

Thinking about Crisis, Thinking about Emergency



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THINKING ABOUT CRISIS, THINKING ABOUT EMERGENCY

When is a state not a state? This riddle is at the heart of how we think about the state in crisis. Traditional realist theorizing treats the state as a sort of organic entity which exists to build itself up through processes of extracting resources and mobilizing citizens, processes which occur during ordinary time and during war time. In contrast, a state which is unable to grow and maintain its infrastructure and defend its borders is frequently described as a failed state or the opposite of a state. I contend that this binary juxtaposition is neither useful nor accurate. Rather, it comes from a much older tradition in which disaster and disaster periods were treated as a sort of 'time out of time,' wholly unrelated to the periods which preceded them or followed them. In truth, states prepare for disasters long before they occur, and in the process build up their infrastructure and their state capacity – and the social and political changes which come about as the result of crisis have long-lasting effects upon the state long after the disaster has abated. In this way, the time of crisis is a vital aspect of the larger process of state-building, rather than a historical detour or 'blip' – as it has often been presented.



The past has devoured us; the present is gnawing our entrails, the future threatens yet greater dangers. What we laboured to amass with feverish activity we lost in one hour (Gabriele de Mussis, *Historia de Morbo*, p. 16).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), disaster is 'any occurrence that causes damage, ecological disruption, loss of human life, deterioration of health and health services on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected community or area.' A disaster, whether natural or man-made, is thus something out of the ordinary. It is the opposite of business as usual. Instead, disaster is often experienced and described as a profound disruption in the state and in society.

This notion of disaster as a disruption or tearing in the fabric of society, or even as a sort of peculiar 'different time zone' – wholly unrelated to that which came before or that which will follow, tearing in time, is not a new idea. Even in the present day, the government individuals who engage in disaster planning and who react in times of crisis are often not well integrated into larger governmental structures. They are seen as having a particular mission which only applies during disaster, but which is seen to have very little to do with the 'business as usual' functions of government. And the norms governing how individuals, groups and the state itself should behave during disaster are often very different from how these groups are described as behaving during 'regular time.'¹ In this way, the time of crisis or emergency is viewed as a sort of 'historic detour,' the study of which lends little to our understanding of how states behave, are formed and grow.

This notion of emergency time as 'time out of time' can be identified in narratives as early as 430 BC, when Thucydides wrote the following about the plague of Athens:

The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water.

The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane (*Histories* 2.47.1–55.1).

My concern here is specifically with those overriding, all-encompassing disasters which a society faces, and which have often been described by chroniclers as forming a definitive breach between what normally occurs and what is occurring at present. I am interested, thus, in disasters like the Black Death, which carried off roughly thirty per cent of Europe's population in the 1300s in the aggregate. (However, this devastation was not equally spread throughout Europe, and in some places the death toll was estimated at eighty to ninety per cent of the population.) The Black Death refers not to one specific plague, but rather to a series of plagues which swept across Europe over a period of approximately 300 years. The Black Death is usually dated as having begun with the plague of Genoa which began in 1348, recurring annually in that location until 1352 and spreading across Europe. After that first plague, new waves recurred at approximately 30 to 60 year intervals. London experienced episodes of plague in 1563, 1593, 1603, 1625, 1636 and 1665, for example. Plague finally died out in London in 1665–6, in Vienna in 1712, in Marseilles in 1720–22 and in Moscow in 1770–1772.² While the 1348–51 outbreak fits today's definition of a pandemic, or an outbreak on a global scale, plague outbreaks also occurred cross-nationally and in some cases locally. The 1348–51 outbreak, however, was known as the Great Mortality because of its virulence, its global scale and the fact that it was a completely unknown and new phenomenon to its sufferers and chroniclers.

