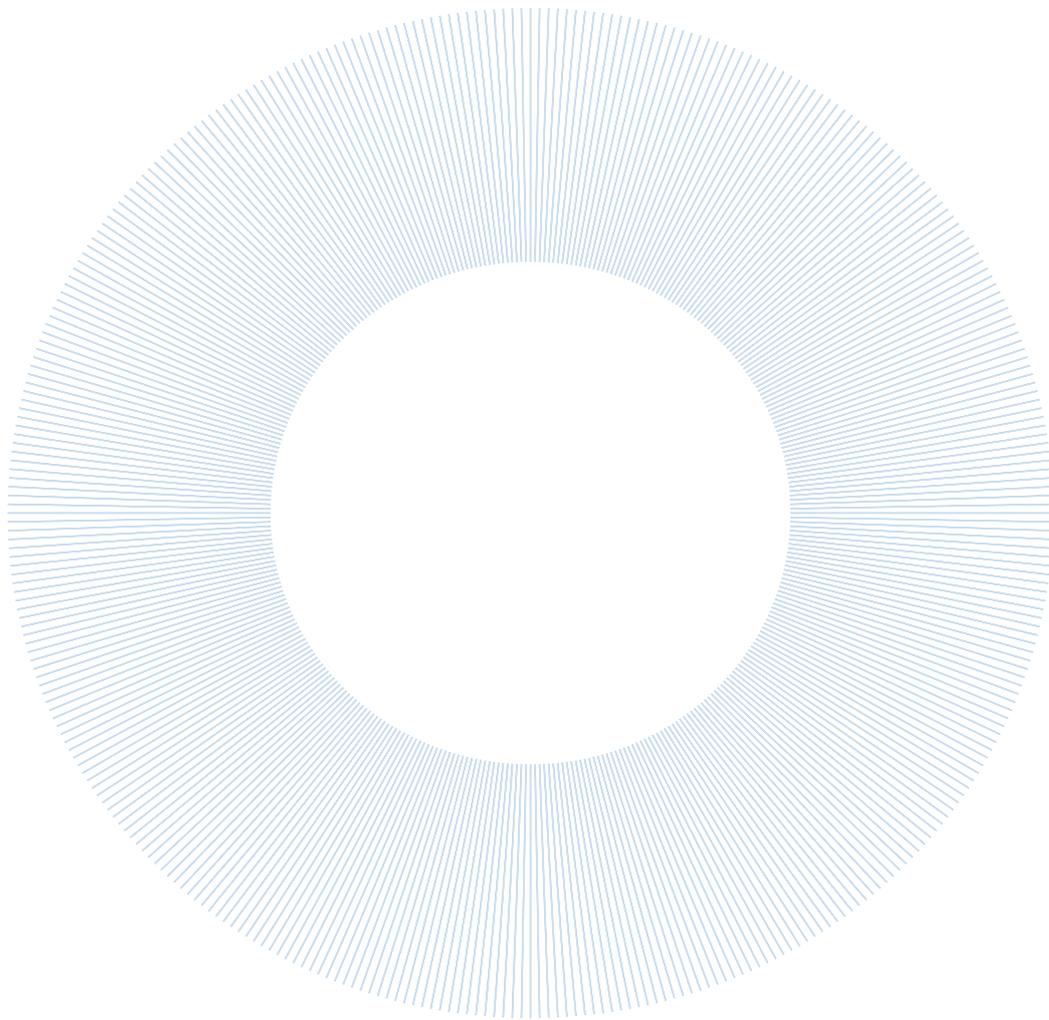


Emergency Futures



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EMERGENCY FUTURES

In this brief paper I introduce some questions that animate my current research on the role of the category of emergency in contemporary late capitalist life. Specifically, I pose three questions that, when taken together, focus attention on how and why the category of emergency is deployed in relation to disparate events and conditions: How are events and life understood in relation to the term emergency? How is twenty-first-century life governed in and through emergency? How might we learn to be democratic in relation to the necessity and urgency that seem to define emergency, whether emergency is understood as a legal-political category, structure of feeling or an idea?

