
Guest editorial: Introduction to the special issue: liberating disaster studies

Is it possible to liberate disaster studies? This question was at the core of the call for this Special Issue. Liberation of disaster studies was meant to be a provocative register understood in a double meaning. On the one hand, to liberate in a proper sense, look for the ways in which the practice, the discourses and the theories used, developed and emerging in disaster studies are allying and allied to broader and expanded struggles for liberations globally, therefore crossing and overlapping with questions of epistemological justice, decolonial struggles, radical pedagogies and solidarity within and beyond STS, planning, anthropology and sociology. On the other hand, to liberate disaster studies from disciplinary arrogance, uncritical criticism and rationalistic institutional projections, challenge the very nature of the possibility of critique in the pragmatic, operative and highly empirically based work of disasters.

Current political constellations of climate emergencies, planetary neo-colonial predations, extreme refugee migrations and their complex socio-environmental and political dimensions all give a special urgency to frame liberation as a form of critique – active, practical and situated – as a constant search for the unmasking of pre-existing truths and violences – a critical practice, counter-hegemonic, reflexive discourse capable of unlearning as well as understanding and appreciating its failures.

The call for paper started from the assumption that disasters were seldom conceptualised and used as a central point for liberation, despite their reflective practice and critical attitude, but always as a starting point. Disaster provides the pre-text for discussing liberation and appreciating its efforts, collective dimensions, projective experimentation and pedagogical innovation. Liberation was taken as manifold: as a desubjectification and resistance to dominant epistemologies and power, as a way to escape and reframe disaster studies as universal and transnational, as a liberation from dominant modes of practice, research and writing imposed by techno-essentialism and positivism, situated readings of oppression that shape the project of liberation, as well as laterally embracing a series of literature and epistemologies not conventionally used in framing disasters from popular cultures.

We did not expect such a great response to our Call for Papers: we received more than 70 abstracts, out of which 18 full papers were invited. After nearly a year of revisions, exchanges, collective readings and discussions, we are presenting this Special Issue with 10 excellent papers coming from different geographies and epistemological trajectories. When we heard about this call in early 2022, initiated as a part of the GRRIPP project [1], we were aware that we were all left with a broken world where there is no way back to integrity, though we did not expect the atrocities in Gaza, the recrudescence of regional conflicts, the dire rise of populism and nationalism, the return of Trump and the oppression, domination, subjectification and all that this means across different latitudes.

The 10 papers presented here all bring very different answers to whether liberation of disaster studies is possible; they all approach the question from different angles – be they personal experiences, critical reflections, reading together and alone. Yet they all emphasise the hope for liberation and the importance of the politics and call for praxis and knowledge plurality. Several papers look at the frames within which disaster scholarship operates: Cadag examines the relationship between modernism, post-modernism and disaster studies;



Cheek explores how a disruption of place attachment turns into the ongoing process of alienation and Bradshaw brings to the forefront the notion of extractivism, as its origins can help disaster scholarship engage more with resistance.

Fuentealba calls on disaster scholars to embrace epistemic reflexivity and to reflect on our own intellectual practices, concepts and actions. And this is what Marchezini offers in his paper: he reflects on the personal whilst asking who liberates who and what does disaster scholarship have to do with it? Marchezini, in turn, explores his career to analyse the practices and discourses that are performed in our various roles as disaster scholars. Vaiciulyte *et al.* play with fire, weaving in their personal reflections into the exploration of fire as a socio-technical phenomenon.

Knowledge production is also at the centre of liberation: Tran and Kim explore how the political function of co-production tackles the domination of existing knowledge, thus allowing for equity and justice; Sang Yum and Baars call for encapsulating Pacific worldviews and knowledge as valued and valid to reconstruct Pacific research; Harb *et al.* show how an aid platform that appears to be innovative and inclusive instead re-establishes the status quo and finally, Von Meding *et al.* use literature as allegory to critique society and dominant systems, exploring absurdity, struggle and hope to show in a different way how disaster risk is a function of absurd social relations and how disaster research and practice can be acts of solidarity and liberation.

We did not aim at completion and composition; rather, we see this Special Issue as a constellation of ways to think, to practice, to imagine and to question the position of disaster scholars and scholarship within the current broken and bleak present – a Special Issue of the impossible and yet possible. Many colleagues, friends, early career researchers and scholars from the Global South who we hoped would contribute, had not had the chance, the time, the support or simply the space to present their valuable contribution because of the oppression, because of being in the “wrong” place and because of being a subject to many forms of discrimination. And so, we ask ourselves: Who can write of liberation in an oppressive context in academia and beyond? Who can write about liberation in the current global meltdown? Do disaster studies, as a discipline, practice and field of inquiry need to be liberated? And from what?

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Notes

1. Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice (GRRIPP) - Networking Plus Partnering for Resilience – Grant Ref: ES/T002700/1. More information can be found at: <https://www.gripp.net/about>