

Disaster Professionals

Sandrine Revet, *Les coulisses du monde des catastrophes 'naturelles'*, Éditions de la MSH

By Romain Lecler

It has taken only a few decades for so-called “natural” disasters to become a major concern for international professionals. A long, on-the-ground study reveals the concrete ways in which environmental disasters are managed, from UN officials to affected countries.

After having analyzed, through an ethnographic approach, the social construction of disaster at a local level in her 2008 book, *Anthropologie d'une catastrophe. Les coulées de boue de 1999 au Venezuela* (Anthropology of a Disaster: The Venezuela Mudslides of 1999), Sandrine Revet, an anthropologist and researcher at Sciences Po's Centre de Recherches Internationales (Center for International Research) examines in her new book the emergence of "international governance of 'natural' disasters." Her book draws on a study conducted between 2008 and 2015, which took her from the United Nations offices in Geneva specialized in disaster management to several Latin American countries, where she observed the introduction of training sessions and disaster simulation exercises. Her account of negotiations between delegates from across the globe during an international conference held in Sendai, Japan in 2015 opens and closes her study of the international management of “natural” catastrophes.

The Social Construction of “Natural” Disasters

More than anything, Revet's new book is a relatively rare example of a study of global policy that uses ethnographic methods to the hilt, in that the author spent seven years immersing herself in a social milieu, draws on a long series of observations, fifty or so in-depth biographical interviews, and first-hand sources, and takes the time to reflect upon the

field study—a field that had to be defined and delimited. In this respect, her book is representative of new approaches to the international realm, which emphasize “social scientific” methods,¹ but do not apply them solely to anthropology's traditional objects, such as actors and practices of development aid in so-called southern countries, but directs them towards the global power centers that are international organizations and the professionals who work for them.²

She doubles down on the thesis that “natural” disasters are socially constructed. Her book traces the evolution of ways of defining disasters triggered by phenomena that were initially natural (earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions). The first type of analysis, dating from the Cold War, views disasters as accidents. It emphasizes urgency and efficiency in response to such disasters. It mobilizes knowledge drawn from the hard sciences (particularly seismology, which received abundant financing thanks to programs seeking to differentiate natural tremors from those caused by nuclear testing). To these were added the experience of first responders, who flourished with the sudden rise of humanitarianism in the 1980s.

But Revet sides with a more recent interpretation, on the upswing since the 1990s, which emphasizes societies that have been affected by disasters. The latter stresses prevention and resilience in the face of such phenomena. For its part, it mobilizes social scientific knowledge—the author's home field. This interpretation is promoted by NGOs specialized in humanitarian relief.

The competition between these two interpretations shapes two different genealogical accounts of the “disaster world,” one focused on accidents (the impact of major disasters), the other on the concept of vulnerability. It resulted in the creation of distinct international organizations. First, the UN created a Coordinating Office for Humanitarian Affairs at the initiative of seismologists and scientists who, since the 1960s, benefited from surveillance networks established to ensure nuclear non-proliferation. Then, once social science researchers began making their voices heard at international conferences held in Japan beginning in 1994, a second body, the UNISDR (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction) was created to harmonize the various competing paradigms (chapter 1).

The success of the interpretation emphasizing societies' vulnerability (and not simply the management of accidents) explains why, since the 2000s, the term “natural” has been placed in quotation marks. The latter call attention to the fact that “the international ‘natural’ catastrophe milieu has ... constantly ‘denaturalized’ catastrophes.” By using quotation marks, Revet places herself clearly on the side of the interpretation advanced by humanitarian NGOs, for which she worked, incidentally, before devoting herself to research.

¹ Johanna Siméant (dir.), *Guide de l'enquête globale en sciences sociales*, Paris, CNRS, 2015.

² À la manière de Laëticia Atlani-Duault, *Au bonheur des autres - Anthropologie de l'aide humanitaire*, Paris,

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Two Competing Frames

The competition between these two interpretations is really the book's guiding theme. Through systematic analysis, Revet shows how "natural" disasters were socially constructed, in that they were viewed through two competing "frames" in international relations and that each was defended by actors in competition with one another. In this way, she locates this opposition in the iconography of reports produced by the UN and international organizations specialized in disasters. Whereas some images represent disaster damage and relief, thus belonging to the first frame, focused on accidents, others, to the contrary, underscore resilience and prevention by highlighting, for instance, children and mothers, and, in this way, generally belong to the second frame, emphasizing the vulnerability of societies hit by disaster (chapter 2).

