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Abstracts from the panel

Rethinking disasters and social change:  
Beyond hope and despair



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# “Grenfell changes everything?” Post-disaster agency beyond hope and despair

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The horror of the devastating Grenfell Tower fire, and the shock that 'it could happen here', in 21st century Britain, led politicians, professionals, and community workers to proclaim that 'Grenfell changes everything'. Affected people, turned into activists by the disaster, committed to ensuring that such a disaster could never happen again, by demanding changes to regulations and policy, putting hope into action. As time moves on, and such hope is undermined by the refusal of sidestepping of the demands, a sense of despair at structural inertia would be warranted. The experience of activism after Grenfell has been characterised by frustrating partial wins, inertia, delay, and setback. This paper seeks to theorise the activist condition of seeking change that is refused, and to do so in a way that values the agency and care of (thwarted) activism. Inspired by Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' and critical scholarship on hope, and drawing on 3 years of knowledge exchange and ethnographic engagement with the community response after Grenfell, I explore the trajectories of six activist change efforts: a fire safety campaign, engagements with a Public Inquiry, campaigns to preserve community assets, community gardening, silent walks, and provision of support to children at a community centre, each 'staying with the trouble' in different ways. I argue that set-backs do not invalidate a struggle or warrant despair, but that in insisting on caring for others' lives, activism succeeds in instantiating a caring world. Beyond hope and despair is the staying power of communities who value human life and solidarity and keep fighting for them.

# (Re)adaptation of historic urban spaces in post-disaster recovery

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Natural disasters are becoming more frequent with far-reaching impact on cities. In historic cities, natural disasters disrupt lives and livelihoods through not only the damage they cause on the social and physical fabric but also trigger psychological trauma at deeper level. Buildings and monuments are commonly prioritized in post-disaster reconstruction but the role of historic urban spaces, along with other open spaces is overlooked. The paper therefore seeks to shift the focus from buildings to open spaces by examining how historic urban spaces interact with urban fabric and cultural practices to help build resilience. This shift has been an emergent theme in cultural geography through the acknowledgement of the role of open spaces in improving disaster response and recovery (Allan et al., 2013; Brosius and Michaels, 2020). Drawing on interviews with survivors and rescuers and field observations of earthquake-ravaged Durbar Square in Kathmandu, this paper links features of urban spaces with prevailing social and cultural practices that triggered specific community actions to understand how historic urban spaces have allowed local values to be expressed in the aftermaths of the disaster creating a coping mechanism. This layering of various personal experiences on the scientific inquiry allows us to first approach historic urban spaces as an object that enables user actions to emerge during disaster and be improvised in a certain way that helps to build resilience; and second to explore cultural and religious practices that link back to the objects and spaces to derive psychological recovery from the trauma. Ultimately the paper argues that urban spaces have inherent functional, performative and restorative qualities that play an important role in post-disaster recovery, and more attention needs to be given to them in planning and urban studies. In terms of methodological contribution, the paper is a critical enquiry into urban space as a conceptual category and an interrogation of its relationship with disasters and resilience.

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# Citizenship and Extreme Events: Communities and the Imagining of Alternative Futures

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The main objective is to analyse the potential of citizenship as postright, operationalized through the notion of invisible citizenship in the context of disasters and post-disasters. The intent is to deepen the analytical and empirical relevance of the concept of invisible citizenship, aiming to further conceptual and epistemological innovation and to obtain results relevant to public policies.

Disasters are used as entry points to reflect on citizenship as the right to have rights in a world of climate change crises. Through a comparative analysis of concrete disasters and their impact in Portugal and France, the objective is to study how states address the needs of citizens in the occurrence of extreme events, as states appear to be the last resort in guaranteeing the value of goods as well as people's lives. The analysis is structured via three dimensions: institutional, community and the personal encompassing the body.

Citizens of nation-states feel they can take the privilege of the right to have rights for granted. However, in disasters such a privilege is placed in jeopardy. Hence, the questions: When is a citizen a citizen? When does or can one become a citizen? In an extreme case scenario, every person in a disaster or catastrophe may well discover that (s)he is not a citizen. The paper analyses how disasters put to the test the fabric of the social and the fragile notion of citizenship, alongside how the struggle for citizenship enacts different types of communities.

The paper, based on the mobilization and application of the distinctive concept of invisible citizenship, facilitates a move beyond the existing approaches and the developing of an epistemological and normative approach that is firmly anchored to qualitative data, is multi-dimensional and integrates different scales of action and policymaking.

