

Disaster, democracy, and the problem of the sublime

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At the basis of the present-day concern with disaster, whether natural in origin (e.g. hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, or volcanic eruptions) or directly human in cause (e.g. wars, terroristic acts of violence, or breakdowns in technological systems), is a modern desire for social order. As the following article argues, media attention to disaster may take up many concerns, but it is always infused with a distinctly modern disquiet about social order.

Important foundations of the modern social order, including theories of human rights, international law, and just war, were laid in response to social disaster. A contemporary of the Eighty Years War and the Thirty Years War, Hugo Grotius (1583-1643) was perplexed at the violence among Christian states. His influential theories of rights, law, justice, and international society grew out of this perplexity, writing in his *Prolegomena*:

‘Throughout the Christian world I observed a lack of restraint in relation to war, such as even barbarous races should be ashamed of; I observed that men rush to arms for slight causes, or no cause at all, and that when arms have once been taken up there is no longer any respect for law, divine or human; it is as if, in accordance with a general decree, frenzy had openly been let loose for the committing of all crimes’ (Grotius, 1957, p. 21).

Similarly, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) presented the inspiration for his work as social disaster. Hobbes, however, amplified the disasters of his age, tying them to the state of nature, where he insisted social chaos was inevitable. Hobbes argued that only an awe-inspiring sovereign could successfully circumvent the human tendency toward social chaos, as awe of power overcame natural competition, diffidence, and glory-seeking. ‘Hereby it is manifest,’ Hobbes famously concludes, ‘that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man’ (Hobbes, 1962, p. 100).

Thus, at the philosophical basis of the modern social order is a quest for a stability and security over and against social chaos. One could go so far as to claim that the modern social order is basically therapeutic in origin, in the broad sense of ‘the treatment of disorder’. Indeed, this is important, for it suggests the basis of the modern social order goes beyond revolutions in thought and polity to the more subjective but no less significant realm of desire. (It was Augustine, of course, who put the affections at the center of social life and, indeed, of life itself.)

It is at this point of desire that philosophical theories of social order, as in Grotius and Hobbes, powerfully intersect with what the philosopher Charles Taylor has recently described as the ‘social imaginary’, meaning the way people more broadly ‘imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 6). Grotius and Hobbes shared with many of their less philosophically-inclined contemporaries, and especially with subsequent generations in Europe, a desire for a more certain guarantee of social stability.

Desire for social order

In ancient and medieval societies order was taken for granted as natural or god-given. In a certain sense, there could be no real breakdown in order because the foundation of order was grounded not in human fashioning but in a transcendent source or a mysterious 'time of origins', as Mircea Eliade calls it in his book *The Sacred and the Profane*. Indeed, whatever collapses or disasters occurred were seen as a form of judgment wrought against a people for a violation of transcendent order, as in the story of Oedipus. Thus, order in antiquity was pervasive — even when it broke down, the breakdown was meant to restore order.

Taylor argues that the pivotal shift from the ancient to the modern with respect to the 'social imaginary' has to do with the origins of social order, which were transferred from the transcendent to the immanent. Order was no longer a given, but something humans made. Hobbes is therefore eminently modern. Whereas the ancients assumed that the 'natural' state of things was orderly, Hobbes assumed it to be chaotic; and where the ancients assumed that order would be 'naturally' preserved or restored, Hobbes assumed it was up to human agents to create and maintain order.

A fundamental concern with the construction or preservation of order is evident in the stories journalists habitually tell after disasters regarding technology, science, and engineering. Even in reporting on war and terrorism, directly human-wreaked disasters, there is a fascination in media stories with either the primitivism or sophistication of the arms wrought and the defenses used. This helps explain why more than any other segment of modern society, engineers and scientists are forced to bear the social burdens of circumventing or mitigating disaster. Even when the Trade Towers were destroyed on September 11, 2001 — an act unprecedented and fantastic in the United States — much of the following discourse about the tragedy focused on the faults of actors within the technological sphere of society, e.g. engineers who failed to design the Towers properly or security professionals who failed to connect the dots buried within reams of data and detect the plot.

Similarly, much of the focus of the Western media after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 was on inadequate engineering standards within the area and a poor warning system. If the modern age is one burdened with the responsibility for social order, modern attention to science and technology is the expression of a pervasive wish to be set free from that burden through the perfection of inhuman instruments.

