

Catastrophes and Globalization

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The course's main purpose is to present a critical and interdisciplinary approach to contemporary catastrophes that takes into account their geopolitical, moral, economic, and sociological aspects. Contemporary catastrophes are understood as being large-scale and complex human disasters (both "natural" and "man-made") that, for a certain period and within a certain area, have become unmanageable. The course's working premise is that contemporary catastrophes should be perceived as effects of, as well as media and catalysts for, processes of globalization. They are distinguishable from earlier large-scale disasters by the transnational mechanisms of relief and aid, the political and economic intervention they activate, and the various forms of transnational causal chains in which they are involved. Because contemporary catastrophes are embedded in globalizing processes, they should be studied in the context of the various facets of globalization and, for the same reason, have become instructive sites for exploring the relationships between global networks of various types, new world orders, modes of domination and forms of sovereignty and new moral-political technologies aimed at rescue and relief.

1. An overview on catastrophes in the age of globalization

Since the end of the cold war, the international arena has witnessed a proliferation of armed conflicts, ethnic violence and civil strife, which prompted the appearance of a new type of catastrophe. Catastrophes have accompanied mankind since the beginning of time; but in their new formation, they differ from both ancient and modern precedents. Unlike "ordinary" natural disasters, the social constructedness of these events is a conspicuous and important aspect of the experience of those who undergo or witness a catastrophe. Even when a catastrophe is triggered by a natural cause, it can no longer be related to an arbitrary force of nature, nor to the hand of God alone. And unlike the catastrophic atrocities committed by the totalitarian regimes during the 20th century, contemporary catastrophes are often related to the weakening of the State and the disintegration of its apparatuses, and not to their excessive power. Usually, these events are not confined to the territory or result from

the policies of a single regime, and the violence associated with them has mostly consisted of spectacles of atrocities rather than secret deeds of clandestine agencies.

Compared to their precedents, then, contemporary catastrophes might be characterized as large scale, multi-dimensional events that transcend regional boundaries and defy conventional causal explanations and traditional ways to contain and manage the rapid dissemination of their destructive effects. In most cases, the political sovereign in the stricken region either fails to come to the rescue of victims, or is implicated in their destruction, and, hence, an outside intervention is called for.

A catastrophe is a large-scale disaster that, for a certain period of time and within a certain area, has become unmanageable, at least, for its victims; what turns a disaster into a catastrophe is the magnitude of the destruction and depth of the rupture that prevent social agents from administering relief. Both a human-induced disaster and a natural disaster may develop into a catastrophe. However, what characterizes contemporary catastrophes is the fact that nature has been entirely socialized and natural causal chains cannot be disentangled from social ones, which include the orchestrated, yet often contested responses to the catastrophic situation. The required response is multi-layered; from physical equipment to psychological treatment, and from financial assistance to the imposition or reconstruction of governing bodies. Such a response involves a coordinated effort among a host of organizations, governments, and experts, yet opens new arena of conflict and competition among different social agents. Both cooperation and conflict transcend national and regional boundaries; they have grown out of the dynamics of different processes of globalization, and, in their turn, contributed to their intensification. Thus, in the second half of the 20th century, there have appeared new mechanisms of relief, aid, intervention and domination of unprecedented form, range, and efficiency.

This is why a catastrophe might be perceived as a privileged site for the study of globalization. Globalization is understood, here, as a constellation of processes and social dimensions that involve – simultaneously, yet not at the same pace – the transformation of markets, modes of production and forms of exchange, states, civil societies, forms of governance, the structure of personal experience and self-identity, the media and the realm of international organizations. Those processes do not carry the same effects everywhere; they create networks of dependencies and interrelations among agents across the globe, homogenize certain localities and, at the same time, differentiate between others thereby accelerating segregation and disparities.

Although many writers would easily agree that catastrophes today could not be studied out of the context of globalization, the course would invert this line of thought, and study globalization itself through the special perspective gained through contemporary catastrophes. Catastrophes will be interpreted as productive events, not only as grand spectacles of destruction, devastation, and suffering which block the way to progress and not only as effects of, but also as media and catalysts for, processes of globalization. The course will examine how contemporary catastrophes enhance novel global orders of human existence, transform social and economic relations, promote new forms of morality, and shape new forms of political governance.

2. New types of catastrophe

The unmanageability of some natural and man-made disasters and the distress they inflict on large populations send shockwaves throughout the social, economic and political fabric at the local, regional, national, and transnational levels. Displaced people flow inside and across borders. National sovereignty is challenged. Testimonies and images of suffering are distributed worldwide. Responses are called for, a sense of moral emergency is aroused, and responsibilities are negotiated and assigned. Eventually, a host of experts and volunteers, governmental and non-governmental organizations, civilians and the military, are spread over regions now recognized as disaster-stricken.

