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Perspectives

How to cite:

Baez Ullberg, Susann. "Learning from Loss? The Politics of Memory and Morality in the Post-disaster." In: "Sites of Remembering: Landscapes, Lessons, Policies," edited by Vikas Lakhani and Eveline de Smalen, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2018, no. 3, 79–83.
doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8489.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Learning from Loss? The Politics of Memory and Morality in the Post-disaster

The Post-disaster as an Analytical Lens

Despite much global and local effort in recent decades to mitigate and prevent disasters, recent hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, the flooding in Belarus and Rwanda, and the sand storms in India show that the environment continues to put societies to the test. To reduce the risks of future disasters, we need to learn from past ones, as is often proclaimed, but how do we achieve this beyond safety as a cliché? Disasters are critical and all-encompassing events and essentially the outcome of societal vulnerabilities and hazardous forces, which, in our era of the Anthropocene, are increasingly entangled. Disasters are not only material and spatial events, but also temporal phenomena in that they occur in and over time, grounded in historical processes that forge the present and shape future actions. A temporal perspective on disaster asks not only when and how the risks that led to the disaster were produced, but also when and how a disaster ends—if it ever does. While disaster managers and decision makers turn to the next crisis, disaster survivors and others affected live on with the affective and material experiences of acute events and their aftermath. In addition, recovery and reconstruction processes often have social and political consequences that can be flawed and misguided. Contemporary disasters tend to have long public afterlives also because they are often, albeit not always, politicized and even judicialized. To understand the effects of disaster, to learn from them beyond a focus on the type, magnitude, and losses of the event, we need to zoom in on the post-disaster process, which is when the event is culturally and politically signified—that is, remembered.

A Short Note on Memory and Morality

Memory is the principal mechanism that mediates past experiences with present understandings and anticipatory actions. It is well established by now that memory is as much an individual as a social phenomenon; a heterogeneous, dynamic, and situated process that is made in the past as much as in the present. Actors make memory in many ways:

through rituals, oral and audiovisual narratives, artifacts, and memorial places, but also through daily practices and embodied action. Social memory is not only made through practices of remembering, however. Forgetting also plays a vital role here. Oblivion is arguably an inherent feature of modern societies and what makes modernity possible in the first place, because it enables what is new. This thinking is articulated in critical ideas of disaster interventions as enabling drastic social and economic change, which is a form of amnesia of what was there before (instead of restoring what used to be there). What is being remembered and/or forgotten in societies is largely a consequence of who remembers and from which position in the social structure this remembering takes place at a given point in time. Public remembering easily turns into politics of memory and framing contests that are shaped by stakes at play for the involved actors, but also by subjective perceptions, cultural notions, and moral understandings of good and bad actions taken in the disaster and its aftermath. In this sense, memory and morality go hand in hand—it can be a duty not to forget, or treason to remember. Drawing on ethnographic research in Argentina and Sweden, I argue that studying the entangled processes of social remembering and moral reasoning can make a significant contribution to the understanding of risk governance and of societies' repeated failures to prevent disaster and to build back better.

The 2003 Flood in Argentina

On 29 April 2003, an unfinished dike transformed a flood into a big disaster in Santa Fe City, the eighth largest city in Argentina, located at the confluence of two large rivers. Twenty-three people died in the emergency and more than one hundred died in the following years as an indirect consequence. One-third of the population of the city, about one hundred and thirty thousand inhabitants, had to be evacuated for weeks and in some cases months. Hundreds of families had no home to return to. The disaster came to be called by the city's inhabitants simply "the flood." In the wake of the disaster and the years to follow, the memories of "the flood" would structure their lives. For years afterwards, memories of "the flood" loomed large in the everyday lives of the citizens in absences, smells, and small talk. Parallel to this evocative and reminiscent remembering, affected inhabitants commemorated the disaster through ritual practices and memorials. Survivors and activists also organized protests against the government, which they considered responsible for the disaster, clamoring for justice and economic

compensation. This movement used memory as a tool of protest, arranging rallies and manifestations at certain times and in certain places connected to “the flood,” and pressing charges against decision makers as a way of keeping their claims on the local political agenda. The local and provincial government, in contrast, practiced a logic of omission, avoiding public comments, ceremonies of commemoration or public monuments, and any thorough inquiry into the much-criticized disaster-management process. “The flood” seemed to have come completely unexpectedly, but according to historical sources, at least 30 extraordinary floods had afflicted the town since the time of its colonial foundation. Given this historical experience, it was rather striking that risk reduction and disaster preparedness were so poor. Had the earlier floods been forgotten? My research shows that they were recalled, rather than forgotten, as part of a longstanding historical problem of flooding, rather than singled out as an extraordinary disaster event like the 2003 flood. Historical flooding in Santa Fe was in fact publicly considered “normal” and a problem that “typically” would affect the people in the poverty-stricken and peripheral lowlands. The inhabitants of the flood-prone outskirts themselves did not practice any active commemorations of the many past floods they had experienced, but this did not mean that they were oblivious to these disasters. Rather, their flood memories were of a reminiscent and evocative character, embedded in local everyday life and emerging through daily practices, such as fishing or market trading; by passing specific places or by using particular artifacts. Their memories, however, were forgotten overall in Santa Fe’s public urban flood memoryscape; the extraordinary memory work around the 2003 disaster came at the expense of these embedded local memories of recurrent flooding. Thus, the memory of one singular past flood only reproduced risk for future flooding.

