

# L'Année sociologique

Journal founded by Émile Durkheim, and published since 1898

Third series

Director : Gianluca MANZO

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### Disasters, sociological questions

Scientific Coordination

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Volume 75 / 2025 - Issue 2

This call for papers aims to contribute to the updating and renewal of sociological reflections on **Disasters, as sociological questions**. By inviting the presentation of cutting-edge research in the journal founded by Emile Durkheim, this special issue of *L'Année sociologique* aims to contribute to an effort to structure sociological research on disasters: disasters have become a common social experience; what can the sociology of disasters tell us today? Proposals for contributions may relate to contemporary or past events. In all cases, they should be based on solid empirical material, whatever the methodology chosen (qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods). Particular attention will be paid to their ability to operationalize contemporary issues in the sociology of disasters, articulating empirical elements with theoretical reflection.

### Terms of response to the call for papers

Authors who wish to respond to this call for papers with a proposal for an article are requested to contact Benoit Giry ([benoit.giry@sciencespo-rennes.fr](mailto:benoit.giry@sciencespo-rennes.fr)) before Monday 01/04/2024. The proposal is an abstract of 3,000 characters and specifying the chosen axis. This will give the issue's coordinator a first glimpse of the scope of futures contributions. He will make a selection and will communicate it to the prospective authors by the 01/05/2024 at the latest.

Subsequently, the texts in zero version - with a volume of 60,000 English characters maximum, all include - must imperatively be drafted following the instructions presented on the [Journal website](#) and sent to the address [benoit.giry@sciencespo-rennes.fr](mailto:benoit.giry@sciencespo-rennes.fr) before 15/09/2024.

A response will be made quickly by the coordinators so as to allow the drafting of a version 1 (amended) to be transmitted to the Editorial board's secretary at [L'Année sociologique](#) by December 1, 2024 at the latest.

The article proposals will then be evaluated anonymously by two members of the editorial board and one external expert, with feedback scheduled for January 2025 (and a publication on Fall 2025, no 75-2).

## Argument

Since 1920 and Samuel Prince's study of the Halifax explosion (Prince, 1920), the sociology of disasters – namely the study of violent interruptions to social life due to real or anticipated death and/or material or environmental destruction (Fritz, 1961: 655) – has made significant progress. Over the course of its long, bumpy, and non-linear history, it has investigated several catastrophic phenomena (industrial accidents, terrorist attacks, epidemics, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) highlighting their social aspects. It now constitutes a voluminous body of knowledge on the causes, social effects, and governance practices of disasters (Tierney, 2019; Giry, 2023).

This research area is now at a crossroads. While the annual incidence of disasters has increased 15-fold since 1950, research is lagging behind. In many places, data is lacking or scattered, due to insufficiently structured efforts; many results, obtained in specific locations, have yet to be replicated elsewhere. On a theoretical level, the sociology of disasters has, since the 1950s, largely remained outside the discipline's central debates, and has contributed little to the effort to build up a general sociology (Stallings, 2002; Tierney, 2007).

Recent developments, however, are attempting to systematize investigations and renew links with other branches of sociology. Many works, for example, propose intersectional approaches to vulnerability, crossing different social attributes (class, gender, race, etc.) to explain the diversity of social experience of disasters (Hartman & Squires, 2006; David & Enarson, 2012). Some works even revive the categories of classical sociology, such as those by Rebecca Elliott and Ryan Hagen, who mobilize the Durkheimian categories of “normal” and “pathological” to think about the existence of a “pathological normal” (Elliott & Hagen, 2021). An overall movement seems to be helping to give the sociology of disasters a more central place.

By inviting the presentation of cutting-edge research in the journal founded by Emile Durkheim, this special issue of *L'Année sociologique* aims to contribute to this effort to structure sociological research on disasters: disasters have become a common social experience; what can the sociology of disasters tell us today?

Proposals for contributions may focus (but are not limited to) one of the following four topics:

### 1. Revisiting the Emergent Norm Theory (ENT) and Therapeutic Community

The dominance of the “pro-social” behaviors, of mutual aid and assistance, and the strong political consensus following disasters, are now well-established findings. Explanations for this (temporary) state of *communitas* are less certain: they are often limited to the thesis of the “emergence of norms” in situations (Turner & Killian, 1972; Aguirre et al., 1998). Apart from several problematic points, this theory remains essentially descriptive, explaining neither the suspension of old norms nor the rise of new ones (Giry, 2023: 68).