Introduction

In the shadow of the ‘war on terror’ it has become something of a truism to claim that liberal-democratic societies are characterised by a permanent state of emergency, in which claims to emergency lead to the suspension of law (Scarry, 2011). In this paper I am interested in pushing existing reflections on the politics of emergency further. My argument is that governing emergencies opens up a new space-time of governmental action: an ‘interval’ where disaster is imminent but has not yet happened.

My way into questions of the politics of emergency was initially through research on one way of responding to sudden, unpredictable, events – emergency planning in the UK – and one anticipatory technique – the exercise (Adey and Anderson, 2012; Anderson and Adey, 2012). Emergency planning functions, we argued, by preparing for action in an ‘interval’ in between the occurrence of an event and its becoming a disaster; an interval in which life and death are at stake, or are claimed to be. In many ways the counter to secular and theological doomsaying, which we see in the return of apocalyptic imageries of the future, the time of emergency is a time of suspension. The interval of emergency is a space-time tensed between threat and promise, held between hope and fear (Anderson and Adey, 2012).

My interest in emergency began with this specific project. But once I focused on emergency specifically, I started noticing it everywhere whilst noticing how little it was reflected on as a category linked to but distinct from disaster, crisis or catastrophe. Most obviously, we find ‘emergency’ in recent justifications for eurozone austerity measures and as a prefix to specific forms of action that surround the current financial crisis – emergency conferences, emergency bailouts, emergency funds, and so on. But we also find ‘emergency’ in relation to a range of other events and processes: terrorism, the insecure conditions of migrant workers, Britain in the 1970s, famine, new forms of war, the plight of public sector workers, climate change, trans-species epidemics, the environment, industrial unrest, flooding, rebellion and revolution, and even the fate of the orang-utan. Now used to denote a specific type of situation that requires immediate action, the use of the term emergency is a taken-for-granted part of the political administration of late capitalist societies (Neocleous, 2008). It is used by left and right, and it is used in relation to a seemingly disparate set of events and conditions in which some form of valued life is threatened but action promises to make a difference. It has also taken on the status of proper names – Darfur or Rwanda being as much names for emergencies as places (Calhoun, 2010) – and formal categories – complex humanitarian emergencies (Duffield, 1994) and environmental emergencies, for example.

So I have become interested in the relation between how life is governed through specific apparatuses – UK Civil Contingencies being just one – and a logic of emergency that crosses and therefore draws into relation disparate actors and events and processes. And I have begun to wonder about the role of governing in and through emergencies in the political administration and life of late capitalist societies. Stepping back from the original project, the present paper poses a set of deliberately broad questions about emergency futures: How are events understood in relation to the term emergency? How is life governed in and through emergency? How might we learn to be democratic in relation to the necessity and urgency that seems to define emergency as a legal-political category, idea and specific kind of structure of feeling?

The Problems of Events and Life

The last time a ‘state of emergency’ was declared in the UK was on 13 November 1973 and ended on 11 March 1974. The event was a strike by coal miners and electricity power workers. The basis to the declaration was the Emergency Powers Act 1920, although this Act was updated in 1964. The strike was the last of the 12 times in which the 1920 Act was invoked in the twentieth century. All were in relation to strikes, even though the legislation emerged out of traditions of law designed to deal with the threat of state versus state war (see Jeffery and Hennessy, 1983).