A certain configuration and conception of the catastrophic event is involved in this description, which the course will explore and question. The catastrophe is imagined as a well-demarcated site, with clear spatial separation between a center and a periphery, and a chronological demarcation between a traumatic period and periods of anxiety and distress that precede and follow it. This configuration seems to follow the model of an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, but also that of a concentration camp. The catastrophic situation is then imagined as a "black hole" in which a whole life-world has been completely devastated, cultural defenses collapse, no ordinary expectations (from the victims' point of view, at least) are met, and "everything is possible." This "black-hole" is surrounded by circles of disastrous effects, in which the traumatic damage diminishes as one gets farther away from the catastrophic center. But usually, the "black hole" itself betrays/defeats all the attention and concern of those who come to rescue and render aid as well as of those who insist on witnessing and commemorating.

However, the moral and political interest in preventing catastrophes, or in reducing their effects once they occur, forces one to concentrate special attention on the multidimensional context in which such a "black hole" is created, and the forces on which it subsists. Therefore, a division of the attention concentrated on the event and on its context can be identified. This certain split of concern characterizes much of the debates, competitions, and divisions of labor in the field of humanitarianism and human rights activism today. Contemporary catastrophes exemplify a field of interaction between organizations that monitor and criticize violations of human rights, trying to address the 'root causes' of catastrophes, and those organizations that specialize in relief operations and the delivery of aid in emergencies, often under an 'a-political' banner. While agents of the first type address themselves to the wider context of catastrophes (which are usually yet to come), agents of the second type focus on the "black hole" itself.

Lately, humanitarians and human rights advocates have become ever more visible, assertive, and creative "moral entrepreneurs", and are gradually establishing themselves as prominent mediators of moral sensibility and responsibility. The two parties, however, use different ideological and political discourses. They sometimes differ radically in their conception of the problem-situation and in their assessment of what ought and can be done, and they often compete for the same financial resources and for similar spans of attention by the media and the politicians. But alongside this competition, a new division of labor between different organizations has been gradually established during the last decade, and new channels of cooperation and coordination have emerged. This division of labor, however, is not rigid and is subject to constant changes. For example, an agent assigned with a political mission, like the UNHCR, might gradually concur with a humanitarian position, and an organization primarily devoted to humanitarian ends, like MSF, might assume a political role. To a large extent, such allocations of positions and functions take place vis-à-vis catastrophic events and in light of the articulation that experts from different disciplines have given to them.

This sensitive division of labor might be further complicated by the appearance of catastrophes of a yet unknown character. Amidst contemporary catastrophes, which can be likened to what was defined in the literature as a "Complex Humanitarian Emergency", there emerge catastrophic constellations that totally diverge from the classical dynamics of disaster.

Some of the most harmful catastrophes of our times disobey the model of the demarcated event, with its relatively clear separation between center and periphery, event and context, before and after. Those catastrophes distribute distress over time and place, creating prolonged periods and networks of smaller, local disasters that enhance each other. Such catastrophes are not concentric, site-specific events, and can be described only as a multiple network, or a rhizome (to use Deleuze and Guattari's notion). The AIDS epidemic in Africa, recently recognized by the UN as one of today's worst catastrophes, is a compelling example. Having no spatial center and no distinct temporality, it is yet an unmanageable, multi-dimensional disaster that threatens a whole continent and seems to defy conventional causal explanations and traditional ways to contain or control the rapid dissemination of its destructive effects. The ongoing catastrophe of Chernobyl is another such example: although this catastrophe had a clearly demarcated site and, at least, at the moment of its eruption, a definite center, it lacks any clear temporality, and its effects are still being disseminated over vast and distant regions, harming hundreds of thousands of their residents. Even more importantly, the same network dynamics threatens to characterize more and more catastrophes in the future, as, for example, in the case of a widely distributed biological contamination induced by terrorist acts.

The network-like catastrophes might be described as liminal cases: they do not strictly fall into traditional categories and can be properly classified neither as purely natural, nor as purely man-made disasters. Chernobyl is a paradigm of a bureaucratic- technological fiasco, a consequence of man's failing control over technology. At the same time, however, natural elements were crucial for the dissemination of its lethal radiation. AIDS is evidence of man's powerlessness to fully control nature, but prevention of the epidemic and reduction of its rate of spread are entirely within the scope of the politics of public health and the economy of pharmaceutical drugs. It is interesting to note that in these two catastrophes the mobilization of the inter- and non-governmental mechanism of aid and relief has been slow and difficult.

