Avalanches and the Produce of the Ordinary.

Traditions of Disaster in the Central Alpine Region.

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Introduction:

"Avalanches as a threat to social orders" is the title of the project we, that is Prof. Reinhard Johler, Sandro Ratt and me, work on form the perspective of European Ethnology/Empirical Cultural Science in the collaborative research center 923 of Tübingen University "Threatened Orders". The research center aims at analyzing how social orders get stabilized or overthrown in the face of threat such as riots, competing orders or catastrophes. Our own project focusses on avalanche disasters and inquires how those catastrophes shape alpine communities, how those react towards constant threat, and finally, how avalanches as well as the social order are subject to permanent re-negotiation.

The discourse of disaster:

„What is a disaster?"[1] The 1998 title of Quarantelli's anthology seems obvious, yet tilted: "What is a disaster, opposed to all the other different approaches to disastrous phenomena?" it seems the question has to be. To catastrophe? To calamity? To accident?

Disaster terminology is differing, and has yet not been able to come up with a satisfying definition nor with sufficient clarity rendering different fields, terms and perspectives. It is questionable whether this is possible, or after all, necessary. Whereas the term disaster, literally a "bad star" or "un-star" seen as an omen for an impending catastrophe, indicates a form of higher power as the cause for disaster, the term catastrophe with its highly disputed link to greek drama theory, indicates a turning or tipping point, usually to the worse. Its common qualifications "natural" or "technical" bring more confusion than clarity – especially taking into consideration that this divide merely reproduces out of date concepts of nature and civilization, which ask for an updated critical analysis rather than manifest definitions.

Yet, what is it now, a disaster? Disaster research seems to indicate three shared and interdependent aspects throughout all the different approaches:

1 E.L. Quarantelli (ed.): What is a disaster? Perspectives on the question. London/New York 1998.

1. The need for meaning

If anything, a disaster is a phenomenon that asks for meaning and interpretation. Catastrophes are "sinnbedürftig" – a beautiful term, that only the German language knows. Terminology is a form of interpreting the disastrous event rather than explaining it. Scientific terminology is a discourse in which those phenomena are classified and interpreted. Thus the term "natural disaster" does not reflect upon any factual causes or results but furthermore indicates a construction of nature vs. civilization. Disasters are events that are subject to constant negotiation, strategies of narrativization, visualization etc. in short terms: they need to be interpreted; in the perspective of Foucaultian discourse or dispositive theory, these interpretations are not only rendering causes, but in the same way damages, contexts and ways of dealing with those calamities; they put into place actions of prevention, laws as well as legitimate and illegitimate knowledge.

2. The Suddenness

In these very processes of interpretation, disasters are described as sudden events, as accidents. Suddenness is not only due to a notion of unforeseeeness but furthermore to its notion of impact, its ability to render all actions of prevention as useless. In other words: Disasters can't be anticipated, and if they can be, anticipation could never foresee the full dimensions.

3. The opposition to social order

As much as disaster research or environmental history are aware of the fact that disasters are generally a result of the interaction of society and nature, disasters are usually seen in opposition to social order. In his 1983 essay „The idea of calamity in a technocratic age"[2] geographer Kenneth Hewitt, whose work never found the appreciation it should have received, outlines the dominant view of disaster research. He argues, that disasters are subject to an process of enclosure in a Foucaultian sense[3], expelled from social life, controlled by scientific knowledge which they themselves (help to) produce. Thereby, expanding Hewitt's focus on the academic discourse, the sciences and humanities alongside with artistic, medial and everyday discourse construct disasters as opposing social order, hence posing a state of chaos and disorder, in which everyday life loses its organizing power and relevance and in which society, its routines, and stabilities are overthrown. According to Hewitt, disaster discourse is shaped by a language of "'un'-ness"[4]: unexpectedness, unforeseenness, unpredictability, abnormality, thus: disorder, chaos, disquiet etc. Disasters are analyzed and represented as ruptures or voids, as phenomena that exceed the ordering capacity of

2 Kenneth Hewitt: The idea of calamity in a technocratic age. In: Kenneth Hewitt (ed.): Interpretations of calamity from the viewpoint of human ecology. Boston et al. 1983.
3 Ibid., p. 9-12.
4 Ibid., p. 10.

everyday life, as the incommensurable. However: When in disaster discourse constructs the opposition to social order, this reflects not only about the question "What is a disaster?" but furthermore gives detailed insight into what is believed to characterize social order. Ex negativo, disasters thereby construct social order as stable, routined, secure, normal, continuous, reliable and so on and so forth. They serve as the antidote to society, thereby outlining a normative understanding of social order. However, a critical theory of the cultural construction of disaster asks for a more reflected perspective on and concept of disasters as well as of social order.

