

Catastrophes

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A History and Theory of an Operative Concept

Edited by
Nitzan Lebovic and Andreas Killen

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Table of Contents

Andreas Killen and Nitzan Lebovic

Introduction — 1

Deborah Coen

The Storyteller and the Seismograph — 15

David Bates

Unity, Plasticity, Catastrophe: Order and Pathology in the Cybernetic Era — 32

Eva Horn

The Last Man: The Birth of Modern Apocalypse in Jean Paul, John Martin, and Lord Byron — 55

Andreas Killen

Accidents happen: The Industrial Accident in Interwar Germany — 75

Nitzan Lebovic

German Jewish Judges and the Permanent State of Catastrophe — 93

Martin Kavka

Ending Time and again in Ruins: Catastrophe and its Discontents in Jewish Theology — 111

Dagmar Herzog

The Obscenity of Objectivity: Post-Holocaust Anti-Semitism and the Invention-Discovery of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder — 128

Alyssa Battistoni

***Kata* and/or *Streiphen*?: Climate Change and the Politics of Catastrophe — 156**

Matthias Dörries

Anticipating the Climate Catastrophe — 181

The Authors — 199

Andreas Killen and Nitzan Lebovic

Introduction

In our situation it is our duty to reckon with catastrophe, to sleep with it, so to speak, so that we shall not be caught unaware. Only in this manner can we acquire a reserve of security which will enable us to act reasonably. In a state of complete security our thought merely plays with the possibility of catastrophe. We include it in our plans as an improbable eventuality, and we protect ourselves with minimal precautions. In our days the reverse must be the case. We must spend almost our entire capital on the possibility of catastrophe precisely in order to keep open the middle road that has become as narrow as the edge of a knife.

Ernst Jünger, *Into the Forest* (1951)

Less than ten years ago, Richard Posner pleaded for a revival of interest in the task of “determining the positions that law, policy analysis, and the social sciences should occupy...[in] taking catastrophic risks seriously and addressing them constructively.”¹ During this past decade a whole corpus of scholarship arose as a response to this and similar pleas, prompted by a growing conviction that the proliferation in the contemporary world of the “catastrophic risks” cited by Posner can no longer be ignored. However, little in that scholarship considered its own historical conditions and assumptions. The purpose of this edited volume is to do precisely that. It brings together a series of historical and cultural readings motivated by a common interest in examining catastrophic events, and furthermore, the very assumptions accompanying the process of examination and analysis. For us, historians and theoreticians working largely from a Central European perspective, this implies a position that ties different perspectives to a catastrophe that is more often than not man-made, unprecedented, and often striking with such velocity that its impact forces multiple examinations from different angles. We believe that in order to discuss and analyze the problem of catastrophe we must begin by discussing the conditions that lead, historically, to its forming and, simultaneously, to the reaction to it.² The contributions to this volume take the reflection about catastrophe one step beyond the mere under-

1 Richard Posner, *Catastrophe: Risk and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

2 Such a simultaneous approach to catastrophe was also the position taken by recent anthropological research of catastrophic scenarios. The major claim here is that “part of the problem is that disaster is often considered an event rather than a process.” See Anthony Oliver-Smith, “Theorizing Disasters,” in Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (eds), *Catastrophe & Culture: the Anthropology of Disaster* (Oxford: School of American Research Press, 2002), 23.

standing of catastrophe as such, in order to think about it not only as the end of one world, but as the middle of another, and the beginning of a third. In short, we think about catastrophe in operative terms—as an opportunity to rethink our own understanding of the past, the present, and the future.

In “The Great Wall of China,” Franz Kafka narrates the tale of the imperfect and perpetually decaying project that had been designed to secure the kingdom against the nomadic tribes that threaten it from the north. The piecemeal system of construction adopted by its builders leaves the Wall vulnerable to the attacks of the northern invaders, who the narrator compares to “locusts” in their constant movement: “Those sections of the wall left abandoned in barren regions can easily be destroyed, over and over by the nomads....” This utopian defensive scheme, which ends in disaster—the kingdom, as we learn in the tale’s postscript, is finally overrun—has a close relation to the dream of security that animated the accident insurance system in which Kafka himself served as an employee of the Habsburg state. At the time he wrote this tale, during the latter stages of the Great War, this system was faced with increasingly unmanageable challenges, as the task of caring for ever-mounting numbers of maimed veterans imposed intolerable strains on it. Even while the propaganda of the Central Powers stressed the role of social insurance as an essential bulwark of national defense, the actual practice of social insurance fell into disrepair, sacrificed to the exigencies of war. With the accelerated pace of wartime production, the risk of accidents from heavy machinery increased dramatically, yet measures to protect workers against those risks were neglected as the empire shifted its resources towards defending itself against impending military catastrophe. By the time he wrote his “Chinese scenario” in 1917, Kafka found himself struggling to uphold the claims of insured citizens against the increasingly total claims of the military state of emergency. His tale depicts the collapse of the wall—a system of “nomad insurance”—as a descent into animality: lacking language, the victorious nomads communicate “much as jackdaws do.”³

