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Toward a cultural sociology of disaster: Introduction

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Introduction

Readers of this special issue hardly need to be convinced that disaster is an important research topic because all of us are still living amid a once-in-a-lifetime disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic. The life course of this special issue also has been concurrent with the worldwide disaster. We proposed this special issue to *Poetics* before the coronavirus began to spread. Our seemingly prophetic move certainly was a sheer coincidence. But even more coincident was that we publicized our call for papers in March 2020, when the virus was pronounced a "global pandemic." Countries around the world started lockdowns, hoping that such practices could "flatten the curve." Two years later, when we are writing this introduction, the flattening effort is anything but a success, although the new variant seems less severe and many in the West have access to effective vaccines. "Regular" disasters, including tsunamis, wildfires, floods, earthquakes, and so on, did not spare us despite our bigger trouble. "Disaster," once a term on the margin of sociology, has now become a buzzword, and its popularity unfortunately reflects the dire strait of today's world.

What we seek to convince readers, however, is that cultural sociology provides a valuable perspective on disasters and a fruitful agenda. This perspective focuses on values in the cultural structure, meanings in actions and objects, and norms of interactions, all of which are dramatized and intensified in disaster situations.

Before we proceed, a few words about "culture" and "disaster" are in order. In this special issue, we, along with our contributors, have by and large adopted a framework of "culturalized sociology," which, drawing inspiration from Elizabeth Clemens's (Clemens, 2007)call for a "historicized sociology," views sense-making endeavors as shaping all aspects of social life (Grindstaff and Lo 2020). Granted, not all scholars share this framework; indeed, sociological discussions of culture are riddled with academic contention that, as illustrated by Orlando Patterson (2014), sometimes resembles the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Without adjudicating the diverse schools of thought, our view is that it takes many "hands" (approaches) to comprehend the "elephant" (culture). In reality, there very likely exists more than one elephant.

The framework of culturalized sociology accentuates a pluralistic and dialogical view toward cultural sociology. In the conversation within this special issue—which necessarily remains open-ended—four analytical approaches can be identified. First, *culture in structure*: "culture" refers to the multiple, often conflicting items in the "structure" or "classification" of symbols, meanings, moral principles, values, assumptions, and cognitive categories (Alexander and Smith 2001; Zerubavel 1997). Second, *culture in action*: people may selectively draw upon some items but not others in the cultural structure they live under and also reinterpret the items to understand and justify their actions (Swidler 1986). Third, *culture in interaction*: people often develop norms of interactions among themselves, including conventions, rules, and expectations concerning appropriate ways in which individuals and groups engage in interactions in specific situations (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine, Gary Alan 2012). Fourth, *culture in object*: "cultural objects" embody meaning in audible, visible, and tangible forms, such as movies, music, advertisements, novels, museums, etc., and are produced, disseminated, and received in various social fields (Griswold 2013; Peterson and Anand 2004). Each perspective captures

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one aspect of culture, and all the aspects are in a state of constant contradiction, with evolving dynamics and interactions.

In this special issue, we define "disasters" as social events that disrupt normal social life and are caused by unintentional human actions and/or natural forces, with large-scale destructive impacts on human bodies, built environment, and societies. This definition corrects some problems in earlier definitions, for example, the view that disasters are external threats to a society (Fritz 1961). It also explicitly states that disasters are social events. Thus, this definition does not separate "natural" from "man-made" disasters since disasters may be triggered by natural forces but become disasters when such natural forces reveal and exacerbate problems in the society, for example, poverty, lack of preventive measures, and so on (Perry and Quarantelli 2005). When disasters are directly caused by human mistakes and actions, such actions, unlike wars and terrorist attacks, are unintentional.

Cultural Sociology and Sociology of Disaster

Insomuch as it analyzes the ways in which meaning-making processes shape all things social, cultural sociology is broadly relevant to all aspects of society, including those that, on the surface, do not appear explicitly cultural. For instance, scholars have analyzed the epistemological assumptions of science by researching its "culture of no culture—the politics of the apolitical, the contingencies and limitations of the universal, the embodiment or rhetoric of abstract reasoning" (Bray 2019, 446). Scientific knowledge, rational procedures, and merit- and rule-based institutions are variously embedded in cultural frameworks, which privilege group-specific assumptions, values, and worldviews. At least part of the intellectual enterprise of cultural sociology, then, seeks to lay bare and analyze the cultural practices that promote and sustain "the way things are," not the least as it pertains to those seemingly "non-cultural" social processes.

