

The social scene of disaster

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The inexorably unlimited deployment of a civilizing ambition, at a point of intersection between humanity and nature, represents a risky strategy that has drastically modified the ancestral conditions of the development of the natural processes which, as a whole, constitute the bases for life on Earth (the courses of water, the protective properties of the ozone layer or the balance between the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom amongst many others). In this way, it defines social sceneries which are becoming much more concentrated in mega cities, and which host the transformation of natural hazards into manufactured risks through human action. If we are to talk properly, this transformation cannot be understood as a simple modification but rather as a series of absolutely catastrophic damages done to natural systems on a global stance.

At the beginning of the twenty first century, a significant characteristic of this new catastrophic horizon lies on the fact that although the increase in the frequency, the scope or the intensity of natural disasters that threaten human security (such as earthquakes, floods, typhoons, tornados, volcanic eruptions, droughts etc.) hasn't been proven, what is clear is that the vulnerability of the population confronting these threats is increasing. Using common sense, this forces us to turn our attention from a fatalistic contemplation of the evolution of *natural hazards* to the lucid observation of the *real causes* which, through the corresponding *dynamic processes* -economic, social and political- generate *insecurity conditions* which, in turn, determine the *vulnerability* of certain populations.

It is not a case of opposing one's own view of social and natural sciences, but rather of combining both. It is obvious that we should be able to understand the functioning of the natural systems of which we are a part of and, in particular, those physical phenomena that represent a problem for human survival. As an example, it is useless for us to know everything there is to know about the monsoonal and typhoonal regimes that each year cause, in Bangladesh, the rising of the vast delta that receives the waters from the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, if we are not capable of also understanding why certain population groups are forced, even in the light of imminent danger, to live in extremely insecure conditions that make them vulnerable to this catastrophic natural disaster.

Therefore, we need to resort without avail to natural sciences to obtain the necessary knowledge of those physical phenomena which, given a series of specific circumstances, can act as events that trigger public catastrophes and disasters. However, it is just as necessary to resort to social sciences to understand the crucial element in this whole disaster process: the *vulnerability*, i.e., the exposition of certain populations to the eventually dangerous effects of natural phenomena.

Thus, only the synergic combination of natural and social sciences, and not just their juxtaposition, will be able to undo the artificial difference that we have established between natural disasters and disasters caused by the hand of man, or between *normal* disasters (cholera outbreaks in Africa or Latin America or even traffic accidents), *extreme* disasters (AIDS epidemic) and *permanent* disasters (the hunger suffered for some time now by a great percentage of the world population; or the global decrease in the supply of safe water: 1 in 5 people does not have access to safe drinking water, and almost 1 in 3 has no adequate drainage). We will, therefore, be able to attain a holistic view which will consider, besides the risks derived from natural phenomena, the *manufactured risks* that are innate to the global expansion of the Western world: Whether for military or for industrial purposes, the manipulation of the energy obtained from the disintegration of the atom; the massive production of chemical and bacteriological weapons; the imposition of political and economic structures that deprive a majority of the world's population from having access to essential resources for survival; massive production and transportation by land and by sea of toxic, poisonous, flammable or explosive substances; accidents in the work place, etc.

This new outlook will allow us to point out, as a first and necessary step before we can avoid them, three major shortcomings present in the current models of disaster management. Firstly, disasters expose the chronic vulnerability of "normal situations". For the inhabitants of critical areas we are dealing with a "lesser misfortune" amongst several sceneries predisposed to disasters. Secondly, complex threats cannot be tackled by solving the problem "from the top down". Instead, we need a local and detailed knowledge of social situations which are highly variable. And lastly, official interventions geared towards reaching higher levels of security tend to ignore what the population is

doing, and thus tear down ancestral strategies and destroy social cohesion; this, in its own, is an added disaster.

In the end, this comprehensive vision -from the surface towards the centre- of *disaster, danger and threat, vulnerability, insecure conditions, dynamic processes* and the *real causes* will allow us to, once the misleading questions have been disregarded, face the important question: When, where and, above all, *how* do disasters get started? This would mean that we could go from constantly and erroneously asking “what can we do to mitigate disasters?” to focusing all our attention towards discovering “what are we doing right now that ends up triggering those disasters?” This is equivalent, in terms of governance and human development, to the difference between *managing disasters* and *managing risks*, and, ultimately, to the specific policies that refer to a systematic implementation of the *caution principle*.

To summarize: the security, when confronted with the threat caused by violence and famine, represents the basic core of human needs (Marlow) and, therefore, the main objective of a global governance can only consist on guaranteeing access to the whole of the world’s population to the minimum necessary food, shelter and personal safety needs.

This would mean facing, regardless of the consequences, the question posed by the World Bank in its World Development Report 2003²⁹: «*How can we provide productive work and a good quality of life to 2.5 o 3 billion people who are currently living on less than 25 euros a day (and to the 3 billion people that will probable be added onto the population of developing countries by the year 2050) in a sustainable environmental and social manner?*»

Even before trying to neutralize natural threats, security policies should, maybe, be directed towards promoting “more secure conditions” and, thus, reducing the forced vulnerability suffered by certain populations. Ultimately, the achievement of a sustainable security in a society of risk, i.e., the minimization of human vulnerability in the face of disasters and violence will require social justice (in order to guarantee security for everyone) and technological humility (in order to re-establish a harmonious interconnectivity between humanity and nature).

²⁹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2003. Sustainable Development in a Dynamic World. Transforming Institutions, growth and quality of life*. (ISBN: 84-8476-090-1).