Kafka’s tale of the Wall stands as a parable of the innumerable projects modern societies have undertaken for the protection of their citizens against catastrophe: systems of military defense and levees, insurance schemes, sciences of earthquake prediction, etc. The extent to which all such systems of security are haunted by a sense of their fragility and impossibility has been brought home in recent years by an escalating series of disasters as well as by growing anx-

³ Franz Kafka, “The Great Wall of China” and “An Old Manuscript,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York 1946); S. Corngold, J. Greenberg, B. Wagner (eds), *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings* (Princeton 2009), 269.

ieties over still larger disasters to come. In response, catastrophe has become an increasingly urgent theme within the humanities. Dikesh Chakrabarty takes it up in his article “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” where he addresses the “contemporary mood of anxiety and concern about the finitude of humanity” that is bound up with the grave environmental risks posed by global warming.⁴ Increasingly, he writes, it has been born in on us that humans are an agent in the geological sense and that we now inhabit the “anthropocene era”—a term that evokes the magnitude of mankind’s impact on the world’s ecosystems. Research in carbon dating indicates that the onset of this new era of climate change caused by human impact dates approximately from the invention of the steam engine. While this date conventionally marks the beginning of the modern industrial era and the resulting unleashing of mankind’s productive capacities, it also marks the unleashing of a host of new dangers that came to mark the 19th and 20th centuries, dangers often comprehended in a new idiom of risk (an idiom in which the insurance expert Kafka was deeply versed). Implicit in current formulations of the anthropocene era is the realization that the production and globalization of risks has outstripped the production and globalization of wealth.⁵ As this volume demonstrates, recent “catastrophe studies” underscore the need to reconsider this conceptualization as well; rather than finding catastrophe at the end of every modern form of mobilization, catastrophe can be seen as its condition of possibility.

This historical paradigm shift compels recognition that mankind’s conception of the future has been placed in great jeopardy. One of the implications Chakrabarty draws from this development is that, in writing the history of the anthropocene, we are writing “species history,” a form of history marked by the collapse of the distinction between natural and human histories. Moreover, in a world threatened with massive species extinction—including that of our own—the distinction between man-made and natural disaster no longer has meaning.

In truth, as Kafka’s fictions repeatedly suggest, it is precisely the fragility of the boundary between natural and human histories that the catastrophes of the modern era seem so often to have exposed. The “imagination of disaster” that is so constitutive for modern thought is deeply marked by this realization. Writing in the 1950s, Ernst Jünger identified the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 as the key world-historical event of modern times.⁶ Reflecting back from the perspective of a Cold War world dominated by the specter of atomic annihilation, Jünger identified this calamity with the end of a post-Enlightenment era that had fallen

⁴ Dikesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶ Ernst Jünger, *Der Waldgang*, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 1951).

under the spell of historicist conceptions of progress. Jünger did not lament the demise of this era. On the contrary, for him the Titanic's sinking marked a beginning, a necessary occurrence in the creation of a new order. A disaster such as this stripped away the conditioning acquired in the civilizing process, exposing a primordial self. In so doing it also inaugurated a new era of danger, one that of necessity demanded novel forms of social mobilization and political organization. Jünger's writings on the Great War describe a world transfigured by the impact of mechanized weaponry—the apotheosis of that developmental process begun with the invention of the steam engine. His texts conjure up landscapes in which all traces of nature, every blade of grass, have been blasted away by artillery fire. Technology has here assumed a life of its own, and the fascination with industrial accidents that marks all of Jünger's later work demonstrate ever more clearly the tendency to *naturalize* technological calamity.⁷