The 2014 Wildfire in Sweden

The summer of 2014 was extraordinarily dry and warm in Sweden, and many municipalities declared fire bans within their respective jurisdictions, as the fire risk was extremely high. The Rescue Services had already extinguished several smaller forest fires when, on 31 July, a spark from a forest machine, working near the town of Sala in Västmanland County to prepare the soil for forest plantation, accidentally caused a fire. Within days the fire had spread over an area of 13,100 hectares, of which 75 percent was productive forest land. One person died, and two people were injured in the emergency. Almost a hundred buildings were damaged or destroyed. A total of one thousand people

and nearly two thousand farm animals were evacuated due to the fire. Among the affected landowners were both small-scale family forest producers and large-scale forest companies. In the post-disaster, extraordinary measures were taken to manage this—by Swedish standards—extraordinary disaster. A special unit was created within the Västmanland County Administrative Board to coordinate the support for people affected in collaboration with all public and civil society actors involved, and according to the principle of “good dialogue.” This was a trope for a transparent, empathetic, pragmatic, and unbureaucratic model of governance. There was an active decision not to build any public monument or to establish a day of commemoration, in order not to remind the people affected of the event and potentially stir up painful emotions. The year after the disaster, the County Board decided to declare the ravaged forest a nature reserve. The aim was to preserve the area for the study of the long-term ecological effects of the fire, and, despite the prior reluctance to create sites of remembering, the ambition was also to turn the area into a memorial of the disaster. Special visiting sites within the reserve were built, with observation towers, information boards, and rest areas. This was also a measure to handle disaster tourism. Many people from the region and beyond had traveled to see the fire at the height of the emergency and afterwards to see its devastating effects. To their voyeuristic gaze, the fire became a spectacle, and they took pictures and selfies in front of it. Their presence in the area was not only dangerous because of the risk of falling trees, but unpleasant for those people living in stricken areas. The creation of the nature reserve was a way of keeping people within the defined and safe confines of the scorched forest memorial. In the post-disaster, numerous public investigations were commissioned to evaluate the disaster event and its public management. In addition, many scientific research projects were launched to study the psychological, social, and ecological effects of the forest fire. The inquiries in general lauded the actions by local, regional, and national crisis managers, yet they also identified numerous flaws in the interoperability of the Swedish disaster-management system. Judicial investigations around causal responsibilities have been strikingly slow and inclined towards avoiding blame. In late 2017, one of the country’s Land and Environmental Courts exonerated the private forest company Stora Enso from responsibility; the prosecution recently made by the State Attorney is due in January 2019, almost five years after the disaster. Taken together, the 2014 wildfire is publicly remembered as an unfortunate accident that everybody did their best to manage. Little, if any, public debate has addressed social vulnerability and climate change, or the role of the Swedish forest industry—all things that would need to be addressed in order to enhance disaster risk reduction.

So What?

By now it should be clear that the two cases presented are not analytically intended for strict comparison, embedded as they are in specific cultural, political, historical, and ecological contexts. Rather, studied in tandem, they let us gain complementary theoretical insights about how social processes of remembering/forgetting and of moralizing around past disasters operate in the post-disaster process of making meaning. While the Argentinian case took the shape of a highly politicized and judicialized blame game, enabled by processes of memorializing the flooding in a larger context of vulnerability and political violence, the Swedish case illustrates instead a logic of omission enabled by a set of moral ideals including emotional control and consensus building, embedded in a political history of a strong welfare state in which open criticism and conflict is rationalized. As scholars, we can learn much from this focus, and I believe in taking peoples' memories and moral concerns around disasters and environmental problems seriously. Disastrous events are likely to elicit all kinds of interpretations in affected societies. We need to pay close attention to the many ways in which a disaster is remembered, but more importantly, to what is **omitted** from public discourses of such events. Such careful analysis of social remembering takes time, because social remembering is not only a **selective** and **unequal** process subject to different stakes and resources to make public memory, but one that is **dynamic** and subject to change over time. Policymakers need to carefully ask how a disaster is remembered among the people and organizations affected, and what the **effects** of that are, before rushing off in the wake of disaster to build official monuments and establish commemorative rituals that express merely their moral concern to pay respect to the victims. Historical examples abound of governments, politicians, and political parties striving to govern public memory and (re)write history. Making way for, and including, the multiple memories that are produced in society in the post-disaster is to democratically bridge the gap between policymaking, people, and politics. That is the lesson to learn.