When we begin to think about devastation on this scale – when devastation threatens to approach oblivion – there is a tendency to abandon our usual types of discourse. The experience is so overwhelming, so mind-boggling, that we tend to grasp for metaphors, for narratives that would seem to do the event justice. In doing so, something peculiar begins to happen: our descriptions of disaster tend to have their own unique elements, but in some ways they also tend to be very similar. In modern terms, the global pandemic of the 1300s is the closest example we have to what the Yale Philosopher Nicholas Bostrom (2002) has called an 'extinction scenario.' Such events are described as being very large in terms of scope and intensity, while being relatively low in probability. Other events which meet these criteria of being high in scope and intensity include the Rwanda genocide in 1994 (with a death toll estimated between 500,000 to 1 million); the Ukrainian Famine under Stalin which killed an estimated 10 million people; the holocaust which killed an estimated 10 million people; the tsunami in Indonesia which killed over 500,000 people and the Belgian atrocities in the Congo which are said to have claimed 13 million lives.

It is my contention that both historic and present-day descriptions of catastrophic disaster – large-scale famine, genocide and disease – tend to treat the 'emergency time' of catastrophic disaster as a peculiar time zone of its own. It is a point in which states appear to abandon their usual projects of building infrastructure and warring with their neighbours. Instead, the affected states draw inward – erecting strict border controls and abandoning a role which they might have had in a larger international community. In some ways they appear to move backward, reverting to earlier patterns of behaviour, governance and belief. Such crises thus have their own peculiar shape, their own language and their own relation to the time which preceded them and which comes after. In that way, crises may seemingly be compared, even over a space of a thousand years. If we are to think of this process in temporal terms, we can argue that the state in crisis is often seen as having engaged in a sort of backsliding. At the moment when genocide occurs in Rwanda, when people are dying in New Orleans, or when people are starving to death in Leningrad, witnesses often describe the events in language which uses terms like Stone Age, primeval and underdeveloped.³ The implication is that this moment of crisis is somehow a

moment 'outside of time' which is not related to either the period immediately before it or that which comes after it. It is, rather, its own time zone.⁴

Present-day disaster theorists tend to treat the state in crisis – and the community in crisis – as an anomaly, as a separate 'time zone.' They also characterize disaster in terms of a break between those events which precede and follow it. The World Health Organization thus notes that:

A disaster is an event located in time and space which produces conditions whereby the continuity of structure and process of social units becomes problematic. It is an event or series of events which seriously disrupts normal activities (WHO, 2002, p. 9).

Scales which have been developed to measure and describe crisis often focus on the magnitude of crisis (e.g. how many people are affected; the extent of monetary loss); the duration of crisis and, most importantly, how long it will take for the community and society to recover and 'get back to normal.'⁵ The political scientist Oren Gross repeats this thinking in his definition of the state of emergency as 'an exception to the rule which lasts a relatively short period of time, and which yields no substantial permanent effects.' He quotes Cecil Carr, on crisis legislation in Britain, who notes that:

Free peoples, when they temporarily surrender freedom, will expect to see their inheritance restored to them when the storm is over. There will be two anxious questions – how large must that surrender be and how soon will the restoration come? (Gross, 2006, p. 43).

In this way, the state in crisis (and, by extension, the society in crisis) assumes a peculiar ontological status. It is seen as being the state while simultaneously not being the state. As analysts, we have traditionally tended to assume that activities undertaken by the state during crisis are of little utility in illuminating any underlying truths about the state itself. That is, we assume that a state can be inherently democratic in its orientation, despite the fact that it utilized the military in civilian situations after a natural disaster (as was the case in New Orleans), or despite the fact that it may briefly have invoked martial law (for example, at the conclusion of the American Civil War). We tend to assume that once the state and society return to normal, these behaviours and activities are in a sense erased, and are no longer relevant to our understandings of the society in question. For example, in the field of law, the line between normal and emergency law is very clearly drawn.⁶

In defining disaster as a breach in time, we have implicitly built into that definition the assumption that disaster time is somehow less 'real,' and that returning to normality means erasing any traces of disaster. This affects us as analysts in two ways: first, it may cause us to downplay the connection between what the state does during emergency and what it 'normally' does. Here it is possible to suggest that the state is differently gendered during the two different time states. When the state is in control and behaving 'rationally' – fulfilling expectations for its functioning – it is gendered as male. However, when the state is in a state of collapse or failure, when it may require outside assistance and support and when it appears to be behaving 'irrationally' – then it is gendered as female.⁷ However, when international-relations analysts working within the realist school begin to theorize about the state 'as it really is,' they tend to defer only to the state when it is behaving in its male orientation, during normal time. The other state is regarded as a mere aberration, a temporary state which is erased and forgotten. Thus, for example, in writing a history of the growth of the state, we may tend to treat the state in an emergency and the state in a normal time as having two separate identities – and almost as being two separate entities.