Working from a quite different vantage point, W.G. Sebald uses photographs, memoirs, and novels to evoke the nearly lunar landscapes produced by the bombing of German cities during WWII. If Sebald's writings are marked by some of the same fixation on destruction and ruins that marks Jünger's, they nevertheless do not share the latter's tendency towards apocalyptic thinking. In contrast, Sebald is struck by the natural world's *reclamation* of Hamburg's ruins. Writing at a moment (1999) clearly marked by the concerns articulated by Chakrabarty, he notes dryly that "In contrast to the effect of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature's ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms. In fact, many trees and bushes, particularly chestnuts and lilacs, had a second flowering in Hamburg in the autumn of 1943, a few months after the great fire." Citing one notorious proposal to solve the "German problem" of unrestrained militarism through destruction of the country's industrial base, he adds: "If the Morgenthau Plan had ever been implemented, how long would it have taken for woodland to cover the mountains of ruins all over the country?"⁸ Such observations form elements of Sebald's contribution to the project of writing what he calls a "natural history of destruction." Sebald's effort to recover the naïve voice of a 19th century naturalist represents a strategic response to the evasions of generations of Germans who were unable to come to grips with the catastrophic destruction visited on their cities in anything other than an apocalyptic mode that reeked of denial and evasion.

Catastrophes, as Sebald's project implies, are marked by failures or crises at multiple levels—to begin with, of course, of physical and social structures and the

7 Ernst Jünger, "Über die Gefahr," in F. Bucholtz (ed.), *Der Gefährliche Augenblick* (Berlin 1931), 11–16.

8 W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York 2004), 39–40.

human lives those structures were designed to make secure. Equally, however, they are marked by failures or breakdowns of conventional ways of knowing, representing, and signifying. Within the canon of Western thought, an event of the magnitude of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, for instance, represented a crisis not simply of the social and political order but of the epistemic order as well.⁹ Out of the ensuing wreckage, a new order had to be constituted—a new order in which catastrophe formed the essential pre-condition of all knowledge, and in which that knowledge, so Jünger believed, would be operationalized through strategies of total mobilization and their political correlate the state of exception.

For his part, Sebald aligned himself with the tragic perspective of Walter Benjamin's angel of history. While some observers saw in the destruction of Hamburg by Allied bombing the apotheosis of an industrial modernity whose inner dynamics had been analyzed by Marx, Sebald saw rather only the failure of such explanatory schemes: "Can materialist epistemology, or any other such theory, be maintained in the face of such destruction? Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature?"

It is not by coincidence that Sebald returns to Kafka's permanent state of crisis. One cannot separate his contemplation from other forms of the interpretation of modernity in terms of crisis and catastrophe. These authors point us to the modernist attempt to project dreams of progress back into the past, and the failure of all such attempts. Repeatedly, the epistemological challenge posed by such cataclysmic occurrences resolves itself into a narrative challenge. How might one begin a "natural history of destruction" asks Sebald? Citing as model the precision and sobriety of the diaries of Dr. Hachiya from Hiroshima, he stresses the need for the "concrete and documentary." The vast majority of German novelists confronted with the effects of the bombing campaign—even those concerned with recording "plain facts," he writes—retreated into abstraction and outright fantasy. This fantasy, moreover, was fueled by an earlier anticipatory "imagination of disaster" whose most recent incarnation he traces back to the "kitsch" celluloid creations of Fritz Lang. As Slavoj Žižek has suggested, disasters always

⁹ Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe* (Berkeley, CA 1997); Deborah Coen, "Witness to Disaster: Comparative Histories of Earthquake Science and Response," *Science in Context* 25, 1 (2012): 1–15.

have a “fictional presence on TV and theater screens long before they happen in real life.”¹⁰

The “imagination of disaster” is thus part of the modern history of catastrophe as well. Sebald describes the remorseless inner logic that lies behind all weapons programs and doomsday devices, the manner in which, merely by their existence, they acquire a momentum of their own.¹¹ He also identifies another dynamic that is at work in such programs, noting the continuities that extend from Lang’s evocation of “the last battle” in *The Nibelungen* or the destruction of the city in *Metropolis*, up to Hitler’s intoxicated visions of the destruction of London, and to the relish with which, by 1943, he apparently contemplated even the bombing of German cities.¹² Here Sebald recalls another Benjaminian insight, namely that one of the chief forms of pleasure invented in the modern era was precisely that of imagining a city’s destruction.

