



Catastrophe: Introduction

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Our contemporary political consciousness is marked by a tendency to normalise even the most extreme circumstance. The ongoing refugee crisis and climate change provide two ready examples, but there are many more. We normalise the world around us and then use it as a base-line to measure social and political events, with each new normal broaching further into the previously unthinkable. This process invisibilises all but the most dramatic events. In 2017 the Critical Legal Conference called for papers that reflect upon the idea of ‘catastrophe’. Our aim was to challenge this apparent normalisation. This edited collection is a continuation of the conference, in a certain sense. In this very brief introduction, we will draw out the logics of the conference and the manner in which these are developed here.

We began our call for papers with The Invisible Committee’s insistence that: ‘The catastrophe is not coming, it is here. We are already situated within the collapse of a civilization. It is within this reality that we must choose sides’ (2009, p. 135). The catastrophe has arrived. It is not simply a sudden shock or a grand world-historical moment that would be evident to all. It is also a slow violence: a gradual and often imperceptible crumbling that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous; the ‘human catastrophes’ fostered by capitalism in its crises of social reproduction; intimate catastrophes, moments of collapse and calamity that concern the subject and the psyche. In short, our call to catastrophe was an insistence upon remaining sensitive to this everyday ruination.

We took a cue from Honig (2003) and Anker (2014), who identify the genre of this mode of critique as containing something of the dark romantics. The catastrophe is that chasmatic void into which we are about to fall (or perhaps we have already fallen). We are pervaded by a sense of the coming (or already arrived) doom. The catastrophic then is a mode of critique. However, catastrophe also suggests an opening to something beyond. It creates new spaces for resistance

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and solidarity, while potentially strengthening old ones. Catastrophe names the end in ancient Greek music and theatre, an unravelling and return to context. It was coupled with *anakrousis*—a sonorous explosion that was played at the beginning of a performance to clear the ears and so make space for a *cosmos* to be created. Catastrophe announced the overturning of that world and prepared the listeners to leave the theatre, to return to the street and to the context of popular life. Tolkien coined the term *Eucatastrophe* to signify the sudden positive resolution of a seemingly impossible situation. The theme of catastrophe thus also asks us to consider the day after the moment of rupture, not just unfolding scenes of chaos, whether distant or intimate.

Our decision to organise the Critical Legal Conference in Warwick around the theme of catastrophe was also not simply a response to our current situation, to trends in politics and law, or indeed simply to theoretical eddies and streams. There was also another more local logic at play. Warwick has been famous for the ‘Catastrophe theory’ explored initially by French mathematician René Thom in 1972, but developed and disseminated by Christopher Zeeman, the founder of Warwick’s Mathematics Institute. Zeeman sought to explore the topology of what he termed catastrophe and so identify the structures in which rupture and dramatic change occurred. More than this he attempted to expand the theory from Maths, into many other fields in which revolutionary change occurred, from the psychology of the creative mind to the collapse of stock markets to social upheaval. As such catastrophe theory formed an important stage in the move towards chaos theories in the 1980s and provided, through its linkage with Thom’s continued work, an important point of reference for understanding the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold* (1992). At the same time, we felt that it was also important to think about catastrophe in Warwick, a university which sits on the outskirts of the city of Coventry in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom. Coventry has suffered two major catastrophes in the last century. The conflagration that engulfed the city during the Second World War reduced its medieval lanes and by-ways to ashes. From these ashes, a new gleaming motor city grew, with a fully pedestrianised city centre and ‘modern’ road infrastructure. As the ‘Detroit of the Midlands’, Coventry’s fate was seemingly sealed with the oil crisis in the 1970s and the attendant collapse. But it is still a city! A living space of building and rebuilding, an *oeuvre* as Lefebvre would insist. As such, the spectacular destruction is matched by the quiet and constant production of work, life, law and space.

Catastrophe is also not an unproblematic concept. If everything is a catastrophe, it loses the force of its meaning. More than a few participants in the conference resisted the very notion, identifying many of its traps. So for instance, in certain modes of Christian theology, catastrophe would seem to require redemption. We are trapped in the *katechon*, the worldly suspension of the end times which holds off the justice of the end of the world. Participants introduced other cosmologies, where the significance of the catastrophe appeared differently or was rendered irrelevant. Others developed catastrophe in a more profane sense. We have tried to channel some of these key questions into this special issue. Here we pull together three beautiful engagements with catastrophe. Each of the articles engages with the question of catastrophe in different contexts, but they also instantiate some of the most

important current strands of critical legal theory. We want to suggest that they can be read together productively.

Butler reads the films of Keiler to grasp the catastrophe of urban ruins of neo-liberalism. The fantastical or surreal qualities of these texts help us think about the familiarity of the catastrophic spaces. In contrast, Taha's article presents us with a careful archival recovery of a minor officer of Empire, whose quotidian colonial administrative acts expose the everydayness of the catastrophe that was engulfing the world around him. In this, Taha focuses our attention on the manner in which international law takes place alongside and within the catastrophe. Paes takes up on the other side of the process that Taha describes—but in a very different way. She utilises psychoanalytical methods, but her object is very clearly the question of the decolonial. In these very different moments of thinking catastrophe, we see the playing out of redemption and condemnation, of delirium and reason, the intimate, the social and the global. In short, we begin to see the possibilities opened by a sensitisation to catastrophe.

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