Disasters and related social processes are such *seemingly* non-cultural but *intrinsically* cultural processes and, thus, should not be an infertile land for cultural sociology. Yet culture has not taken root in the field. This lack of discussion of culture partly has to do with the field's unusual history.

The mainstream sociology of disaster began in the 1940s and 1950s, when the US military and civil defense wanted to know how organizations and individuals would react to potential nuclear attacks and chemical wars (Tierney 2019). Because it was impossible to study real nuclear attacks, the best "simulation," as the state figured, was disasters like earthquakes and tornados, which caused similarly massive damage, heavy casualties, and psychological and social impacts (Quarantelli 1987). Funding from the US government, especially the military and the civil defense, supported early studies and institution-building in the field.

This institutional origin has significantly shaped the field, especially the prevalent epistemological assumptions and the research orientation. The early sociology of disasters focused on the emergency response period, which reflected the American state's interest in civil defense after potential nuclear attacks (Tierney 2007). It also relied on a tacit "seeing-like-a-state" perspective (Scott 1998), a scientific-managerial view that defined disaster as a sudden crisis that the state should and can solve through better-designed emergency management plans. In this perspective, disaster was defined as an external force that threatens the stability of the normal society, similar to a bomb dropped on a community (Fritz 1961). Consequently, the mainstream sociology of disaster became an applied research field, boosted by the ample funds from state agencies and the demand for academic knowledge that could be used in the training of emergency management professionals.

The cost of this development, however, was its diminishing ties with the central themes and theoretical debates in sociology. As Tierney, a leading sociologist of disaster, wrote in a self-reflective overview piece, theory took a "back seat" in the sociology of disaster (Tierney 2007, 506). The field tended to ignore those significant topics and approaches with no obvious practical uses for management purposes. Culture, more precisely, its stereotype, could easily be dismissed by this perspective as theoretical and "soft," if not "useless." The early sociology of disaster was also very American because its early funding came from American state agencies and reflected the American state's interests. Thus, an outsider might find it strange that most studies were about disasters in the United States, whereas more devastating and deadlier disasters that happened in the non-Western world were only marginally examined.

In the last two decades, however, the sociology of disaster as a field has changed significantly in response to transformations of the academic world, such as the globalization of knowledge production and interdisciplinary research. The changes include more diverse topics, new ideas borrowed from other fields, attempts to dialog with the outside, and expansion of its regional scope to the global level (Rodríguez, Donner, and Trainor 2018).

One of these recent trends is the increasing attention to culture. Before the 2010s, most introductory texts on the sociology of disaster did not include a section or a chapter on culture. For example, "culture" was largely absent in the first edition of *Handbook of Disaster Research* in 2006 (Rodríguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes 2006), a landmark introductory publication in the field. It was not until 2018 that a newer edition of the *Handbook* included a chapter addressing the "cultural turn" of the sociology of disaster (Rodríguez, Donner, and Trainor 2018; Webb 2018), four decades after the cultural turn in general sociology (Bonnell et al., 1999). More scholars have come to believe that culture can broaden and nuance our understandings about risks, community resilience, vulnerabilities, post-disaster priorities, etc. A new perspective began to take shape in a deeply positivistic and practical field that many "hard" facts about disaster are significantly mediated by such "soft" matters as values, narratives, memories, and civic epistemologies. The field has become more welcoming to the once-alien term "culture."

Welcoming should go both ways. Studies of disaster, in turn, bear great potential for enriching cultural sociology. Disasters almost always represent "eventful moments" (Sewell 1996)—historical turning points when structural conjunctures in a local or national society are transformed, cultural schemas are transposed, and human agency is activated, indeed required, by rapidly unfolding historical contingencies. If, as we have noted above, cultural sociology seeks to denaturalize "the way things are" and, in so doing, critically reflect upon what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence, disasters represent particularly rich cases for such intellectual endeavors. These are empirical cases for observing and analyzing how taken-for-granted assumptions rupture and how, consequently,

new stories and visions are being called for and developed. Through studying *and* contributing to such new collective narratives, a cultural sociology of disasters not only facilitates better understandings of the many crises of our time but also aspires to advance the conversations about how to address them. While most cultural sociologists, who are often theoretically minded, may not typically think of our research in terms of policy discussions, disaster research both challenges and inspires us to discuss how culture helps kill or save lives during crisis moments.

