

A Disastrous Undertaking: In Search of a Theory of Catastrophe

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Abstract:

In his recent volume, sociologist Bryan Turner attempts to formulate a theory of catastrophe based on observations regarding historical events. Beginning with a quote from Walter Benjamin, Turner's book covers concepts like Ulrich Beck's "risk society" and Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity," in addition to occurrences like the Enlightenment, the Black Plague, colonialism, war, and utopian thought. Ambitious from the outset, the volume contains shortcomings and contributes little to the catastrophe discourse; indeed, a theory of catastrophe never arrives.

Eine desaströse Unternehmung: Auf der Suche nach einer Theorie der Katastrophe

German Abstract:

In seinem kürzlich erschienenen Buch unternimmt der Soziologe Bryan Turner den Versuch, eine Theorie der Katastrophe zu formulieren, die auf Beobachtungen historischer Ereignisse beruht. Beginnend mit einem Zitat von Walter Benjamin, behandelt er Konzepte wie Ulrich Becks „Risikogesellschaft“ und Zygmunt Baumans „flüchtige Moderne“ sowie Ereignisse wie die Aufklärung, die Schwarze Pest, Kolonialismus, Krieg und Utopie. Der von Anfang an ambitionierte Band weist Mängel auf und trägt wenig zum Katastrophendiskurs bei; eine Theorie der Katastrophe wird nie entwickelt.

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In his most recent volume, the sociologist Bryan Turner endeavors to formulate a theory of catastrophe for a world whose inhabitants face concurring and cascading disasters. Climate change, war, pandemic – these events represent but a fraction of the challenges the twenty-first century promises to present to the human species. Turner’s book attempts to describe the very real and life-threatening realities such occurrences constitute, while also showing how the history of human beings’ encounters with catastrophe can inform our present actions.

Following the introduction (“Disasters, Crises, and Catastrophes”) and the theoretical chapter (“Risk Society and Liquid Modernity”), the book is structured according to different kinds of catastrophes or, in some cases, discourses of catastrophe. The third chapter (“Enlightenment and Catastrophe”), for example, looks at the understanding of catastrophe in the eighteenth century, with special emphasis on the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, and reviews claims about the connection between the Enlightenment ideology and twentieth-century events like the Holocaust vis-à-vis Theodor Adorno. Chapter four (“Plagues, Famines, and Population”) takes a turn towards demographic catastrophes brought about by sudden mass death events, like the Black Plague, or rapacious famines generated by extreme weather events or shortcomings in human planning or agriculture. The role of the human being in encountering and, indeed, creating catastrophe becomes more prominent as the book continues with chapters on colonialism (“Colonial Catastrophes and Genocide”), war (“War: The Cascade of Catastrophes”), and economic uncertainty (“The Economics of Catastrophe”), ending in a conclusion that endeavors to find a use for catastrophe through the balancing effect of utopian thought (“Catastrophe and Utopian Hope”). Demonstrating his chops as a sociologist,

Turner's analysis is informed by a number of sociological theories and includes historical examples from across the globe, which helps to support his belief that catastrophe and its understanding are of universal concern.

Turner's take on a theory of catastrophe begins with a quote from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1942) about the *angel of history* and a look at its artistic counterpart in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which together present a confounding yet thought-provoking idea of what catastrophe might be. This "overlap between the secular-Marxist hope for a society based on equality and mutual respect and the Jewish-Christian hope for a world to come" (p. 1) acts as a point of interest for Turner and his approach. From this promising beginning, Turner moves on to discuss different elements of catastrophe, stating right away that his understanding is not confined to "political catastrophes" (p. 2) and that catastrophe has a tendency to bring about "catastrophic consequences" (p. 3). He then touches on the notion that there is more to catastrophe – as opposed, for example, to disaster – than "size and scope" (p. 9), even going so far as to assert that catastrophes have the peculiar tendency to withhold any positive effects for a society following their occurrence (p. 11). This last statement is a touch odd, especially considering that he states in the third chapter ("Enlightenment and Catastrophe") that "modernity starts with a catastrophe" (p. 43). After all, if there is little opportunity for deriving positives from catastrophes, then how is it that we have arrived where we are, where Turner himself is? In context, the quote is referring to the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, which is a common reference point for scholarship about catastrophe. Considering that figures like Immanuel Kant produced essays in its aftermath that anticipated the development of disaster management and urban planning, two important and life-saving frameworks that have profoundly reduced the number of people who die from such events, his claim would seem to be begging for a contradiction. Indeed, Turner does go on to discuss many additional examples of helpful concepts from figures like Amartya Sen (p. 60) and John Rawls (p. 130) that have developed from catastrophic events like famines. Moreover, while not foreclosing the chance of positive takeaways from catastrophes altogether, Turner's phrase would seem to be an opportunity to articulate more clearly the characteristics of what a catastrophe is in relation to other terms (e.g., disaster) that are used to describe destructive and disruptive events. This elucidation never arrives.

Unfortunately, in these moments, as elsewhere in Turner's text, he fails to go into detailed discussion of what catastrophe *actually* is, resulting in the notable absence of any "theory of catastrophe" in his book. The chapter about concepts like Ulrich Beck's "risk society" and Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" and subsequent thematic chapters about enlightenment, plagues, famines, demographic challenges, colonialism, war, economics, and utopian hope are filled with useful references but strikingly shallow argumentation. In fact, most of the text is comprised of recitations of factual historical details with little to no clarification as to its relevance for a discussion, theoretical or otherwise, of catastrophe. Turner never sets the parameters for understanding catastrophe beyond the occasional allusion to "size and scope" (p. 2), which is never followed up by a consideration of how they figure into his understanding of catastrophe. Instead of a well-reasoned and informative account of what a catastrophe is, Turner simply recounts historical examples of destructive events and then moves on, as if to say: "Well, here you go." There are no attempts to systematically come to terms with distinctions or paradoxes, such as the fact that a catastrophe for one society could be a boon to another or might be beneficial for non-human creatures who are able to reclaim previously lost habitats (e.g., the Fukushima nuclear disaster). They may be mentioned occasionally, but they are abandoned in favor of another reference to Malthus or a peculiar diversion into unrelated explanations of the American civil war.

So, what to make of Turner's *A Theory of Catastrophe*? As far as its place in contemporary scholarly discourse about catastrophe, it has little to contribute. Its references are tired, and the book offers no new thoughts on where one might go from here when thinking about the utility of the catastrophe concept in the twenty-first century, if there is any such use to be found. This is really too bad given that, with a grasp of global historical events and an obviously skilled understanding of important sociological concepts, Turner had much to offer here. In that respect, his text might nonetheless be helpful for those who are just beginning to examine the idea of catastrophe, as there are many useful references and pieces of information about their contexts that could expedite one's entry into the scholarship. Yet, if one is looking for something that will push the boundaries of catastrophe studies or even just ask a thought-provoking question, then they should move on to something else. Though I am

reluctant to do so, it must be stated that Turner's book is a disastrous undertaking: one should continue the search for catastrophe elsewhere.