Secondly, in adopting a definition of disaster as a breach between ordinary and emergency time, we implicitly make certain assumptions regarding the agency of the state. The metaphor of a state which is overtaken or consumed by events beyond its control makes it impossible fully to interrogate the activities which the state has taken to prevent a disaster, the ways in which the state and its citizens behaved during the disaster or the role of the state in the events following disaster.

In my analysis of conceptions of emergency time, I have focused largely on reading descriptions which have been written by historians, theologians and political figures who have attempted to describe the so-called 'visitations' of the plague which occurred throughout Western and Eastern Europe, beginning in 1348 and finishing in 1721, when the final episode of plague hit Marseilles but did not make its way to England. Here the very use of the term 'visitation' to describe the outbreaks of plague is, I feel, deceptive. While literary language frequently speaks of a nation being 'struck by' plague through God's arrow of wrath, or of plague as a wind which blows across Europe from Asia, or as a visit by a sort of demon, these literary metaphors tend to mask the long and ongoing preparations which states took as they became aware of the approach of disease (sometimes as much as three or four years in advance), as they set up quarantines and coastal guards, harbour blockades and public health programmes, and as between outbreaks of the plague, they made decisions regarding which infrastructure to dismantle and which to keep in the event of further outbreaks. In reality, the state may have been preparing for the event even several years before it occurred and even during the disaster, opportunities may be created for some groups and individuals to profit from disaster through their responses. Thus, the power of both state officials and groups within society is often redistributed in new and surprising ways in the aftermath of disaster. However, our focus on the two time periods – normal time and emergency time – as unrelated causes us to downplay or fail to see this process altogether. The distinction between the two time zones is, I contend, largely a literary creation and should not be treated by analysts as a binary opposition.

This way of describing state behaviour during crisis – like the disaster myth used to describe group behaviour during crisis – appears to be remarkably widespread. Descriptors of the emergency as a sort of 'time without time' which is entirely disconnected from that which went before, with its own behavioural norms and expectations, and its own relationship with God and the cosmos, appear as early as late antiquity in disaster descriptions, and can be found as recently as the 2005 Indonesian tsunami.⁸ In addition, they operate in an intertextual fashion – older narratives are borrowed or plagiarized by later chroniclers, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. In his work on narrative, Reinhart Koselleck (1985) reminds us that to the citizens of medieval Europe, imitation was the sincerest form of flattery. More specifically, he tells us that within the knowledge tradition of that time period, it was a given that history held lessons for current citizens and that the mining of historical texts could provide insights into a present-day problem. Thus, it is hardly surprising that many of the descriptions of the plague which were written in the early 1400s include both literary tropes as well as more 'factual' epidemiological information which resembles that found in two documents in particular, descriptions of the Plague of Athens and the later Plague of Justinian. (Crawford, in his work *Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art* (1914), provides a more complete pedigree of the ways in which narrative aspects of the Greek plague story – including an emphasis on contagion and the practices which led to it – were repeated in texts which appeared during the First Pandemic in the Roman Empire in the 600s AD, reappeared again in the Holy Roman Empire and persisted all the way through to the Great Mortality of 1348 and beyond. He also points to ways in which the non-narrative aspects of the story were preserved from one generation to the next through practices such as the creation of frescoes depicting the events of the plague, particularly in churches).⁹

In very general terms, we can identify four constant or universal themes which tend to appear in plague discourse in particular, from the Plague of Athens described by Thucydides to descriptions even today. They are the themes of abandonment, which focuses on the breaking of social and family structures during times of unrest; the violation of social norms, including the rise of crime and deviant behaviour during times of uncertainty; and the collapse of social infrastructure. Finally, a fourth theme, that of an awareness that one is living within historic times, can be identified. Each of these themes helps to augment the sense that what is occurring is a breach between the time that came before and the time that will come after the event itself. Together, they tend to form a description of a state and society which is 'possessed.' Taken together, they allow us to view the period of crisis as like a fever dream, as a sort of delirium. Descriptions have a hallucinogenic quality, as analysts describe the ways in which the anti-state engages in a completely uncharacteristic paroxysm of primeval violence.