Given the timing of this special issue, it seems apt to reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic as an example for how dialogues between cultural sociology and disaster studies can generate insights pivotal for both fields. For instance, scholars have analyzed how governments guessed the "crisis genre" for this new disease, subsequently influencing public health policies that would protest or sacrifice lives (Morgan 2020). Political leaders and citizen groups developed rituals about "fighting COVID," the performance of which would foster or, alternatively, challenge government authority and civil solidarity (McCormick 2020; Villegas 2020). Rhetoric of "pandemic othering," as exemplified in anti-Asian hate crimes, diverted public awareness from mitigation strategies and compromised the civic membership of immigrants and minorities (Dionne and Turmen 2020). Furthermore, emergent research gestures at how a cultural sociology of COVID can help address future pandemics. As Lo and Hsieh (2020) document, agents of the civil sphere in Taiwan invoked trauma memories from the 2003 SARS crisis to develop a new discourse of civic interdependence, balancing between individual autonomy and mutual protection. The discourse of civic interdependence served to largely depoliticize mask-wearing, social distancing, and other government-issued COVID restrictions in an otherwise hyper-contentious society. Researchers also note that the social and cultural mechanisms that help activate trauma memories differ across regime types (Qian 2021). In democratic societies, social movements and other efforts of "societalization" foster bottom-up discussions for how to reactivate past memories to facilitate the framing of the current crisis (Lo and Hsieh 2020). By contrast, under authoritarian regimes, concerns about regime legitimacy can prompt government to either block or invoke trauma memories, alternatively helping or preventing the state-society collaboration to draw upon past lessons (Qian 2021). As such, "what transpired in Taiwan [and by extension China, Hong Kong, and Singapore] between 2003 and 2020 provides a cultural-sociological road map of how the bitter taste of national failure can create social resources for future success—how, from lemons, a society can make lemonade" (Alexander and Smith 2020, 267).

In sum, cultural sociology and the sociology of disaster, two streams once divergent from each other, have now begun to converge at this historical moment, when we unfortunately are forced by the chaotic world to examine not only how organizations and states react to disasters but also how people think, act, and feel in this "new normal." With pain and melancholy, we propose an explicit intellectual agenda of a cultural sociology of disaster, hoping that we may have a better grasp of the disaster-ridden world and find solutions.

Pioneering Work

We do not start from scratch. Scholars have already done pioneering work on culture and disaster. Their work has largely revolved around three broad themes: 1) perceptions of risk; 2) drama and performance, and 3) solidarity, trauma, and memory.

Perceptions of Risk

This line of research owes much to Mary Douglas's theory of risk and culture, a typical culture-in-structure concept, which focuses on "how particular kinds of danger come to be selected for attention" (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, 8). In contemporary sociology, cognitive sociology continues this theory by examining cognitive biases and their effects on popular imaginations and management of risks (Cerulo 2006). Affinitive to cognitive sociology is the "risk society" theory, which asserts that high risk is intrinsic to modernity, especially the ubiquitous modern technology and corresponding institutions. "Risk society" is also a cultural concept. In a risk society, the fundamental human relations are not Marx's "relations of production" but "relations of definition"—who has the power to define what is a risk or not (Beck 2007).

Lee Clarke's *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* is an exemplary study of disaster along this line of cognitive culture (Clarke 2006). It challenges the overconfident modern perceptions of risks, which he terms "probabilistic thinking," that is, the thinking pattern based on the probability of an incident. Probabilistic thinking tends to underestimate the impacts of statistically rare incidents, for example, the triple disaster of Fukushima, which was statistically almost impossible but made the adjacent areas inhabitable for years if not decades. Designing institutions and facilities according to this probabilism could lead to detrimental outcomes. Similarly, Karen Cerulo argues that humans tend to have "positive asymmetry" cognitive bias, which, as a result of various social and cultural factors, drives individuals and organizations to ignore warnings (Cerulo 2006). Ryan Hagen, however, argues that people sometimes develop a populist, "negative asymmetry" to attribute the "worst-case scenario" to elite's conspiracy and manipulation (Hagen 2019). Diane Vaughan's study of the space shuttle Challenger explosion also focuses on risk but relies on a different concept of culture, that is, culture as norms of interaction, particularly within organizations. It addresses how an organization's structure makes regulating and monitoring difficult and how organizations develop a structure and internal culture that tends to ignore, misinterpret, and suppress early warning (Vaughan 1996).