However, the modern social order is also deeply allied to democracy. And here between the technologically channeled desire for order and the celebration of democracy we enter a profound set of tensions within modern life. For democracy does not guarantee fail-safe security. There is substantial evidence that it contributes over the long haul to relatively more stability in a society because it cultivates prudence, that is, wise decision making. But democracy is an intensely

social form of polity, and therefore it does not lend itself to rapid action, wide powers of oversight, and efficient operations — the capacities praised within the technological sphere with respect to security and the maintenance of social order.

Indeed, the intensely social nature of democratic polity has made it at different times in history the equivalent of a kind of social disaster. It has repeatedly been connected with mobocracy, the irrational feelings of the crowd, or demagoguery. However, the connection between democracy and disaster runs deeper than associations with mobocracy and the like. In the modern age, democracy is indelibly tied to revolutionary freedom and absolute human rights. Indeed, the reason democracy carries so much weight for many on the left and the right is because of this connection.

Democracy's strong ties to revolution, freedom, and the satisfaction of human rights have to do with what political philosopher Patrick Deneen describes as a form of 'faith' in democratic transformation toward a perfect or near-perfect state. This view follows the thinking of Rousseau, assuming 'a conception of human beings as both infinitely malleable and ameliorable, along with an accompanying belief in the compatibility or malleability of nature and the universe to such perfectionist inclinations' (Deneen, 2005, p. 5).

Critically, however, this view tends to support forms of radical intervention by an enlightened group in order to usher in such dramatic transformation, and this intervention can assume a violent and disastrous form. While the violence of the French Revolution had numerous causes, it is impossible to divorce this radical Rousseau-like vision of democratic transformation from it. Similarly, the neo-conservative drive to democratize the Middle East by beginning with a 'Shock and Awe' campaign in Iraq is intimately connected to a Rousseau-like faith in the possibility of democratic transformation and revolutionary freedom. There is something of the image of the *tabula rasa* lurking here: if only the political slate can be wiped clean, democratic transformation will blossom.

This image, of course, is closely aligned with the technological order. Democracy becomes the 'organic' complement to the instrumental component of the modern social order. Both are potentially revolutionary in scope and power. Both aim at perfectibility. In the United States, the alliance of such visions of democracy and technology was vividly displayed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. An immense amount of energy in the media was directed not toward memorializing the losses wrought by the disaster, above all the city of New Orleans, but toward projecting a Gulf Coast region made anew. The focus was not just rebuilding, but a kind of wholesale renewal, rebirth, and transformation of the area and its people.

In his speech just after Katrina, President Bush pithily described this vision as 'a powerful American determination to clear the ruins and build better than before' and declared 'we will not just rebuild, we'll build higher and better' (Bush, 2005). A great disaster therefore became the occasion for collectively imagining a transformed society. For those on the left, the image

projected was a nation free from poverty and racism. Katrina had taught us a great lesson, or so it was believed. For those in the middle or nearer to the right, the image of New Orleans that emerged was a cleaner, safer, and more prosperous city. A faith in the radically transformative powers of democracy and technology made this sort of public discourse plausible.

Questioning beliefs

While we should desire transformation and work for it, we must question the twin-beliefs that underlie so much of our modern social imaginary, namely that (1) social stability is the ultimate human good, and (2) disaster can be an occasion for revolutionary transformations in society (toward, of course, a strong and stable polity, which in the West must be democratic;). The problem with these beliefs, whether they are held explicitly or remain tacit, can be described in very pragmatic terms. Making social stability the ultimate good and finding in disaster occasions for the radical transformation of society draw us toward absolute approaches to society's problems, and this absolute approach has taken immensely destructive and dangerous forms. The most obvious and reprehensible example is the massive buildup of nuclear weapons during the Cold War in the name of geopolitical stability.

As Oliver O'Donovan has argued in *Peace and Certainty*, while the logic of such 'deterrent' measures seems on the surface to be air-tight, a bit of probing reveals its ridiculous nature. What national interest could possibly be served by 'massive retaliation' when a nation has been obliterated? The answer is only wrathful revenge — of which millions of civilians would be the object. On a slightly more modest but still very important scale, an infinite faith in the powers of science and engineering to produce a prosperous, safe, and stable social order has had a great many negative repercussions, ranging from global warming to destructive land management to greater risk of large-scale accidents. Such technological and political ambitions have put societies in far greater jeopardy than if faith in science and technology were more modest. As we have built 'higher and better' we often have destroyed and risked more and more.

