous situations scribbled on leaflets and fixed to the walls in pilgrimage chapels are further proofs of religious vitality. Schäfer's contribution in this volume does not reflect the 'exoticism' of a pre-modern world view, but demonstrates its *coevalness* – to cite a term of Fabian's (1983) – with beliefs in a highly complex society.

A similar world view regarding the dependence between humans and the invisible forces of nature is described by **Dorothea Schulz**. Taking as her point of departure the triple disasters that Ugandans have had to endure in recent decades – civil war, natural disasters like landslides, floods and droughts, as well as the AIDS epidemic – she asks how people deal with these premature, often violent deaths. The main issue at stake is the question whether the experience of civil war and natural disasters are perceived as the same form of violence and to what extent these experiences are differently constructed.[5] Rituals of mourning are a helpful tool in understanding the conceptualization of death and the dead, and their transformation into spiritual beings does have great importance in Africa and elsewhere. They can even become political issues, as discussion concerning the death of the Congo dictator Mobutu made apparent (see Jewsiewicki and White 2005). As Butler (2004) has shown for other parts of the world too, the differentiation between good and bad deaths is of prime importance for the living. A good death involves proper mourning and mortuary rituals in order to allow for the transformation of the dead person into a 'living' ancestor who will decide the fate of his relatives. In contrast, improper rituals or no rituals at all will haunt the living, causing illness, infertility, misfortunes etc. As Schulz points out, we do not know much about how disaster-related deaths are perceived in the Muslim community in and around Mbale in eastern Uganda, nor elsewhere in Uganda and beyond. How can threats from the living be averted and the harmony between the world of the spirits and humans restored? It is a merit of this chapter that it addresses the importance of the physical presence or absence of corpses, or even of particular intimate parts of it, like skulls, to the proper performance of mourning rites. In most rituals of mourning, the presence of the corpse is necessary for a proper disposal,[6] but due to the multitude of violent deaths in Africa (see de Boeck 2005) people have devised substitutes for them (see Luig 2009). Yet we still do not know to what extent such pragmatic measures are applied in the case of disasters as well.

Schulz's chapter dicusses new lines of inquiry into new research options which put rituals of mourning and their accompanying emotions high on a future research agenda**.** The theoretization of emotions which have been conspicuously

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5   To regard natural disasters as a war of nature against humans is a familiar metaphor in disaster research (see Engels 2003: 124).

6   See Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 2001 on the war over the corpse of the Kenya foreign minister.

absent from discussions in disaster research,[7] allows us to analyse the painful experience of loss and sorrow, of beloved victims who are commemorated in ritual celebrations. The analysis of emotions, embodied in religious rituals, mediates individual and social spheres of action. Emotions translated into actions are important sources in building up resilience, possibly shaping strategies of prevention, as well as specific measures of coping.

The yet underdeveloped discussion of disaster and violence opens up a window not only into discourses on war but equally into the spaces of death that are closely linked to social memory, body politics and suffering. In the process of remaking their world (see Das, Kleinman, Locke et al. 2001), religious beliefs – or spiritualism, as Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono ultimately call it – can be of great importance in relieving the sufferings of the victims. In her personal account of the Oakland firestorm, Susanna Hoffman (2002: 118ff) recounts that prayers and ritual practices helped the victims find a new relationship with themselves and to overcome their depression. The experience of total loss was so fundamental for their self-image that nobody felt the same person as before. This essential change of identity is also documented in some of Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono's case studies. While narrating their subjective maturation process, villagers referred among other topics to questions of guilt and to the various ways of overcoming sorrow and depression. Phases like acceptance, surrender and gratitude, which are embedded in rich semantic fields of meaning, were helpful steps after inner protests in order to come closer to God. Their interviews show how victims were able to constitute new identities for themselves to master their lives after the earthquake. But the narration of their disaster experience also laid open the dynamics of cultural change in Indonesia and the various ways in which they constructed a new moral order.

The construction and perception of change after disasters is also the concern of **Brigitte Vettori**. She questions the frequent assumption that disasters eradicate whole cultures and allow for new beginnings like a tabula rasa. Her argument is not only well illustrated by the articles on coping strategies in this volume (Sökefeld, Schild, Simpson), but by the very interview she was able to have with a leading village chief in the Nicobar Islands. In an unpretentious manner, this village chief provides insights into the everyday fabric of his society, the emotions and doubts he had during the time of rescue, the mistakes of his relatives and neighbours during the tsunami and the kind of support he was looking for. Through this very individual and intimate picture, basic assumptions about cultural changes during and after disasters are refuted, as is the naïve trust in local knowledge which for long belonged to one of the cherished items in disaster research. The interview discloses a world in which new and old traditions compete for acceptance. The very practical behaviour of the chief, who selected the

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7   For an exception, however, see Oliver-Smith 1999.