While recent cases of catastrophes, in Kosovo or Turkey for example, have witnessed spectacles of rapid international mobilization, the UN fund for the victims of Chernobyl remains empty almost defunct, and in the case of AIDS a long battle conducted by committed NGO's was needed in order to make the powerful drug companies give up their demands on the South African government. It might be suspected that this is not only due to the selective character of humanitarian action in general, but should be thought of in relation to the network-like dynamics of those specific events. Unlike "regular", clear-cut catastrophes, the attention that AIDS or a fiasco like Chernobyl demands is always-already attention to the wider context and to the various conditions that make the catastrophic event possible, enhance its effects, or prevent its prevention. This leads sometimes to radical responses, which tend to negate the magnitude or even the very existence of the disaster.

3. Global Networks

Global networks often seem to facilitate both the progress of a catastrophe and the work of those assisting its victims. On the one hand, local disastrous elements, both natural (e.g., draught) and political (e.g., religious or nationalist extremist groups), are capable of generating large-scale disasters due to their integration into regional or global networks of economic, political, and cultural relations. On the other hand, humanitarian assistance, carried out and administered by inter- and non-governmental organizations, can function only when global networks of information and of political and economic relations are interwoven into local bodies of government and of civil society in disaster stricken regions. Thus, in both facets, catastrophic situations create scenes in which constellations of globalizing-localizing forces are exposed.

In this respect, the media serves as one of the major links between catastrophes and processes of globalization. If humanitarian assistance is understood as a specific regulation of the global flow of goods, then the media might be regarded as one of the most powerful agents conditioning this flow, using a parallel dissemination of images of evil and human suffering. More specifically, the growing "mediatization" of catastrophes and humanitarian responses alike might be interpreted in the context of the growing subjection of humanitarian action to the dynamics of the global market. Catastrophes are associated with recognizable media icons, their place in news programs are allocated in advance, and their display is constantly aestheticized. However, the media, which plays a decisive role in mobilizing civil societies and governments in North-Western countries towards helping victims of catastrophes, often draws attention away from the conditions that make them possible. By hiding the larger political and economic context of catastrophes, the media often blurs the contribution of globalizing processes to their occurrence.

Contemporary catastrophes, however, are not just another site exemplifying processes of globalization. In the case of a catastrophe, the proliferation of global networks of all types is deeply connected to the moral obligation and the political responsibility to alleviate human suffering. The moral-political discourse of a catastrophe is embedded in a host of new techniques, professions and practices designed to take care of victims, or to prevent their appearance in the first place. The last three or four decades have witnessed the emergence, consolidation and proliferation of new apparatuses of humanitarian response, relief and care, capable of quick intervention in disaster stricken sites. At the same time, the ideology and practices of human rights have crossed the boundaries of one's own state and are applied on a global scale to new domains of political and social life. The discourses of humanitarianism and human rights thus gain more and more visibility in contemporary culture, and have become, in a sense, the new ideology in the liberal democracies of the North-West. Together, they form a new constellation of power/knowledge, which emerges around the site of the catastrophe and is shaped vis-à-vis its horizon. This constellation of power/knowledge yields multiple forms of intervention, including human rights monitoring, disaster management, development and reconstruction. It effects other, traditional formations of power/knowledge, especially those related to state sovereignty, and promotes forms of governance of a new kind. Most significantly, perhaps, this multi-facet constellation might be situated so as to be both an effect of globalizing processes, and one of their active agents.

In this context the course will examine the discourse and practice of humanitarianism and human rights as a new set of technologies of moral intervention, which seems to be embedded in a more general transformation of moral sensibility and political imagination, and may even point to the possibility of a new formation of the "moral" in North-Western societies, a new way a moral "ought" is articulated by different discourses and inscribed in social networks and political institutions.

4. The Structure of the Course and a Description of its Modules

The course does not aim to exhaust the vast domain of research laid open by the global formation of contemporary catastrophes. Its aim is to offer several – different, sometimes conflicting and always interrelated – perspectives on the subject. The course will be organized around six principal modules, conducted by a team of six lecturers, who have worked together in the past in different frameworks. Each lecturer will be responsible for one module, but a structured exchange among the lecturers is planned for some of the sessions. The entire team will conduct the opening and the concluding meetings, trying to give a synthetic perspective on the questions discussed in the course and an account of the divergences and disagreements that are certainly due to surface. A description of the six modules follows.

