Book Review

Governing Disasters: Beyond Risk Culture

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Revet, Sandrine and Julien Langumier (eds). 2015. *Governing Disasters: Beyond Risk Culture*. Trans. Ethan Rundell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 250pp.

The theme of disasters has been gaining ground as a pressing issue to be dealt with at the international level. The creation of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) as an international strategy for disaster reduction has contributed to the rise of awareness of the theme. Experts and organisations use global devices to prevent, anticipate and manage disasters worldwide. These devices are composed of a set of international management rules and standards for disaster situations and risk prevention and encompass a diverse set of actors, including victims, international agents, humanitarian aid, experts, local and national authorities, and the media. The development of transnational devices of prevention, assistance and reconstruction coincides with the rise in participation of populations affected by disasters (Community Based Disaster Management). Therefore, disasters bring up the question: what is 'the governing of disasters,' which is becoming visible in contemporary situations of urgency, between the global and the local?

Governing Disasters: Beyond Risk Culture takes as a reference the role of disasters and how they are managed in contemporary societies. This collective work presents the study of researchers who share common worries, such as recognising the fundamental heterogeneity of resources that allow individuals and groups to apprehend risks and take a stand against them.

A thematic reading of the volume invites the comparison of six study cases preceded by an introduction by the co-editors, Sandrine Revet and Julien Lagumier. The framework of questions that permeates the collection is: how do people, institutions and international agencies evaluate disasters, their prevention, and reconstruction after disasters, beyond risk culture? The afterword by Nicolas Dodier proposes a reflection about the paths taken in the book and its insertion in the trajectory of Social Sciences on the theme.

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The common goal is to problematise the issue through careful observation of interactions between managers and local populations from the standpoint of risk culture, which is established as an a priori reference. Risk culture is understood as a system of knowledge, rules, values and measures from which social organisations determine the degree of preparedness in the face of disaster experiences. According to the editors, risk culture presents a dichotomy: it either relies on experts who handle risk culture using global models, or favours practical approaches and specific local believes as a means of obtaining appropriate knowledge.

The authors criticise this divided approach arguing that it hinders the recognition of the fundamental heterogeneity of existing resources and devices. This heterogeneity allows groups and individuals to apprehend disasters and find where they stand, surpassing previously delimitated positions – for instance, when specialists seek to sensitise and educate populations about good practices, or to incorporate traditional local knowledge and practices into guides for good disaster practices. What these reveal is a great divide between managers and local communities and models stripped of all complexity when put into practice. Contrarily, what is in question is the interaction of global and local devices and its actors. As such, the editors reclaim the need to study, in every case, the means by which actors combine these two dimensions in their practices: global disaster culture and local knowledge and experience.

The papers result from research, mainly ethnographic, done in many countries, and they share the idea of surpassing this dichotomy in disaster studies. Through field analyses and studies, researchers seek to understand the practices of different actors present in disaster situations. They adopt localised perspectives, as attempts to account for the ordinary in these situations of exception.

The article that opens the first part, 'Anticipation, Preparedness, and Controversies,' focuses on landslides in Alma-Ata and the development of meanings to form a sport and tourism culture in Kazakhstan, where a 'political history of disasters' is shown. The second article broaches the spread of avian influenza; researchers 'followed the virus' to understand the world's reorganisation through sociotechnical biosafety devices and alert sentinels amongst living beings. In the second part, 'Participation and Consultation,' one article deals with practices and discourses from the reconstruction programme based in local communities after the tsunami in Sri Lanka and the conflicting grounds of communities' participation. The second article shows how meticulous observation uncovers the asymmetry of interactions between public managers and the local population during the river Rhone flood prevention plan in France. In the last part, 'Issues of Memory,' one article asks how memories and lack thereof of the floods in Santa Fe, Argentina, are reflected in local practices and public management. The last article explores the transformation of memory of the local population as a response to the disaster in the city of Seveso, Italy, contaminated by dioxin after an explosion in a chemical plant.

The authors go beyond reporting field experiences; they propose an anthropological, sociological and historical discussion of disasters, following a comprehensive and critical approach anchored in everyday life. They are also thoughtful of methodological proposals that may accompany day-to-day life in the aftermath of disaster.

A careful observation of the subject shows that, when a community is exposed to a collective threat, what surfaces is neither a shared regime of ideas and actions, nor a sharp opposition between experts and non-experts. Neither is it an opposition between a romanticised local community, on the one hand, and more systematised approaches to international disaster management, on the other. In reality, in the aftermath of disaster, a plurality of expertise and knowledges get updated as a result of processes of choices, arbitration, and power relations, which lead to the favouring of one specific risk culture device over many others.

This collective work gives us the opportunity to examine disciplinary convergencies and differences, offering multidimensional comparisons of disaster governance. The field-work done shows both a multiplicity of discourses and practices competing in order to assign meaning to events that have interrupted the everyday life, and the co-existence of divergent views, discourses and practices.

The book is a huge contribution to disaster anthropology and sociology, public policies, international relations and risk communication because it widens the range of approaches connected to the theme. It introduces rich and complex analyses stemming from case studies, which allow us to compare how prevention devices, participation and reconstruction are used in multiple ways by actors facing disaster.

About the author

Marta de Araujo Pinheiro holds a PhD and a MA in Communication and Culture from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Brazil. Between 2015 and 2016, she was a visiting fellow at Science Po (Paris), in the Centre for International Studies and Research (CERI), where she took part in two research groups: 'Political Anthropology of Catastrophe and Risk' and 'Governing Catastrophes.' Currently, she is a professor and researcher at both the School of Communication (ECO-UFRJ) and the Social Ecology Community Psycho-sociology Postgraduate Programme (EICOS-UFRJ), in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is also an associated researcher at the Interdisciplinary Coordination of Contemporary Studies Research Centre (CIEC-UFRJ). Her current research addresses vulnerability and resilience discourses in the Brazilian environmental disasters scenario.