"Traditions of disaster" or "producing the ordinary in the face of crisis"

Among the few seeking a deeper insight that goes beyond the dichotomy of order and chaos, historian Greg Bankoff seems the most prominent. From a postcolonial perspective, Bankoff analyzes disaster-prone regions such as the Philippines and argues, that, in short terms, due to a high technical vulnerability in those areas which is linked strongly to the colonial structures of the dominating West, disasters have to be incorporated into the pursue of daily life to grant for a high cultural resilience. This routined incorporation of catastrophe into everyday life is what he describes as "cultures of disaster"[5].

Bankoffs argumentation is especially productive when we analyze "traditions of disaster": routines of disaster communication, structures of reactions, and patterns of remembrance and neglect, religious, cultural and technological forms of securing, by which means disasters are integrated and incorporated into daily life, and, in the long run, become a part of the ordinary experience. The concepts of vulnerability and resilience are taken into consideration, however, as fruitful as they seem to be, they require a cultural readjustment to overcome their technological implications as well as their strong notion of predictability and calculability.

Avalanche catastrophes pose a constant threat to alpine communities such as our case studies Blons (Vorarlberg/Austria) and Galtür (Tyrole/Austria). Both villages were hit by devastating avalanches in recent history (Blons in 1954; Galtür in 1999), leaving numerous casualties and enormous damage to the build environment. Yet, in both cases, those disasters were not a single event but furthermore just items in a long history of avalanche catastrophes. Over centuries of habitation in the central alps these communities experience avalanches on a frequent level. The records of catastrophes (which is essentially a "tradition of disaster" itself) show that big avalanches are

5 Greg Bankoff: Cultures of disaster. Society and natural hazards in the Philippines. London/New York 2003; cf.: Cultures of disaster – cultures of coping. Hazard as a frequent life experience in the Philippines. In: Christof Mauch/Christian Pfister (ed.): Natural disasters – cultural responses. Case studies toward a global environmental history. Laham et al. 2009, p. 265-284.

present in the memory of one or two generations. When an avalanche rolled over Galtuer on February 23rd 1999, it left big parts of the village's centre destroyed, 31 people dead (25 of which were tourists), and the economic source of income, namely ski-tourism, severely endangered. However, the step to “business as usual” seemed unusually quick. I want to argue here, that this rapid form of recovery or reconvalescence, was made possible by two interdependent facts: 1) The community of Galtür possessed established forms of traditions of disaster. 2) These traditions are strongly linked to the social order, thus we are able to analyse disasters not in opposition but furthermore in interrelation to social order.

Within a few month after the disaster, the community could open the “Alpinarium” – a museum, that focusses on the “human life on the mountains”, but has had a strong reference to “the avalanche” (which also served as the title for a temporary exhibition). This museum, or documentation centre, as they refer to themselves, includes a memento for the 31 casualties. Beyond that, the museum is integrated in an avalanche protection wall, which is 350 meters long and up to 24 meters high. What we have here is a dense assemblage (again, Foucault) of different traditions of disaster. With its complex spatial arrangements of tangible objects and intangible meanings and narrations the museum offers different but spells out one interpretation of the past disaster and is essentially an interpretation itself, rendering a catastrophe as an unmarked phenomena with has to be assessed with meaning. The memento, as any memento, is a means of mourning; a look back on the past and a reference to a future in terms of “lest we forget”. The wall, one of many newly built in 1999, reflects on a long tradition of protection walls or securing architecture in Galtür. But beyond that, it is a means of protection and prevention (in both of which cases the past plays an active role for the present and future) from a nature, which is viewed as dangerous and outside. Thereby, it offers a possible interpretation and as the museum, it is itself, essentially an interpretation.