For much of the twentieth century emergency powers were deployed by the UK to manage industrial unrest in the context of Fordist capitalism. By attempting to maintain the ‘essentials of life,’ deploying emergency legislation bought time for strikes to be broken – it extended the time until the disruption became catastrophic or disastrous. So, in the context of the use of emergency powers, the ‘strike’ was taken to be the predominant form of non-military event that threatened a Fordist economic order. The emphasis on strikes occurred alongside an orientation to the apocalyptic future that nuclear war threatened. If nuclear war as an event was problematised as a question of the limits of life and thought (Aradau and Van Munster, 2011), strikes were problematised in terms of thresholds in between normalcy and exception. As such, it is worth reflecting on how the strike was problematised as a particular type of event. First, the strike was a temporary but indefinite interruption that had become a normal part of the system. Second, and in the early days of emergency planning and the 1940s, the strike threatened the state’s existence because of what may have lain behind it – the lurking threat of communism but also the force of labour (Jeffery and Hennessy, 1983). However, later the strike became an infrastructural problem and the definition of ‘essential life’ was rooted in logistics. Third, the strike had an ambivalent relation to prediction. On the one hand, strikes were frequently announced in advance and occurred after grievances had been identified. On the other, a whole series of categories existed for delimiting strikes that occurred without warning – ‘unofficial strikes,’ ‘walkouts,’ ‘wildcat’ strikes. Making strikes predictable through a range of strategies – including banning secondary strikes – was central to their governance in the 1980s and 90s.

In other words the strike as an event has a particular form, one separate from the catastrophic imagery that developed simultaneously in planning for nuclear war. If the bomb is about the limit of the thinkable, then strikes are about a threshold. If a threshold is passed then the strike may disrupt the life of the nation. If not, then the strike can be ‘broken’ or ‘ended’ before disruption becomes a catastrophe. There is much more to say about the strike and nuclear war as two parallel ways in which events and the unknown were rendered governable (and there are examples of where ways of thinking about limits and thresholds blur with one another). Somewhat abruptly though I want to move to our contemporary last capitalist condition. For what we find is that whilst the emphasis on limits and thresholds persists, an expanded range of events are

governed as emergencies that, somehow, threaten disaster. Strikes and nuclear war persist as threats, but they no longer dominate. Events multiply. Consider examples of two different ways of thinking about the relation between an event and the normal: the sudden irruption that emerges from within life without warning (Massumi, 2009) and the incubating disaster that is already ongoing beneath awareness (Cooper, 2008). Terrorism being the paradigmatic example of the first type of event, and climate change being the paradigmatic example of the second (Anderson and Adey, 2012). We could add other generic types of events that are taken to threaten modern liberal societies: the crisis of circulation as we see in relation to liquidity in financial markets, or the minor system interruption that intensifies in the context of tightly coupled and automated infrastructures (Graham, 2008). Furthermore, we could think of how events such as trans-species epidemics or pandemics trouble attempts to think of events as discrete, and calculable, entities. Instead, epidemics and pandemics move, crossing boundaries.

What is common across the expanded set of events that become emergencies is an assumption about what constitutes an event, any event, *as an emergency*. Emergency has come to name a situation that is outside the closed loops of cyclical time or the progression of linear time: an 'interval' where disaster has not yet happened, action has consequences, and life and death are at stake, or at least are claimed to be. What emergency also shelters within it is the presumption that action makes a difference, but that the success of action is precarious because the situation is uncertain. What I think we are seeing is the intensification of this 'interval' of emergency across more dimensions of life as it gets attached to disparate events and situations. For example, we feel the demand for action in Al Gore's claim that 'we have just ten years to avert a major catastrophe that could send our planet into a tailspin of epic destruction.' We also feel it in George Osborne's claim that he acted 'decisively to tackle Britain's debt,' a form of emergency action, alongside the other emergency interventions, that was needed in order to prevent a 'catastrophic collapse' in economic confidence.

Perhaps the demand for action that is so central to the idea of emergency is nowhere better expressed than in the hit US TV programme *24*. *24* is set up around a succession of situations where timely action by Jack Bauer and other counterterrorist officers promises to avert some kind of looming catastrophe. Because the potential for some form of catastrophe is ever present, emergency as a situation of urgency in which timely action is demanded is permanent. There is always the promise of a way out of the emergency before catastrophe strikes, as long as correct and timely action is taken. Very often the action that the situation appears to demand is exceptional action of some form, normally, although not exclusively, extra-legal that involves interrogation that becomes torture. Compare with recent post-apocalyptic films such as *Children of Men* or *The Road*. Subverting the narrative of survival and then rebuild that is such a mainstay of disaster films, Mark Fisher (2009) argues that what is played out in both is the end of a future as such. Humanity dies in the first, nature in the second. Both are catastrophic in the sense that human life is shown as reaching some type of limit. In contrast, *24* perpetually stages an interval of emergency and dramatises a life always on the *threshold* – always threatening to tip over into a disaster of some form. What has become the rule is not the state of emergency but the 'interval' of emergency as a distinct type of 'time-space.' In *Children of Men* and *The Road* both end with a moment of promise, in *24* those moments are everywhere: intervention always promises to make a difference, but it is also always uncertain whether or not the emergency will be exited.