Sebald and Žižek’s emphasis on the phantasmagorical dimension of modern disaster should be problematized. The result of their interpretation—and this too is a risk—is the disappearance of the catastrophe as event, its absorption into various meta-narratives of disaster, whether of redemption or of apotheosis (Rabinbach): the fiction of the “just punishment” that some Germans imagined was being visited upon them for their crimes, or that of a historical telos (“the last battle”) whose origins were similarly pre-programmed, whether by the course of modern industrial development or by the spectacles of mass culture. Or finally, that of the Nazis’ well-known “ruin theory of value”: a theory that fully exhibits the logic of what Anson Rabinbach calls the “banality of catastrophe”—the reduction of the event to the end point of a historical trajectory.¹³

One senses a similar impulse in some contemporary efforts to theorize the modern era’s accumulation of disasters as part of a narrative of the globalization of risk. Industrial society’s capacity for creating new forms of danger (defined probabilistically as risks) became constitutive of major aspect of state formation in the modern era. For figures like Francois Ewald or Ulrich Beck, risk represented a dominant way of knowing and intervening in the world.¹⁴ Yet according to Paul Virilio, the 20th century’s “mass production of accidents from the Titanic to Chernobyl” has resulted in a situation in which risk is “no longer quantifiable or sta-

10 Isak Winkel Holm, “Earthquake in Haiti: Kleist and the Birth of Modern Disaster discourse,” *New German Critique* 115, 39 (2012): 49–66.

11 Sebald, op cit, 18, 65.

12 Daniel Pick, *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind* (Oxford 2012), 138.

13 Rabinbach, op cit.

14 Francois Ewald, *L’Etat Social* (Paris: B. Grasset 1986); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage Publications 1992).

tistically predictable.”¹⁵ In Virilio’s writings Beck’s so-called “risk community” seems to be transformed into a community of fate, a community in which no one is insurable; in his fascination with the spectacular consequences of large-scale accidents he at times comes close to elaborating his own “ruin theory of value.” Here as earlier, apocalyptic event and apocalyptic thinking became deeply entwined in meta-narratives of redemption and apotheosis.¹⁶

The rise of sovereignty and other forms of centralized power utilized means of control that were meant to reinstate order and stability in the aftermath of a disaster. The idea of insurance and of a system of saving helped shape a human sense of preparedness.¹⁷ Michel Foucault pointed to such new forms of centralized power and the socio-economic processes of early modern times as the beginning of a new era. As Foucault emphasized, when looking at the relationship between nature, man, and different forms of control he identifies with bio-power, it is impossible to divorce modern politics from the attempt to regulate and control change, especially change that endangers order and stability. A new conceptualization of large masses of people, according to Foucault, is a direct result (rather than the cause) of such attempts to regulate and control change and nature. After the civil wars and natural catastrophes of the seventeenth century, in Europe, eighteenth century scientists and politicians realized that “risks are not the same for all individuals,”¹⁸ and saw the need “to arrive at a finer analysis that will make it possible to disengage different normalities” in relation to morbidity and mortality, even when accompanied by mass death.¹⁹

Modern urbanization, according to Foucault, was shaped around the market town, scarcity of necessities, and epidemic. “For in the end the problem of scarcity and grain is the problem of the market town, and the problem of contagion and epidemic diseases is the problem of the two as the home of disease. The town as market is also the town as the place of revolt; the center of disease is the town as the site of miasmas and death.”²⁰ The very notion of controlled population “was posed in relation to the desert or desertification due to major human catastro-

15 Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident* (London 2007).

16 Rabinbach, op cit.

17 Verema Twyrdy, “Die Bewältigung von Naturkatastrophen in mitteleuropäischen Agrargesellschaften seit der Frühen Neuzeit,” in Mackowiak, Masius, Sprenger, *Katastrophen machen Geschichte*, (Göttingen 2010), 18–20.

18 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 60.

19 Ibid, 62.

20 Ibid, 63–4.

phes.”²¹ The notion of “population,” the existence of many lives in a regulated form, was directly connected to the ability to overcome catastrophes after the continuous “state of emergency” of the seventeenth century; a new understanding of regime and people was then “a fundamental element, that is to say one that conditions all the others.”²² In short, *catastrophe*, according to Foucault’s analysis of modern bio-power—and more recently that of Agamben—lies at the heart of all modern politics and forms of regulation and control.