Traditions of disaster themselves are assemblages of verbal and written discourse, as well as material aspects such as architecture, wayside shrines, chapels, museums etc. They provide strategies of communicating catastrophes, patterns of visualization and narration. Traditions of disaster offer possible interpretations: religious and secular, scientific and mystic. They have to be understood as phenomena that involve an active renegotiation of the past in the present, thereby reflecting upon a future to come, and, thus, serve as means of production of continuity, stability and reliability, or: the ordinary.

In this view, traditions of disaster help to overcome the dichotomies of order and chaos, allowing for stability and continuity. When able to be incorporated into the lifeworld, disasters do not overthrow social order into a state of disorder but furthermore challenge societies' ordering

capacities. Thus, they do not negate social order but furthermore serve as a trigger for renegotiation and, with it, stabilization.

Traditions of disaster, as a consequence, shine a light on the social order they origin from and can furthermore be seen as an analytic tool for a more comprehensive and more critical perspective on social order and the construction of its antidote: In this view, social order itself, is a produce: It is produced by architecture, law, medial, academic, political, and individual discourse and knowledge about nature, society, culture, and threat; produced in a process of negotiation, in an assemblage of material aspects and discursive elements. Traditions of disaster are both representation or manifestation of social order as well as its prerequisite. They are both descriptive and prescriptive.[6] They function as a means of ordering. With reference to the theory of the actor network[7], social order thereby is the effect – rather than the actual result! – of manifold interdependent ordering processes.

Producing the crisis in the face of the ordinary?

What was camouflaged as the answer to the question how the ordinary is produced in the face of crisis, is in itself another question. If, with traditions of disaster, we have a productive and valuable tool, to inquire how disasters are incorporated into the lifeworld of alpine communities, to analyse how those traditions produce continuity and stability, thereby reflecting more onto social order than they do on a state of chaos, this tool becomes an arrogant and problematic one at the same time. Dealing with disasters requires a special amount of sensitivity and care; too wide are the traps to play down the tragedies, that they pose for many people. Hence, the question must be: What is a catastrophe, if its well integrated into the social order? What makes it still a catastrophe. I would like to end this paper by not giving definite answers but rather with thinking out loud three aspects:

1. You could argue, the incorporation of disasters works only to a certain point, a threshold value. However, arguing catastrophes would mainly over-exceed a certain social or human capacity, would underemphasis the arbitrariness of renegotiation practise. One the other it would overemphasis again, yet with a shift, the idea of a routined, stable order which faces disasters and thus stabilize the dichotomy of order and chaos.
2. A fruitful approach to disasters, which has to be inquired in detailed, seems to us the theories of presence, as they are put forward among others by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht[8], which,

6 cf.: Stefan Beck: Anmerkungen zu einigen Problemen der Begriffe Wissen, Ordnung, und Gesellschaft – und deren Kombina(-rhe-)torik. In: Jörg Feuchter et al.: Wissen und Soziale Ordnung: Eine der Kritik der Wissensgesellschaft (= Working Paper des Sonderforschungsbereiches 640 „Repräsentationen sozialer Ordnungen im Wandel“, Nr. 1/2010), p. 17-25.

7 cf.: Bruno Latour: Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft. Einführung in die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie. Frankfurt/M. 2010. (especially p. 50-75).

8 Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht: Präsenz. Frankfurt/M. 2012; Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht: Diesseits der Hermeneutik. Die

turning away from radical constructivism, focus on the materiality and tangibility, on experience and emotion and could, thus, allow for an analysis of disaster beyond questions of representation but with a strong emphasis on the here and now, on the sheer brutality of the moment.

3. However, "presence" is not the full picture either: We have learned to perceive the catastrophic moment, we have a routined way of reaction, follow established patterns of visualization, narrativization, and interpretation. Or, as a CFP for an interdisciplinary conference on disasters in Cincinnati put it recently: "[...] catastrophes are not merely reflected in works of art [you could add in: the media, the sciences, etc], they are embedded in artistic and media representations from the very moment they happen."[9]

In other words: As much as the ordinary is produced in the face of crisis with help of traditions of disasters, the crisis (or catastrophe) has to be produced (or furthermore is produced) in the face of the ordinary.

Produktion von Präsenz. Frankfurt/M. 2004.

9 http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/id=18869 [18.6.2012].