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# Transitioning from hope to optimism and back again

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I consider what happens when hope is no longer needed, when hope is left behind. What displaces or pushes hope aside and for how long can this last before hope is needed yet once again. These thoughts run through my mind when I consider the economically precarious, post conflict, post earthquake country of Nepal. During seven years of conducting research in this country and through repeated, granular engagement with one particular city (Bharatpur), I found people to be overwhelmingly hopeful. Full of hope that one day their country would no longer be in 'transition'. Transition from what to what was not always clear. In the past three years (2017-2020), hope has been replaced with optimism. Then optimism has been replaced with hope. Thinking through what this signifies for people and the country will be the foundation for my reflection.

# Disasters as an opportunity for improved environmental conditions

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The paper presents case studies where disasters provided a window of opportunity for change that included social action with (potentially) positive effects on the environment. The research literature was screened for empirical cases in support of societal changes with a focus on environmental issues, and a more in-depth case study of the extensive tree felling after the storm Gudrun in Sweden 2005 was also conducted. The case study is explored through available research as well as “grey” literature to identify societal actions taken after the storm that had – or not – an effect on environmental conditions. With the help of the framework presented by Birkmann et al. (2010), the study aims to characterise the nature of these anthropic changes. The framework was modified to focus specifically on societal actions implemented because of an “open window”, and the environmental effects of the actions. This enabled identifying changes with a positive/negative and intended/unintended effect on the environment, as well as determining if a change was based on formal or informal decisions. Several cases identified in the literature provide empirical support for the theory that disasters can generate a window of opportunity for positive environmental change. However, open windows are not always exploited, as is apparent in the case of the storm Gudrun.

Birkmann, J., Buckle, P., Jaeger, J., Pelling, M., Setiadi, N., Garschagen, M., . . . Kropp, J. (2010). Extreme events and disasters: A window of opportunity for change? Analysis of organizational, institutional and political changes, formal and informal responses after mega-disasters. *Natural Hazards*, 55(3), 637-655. doi:10.1007/s11069-008-9319-2

# An anthropologist's view of the question of socio-cultural change or continuity post-disaster: old thoughts and new perspectives

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Disaster that devastate or threaten human populations have become of increasing concern in all the social sciences. Disasters disrupt physical, social, and emotional worlds. They cause loss, bereavement and increasingly displacement and resettlement. Reconstruction after any disaster is fraught with difficulty and ambivalence. As a consequence, the question of social cultural continuity or change concerns all those involved in the calamity, from survivors to those not harmed, from officials and aid workers to the scientists studying the event. Early research in disaster generally promoted the point of view that calamities bring little social or cultural change. Studies tended to be ahistorical. They looked at disasters within a short span of time, with narrow topics and an eye to major shifts, rather than viewing calamities as processes that continue long after initial upheaval that affect almost every arena of human existence. When I first wrote about the concern, I offered that the extent to which disasters cause consequential cultural change is largely determined by size or magnitude of the disaster, whether the manifestations of change are scrutinized in short or long term, and whether the change occurs within the deep structures of a culture or merely surface regalia. I further touched on resistance to change. In light of seriously changing global conditions, along with an anthropologists long often on-sight field research, I recently expanded my observations to add no thoughts on the question of cultural change after a disaster. My observations pertain both to general theories of culture continuity and change and to today's altered global situation.

# Social struggles of responsibility in transition from response to recovery – comparison of two Danish cases

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The questions dealt with in this presentation is 1) how responsibility for recovery is debated and negotiated following larger disasters 2) how citizens engage in the debates and if their engagement has the potential to influence social and legal changes which might affect the disaster management of future events.

These issues are discussed on the background of two Danish case studies. The first of an industrial accident and the second of a flood. In both cases disagreement around responsibility emerged in the transition from the response to the recovery phase. As the affected people did not feel they got the help and support they were entitled to, they protested publicly and tried to raise awareness of their situation among the broader audience, politicians, and professionals. Following the industrial accident, the affected peoples' engagement did not have any effects, but in the case of the flood the local community engagement resulted in a public debate, which resulted in a law change improving the situation of the flood struck people.

On the background of Berke et. al. (1993) concept of vertical and horizontal integration and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power (1977), this study argues that those different outcomes might be explained by a difference in power in form of networks, resources, and competences in the two communities.

It further concludes that a reason for the disagreement around responsibility is that recovery from the public view is seen and treated as a private responsibility in Denmark – and many other countries. The protests from the affected people did not manage to change this neither after the industrial disaster, nor the flood. The social engagement managed to create a smaller improvement for the affected people in one of the cases, but did not manage to fundamentally change the logic of the disaster management: The response phase of disasters is treated as a responsibility for the society as a whole, recovery is however the responsibility of the people affected themselves.