Adi Ophir: Catastrophes: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives

This series of lectures consists of four steps: placing both globalizing processes and large-scale disasters in historical perspective; analyzing the concepts of disaster and catastrophe in order to understand what is new about contemporary catastrophes; examining the changing role of the modern State in the mobilization and administration of moral technologies in the face of catastrophe and using this perspective in order to shed light on a major yet neglected aspect of the transformation and decline of modern sovereignty; discussing the special way contemporary catastrophes constructed – and have been constructed by - the present form of global humanitarianism and examining its ambiguities: is it an agent of globalization with a moral face or the moral façade of the cruel globalization of the capitalist market?

The series of lectures will bring together philosophical, historical, and sociological perspectives on the questions of sovereignty, governance, civil society, and the relation between the "moral" and the "political". It will demonstrate interdisciplinary modes of thinking and fruitful integration of abstract theoretical analysis with detailed historically and politically conscious case analysis. Finally, the course will cast a new critical light on the question of globalization, with particular emphasis on the ambiguous nature of humanitarianism as an effect and agent of globalization.

Ronen Shamir: Humanitarian Roles and Responsibilities of Multi-National Corporations

This series of lectures engages roles and responsibilities of Multi-National Corporations in providing humanitarian relief and aid in disaster areas. The lectures lay the theoretical and empirical ground for a shift of attention away from politics and governments to markets and corporations, using critical analyses of globalizing processes as a guideline.

Dan Rabinowitz: The Future of Catastrophe: Climate Change and the Perception of Global Danger

The point of departure for this series of lectures is that global warming is already on the increase, that it is anthropogenic, that it could have far reaching and dangerous consequences for life on Earth as we know it. The lecture series further assumes that its impact will be unevenly distributed, effecting poorer peripheral communities more dramatically than others. A third assumption is that contribution to global warming is also uneven, and that big polluters have a vested interest in obscuring the nature and extent

of the problem and in arresting political mobilization against it. The problem is exacerbated by its intangibility. Climate change is slow, and the continuous scientific and political debate regarding its origins, magnitude and likely impact tends to fuzz the issue further. Absent from most people's consciousness, it is a good example of what I call *The Tangibility Conundrum*: risks which, while containing devastating potential for many, remain largely unseen and unrecognized and thus outside social and political theatres of action.

Renata Salecl: Fears and Anxieties in the New Age of Catastrophe

This series of lectures draws on psychoanalytical and philosophical theories in order to analyze fears and anxieties related to contemporary catastrophes. In particular, the lectures will refer to the social relations that contemporary catastrophes engender, to the cynical and ironical character of humanitarianism, and to seductions and fears of hyper-capitalism in Post-Socialism.

Orly Lubin: Testimonies of Catastrophes

This series of lectures deals with the creation of a moral discourse through the use of testimonies, which contemporary, globalized means of communication and transportation make easy to dislocate, transfer and distribute. Particular emphasis will be put on the relations between testimony and the sites of witnessing and testifying; the relations between testimony and the material body of both the testifying person and the persons described in the testimony; and the creation of personal and collective memory/identity. Classes will make use of the analysis of testimonies collected by students.

Dicle Kogacioglu: Questions on Globalization, Civil Society and Catastrophes:

The case of the 1999 Turkish Earthquake

The aim of this lecture series is to develop a critical understanding of civil society and its relationship to processes of globalization, in the context of large-scale disasters. Civil society often becomes a catch-all category comprising actions of a variety of non-state actors in disaster situations. This approach uncritically draws a rosy picture of most welcome democratic developments. The impact of state regulation in the unfolding and delimiting of 'civil society' -in both national and global arenas- is often undermined within such banners as 'crisis' that the disaster situation embodies. This course examines the effects of such packaging in terms of the transformation of forms of socio-political conduct in the context of the 1999 Turkish earthquake and its aftermath.

5. Teaching Methods

A. Classes

Classes will consist mainly of lectures. At least one quarter of the classes, however, will be based on students' active participation: two classes (2 academic hours each) will be entirely devoted to students' presentations of case studies; one class will be based on analysis of materials gathered by the students in group work prior to the lesson; two classes will make use of documentary films and photos as the basis for discussion.

B. Distance Learning

Some key texts will be distributed prior to the summer school. Texts will be accompanied by a short introduction and a series of questions for discussion. These will serve as a guideline for one or two rounds of exchange – through snail mail or email – between the students and lecturers. One or two more rounds of exchange will take place after the summer school. Students will be encouraged to follow up in writing and respond to the arguments made in class and the relevant texts. The lecturer will comment upon and respond to their writings.

C. Modes of Assessment

Students who wish to get formal accreditation for their participation will have to submit two short seminar papers (15-25 pages long) to two different lecturers. Clear instructions for writing seminar papers will be given in class. Topics will be discussed and decided between the lecturer and the students during the summer school.