The theme of abandonment appears in medieval descriptions of priests fleeing their congregations and parents abandoning their children when they became infected. Whole villages are described as deserted. During that same time period, violation of social norms is documented, including the rise in immoral behaviour, people failing to observe religious festivals and increases in drunkenness. The collapse of social infrastructure is best illustrated with a quote by Michele da Piazza, who provides the following description of a plague in Messina in 1348:

The houses of the dead stood open, with all the jewels, money and treasure in full view and if someone wanted to enter there was nothing to stop them; for the plague struck so suddenly that at first there weren't enough officials and then there were none at all (1791, p. 36).

Finally, a description provided by E. Venables of the Cistercian Abbey of Louth Park, tells us that:

In the year of the Lord 1349 the hand of Almighty God struck the human race a deadly blow [...]. It is thought that so great a multitude of people were not killed in Noah's flood (2009, p. 38).

In his work, the philosopher of history David Carr explains that it is in some ways impossible for present-day historians ever to understand the world in which those in the past lived. He notes that our readings of historic texts are often subject to misreading because we cannot help but assume that our world was the same as their world.¹⁰ He notes that we cannot ever fully understand their realities. In order fully to engage with these earlier texts about disaster and to compare them with today, it is important to remember why their authors were writing them. Theodicy is the most important concern in many texts – how to understand why tragedy has befallen society, and how to reconcile that tragedy with conceptions of God. For this reason, analysts adopted a very broad historic framework and looked to documents like the Bible for inspiration. Their primary purpose was not to describe the rise of state power, nor to meditate on its current trajectory. Furthermore, in Christian societies, in particular, crisis was historically regarded as a place of moral testing and an opportunity to demonstrate character or honour.¹¹ Again here it thus assumed a timeless quality in that it put people in touch with their eternal purpose. Particularly in the 1300s, when the plague was seen largely as a sign of God's wrath and of divine punishment of both individuals and the nation, plague time represented a sort of merging of heavenly and earthly time. Here, we can consider the description provided by Gabriele de Mussis, in his *Historica de Morbo*, in which he wrote of how God had 'declared war on the human race.' In 1348, he wrote that:

After this warning had been given to mortals, disease was sent forth; the quivering spear of the Almighty was aimed everywhere and infected the whole human race with its pitiless wounds. [...] And so the terrible violence of death [...] devoured mortals by a sudden blow (p. 15).

Plague was often read as a sign of the imminent apocalypse, and thus seen as a speeding up of regular time. In more worldly, everyday terms, crisis was seen as a moment of opportunity – in which social structures were in upheaval, and uncertain. In this time when the normal rules did not apply, it was possible for people to move up and down the social hierarchy, and to acquire access to new resources which might thus be maintained after the crisis (Ranger and Slack, 1992).

What is remarkable is how long these images and themes have continued to have an impact on later thinking about disaster. Why do these early descriptions have such resonance? What is their utility to present-day analysts? This tendency to borrow the older narratives and this way of thinking about time are perhaps attractive to modern-day theorists for the following reason. They provide a way of reconciling two very different and seemingly contradictory narratives about the state. In describing what the state does during this ‘time without a time’ as an aberration and in no way indicative of the actual state’s character, identity or usual behaviour, we can continue to adopt a progressive narrative which explains how the state is constantly in the process of perfecting itself, moving from a state of societal chaos to one of law and order, without having to reconcile this image with other more disturbing images of a state which can and has, during crisis, taken people’s rights, taken people’s lives and taken people’s liberties. We can continue to view the state as synonymous with civilization, while simultaneously admitting that there are periods during which that civilization appears to fade, or is erased. It is easier to state that the state temporarily backslid but is now once again firmly established on the right path than it is to admit that all nations have the possibility contained within themselves of behaving in an autocratic fashion during times of crisis. The ‘true time’ or trajectory of the state is thus held to be linear, while the emergency which recurs from time to time is viewed instead as cyclical, or timeless. The emergency appears as a collapsing of time, in which ancient problems and relationships emerge, but which is separate from the state’s actual trajectory. Normal time and emergency time can thus be read as competing teleologies.