Drama and Performance

Cultural sociologists analogize disasters to dramas, in both the everyday and scholarly senses, for good reasons. Disasters are "dramatic" in the everyday sense because of their disruptive nature and intense emotions, all of which we see in "dramas"—such as movies, novels, and plays. Disasters are also "dramatic" in the scholarly sense that human actors express and interpret certain

meanings when they take social roles to create their self-images and impressions (Brissett and Edgley 2005). Key actors involved in a disaster—government officials, organizations, and prominent figures—not only want to get things done but also are compelled to present positive public images to other stakeholders. All these are intensified by emotions related to the suffering and death of human beings.

Following this dramatic understanding of disasters, cultural sociologists have developed different ways to theorize disasters. For example, Lisa McCormick draws on Victor Turner's theory of drama and Jeffrey C. Alexander's cultural pragmatics (Turner 1974; Alexander 2004) to emphasize actors' efforts of convincing the audience to accept their definitions of disaster situations and corresponding performance, in her case, political actors' performance during the coronavirus pandemic in the United Kingdom (McCormick 2020). In the beginning of the disaster, both the state actors, including the Prime Minister, and the public invoked the WWII myth, deployed military metaphors, and constructed heroes to understand the situation and achieved meaningful solidarity. Yet such ritualization and solidarity eroded when the government failed to deliver promised efficient responses and to maintain a consistent and sensible policy. Even the heroization became shallow when the medical staff desperately needed protective equipment rather than applause. The solidarity gradually gave way to anomie (McCormick 2020, 346).

Central to many disaster dramas is political leaders' performance. A small body of literature on "crisis management," mostly in the field of public policy and public administration (Boin et al. 2005;Boin and McConnell, 2008;'t Hart, Paul 1993), shows that leaders' political actions are intended to define the situation, account for crises, and frame solutions through symbolic means. This literature is rooted in the symbolic politics tradition and shares with cultural sociology the same assumptions about culture and politics (Edelman 1964). In his study of the Chinese leaders' performance in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake, Xu highlights a less addressed factor, "scene", for political performance (Xu 2012). In disaster situations, mediatized scenes provide an emotive context, which demanded major state actors to be on the scene as quickly as possible and to act according to the emotional atmosphere—in disasters, often showing compassion with people's suffering and death.

Long-term, slow disasters also take on a certain set of "dramatic" properties when they become a public topic. Smith and Howe's study shows that climate change in mediated discourses took on an apocalyptical feature in narrative genres like reports, debates, documentaries, forums, etc. (Smith and Howe 2015). For example, a *Time* magazine article aptly links the warning about the dire climate future with biblical fables: "This year the earth spoke, like God warning Noah of the deluge. Its message was loud and clear, and suddenly people began to listen, to ponder what portents the message held" (Smith and Howe 2015, 59). This apocalyptic dramatic narrative was also effectively used in Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which scientific findings were combined with images and narratives about floods, hurricanes, collapsing icebergs, horrific draughts, and so on. This dramatic analysis certainly does not claim that climate change is a hoax; rather, it shows that to effectively engage in mediated discourses, advocacy narratives of an idea must dovetail with the underlying cultural logics of the society.

Solidarity, Trauma, and Memory

Much research has been done on the emotional and cultural effects of disasters on communities at both local and national levels. These effects can be both solidary and corrosive at the same time, and which effects are emphasized in the literature depends on the type of disaster, features of the community, scholars' view of human nature, and so on.

On the one hand, as the colloquial saying goes, "disasters bring out the best in humans." Mutual help, volunteering, prosocial behavior, solidarity, donations, and community building are ubiquitous in post-disaster communities and well documented in various studies (Barton 1969; Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Britton et al., 1994; Dombrowsky 1983; Oliver-Smith 1999; Wenger and James 1994; Xu 2017). In the early stage of the sociology of disaster, this "good news" view helped demystify the prevalent dystopian image of post-disaster communities, including "panic" and anti-social behaviors, which still plague popular cultural products today (Clarke 2002; Quarantelli 1954; Quarantelli, 2001). A common cultural explanation of the prosocial behavior is that a disaster temporarily suspends social hierarchies, creates a liminal state, and results in a consciousness of *communitas* based on common suffering, what Oliver-Smith terms the "brotherhood of pain" (Oliver-Smith 1999, 166–67).

