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EVOLVING CHALLENGES AND COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSES



ABSTRACT

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Disaster Research/Sociology of Disaster

Many identify Prince's study of the "Halifax explosion" as the first systematic example of sociological disaster research, although missing its original focus on social change, exemplified by the rapidity and radicality of a disaster. Prince was, as most of his time, interested in conducting change and, consequently, in social stability and cohesion. Similar demands arose again during World War II, particularly along with the mass aspects of air raids and civil defence, which gave rise to a massive sociological and psychological research within the US. After the war, recovery and re-integration programmes led to massive crisis, sometimes to calamity. Together with the vast variety of periodically striking natural disasters, civil research and application initiatives emerged. In most cases the natural hazard approach of the geo-sciences and the event-perspective of the practitioners was the leading paradigm of that period.

In Europe, a different scientific development emerged from industrialization and its early mishaps, particularly boiler explosions, railroad and mining accidents and sinkings, which all together resulted in material analysis and testing, trade supervision, accident prevention and licence requirements. Beside the establishment of "traditional" natural- and engineering sciences, new sciences emerged like work and safety sciences, industrial psychology, organization and management.

Present disaster theories resemble more a motley collection or hotchpotch than systematic paradigms one can apply in practice and for prognoses. In the field of disaster sociology, terms like "crisis" or "risk" became constituting elements, although specifically adapted to one's prevailing paradigmatic orientation. Many other elements have been added during the past decades. To reflect on these influences, I will not only examine the imported elements but also its derivation and its cross that has infiltrated our theorizing since. Conceptual loans have been made from economy, ecology, epidemiology, biology, operations research, computer science and simulation, technology assessment, decision theory, game theory, exchange theory and many others. Strong influences stem from fire fighting, accident and work accident research, from the insurance business, its actuarial theory, or, more general, from social arithmetic, statistics and epidemiological research methods. Modern risk analysis and automated decision support- and expert systems would have been impossible without all these advances.

Modern societies are structurally dependent on a trouble-free functioning. Even slightest disturbances suffice to slow down traffic, production or complete societal sub-systems. Any impediment of societies functioning will lead to immense economical losses but also to harmful chain reactions. Vast black outs for example create dramatic hygiene problems and health risks because of the interruption of the so called "cooling chain", the waste disposal system, sanitation and fresh food storage. Cut offs from traffic, supply, disposal or cleaning up create continuously new problems which effect particular groups but also the population in whole. Some shortages have created solidarity and mutual aid, others have led to deviant behaviour, black markets and emergent tribalism along ethnicity, religion or kinship.

At this point, sociological disaster research shows its importance. Risk-taking or risk-aversion have both influence on economic development, as well as law-abiding or crime rates. In modern societies the transitions from opposition to resistance to sabotage to crime almost directly run on from one another – not because people have become more dangerous, but because societies can be interfered with almost no endeavour and almost no skills and instruments. The term "penknife-terrorism" illustrates the argument.

Disaster and crisis research have shown that social cohesion and sustainable development can be relapsed and undermined by "trouble" beyond bearable, acceptable measure. Governance develops more and more toward the balancing of contradictory sources of trouble (and troublemakers): How many accidents, cancer, crime, shortages etc. society can bear? And what type of risk what type of society will accept? In other words: What type of "trouble" will "trouble" which type of society?

The impact of terrorism on disaster research brought up new questions and opened the field for theoretical orientations which seemed old fashioned: The Völkerpsychologie of the late 19th and the early 20th century once asked for collective effects beyond fields of specialization such as Social Psychology, Criminology, Collective Behavior, Socialization and Social Organization. Today, disaster research is in need for paradigms that allow to integrate human, natural, and technological conditions of conducting change.