She also shows how the "disaster world" is split into two groups of actors. The first involves specialists and first responders, who are mobilized when disaster strikes to save as many lives as possible. Highly professionalized and organized on an "almost military" basis, they recruit, in particular, firemen and members of the military, like the INSARAG (International Search and Rescue Advisory Group), and produce guides as well as an entire lexicon of emergency (platforms, signaling, etc.). The second group "considers things in a longer temporality, that of repetition [and] cycles." This is the "world of prevention," in which disasters are not exceptional but likely to recur. It consists of NGOs and is characterized by a more horizontal and participatory form of organization (chapter 3).

Moreover, the production and collection of data are heavily influenced by these two frames. Revet distinguishes between two basic types. The first, which began developing in 1983, is the heir to data previously collected by insurance companies to provide information on the risk and recurrence of "major" disasters. Intended for relief professionals, EM-Dat (Emergency Events Database) consists of 19,000 disasters that caused "at least ten deaths or a hundred victims" and describes the resulting damage. In 1993, however, Latin American social science researchers established a competing database, Desinventar, providing information on smaller-scale disasters, such as hailstorms and house collapses following heavy rains. For this, they draw on newspaper archives and data from police, fire departments, and so on. The goal of these researchers is to direct the attention of international sponsors to "smaller" catastrophes that are usually concealed by "big" ones, yet which are more closely tied to the needs of affected populations (chapter 4).

The final chapters analyze the practices associated with these two frames: guides, signaling, and professional training, in the case of those responding to accidents; prevention and simulation exercises, in the case of those concerned with reducing vulnerability to catastrophes (chapter 5). The book concludes with a critical analysis of the idea of "resilience." This concept, which has become a leitmotiv of international organizations, is, however, only

reactive and can be associated with public disengagement, insofar as it legitimizes a lack of prevention and collective response (chapter 6).

Professional Groups

It thus becomes clear how Revet, by suggesting that disasters are not “natural,” is not simply endorsing the second frame, which emphasizes the vulnerability of affected societies. She goes a step further, showing that “several decades of work, conducted by actors hailing from various horizons, were necessary” to ensure that disasters were thought of as transcending national borders and incorporated into the international agenda. This is precisely her book's contribution in relation to the vast literature on disasters, which she has long mastered. She demonstrates, notably, how the social construction of “natural” disasters has been affected by the creation of a transnational “social world” specialized in managing these phenomena: for years, an entire system has existed for the human management of such crises, which is at once political, bureaucratic, and based on expertise, in which international institutions and the actors who gravitate to them play a crucial role. It is this “social world” that ethnographic methods allow Revet to describe so insightfully, through a series of biographical portraits and detailed accounts of operations and negotiations, as well as through the explanations she provides of how her field gradually opened up once professionals began to “recognize” her as one of “their own.”

From this perspective, the parts dealing with “differentiated professional trajectories in international work,” in chapter 3, are particularly instructive. Revet proposes two ideal types of “professionals,” of relevance far beyond the field of disasters. The first is that of “disaster brokers,” who play a crucial role as intermediaries between international institutions and local populations. Drawing on her profile of Ana Lucia, the director of a small Honduran organization, Revet shows how these “brokers” are crucial point-persons for international agencies thanks to their local networks: “Ana Lucia is a mediator who speaks in the name of the vulnerable, indigenous women and women of African descent, whom she is responsible for representing.” While they are also local actors, these brokers are genuine professionals, fully conversant in the language of the various stakeholders in international aid: “The reduction of disaster risks is only one example of the multiple spaces in which [Ana Lucia] makes demands and mobilizes. Gender, identity, sustainable development, human rights, base communities, reduction of disaster risk and, more recently, climate change are the array of concepts on which [she] effortlessly draws.” The second ideal type is that of the “disaster consultant.” These professionals bring together practical competencies (like first responders and NGO employees) and theoretical knowledge (they tend to be highly educated). As experts in this domain, they seek to be registered on the right rosters, where jobs, consultancies, and projects are announced.

This approach to analyzing “international professionals” makes it possible to break with the disembodied conception of international relations that characterizes even so-called sociological analyses of the international realm, drawing on such concepts as “epistemic community,” “network of transnational appeals,” and “world polity,” or, more generally, on institutionalist perspectives that overlook the divisions and power relationships at play in the groups under consideration. It also makes it possible to set aside an elitist conception of the international sphere, by showing how “international disaster governance” mobilizes diplomats and consultants as well as local actors, all of whom are professionalized in various respects within this domain.

Reviewed: Sandrine Revet, *Les coulisses du monde des catastrophes « naturelles »* (The Unseen World of “Natural” Disasters), Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2018, 240 p., 23 €.

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