Following Foucault’s lead, and influenced by a growing interest in catastrophic scenarios, recent scholars have traced a “cultural historical turn” that links our time with the event that decisively altered the Western episteme, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.²³ Deborah Coen’s chapter in this volume demonstrates the importance of this event for a modern understanding of change, specifically the one relying on “the writer as a seismograph.” Indeed, the philosophers of the Enlightenment looked at the event from the perspective of the Gordian knot between natural catastrophe and epistemological rupture. As Isak Winkel Holm has argued recently, in the wake of this event and the resulting critique of Leibnizian thought by Voltaire and Kant, the earlier theodicy of catastrophe was transformed into a purely secular and scientific discourse.²⁴ This process had both a philosophical history and an administrative history. By the end of the 19th century, the catastrophic *episteme* became an active philosophy by itself. Friedrich Nietzsche made it into his motto: “For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.”²⁵ Nietzsche used the notion of catastrophe and brutal violence in order to “restart” the search for meaning and value, which Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger tried to realize by integrating it with radical—pro Nazi—politics: “This intermediate state, in which the historical peoples of the earth must decide on their destruction or on a new beginning, will last as long as the illusion persists that the historic future is still to be rescued from catastrophe by means of a compromise that will mediate between old and new values.”²⁶ As Deborah Cohen and Andreas Killen explain

21 Ibid., 67.

22 Ibid., 68.

23 Isak Winkel Holm, “The Cultural Analysis of Disaster,” in Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel, eds., *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 24.

24 Cited in Holm, “Earthquake in Haiti.”

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 4.

26 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Vols. 3–4*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 204.

below, “Jünger described the cold blooded account of catastrophe as the ‘new style of language.’” In his own contribution to this book David Bates marks the German 1920s and 1930s as a beginning point of “a new style” of thinking, that was then explored by a radical strand of French scientific thinking. Building on a new interest in the environment or milieu (*Umwelt*), this led from Kurt Goldstein’s emphasis on catastrophe as an internal player for a theory of organic “complex unity” that he called “weak catastrophe” to George Canguilhem’s recasting of the relation between the normal and the pathological, and beyond him, to more recent cybernetic theorists who look at the “pathology of the machine” in similar terms.

Alongside the philosophical encounter with catastrophism emerged not only an ever-expanding administrative apparatus of regulation and control but a modern “catastrophic imaginary” that envisioned disaster as a test-site for investigating man’s true nature. As Eva Horn shows, a crucial moment in this development is the early 19th century Romantic topos of the “last man”—a figure who haunts the imagination both of political scientists like Malthus and of poets like Byron, whose “Darkness” (1816) was written in the shadow of the climate disaster resulting from the largest recorded volcanic eruption in history, the eruption of mount Tambora in 1815. The figure of the “last man” serves as a thought-experiment for testing the limits and blind spots of the “Enlightenment’s optimistic anthropology” (Horn), revealing a man who, under duress, is nothing but bare life, reduced to his animal instincts of hunger and panic. Nowhere was this more clearly articulated than in the work of Malthus, identified by Horn as the godfather of a modern type of bio-politics that essentially revolves around catastrophe.

Over the subsequent course of the 19th century, as Paul Rabinow has argued, the “irruptive events” of the modern era (wars, epidemics, invasions, strikes) “ushered in a long period of experimentation with spatial, scientific and social technologies.” These new techniques of administration integrated the catastrophic potentials of modern times into their planning, taking cognizance of the social reality of occurrences like industrial accidents through the elaboration of social insurance schemes and related forms of security.²⁷ It was at the heart of precisely such an insurance apparatus that the legal expert Franz Kafka toiled, and it is this fact that makes his texts—both his fictions and his “office writings”—so exemplary here. They illuminate a primal scene in the encounter between the modern administrative state confronting catastrophe and Agamben’s “bare life.”