On the other hand, this "good news" approach cannot convince people who witness and experience immediate and long-term impacts of major disasters. While solidarity does exist, it is often ephemeral. The "brotherhood" in the "brotherhood of pain" can easily fade, while pain persists. A classic on this point is Kai Erikson's book *Everything in Its Path* (Erikson 1976), which examines how a mine dam disaster resulted in not only physical destruction of a local community but also a "loss of communality." This loss of communality led to a "collective trauma," "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Erikson 1976, 154).

Erikson's "collective trauma" anticipated Ron Eyerman's "cultural trauma" concept, defined as "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (Eyerman 2001). "Cultural trauma" differs, however, in its emphasis that a disaster does not become cultural trauma unless the meaning-making processes in mediated discourses turn it into one. Such meaning-making processes also revolve around a certain identity. In Eyerman's case of Hurricane Katrina, such identity is "American," and various questions raised in the aftermath of the hurricane can be seen in different versions of a meta question "Is this America?"—in this question, America should have been—but failed to be—an affluent country with people who are well-protected and enjoy equality. Another distinctive feature of "cultural trauma" is that it stresses the construction and reconstruction process through various cultural objects, including music, arts, literary works, and so on.

On the other hand, trauma related to disaster can also be exacerbated by political power's manipulation of memory and memorialization. This point challenges the *communitas* explanation because social hierarchies and power structures in organizations and states are not suspended in or after disasters. The state, especially an authoritarian state, tends to reshape the memory of a disaster

through "naturalizing" the event—using natural forces as an excuse when it has difficulties explaining unnatural deaths. For example, after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the Chinese state used "natural disaster" instead of the substandard construction quality of schools to explain the 5,335 students who died in their schools. Even worse was that the state built a memorial right on the site of a high school where more than a thousand students were killed (Xu 2017).

Toward a Cultural Sociology of Disaster

The important work reviewed above was mostly done not by what Tierney calls "core researchers," who devote their career to disaster research (Tierney 2007, 504), but those "visitors" who make important contributions to the field but do not carry the identification card of "sociologists of disaster." Moreover, the cultural sociology of disaster has yet to become a mature subfield with a clear agenda, distinctive approaches, and a sizable group of scholars. We hope our special issue can be a starting point for such a cultural sociology. While the actual development of the field very much depends on scholars' ingenuity, we want to use this brief introduction as a call for action as well as a potential roadmap. We hold that a fruitful agenda of cultural sociology of disaster can benefit from the conscious effort to pursue the following goals.

Cross-fertilization. The existing work on culture and disaster has been done by outsiders of the mainstream sociology of disaster. Although the core researchers have begun to welcome those outside visitors and a few of them even believe a cultural turn is happening in the mainstream (Webb 2018), a paradigm shift will not happen overnight. To expedite the "turn," we propose a "two-way traffic": a cultural sociology of disaster should not only be done by outsiders and then be accepted by the mainstream; rather, changes must occur from both inside and outside. Only when the core researchers in the field actively participate in the dialogs with general cultural sociology can the cultural sociology of disaster break out of the niche of disaster research and demonstrate how it can contribute to general sociology. To achieve this goal, there should be individual scholars' self-conscious effort and institutional renovations.

Globalizing the field. Mainstream sociology of disaster originated in the United States, even though most devastating disasters happen in non-Western countries. The recent studies have expanded this scope, as our brief review has shown, but such expansion has not been fast and deep enough. A genuinely global field should not only include case studies of the non-Western world but also adopt a new theorizing agenda. In other words, non-Western cases are not just the traditionally underrepresented cases that can serve the purpose of "testing" and "proving" existing grand theories, which are often derived from the West. Rather, they can also generate original theories, however "theories" are defined (Abend 2008). Cultural sociology is particularly up to this task because its meticulous attention to local knowledge and on-the-ground nuances enables a cultural sensitivity to new findings instead of replicating the existing theories.