Governing in and through Emergency

These are only preliminary remarks. Clearly, it is necessary to trace further how what defines an event *as an event* has changed in relation to the category of emergency. Understanding the broad shift I have so far done no more than sketch out – from the strike and nuclear war to any event whatsoever – requires, amongst other things, that we reflect on the relation between emergencies and shifts in the organisation of economic life. So we could speculate, for example, that in late capitalism any event now holds the potential to cross a threshold and disrupt the circulations that make up economic life (Massumi, 2009). In the context of financial capital, and the creation of value through the future, an economic emergency becomes anything that threatens to disrupt confidence and repairing the fragile confidence of economic actors becomes an emergency response. We might also link the intensification of the category of emergency to the just-in-time production systems and networked forms of organisation associated with flexible accumulation; all of which combine to intensify the potential for disruption. Further work is needed to undertake a genealogy of the connections between changing ways of understanding emergency as a particular type of situation where action is consequential and the ways in which life and living have been variously understood.

My second question, though, moves us onto the forms of expertise and authority that accompany the expansion and intensification of the idea of emergency: how are life and events governed in and through the category of emergency? To begin with I should stress that no one theoretical model can account for the multiplicity of ways in which life is now governed in and through emergencies. Consider the idea of a ‘state of exception’ that became so central to critical analyses of the extra-legal spaces of incarceration and interrogation that marked the ‘war on terror’ (Agamben, 1998). Whether understood as a topology, space or technique of government, the state of exception does not exhaust the range of ways in which emergencies are governed; far from it. Instead, what have emerged alongside an intensification of the category of emergency are multiple, partially connected, ways of governing in and through emergency. These ways coexist, rather than succeeding one another in simple linear succession. They blend and blur with one another, intensifying or being redeployed at specific moments in response to particular demands for action. Let us look, then, at three ways of governing in and through emergency, tracing how they involve different relations with the event or situation that is an emergency.

The first way of governing in and through emergencies involves ways of acting within an emergency as it unfolds but before a valued life is destroyed or lost. Exercises – the rehearsal of response – are the paradigmatic techniques of this way of governing (see Anderson and Adey, 2012). For, what an exercise rehearses is response to emergencies through the coming together of an event specific network of response. Here, what is normalised is constant preparation for immediate response to emergencies that could occur anywhere, anytime. The means are through exceptional – but made habitual – organisational forms that exist in potential and are primed to snap into occurrence in an emergency. Response exists in potential: distributed throughout ordinary spaces and specialist teams. So response will, first, involve the coordination of a range of formally separate organisations that are, second, specific to the particular event responded to. Formalised in emergency planning or civil contingencies planning or preparedness planning, the aim is preparation before an event to enable timely response. The event itself is not necessarily stopped (although this way of governing will coexist with efforts to pre-empt or otherwise stop events occurring). Instead, what is intervened in are the emergent ‘effects’ or ‘impacts’ that constitute the event as a disruption. Techniques like exercises enable preparation for action as ‘effects’ and ‘impacts’ are forming.