If the Lisbon earthquake produced an epistemic shift, modern politics assumes the inevitability of catastrophe as means to an end; after all, as several

27 Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA 1989), 12, 229.

papers in this collection point out, it is impossible to speak of catastrophe without its regulation and management. The post-Enlightenment administrative entity oscillates between the rule of law, the domain of norms and procedures, and a “state of exception” in which legally codified procedures are suspended. Emergency systems of rule represent one of the techniques of administration identified by Rabinow, whose emergence reflects the increasing scale of catastrophes of modern times. The Great War witnessed the gradual disintegration of the rule of law in the system in which Kafka was employed, as the Habsburg state—like the Chinese empire of his fictions—faced terminal crisis. In Austria as elsewhere the war served as a laboratory for “testing and honing the functional mechanisms and apparatuses of the state of exception as a paradigm of government.”²⁸ As Andreas Killen demonstrates in his piece, in the context of accident insurance and prevention, wartime emergency conditions (which as Kafka himself noted were never clearly differentiated from those of industrial peacetime) threatened to abrogate the contractual basis of a system that could no longer be maintained in the face of what Agamben calls “bio-political catastrophe.”²⁹ Viewed from this perspective, modern catastrophe studies repeatedly pose precisely the question of who is insured? In her piece in this volume, Dagmar Herzog explores this question in her examination of debates surrounding the diagnosis of and compensation for survivors of the 20th century’s greatest catastrophe, the Holocaust. She not only interprets conflicts among psychiatrists in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1950s–1960s as constituting a key moment in the production of the ever-unstable concepts of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, but also emphasizes the complexity of the post-fascist environment as a key factor that explains the particularities of the epistemological impasses confronted by the doctors.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, catastrophe re-emerged as a central theme of political philosophy. Following explicitly in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin’s critique of progress as “catastrophic,” Jacob Taubes, Martin Buber, Gerschom Scholem and Hans Jonas wrote what should be seen as a German-Jewish response to the Holocaust, re-theologizing the sources of catastrophe and mapping a whole field of catastrophic scenes, politics, and language. Taubes characterized this reviving interest in catastrophes in his 1947 dissertation on *Western Eschatology*, and identified it with a Judeo-Christian understanding of prophecy: “In the belief that the world is coming to an end, prophecy devalues the life and ways of this world.”³⁰ Taubes and the other German-Jewish thinkers

²⁸ Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago 2005), 7.

²⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford 1998), 188.

³⁰ Jacob Taubes, *Western Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 21.

dove into the heart of the catastrophic universe and resurfaced with a new typology revolving around the very temporal order—or its rupture, the *kata-strophic* (over-turn) (*Kata strephein* literally means turning downwards)—of different narratives of catastrophe. “The Jewish messiah . . . [is] coming to destroy the world.”³¹ Different conceptualizations of messianic or post-catastrophic temporality mark “the situation in apocalyptic times—times which are truly out of joint . . . The blessed cultural age of eternity represented by the Enlightenment is shaken by the earthquake in Lisbon. Depths open up which the system of reason is unable to fathom.”³² In his contribution to this volume, Martin Kavka discusses the history of catastrophe within Jewish theology as a movement “from an embrace of catastrophe as an index of the meaning of history...to a radical allergy to yoking together the natural and the supernatural orders.” This shift from a pre-Holocaust to a post-Holocaust theology marks a general change in relation to the hermeneutic power of disasters. For the German-Jewish thinkers the inherent relation of catastrophic imagination to any temporal order in the West implied also a close relation to politics and political imagination. Nitzan Lebovic’s piece in this book builds on this insight in demonstrating the legal-political impact of catastrophe. Following a small group of German Jewish legal scholars who helped to design the legal system of the newly created Israeli state, this group of legalists translated and—by implication—reproduced the catastrophic structure of the Weimar Republic into the heart of the legal-political discourse in the Middle East. The result was a legal structure based on a state of exception that Israel declared in 1948, and never cancelled.

Agamben’s structural catastrophism has repositioned the catastrophic situation at the center of critical thinking, stressing the principle that “It is only in the burning house that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible for the first time.”³³ Following in the footsteps of Foucault and of German-Jewish thinkers who considered Weimar a model for catastrophic thinking and political critique, Agamben continued to reconstitute a post 9/11 *apparatus* at the threshold between sacrifice and meaningless killing and the “naked life” of the Muselmann. This threshold, Agamben argued, was invented and operated by democratic regimes before it was adapted into totalitarian logic. “Democratic regimes were transformed by the gradual expansion of the executive’s powers during the two world wars, and more generally, by the state of exception that had

³¹ Ibid., 70.

³² Ibid., 86.

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 115.

accompanied and followed those wars. These are in some ways the heralds who announced what we today have clearly before our eyes—namely, that since ‘the state of exception . . . has become the rule,’ (Benjamin 1942), it not only appears increasingly as a technique of government rather than an exceptional measure, but also lets its own nature as the constitutive paradigm of the juridical order come to light.”³⁴ In short, the catastrophe and its political appearance have become one, and it is not clear anymore which brings and shapes which.