Thus, it is actually more useful to think of the early Westphalian state period in particular as a sort of permanent state of emergency or crisis politics, rather than breaking the state’s rise into a distinct set of periods which alternate between normal and emergency time. Our current emphasis on understanding how the state mobilizes against a security threat – for example, disease – assumes there is only one security at any given time and that we can clearly delineate the distinction between this new range of state activities during emergency time and what the state normally does. In contrast, historic data suggests that life in medieval Europe and perhaps up until the 1800s was, in some sense, ‘one long emergency.’ The continuing plague and regular widespread famines meant that it was often not clear when a particular disaster began, nor was it clear exactly when it ended. The distinction between security and insecurity was probably much less distinct than it is today. Disaster represented not a ‘time without a time,’ but rather a constant.



Notes

¹ In the present day, we refer to the notion of instituting martial law or a state of emergency, with the implication that the more military functions and structures under which government operates during crisis are markedly different from the ways in which government might function particularly in a democracy. For more on the notion of martial law as a type of exception, see Ellman, 1992. In recent American history, of course, we can point to the passage of the USA Patriot Act in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Here again, the implication was that a crisis of this immensity allowed for a lowering of the usual ways of treating citizens, establishing bureaucracies and monitoring citizens. Here the assumption was that this was a temporary event and that the crisis would eventually recede. For more on this point, see Salter, 2010.

² Figures taken from Public Sanitation in Byrne, 2012, pp. 302–6.

³ For more on the use of language during Hurricane Katrina, see Voorhees, 2007, pp. 415–29. Analysts in the field of disaster management often refer to a universal ‘disaster myth’ – or a topos found in descriptions of individual and group disaster behaviour as savage, animalistic and moblike. However, my interest is not in the universality of descriptions of group behaviour during emergency, but rather in the universality of descriptions of what happens to the state and how this emergency affects the state’s perceived trajectory.

⁴ In my earlier work on state failure (Manjikian, 2008), I have argued that the tendency to apply a label like ‘failed state’ allows development analysts in particular now to redraw the map of the international system in such a way as to create new categories which defy geography. Thus, a failed state in Haiti can be described as being more similar to Rwanda, in Africa, than it is to its neighbours in the Caribbean. Similarly, states in crisis can, arguably, be compared better to each other, than they can be to their neighbours.

⁵ See, for example, Tobin (no date).

⁶ See, for example, discussions of the distinction between the two in Supperstone, 1981.

⁷ Edward Said’s work (1979) on orientalism, of course, suggests that the ‘exotic’ cultures of the developing world and their governments were gendered as female – seen as irrational, weak and subordinated to the dominant male state of the west. This distinction can also be applied, I feel, to the state’s behaviour during so-called normal time and emergency time.

⁸ For specific descriptions of chronicles for the Plague of Justinian (541–42) see Gottfried, 1983. Also, Kulikowski in Little, 2008. See also Stathakopoulos, in Little, 2008. For modern descriptions see Sugirtharajah, 2007, pp. 117–34.

⁹ For more detail, see *Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art* (Crawford, 1914, pp. 96–9). Available at <https://archive.org/details/plaguepestilence00crawuoft>.

¹⁰ Carr, D. (1991) *Time, Narrative and History*.

¹¹ Wallis, 2006, pp. 3–4. For specific texts from the time period, see Brinton, (2009)[1375], pp. 137–43; John of Reading (2009)[1346–1367], p. 74; de Mussis, (2009)[1375], pp. 15–22.

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