The issue here is not science and technology per se. The issue is not even the desire for social order and the belief that is up to humans to create such order. Rather, the issue is a matter of scale, size, or magnitude. Deterrence theory, as O'Donovan argues, seeks to take 'the infinite into our threats' (O'Donovan, 1989, p. 21). It is fundamentally about certainty in that it wants to enforce absolutely a world order by threatening world destruction if it is not followed. Here we have given our desire for social order and our sense of responsibility in establishing it an absolute status. We are tarrying with the infinite. We are gazing upon the sublime.

If the issue is one of magnitude, then it is rooted in our perceptions of ourselves and our world and especially in the nature and form of the stories we tell each other. Here, the media plays a crucial role. In as much as journalists cling to the story of the human possibility of absolute security and ultimate social stability — whether by focusing intently on technological failures and feats or by feeding a belief in the radical and transformative powers of democracy with respect to human crises — they perpetuate a quest for the sublime. Because news corporations often profit

from spectacle, there is almost a 'natural' inclination toward stories concerning absolute forms of human experience. But, as I have argued, these stories put us in greater danger, not less. A more responsible story would assume a more modest key. Its aesthetic, if we can call it that, would come nearer to the tragic (in a non-fatalistic sense) than to the sublime.

To describe a bit more what I mean, I will return to Grotius and Hobbes. While Grotius and Hobbes together are part of the social-compact tradition of political philosophy, their thinking diverges in important ways. Above all, Grotius assumes that humans are inherently 'sociable' creatures. He writes, 'But among the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society, that is, for the social life' (p. 6 Prolegomena). Hobbes, on the contrary, assumes that individual self-preservation is the most basic human motive. Sociability is important, but it is secondary — it is a means to self-preservation. Peace, which is of immense value for Hobbes, is nevertheless also instrumental, in as much as it is a means to the end of self-preservation. Peace means avoiding violent death. And peace requires a sovereign, who establishes and enforces social order by keeping people in 'awe'.

These philosophical differences are very significant, not the least because they lead to very different aesthetic orientations toward the world. Hobbes's outlook is consistent with the aesthetic of the 'sublime' in that he tends to see the world in terms of radical and drastic extremes. At one end of the spectrum, we have the war of all against all and at the other we have the awe-inspiring and order-mandating sovereign. Likewise, for Hobbes 'peace', though instrumental, becomes the object of an absolute quest, as the avoidance of violent death and the war of all against all is the preeminent and ultimate human goal. Thus, on an aesthetic level, Hobbes theory is very much like deterrence theory regarding nuclear arms. Both operate on an ultimate register.

Grotius's aesthetic, on the other hand, is best characterized as falling under the heading of the tragic. His belief in basic human sociability, however ordered or disordered, prohibits any absolute solution to the problem of order, for sociability is always complex and multi-faceted. It cannot be reduced to a single motive. Grotius looks at the world about him and is perplexed by the problematic and disastrous events and actions he sees. He sees them as both wrong and tragic. However, and importantly, he seeks their relative redress. Whereas Hobbes's speaks of the awe-inspiring sovereign, Grotius writes of the need for relatively successful systems of binding international law. The difference is not just philosophical, it is aesthetic.

Sociability, complexity and perplexity

Thankfully, as I have suggested, we have very persuasive reasons, having to do with greater social stability, to tell stories about crises and disasters in a more modest key. And in 'democracy', a watchword of our age, we also have a means to shift our attention from the absolute to the probable and from the sublime to the tragic. Democracy lends itself to an emphasis on sociability, and therefore on complexity and perplexity. Indeed, within democratic thought there is a tradition centered not on absolute revolutionary freedom and right but on

mutual dependence, reciprocal chastening, and self-introspection. Democracy, in this tradition, is about reckoning and living with limits rather than attempting to subdue the infinite. This tradition, at the very least, inculcates a strong sense of the tragic and directs one toward modest but still very fruitful forms of problem solving.

Media are pivotal agents in shaping social desire and aesthetic orientations. With respect to disaster, Western media, and especially American media, have been drawn to the sublime, that is, to casting disastrous events through the lens of the extreme, absolute, and 'unthinkable'. This includes taking part in the absolute demonization of the 'enemy', projections of world cataclysm due to our neglect of the environment, and perpetuating a feeling of radical insecurity in the world. Any shift toward greater stability, however, depends a good deal upon media shifting its narrative strategies away from the sublime toward the tragic and from the absolute toward the relative. For the stories we habitually tell structure the world we inhabit.

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