For Agamben, every catastrophe is by implication part of an apocalyptic temporal order.³⁵ Yet as Klaus Vondung demonstrated, there is a substantial difference between the temporal order of catastrophe, eschatological course, and apocalypse. In contrast to the rising severity between crisis and catastrophe, eschatology and apocalypse assume “this plan for the escalation of the world, the total course of history.”³⁶ In other words, the eschatological and apocalyptic processes presuppose the need to unite a specific collective telos with a universal or a metaphysical course of history.³⁷ A structural reading of catastrophism as a condition fails to note its own anachronistic interjections.

The two essays in this volume dedicated to environmental discourse make this point as well. Alyssa Battistoni reminds us that “the discourse around climate change, which has taken on an increasingly apocalyptic tone as scientific prognoses grow more dire” relies, in fact, on an ingrained ambivalence of the term itself; *kata* or *streiphen*—down or turn, civilizational collapse or transformation—are both aspects of opening or closing spaces for politics. Matthias Dörries follows the recent history of the discourse from its 1960s doomsday images to its more recent understanding of “climate catastrophe” [*Klimakatastrophe*], coined in Germany in 1986 (and still bearing the marks of the Cold War idea of catastrophe). Both articles ask us to confront the successes and failures of climate change discourse, as it continues to rely heavily on a catastrophic imagination in order to cultivate political action. Recent articles demonstrate that the discourse failed, in large terms, to cross the secular-religious or left-right political divide. Reports and UN discussions use explicitly an analogy between such a failure and the political failures preceding the two world wars.³⁸

³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6–7.

³⁵ See his analysis of messianic temporality in Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, trans. Stephen D. Ricks (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 89.

³⁷ Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, 110.

³⁸ “If we fail to prevent climate change... would represent not just a failure of political imagination and leadership, but a moral failure on a scale unparalleled in history. During the 20th centu-

Confronted with the catastrophic potentials of the present, contemporary scholars have an obligation to historicize the development of these potentials as well as identify the resources for facing up to “the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands” (Sebald). The fact that catastrophes—whether wars, earthquakes, industrial accidents, political crises, or genocides—remain stubbornly enigmatic occurrences (“recalcitrant scientific objects”, as Coen puts it in reference to seismic events) is today nowhere clearer than in the current debates surrounding climate change, which has become the object of a campaign of sustained disinformation that operates through the production of ignorance and doubt (operations now studied by means of the techniques of agnotology).³⁹ Meanwhile, the escalating and apparently increasingly unmanageable environmental and other risks of the contemporary era also present themselves as market opportunities, as Naomi Klein makes clear in her analysis of “disaster capitalism.”⁴⁰ That the cognitive and political challenges of climate change compel new perspectives and frameworks of reference is an inescapable conclusion of recent work on this topic. What is the proper time horizon for the “event,” given, as Matthias Dorries and Alyssa Battistoni both suggest in their chapters in this volume, the need to take account of “deep time” in the unfolding of climate change?

Disasters make visible deep structures and long-term patterns of change. They also raise questions concerning the role played by the cultural framing of catastrophe. What kinds of sciences and fictions of disaster will help redress the problem of knowledge that surrounds such occurrences? If it is true, as Beck writes, that the future-oriented paradigms of the risk society put pressure on realist modes of representation, is it necessary to adopt a “constructivist” perspective in the assessment of given risks? Whose knowledge claims count? What is the relation between the various actors: the state, experts, the public? How do we define the “risk community” in a context in which risk has escaped all national frameworks? How have the boundaries of that community—between those who are inside and thus insurable and those who are outside and are not—been redefined in contemporary neo-liberal society? Given the enormity of the

ry failures of political leadership led to two world wars.” See page 2 of “Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a divided World,” A UN Report produced by the Human Development Report Team [UNDP]: http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_EN_Overview.pdf. (Last accessed June 1, 2013). See also the many reports about the failure of the Copenhagen conference on climate change as the “Munich of our time”: Malini Mehra for BBC News, “Copenhagen—the Munich of our times?” 2 February, 2010: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/8490935.stm>. (Last accessed June 1, 2013).

³⁹ Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford 2008); Naomi Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt* (Bloomsbury 2011).

⁴⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador 2008).