Back in the 1960s, Allen Barton defined disasters as moments of “collective stress” when a social system of relief replaces the normal social system: he suggested that, at the time of disasters, individuals strip themselves of their usual social roles to take on new ones, adapted to the emergencies of the moment (Barton, 1969). Following Lewis Killian (1952), Alice Fothergill shows, however, that certain roles, such as motherhood, are “greedy roles” in that they hinder the ability to participate in relief and reconstruction activities (Fothergill, 1999). Conversely, as James Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf's work on the evacuation of Manhattan Island on September 11, 2001 shows, certain social attributes and prior norms favor the assumption of rescue roles (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2016). Beyond these few examples, work studying the moments of status change following disasters is rare. How does this transition take place? How does one become a survivor? How does one become a rescuer or emergency repairer? What are the conditions, relationships and social attributes that favor or determine entry into one of these careers?

### 2. Individual Trajectories and Social Stratification Following Disaster

Since the 1970s, numerous studies have highlighted the unequal distribution of afflictions during disasters, bringing to light the “vulnerabilities” induced by certain social attributes of individuals or communities, such as age, economic poverty, gender, or isolation (Cutter *et al.*, 2003). On the other hand, and despite early intuitions, debates concerning the effect of disasters on social stratification and inequalities are much less clear-cut. While the effects on income distribution (Yamamura, 2015), gentrification and impoverishment of spaces (Gotham & Greenberg, 2014; Pais & Elliott, 2008) and wealth inequalities (Howell & Elliott, 2009; Scheidel, 2021) are relatively well documented, what do we know about the experience of disasters on intra-

and intergenerational social mobility? In the vein of the work carried out on the “children of Katrina” (Fothergill & Peek, 2015), what can be said about the long-term effects of disasters on individual trajectories and biographical dynamics?

### 3. Sociology of Public Action in Disaster Situations: Making Normal or Abnormal

Disasters can be defined as moments of failure of organized action and public policy: it is because the protective measures put in place by communities fail to prevent disasters that they occur. Sociology of public action studies on disasters have long been concerned with how public action contributes to the production of abnormal. In recent years, however, work has turned this questioning on its head, asking how public action produces the normal and the stable. In his PhD thesis, Ryan Hagen studies the set of daily tasks performed by agents that enable the relatively continuous existence of the city of New York (Hagen, 2019). Valérie Arnhold’s work shows how the Fukushima accident was normalized by nuclear safety actors to ensure the continuity of the industry (Arnhold, 2019).

These dynamics of collective production of the normal and the abnormal, through policies of risk prevention (Borraz, 2008), preparation (Collier & Lakoff, 2021), recovery (Centemeri *et al.*, 2022) and loss (Elliott, 2021), have been the subject of stimulating work. However, many points remain to be clarified: while the actors and norms structuring the “disaster world” at international level have been well studied (Hannigan, 2013; Irwin, 2013; Revet, 2018), what diversity of local application do we observe in disaster management? How can these variations be explained? The question of the role of private economic players, for example, regularly mentioned, is only rarely studied systematically. How do companies and individuals intervene in disaster governance, outside diplomatic and humanitarian channels? What impact does this intervention have on prevention, preparedness, and repair policies? Similarly: while a few analyses highlight the deleterious effects of policies based on market mechanisms (Adams, 2013; Elliott, 2021), systematic studies are lacking: what determines recourse to the market, and what effects do market-based solutions have on the different processes (prevention, preparation, repair/loss) of disaster governance?

### 4. Sociology of Disasters, Methodology and Theoretical Work: Intersections

The sociology of disasters does not really present any methodological specificity: the instruments used by sociologists to study disasters are, with little variation, the same as those used in other fields of research (Mileti, 1987: 69). On the other hand, other fields of sociology sometimes make original uses of catastrophic events, as when they use them as “natural experiments” to test the existence of a hypothetical “natural resource curse” (Ramsay, 2011) or the effect of residential mobility (and therefore, the distance from an environment known to be criminogenic) on criminal recidivism (Kirk, 2009).

These uses underline the potential of disaster studies for a better understanding of many social phenomena. But beyond that, doesn’t the world’s instability call into question sociological theories that postulate forms of continuity and reproduction themselves? How can we think about the social world at a time when what we classically call “institutions” – those social regularities that make the future at least partially predictable – are being put to the test by more numerous and more intense disasters? Do historical circumstances favorable to disasters also favor sociological theories emphasizing the movement and discontinuity of social life?

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## CORRESPONDANCE

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