A New Species of Trouble. Globalization also leads to a "new species of trouble" (Erikson 1994), that is, those disasters that are truly global and often long-term and, thus, do not fit well with the traditional definitions of disaster. Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are two of the most significant examples. Both are affecting the whole planet at the same time. Both last more than a year or two and thus are not "sudden," "brief" events, such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, nuclear station explosions, etc. These sudden events are visibly catastrophic, and there is a relatively higher level of consensus on their nature as disasters. But the "new species of trouble" is different since people may debate over whether it is a disaster or not. For example, climate change is such a case: it is not a shocking event that happens in front of people's eyes; no one will immediately and directly die from climate change. One will not understand the causation between climate change and individuals' suffering and death if one does not have adequate knowledge. The same debate has also occurred during the COVID-19 disaster: some believe it is just a "hoax" or maybe little more than a "bad flu" rather than a disaster since one can walk into a crowded bar without being immediately killed by the virus in the air. Also, in the very beginning of the COVID crisis, we painfully witnessed various sorts of "positive asymmetries" in display in the West (Cerulo 2006)—a stated or unstated mentality that all the bad things happened in the "third world" while "we" are safe. These asymmetries are not only cognitive biases but also political-cultural issues shaped by the imperialist gaze and geopolitical relations, especially the relations between China and the United States. Therefore, this new species of trouble compels us to pay much more attention to how people perceive risks and define disasters, how they act according to their perceptions and definitions, and how their identities and political views affect their perceptions, all of which are typical cultural sociological topics.

A Critical Agenda. Compared to the mainstream sociology of disaster, cultural sociology pays much more attention to the less examined perceptions, discourses, and meaning-making processes and, probably more importantly, the power structures and political practices underneath them. Some terms are taken for granted in the existing scholarship as well as public discourses but reflect certain views that divert our attention to the real problems. For example, "resilience" could mean "status quo," and "restoring the order" may signal the maintenance of the status quo, which is assumed to be the order in the "good old days" even if a society may never return to the past after a major disaster. Both terms can become rhetorical devices for the powerful to conceal the real social origins of disasters. Thus, we need a critical theory of disaster to oppose the "easy technocratic solutionism," which seeks engineering solutions to social and political problems (Horowitz and Remes 2021, 3). Moreover, as sociologists have shown, social inequality is not just about disparity in incomes and assets but also constituted and reinforced by culture (Lizardo 2010). Thus, disaster vulnerability, an indication of social inequality, is also cultural vulnerability. For example, cultural trauma—damages to communality—are unequally distributed and disproportionately concentrated in communities with lower incomes and worse mitigation. Discriminatory perceptions of underprivileged disaster survivors prevail and gradually form some myths, for example, depicting them as looters (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006). A critical agenda must debunk these myths and contribute to the solutions of larger social problems that are origins of disasters.

Articles in This Special Issue

In what we hope to be an enriching conversation, the articles in this issue each offer unique theoretical insights and policy implications and, taken as a whole, form an internal dialogue on several key issues. Xu and Bernau's "The Sympathetic Leviathan: Modern States' Cultural Responses to Disasters" highlights that states' cultural responses to disasters are an important yet understudied issue. Elaborating on Weber's theory of theodicy, the authors develop an analytical framework for understanding the meaning structure about disasters and suffering, including attribution (accountability), reaction (compassion), and consequences (long-term visions). The authors argue that, after a given disaster, the state projects and performs a narrative script that addresses these components, the efficacy of which depends on whether, and how, it resonates with various segments of the public. Through a comparison of Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the Sichuan Earthquake in China, Xu and Bernau show how regime types shaped, without determining, states' cultural responses, as the agency of state bureaucrats, on the one hand, and the modernist narrative of progress, on the other, led to surprising similarities and differences between the two cases. Why does it matter that the leviathan must act sympathetically? The authors demonstrate that not only state legitimacy, but also citizens' emotional recovery, are at stake. "The bureaucratic system is designed to solve logistic problems, whereas citizens' desperate need for comfort and meaning amidst suffering and death is believed to be secondary, 'soft' issues, which will automatically 'solved' when the administrative issues are dealt with. The practical implication of our study is to correct this logic and to provide decision-makers with accounts of how states can fail and succeed in cultural responses and how they can improve."

