# CATASTROPHIC URBANISM: DISASTER, EMERGENCY, CITIES

## REFLECTIONS ON THE LSE CITIES URBAN UNCERTAINTY WOKSHOP SERIES, LONDON, 28 MAY 2013

**Panelists:** Peter Adey (Royal Holloway), Ben Anderson (Durham University), Claudia Aradau (KCL), Monica Büscher and Michael Liegl (Lancaster University), Joe Deville (Goldsmiths), and Kevin Grove (Aberystwyth University)
**Chair:** Austin Zeiderman, Research Fellow, LSE Cities

In his opening remarks, Austin Zeiderman introduced the ongoing Urban Uncertainty project at LSE Cities, which seeks to investigate ways of imagining and governing city futures. He described the project goals as developing conceptual tools to explore the diversity of ways that populations, inhabitants, governments and states orient themselves towards uncertainty and the unknown. As part of this theoretical and empirical exploration, the second workshop of the series, Catastrophic Urbanism: Disaster, Emergency, Cities, sought to highlight the intersection of emergency, governance and urban space. He welcomed the contributors, whose work converged on the common theme of catastrophic events and the force of such events across different domains, including everyday life, built environment, politics, and popular culture. Zeiderman encouraged an open format for the workshop, with input and reflections from both speakers and participants.

The first speaker, Peter Adey, presented a paper exploring three distinct domains of evacuation: mobility, politics of emergency and aesthetics. He first briefly introduced varying evacuation sites and events such as the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the logistics of island evacuation with the Haitian earthquake, the coordination issues of FEMA during Hurricane Katrina, and the forms of evacuation that consular embassies and military bases perform during civil war and conflict. Adey argued that the above case study contexts operate with unique but related logics of organization, spatiality, rationality, power, regulation, and professionalized knowledge of coordinating and directing over multiple scales.

Framing catastrophe as a contextually and culturally specific political act and discourse, Adey emphasized the contested civil and state imaginaries of lives and the differing degrees of threat each presume. The three domains mentioned earlier in the talk were revisited as Adey theorized an imperative for mobilities justice in times of evacuation; a politics of emergency that encapsulates the various urgencies related to speed of response and decisiveness; and thirdly, an examination of the aesthetics of evacuation which have bearing on witnessing, reporting, visual cultures of memories, and archiving emergency.

Joe Deville continued the conversation through a historic case study of Cold War Switzerland entitled "Producing Risk: Calculating, Materializing, and Illocuting the Threat of Nuclear War". Focusing on the nuclear preparedness practice of bunker construction, Deville argued that risk is produced through three distinct mechanisms that interact and potentially contradict each other: risk assessment, including both classical and less technical means of measuring risk; risk materialization, or how risk is transformed into a socio-material entity; and risk illocution, the making of risk through linguistic activity. The Swiss system of bunkers represented the concrete materialization of risk, and Deville pointed to its rapid adoption despite a lack of calculable risk assessments to assess the actual risk of nuclear war. Deville suggested that the bunker adoption moved forward because nuclear threat was declared by the state to be a self-evident, pressing risk, which merited a comprehensive national response. Deville pointed to a report created in the 1990s focus-

ing on Switzerland's greatest risks post-Cold War, which quickly became controversial and contrary to political will as it claimed to have calculated risks in a hierarchical and quantifiable manner, and more importantly, that the nuclear attack scenario was not high on the list of risks Switzerland faced. He concluded by underscoring the paradox of risk materialization in the form of shelters: not only can it impede the calculation of risk, but also in the face of external events, such as the nuclear reactor damage in Fukushima, can work oppositely to provide an important justification for government investment.

Claudia Aradau's presentation, "Catastrophe/ Crisis/Critique: A Feminist Reading of Critical Infrastructure", followed on the theme of materialization, but through a different case study of critical infrastructure protection. She argued that critical infrastructure is seen as indispensable and as an essential component of daily life, defined by its potential to be incapacitated or destroyed through catastrophe and disaster. Drawing from a feminist-materialist framework, Aradau argued that critical infrastructure can be viewed through performative enactments, with consequences for boundary-making, marginalization and exclusion. An example of performative enactment includes the protection of infrastructure through high-security fencing and barriers, such as the perimeter fencing provided during the 2012 London Olympic Games, along with the discourses used by security experts to promote such products. For Aradau, the perimeter control reshaped urban space by expanding boundaries, and became viewed as an essential protective measure against natural hazards as well. Contrasting the discourses utilized by security experts versus civil engineers, Aradau suggested that the latter enacted critical infrastructure through systemic failure: a stance of continuous maintenance to prevent decay. Finally, Aradau described how a feminist materialist reading makes social reproduction visible in relation to a crisis of infrastructure.

Speaking on 'An Accidental New Manhattan Project?: Systems of Systems Interoperability in Crises', Monica Büscher and Michael Liegl introduced 'systems of systems,' or enhanced information and communication technologies (ICT)

which seek to minimize deficiencies in emergency response. Presenting the case of the 2011 attacks in Norway, Büscher gave examples of how such integration of information between varying operations, agencies, and social networking systems could have helped emergency response in assessing security, coordinating transport of victims off the island, and deciding best actions forward. Reports showed that the Norway attacks could have been dealt with more efficiently, especially since caller information regarding the perpetrator was not disseminated from the control room in a timely manner. Büscher argued that by looking at how data is mobilized—often contentiously— one can see how information dissemination is being shaped by technological imaginaries, post-disaster enquiries, and innovation and policy that seeks to increase access to data. Büscher outlined novel information prototypes that she and other researchers are developing, as well as the ethical implications of 'smart cities' technologies on mass surveillance.

Kevin Grove introduced work entitled 'Adaptation Machines and the Parasitic Politics of Life in Jamaican Disaster Resilience,' that builds on critical approaches to vulnerability in disaster management. Grove underscored the oversights in current disaster management programming as the depoliticization of vulnerability, and the failure to identify differential adaptive capacities amongst certain populations. Grove drew on work from Kingston, Jamaica, where he looked at a participatory resilience recovery project implemented by the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM). He conceptualized the encounters between ODPEM and leaders from the inner-city community as distinct 'adaptation machines', with each group seeking to appropriate the adaptive capacity of the poor in differing ways. In particular, Grove saw the biopolitics of disaster resilience meeting its limits, as ODPEM was 'parasitically reliant' on the inner-city community's constitutive power; on the other hand, the community itself operated on a hyper-adaptive capacity beyond the global neoliberal order. Grove demonstrated how neoliberal forms of resilience rarely challenge existing political and economic structures and called for disaster pro-

and the conditions of possibility for equality and citizenship rights that may arise out of such dynamics. Clearly the discussions around the contributions different theoretical traditions may contribute to understandings and the implications of these pathways emerged across the very different presentations and prompting much debate about how different models and conceptualisations of uncertainty are produced and mobilized. Perhaps the final area of debate that continued throughout the workshop was focused on thinking about who decides what is certain/uncertain in cities and the spatialities of such power relationships.

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