Now I have to be cautious at this point in moving from one apparatus to identifying something common across other ways of governing emergency. Nevertheless, we can think of other techniques, in addition to exercises or plans, through which emergencies are governed as emergent, unpredictable, situations. First, we might understand the development of 'early warning' systems across multiple domains of life as a means of expanding the time to act before an emergency becomes a disaster. Second, we could note the proliferation of 'rapid response teams' that are primed to form and act in emergency situations. In both cases, what is prepared for is how to intervene in a timely fashion within an 'interval' of space-time. More broadly, consider the extraordinary popularisation of the notion of 'resilience' in ways of governing emergencies as a way of setting up a type of response to emergent impacts or effects – where resilience is defined most simply as the building into systems of an ability to respond to disturbances and return to some form of normal state. Resilience as a norm has become the solution to various forms of systematic risk. Whilst its genealogy is obviously highly contested, the pre-history of the idea of resilience involves a shift from a view of nature involving stable equilibrium relations to an emphasis on the dynamism and complexity of life and systems (Zebrowski, 2009). Unlike some of the other ways of governing emergencies that are organised around the assumption that emergencies are rare exceptions in an otherwise stable world, at the heart of resilience thinking is the idea that emergencies are a normal part of a turbulent world and, as such, must be constantly prepared for.

Perhaps a continuous low level preparation for timely action in emergencies that may erupt anytime, anywhere, has become the rule in the contemporary condition. Techniques such as exercises give the semblance of protection whilst, at the same time, identifying gaps in preparedness that lead to further efforts to prepare. Closely intertwined with this way of governing events is, then, a second: the anticipation of events that might become emergencies so that they may be stopped, halted or ended. Connected to the rise of early warning systems of one form or another, numerous anticipatory techniques are deployed by governments and other state, public and private organisations in order to render future events actionable. Future emergencies are anticipated so that they may be prevented, deterred or pre-empted before they occur. Techniques used include, for example, medium range forecasting that will identify a range of scenarios that, taken together, create a space in which future orientated action can take place to try and ensure that threatening futures do not come to pass.

Of course, these two ways of governing in and through emergencies coexist with the formal declaration of a state of emergency in which exceptional, although almost always legal, action is legitimised in an emergency (Agamben, 2005). There are important differences and specificities in the legal state of emergency powers that a blanket emphasis on the topology of exceptionality can obscure. In addition, the potential to declare a state of emergency always coexists with the potential to respond. For example, in the UK context the declaration of a 'state of emergency' under Part 2 of the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act occurs at the limit of forms of preparation when faced with events of a particular scale that require an exceptional response. Rather than being based on an 'extra-legal' or 'business as usual' model, the model is one of accommodation of emergency within normal law. As Gross and Ni Aolain (2006) show, this is based on an assumption that you can separate an emergency from normal life with the goal of the restoration of normality. This leads to some questions that Gross and Ni Aolain rightly pose: May rights be suspended or derogated from in the circumstances of an emergency? To what extent may law be modified, amended, changed or even repealed? What may emergency measures change?

We should note one other way of governing through emergency: the deliberate holding of population on the verge of a humanitarian disaster. Adi Ophir's (2010) vital work on processes of 'catastrophization' in the occupied Palestinian territories and the Gaza Strip is of critical

importance in detailing the calculations that go into making certain, devalued, lives barely liveable. By tracing how a population lives in emergency, Ophir reminds us that emergency is not necessarily a sudden exception but a condition of existence whether by intention, structural effect or accident. Emergency as condition might, for example, be an effect of (non)participation in capitalist economic life. We could consider, for example, how the combination of Clinton-era shifts in the US social policy and widening inequalities over the past 30 years has made US welfare into a type of emergency relief administrated through networks of emergency shelter, emergency food provision and emergency medical care (Cooper, 2012). Here, the distinction between exceptional events and a supposedly stable, normal life that other ways of governing emergency sometimes assume and work through breaks down.

Democracy and Atmospheres of Emergency

My suggestion so far in this preliminary paper has been that multiple ways of governing coexist as the 'interval' of emergency has become a normal part of life. The fear is that an emergency will 'spiral' or 'cascade' out of control and cross a threshold. My future work on how emergency is deployed in the early twenty-first century aims to develop these starting points by addressing two questions. First, how does governing through emergency relate to changing understanding of events amid diverse ways in which value is created and accumulated? What is the relation, for example, between the intensification of the term emergency and mutations in capitalism against the backdrop of the extension of neo-liberal modes of governance? Second, how does governing in and through emergency take place and what political forms, modes of authority and types of expertise emerge? In a world of events, what happens to state of emergency legislation, for example, and how does it coexist with forms of emergency preparedness or a never ending effort to anticipate emergencies?