Similarly interested in the meanings and emotions related to disasters, Lo and Fan's "How Narratives of Disaster Impact Survivors' Emotionality: The Case of Typhoon Morakot" documents multiple trauma narratives produced by the state and civil society and examines their varying impacts. The authors find that, in telling their Morakot stories, most victims of the Typhoon drew upon the narratives of "government incompetence" or "ethnic environmental injustice," which circulated respectively in Taiwan's mainstream media and a counter-hegemonic public. A very small minority followed the government's official narrative that the government did all it could have. With the state's official narrative achieving little resonance with the victims and the public—and as Xu and Bernau's article would predict—the Taiwanese government lost much legitimacy. In a democratic setting, Lo and Fan's study further shows, the grieving citizenry turned to the trauma narratives developed in civil society for meaning and compassion. Yet, while the "ethnic environmental injustice" and the "government incompetence" narratives were both effective, these two narratives generated contrasting emotional impacts. With its emphasis on long-term institutional racism and environmental degradation, the "ethnic environmental injustice" narrative guided survivors to express ethnic pride and righteous anger and engage in prolific inner conversations about their post-disaster identities. In contrast, with an ahistorical, largely color-blind orientation, the "government incompetence" narrative prompted survivors to express their frustration as grief rather than anger, to engage in the emotional work of self-censorship and gratitude display, and ultimately to develop a silenced or split reflexivity. Importantly, seemingly sympathetic trauma narratives "can impose emotional costs… on disaster survivors, most notably, with the narrative's thin contextualization functioning as a form of 'covert silences.'"

If Lo and Fan's study highlights that even effective trauma narratives can, at times, alienate victims from their inner emotional signals, Saito's "The Imaginary and Epistemology of Disaster Preparedness: The Case of Japan's Nuclear Safety Failure" vividly demonstrates how other resonant cultural frameworks can generate, sustain, and perpetuate organizational failures in disaster preparedness. Saito shows that a prevalent "pacifist imaginary," promoted by the Japanese developmental state and endorsed by the media, emphasized the positive contributions of non-military use of nuclear energy. Similarly, a "technocratic epistemology," justified by a high-performing government and accepted by most citizens, invoked the superior competencies of state bureaucrats and expert advisers. The former legitimated nuclear power as a means of economic development, whereas the latter legitimated the experts' disregard for the possibility of nuclear disasters. Saito's analysis uncovered the cultural underpinnings for the Japanese political economy of nuclear energy and, at the same time, historicized the cultural explanations for the marginalization of antinuclear activism in Japanese civil society. "On the one hand, the pacifist imaginary and technocratic epistemology…. preceded the formation of the political economy of nuclear energy and continued to legitimate it…. On the other hand, it was not 'Japanese culture' in general, but the imaginary and epistemic dimensions of the developmental state in particular, that enabled regulatory capture in nuclear safety to emerge and persist until the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011."

While Saito's article analyzes how popular cultural frameworks can produce organizational failures in disaster preparedness, Cossu's "Performing Social Distancing: Culture, Scripts, and Meaningful Order in the Italian Lockdown," in contrast, explores how ordinary citizens performed certain cultural scripts to attain a sense of routine and orderliness during the pandemic. Through a case study in Italy, Cossu shows that the public's adherence to the rules of social distancing could not be explained entirely by their concerns for public safety. Instead, these acts pertained to everyday performances of the roles of "ordinary heroes" in a pandemic narrative. At the same time, these performances were adapted to specific situations, prompting creative re-interpretations of public and private spaces (such as neighborly conversations from balconies and Zoom yoga classes in one's living rooms), as well as requiring negotiations and mutual approvals in different scenes and with other participants. In one example, the author recalls that "…the worker at the tobacco shop sanitized the packet of cigarette I had just bought, joking that "they were safe now"…." That a pack of sanitized cigarettes would be transformed into a symbol for "fighting COVID" well illustrates how cultural scripts help establish "routines in a situation in which many participants had not been before."

Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici's "Climate Change as an Event" unpacks how diverse narratives about the future may serve to prompt different actions to avert a future crisis. The authors identify three forms of "eventfulness" in contemporary debates about climate change, including scientific journals, texts produced by climate activist groups, and documents written by inter-government entities such as the European Union or the United Nations. While climate change is acknowledged as an impending crisis by all, it is

nonetheless construed differently in terms of how urgent the matter is and how much time we still have. "Scientific eventfulness" features an intertwining of urgency with careful hedging about the future, which allows scientists to communicate to the public the urgency of climate change while continuing to research and debate about the location and magnitude of climate-related events within their discipline. "Radical eventfulness" draws heavily upon scientific findings and is often endorsed by scientists who speak out in the public, but the writings featuring radical eventfulness use stronger and more direct language. "Where it differs from the scientific temporality is in its articulation of the future—both more immediate, and less subjunctive in its modalization… the event has happened; the crisis is upon us; and the future outlined is the immediacy of action and the farther future of the apocalypse." "Sensible eventfulness," by contrast, is characterized by a central tension between envisioning the crisis as a forthcoming rupture and prioritizing non-radical changes as "responsible" solutions. Yet, "if rupture is constitutive of an event, then it cannot be sensible—it requires new modes of action, new footings, an urgent mood. If it is sensible, and 'responsible' then it cannot be a fully-fledged event." Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici show that, as we are increasingly called upon to "act now" in response to climate change, what exactly that means varies tremendously when interpreted from the different lenses of eventfulness constructed by scientists, climate activists, and global political leaders.

Situating the discussion of temporalities in the experiences of a marginalized community in the Global South, Hernández's "Putting Out Fires: The Varying Temporalities of Disasters" examines how neighborhoods can sometimes confront multiple disasters and be forced to inhabit multiple temporal landscapes of future calamities. The author finds that 50 Casas, an informal settlement in close proximity to the largest refinery in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, is exposed to long-term contamination as well as threatened by floods, earthquakes, and industrial accidents. With limited options and resources, the community has developed a protective strategy of "putting out immediate fires," namely, to focus on the urgency of impending disasters, while deprioritizing the mitigation of slower contaminants. Hernández shows how the residents normalized "routine" contamination in their daily lives, at the same time "mobilizing their status as 'contaminated' to make claims for compensation in the form of infrastructural works and services from the industry and government, which further root them in the area." Similar to Tavory and Wagner-Pacifici's study, this analysis demonstrates that 50 Casas residents' actions are "tied to different temporal landscapes that may have conflicting narratives." We can perhaps speculate that to prioritize strengthening infrastructure works is guided by a "sensible eventfulness," whereas to mobilize community activism for relocation would arguably feature a "radical eventfulness." While the material constraints that shaped 50 Casas residents' reconciliation of varying temporalities are evident, their experiences nonetheless compel us to wonder why global political leaders have endorsed a similar "sensible eventfulness" in their resolution to avoid radical actions for climate change.

Taken as a whole, these six studies represent an initial effort to, collectively, address our vision for a cultural sociology of disaster. To achieve the goal of cross-fertilization, our articles draw from both sociology of disaster and cultural sociology and are intended to dialog with both. We seek to globalize the conversation, as we include studies situated in diverse geographical and social contexts and theorize from those cases. These articles all shed light on the ways in which our world is dealing with "a new species of trouble," as each study, in different ways, exposes the long-term manufacturing of disaster as well as their long-term impacts. But perhaps the most notable common theme through all the pieces pertains to their critical reflections upon the tenacious cultural allure of the modernist discourse of progress and growth. As we have seen, in the aftermaths of Hurricane Katrina and the Sichuan Earthquake, both the US and Chinese governments hastily reasserted the values of resilience, individual responsibility, and progress, much to the detriment of the peoples' emotional healing. The Japanese and Taiwanese developmental states, in different fashions, promoted economic growth over the protection of the environment and human lives, encouraging and encouraged by civic narratives of progress and modernity that, alarmingly, received much applause from the majority of the citizens. In the cultural imagination of the residents in 50 Casas, the oil refinery, being a key economic engine for the country, appeared to be a "given," positioned largely beyond their ability to escape from or transform. Global leaders are convinced that however urgent the climate emergency may be, the "responsible" thing to do is to avoid harming "reasonable" economic growth. In all these cases, dissenting voices have been marginalized—discredited as radicalism, relegated to counter-hegemonic publics, or kept underground. One thing we have learned from these studies is that, occasionally, the rupture caused by a disaster would temporarily loosen the grip of the allure of neoliberalism and its variants. Yet such cultural transformation seems few and far-between. Moving forward, we must ask: how can cultural sociologists help identify and envision narratives, theodicies, or civic epistemologies that would more forcefully alter such fateful plotlines centering on the theme of human-made natural disasters?

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