There is, though, a final question that invites us to engage directly with the politics of how emergencies are governed: how might we foster democratic orientations, habits and collectives in anticipation of emergencies and during emergencies? One of the things which is generally presumed to be revealed by how liberal democracies respond to emergency is the fragility of democracy and the authoritarianism of liberalism (Honig, 2009; Scarry, 2011). Emergency powers generally lead to the suspension of law, even as they emerge from the operation of law (Amoore, 2008). For this reason, emergency is generally taken to be antithetical to democracy by critiques of emergency powers and necessary by their defenders (Scarry, 2011). As Scarry carefully shows, emergency thinking is presumed to be antithetical to a specific way of being democratic, as in its emphasis on necessity it forecloses alternatives and in its emphasis on urgency it forecloses deliberation. Emergency is, perhaps, not one of the atmospheres in which democratic life arises or flourishes.

There is, however, a slightly different tradition of thinking about emergency in relation to democracy and that is in relation to demands for rights (Honig, 2009). In other words, emergency once considered to be an atmosphere of urgency amid peril is not antithetical to democracy nor is it antithetical to a concern for social justice; far from it. Various social movements use the language and tone of emergency to puncture the apathy that can infuse political life and thought. Nevertheless, we still need to ask how to respond, and perhaps contest, new ways of governing emergency that are not simply based on a model of a sovereign power that is withheld and periodically erupts, i.e. that go beyond the 'state of emergency' as a technique of government.

Let us put it another way: the normal recourse to the suspension of law is law. The idea being that one should exit a state of emergency and return to law (although this is often contradicted by the fact that emergency powers are rarely extra-legal (Amoore, 2008)). What, though, might be the recourse to ways of governing that prepare for, or anticipate, emergencies where action mixes up the automated and the improvised?

Here I think of attempts to develop what is termed 'participatory resilience' or attempts to learn from work on what actually happens in the aftermath of disasters – the ways in which organisational forms, and types of solidarity, are improvised (Solnit, 2009). How might planning for emergencies be about the development of orientations to other people in distress or ways of responding with presumptive generosity to co-suffering? Of course, in even beginning to speculate about such issues I am being deliberately utopian and there is nothing more counter to the time of emergency and the necessity that defines it than utopian thinking and its useless exploration of the limits of the possible. By far the most pernicious thing about some deployments of emergency, I think, is the way in which the combination of necessity and immediacy foreclose the very possibility of alternatives. We clearly see this in current justifications for austerity measures in the eurozone, although at the time of writing that is changing as the absence of growth becomes a kind of semi-permanent emergency condition.

Slightly differently, what might be the response to the distribution of an emergency atmosphere that pre-scripts how we relate to any and all events? Here I am inspired by recent attempts to stage and perform our relation to emergency by dramatising what it means to inhabit and act in an emergency situation: emergency becomes atmospheric, a particular pattern of affective qualities. For one example of this, The Metis Arts production *3rd Ring Out* stages an installation in which the public is invited to participate as a group of individuals making 'critical decisions' about what to do next in response to a flood event whose impacts and effects spiral through a region. What is staged through the event is an atmosphere of urgency amid peril that builds until the event eventually crosses a threshold and runs out of control. Whilst there is much more to say about *3rd Ring Out*, one of the things that is interesting is that it rehearses how to act in a climate-related emergency and dramatises decisions. Individuals have to work together to make life and death decisions. Perhaps we could understand *3rd Ring Out* as one attempt to develop democratic habits for emergency times by simulating a specific atmosphere of the out-of-control emergency. By which I mean that it experiments with orientations towards decision making that intensify a desire to mobilise to protect and expand a collective life rather than cede to sovereign authority vested in the state or a kind of intensified individualism. What it also does, and what a politics of emergency might do more broadly, is think through how atmospheres of emergency might be experimented with to mobilise concern for particular types of events and to generate new forms of collective democratic action. Asking what it is to be democratic in response to emergencies is a necessary part of a concern with the role of emergency in early twenty-first-century life and politics.



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Insights

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