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Article in *Progress in Human Geography* · February 2010

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Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes

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Abstract: Calls from the climate change community and a more widespread concern for human security have reawakened the interest of geographers and others in disaster politics. A legacy of geographical research on the political causes and consequences of disaster is reviewed and built on to formulate a framework for the analysis of post-disaster political space. This is constructed around the notion of a contested social contract. The Marmara earthquake, Turkey, is used to illustrate the framework and provide empirical detail on the multiple scales and time phasing of post-disaster political change. Priorities for a future research agenda in disaster politics are proposed.

Key words: climate change, development, humanitarian, natural disaster, politics.

I The geographical imagination and disasters

Geographers have long asserted a politics of disaster. Disaster politics analysis focuses on the interaction of social and political actors and framing institutions in preparing for and responding to extreme natural events, and suggests that the disaster events and their management are part of unfolding political histories. In 1983, Michael Watts argued from a materialist perspective that disasters both emerged from pre-existing social relations and had the power to catalyse or trigger further change in socio-ecological systems.

In the same year, from the standpoint of an activist-researcher, Fred Cuny (1983) suggested that catastrophic natural disasters could activate civil societies and produce new leaders that might:

remain to continue the work of bringing economic change to the community ... to replace those who have proved ineffective or unable to cope with the aftermath of a disaster. (Cuny, 1983: 11–13)

The terrain of a politics of disaster was marked out during this period, but not examined in detail. Over the coming decades

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political and critical analysis placed emphasis on pre-disaster conditions of vulnerability but rarely extended to post-disaster impacts (Pelling, 2001). More recently research and policy priorities driven by climate change (IPCC, 2007) and rapid urbanization (UN-HABITAT, 2007) have generated demand for greater understanding of how disaster impacts and reconstruction might reshape political systems and the governable space they inhabit. Demand has coincided with supply in the form of large events, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004, that provide empirical opportunities for comparative analysis. In the case of the tsunami, a sharp contrast has been made between the territorialized disbursement of aid and collapsed ceasefire in Sri Lanka (Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007), and the successful resolution of a peace agreement in Aceh, Indonesia, where pre-disaster peace talks were catalysed by international attention post-disaster and championed by the kind of local actors identified by Cuny, as well as more established political voices (Gaillard *et al.*, 2008). The slow and limited acceptance of international aid following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and efforts by the Chinese state to control criticism and reshape the Sichuan earthquake into a vehicle for nationalist sentiment show how fear of political change can lead to suppression of rights and the reinforcing of the status quo – at least in the short term.

If the political impacts of natural disasters can be observed (in acts of suppression as well as change), is it also possible to identify the tipping points, critical historical moments or broader influences on systems (internal and external) that determine the direction and significance of change? Recent thought on this question has been influenced by two claims. The first sees disasters producing an 'accelerated status quo' – change is path dependent and limited to a concentration or speeding up of pre-disaster trajectories which remain under the control of powerful elites

both before and after an event. Klein (2007) illustrates this at the national and global scales through an account of the increasing shift in resources and influence from the local to the global through the privatization of disaster reconstruction with reference to the Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. The second viewpoint sees evidence that disasters can catalyse a 'critical juncture' – an irreversible change in the direction or composition of a political regime (or its subsets). Olson and Gawronski (2003) apply this term to describe the outcomes of the 1985 Mexico City and 1972 Nicaraguan earthquakes on local and national politics. In both cases more egalitarian political systems emerged so that the post-disaster period served as a turning point in the historical trajectories of these polities. These cases may suggest a correlation between regressive political outcomes and an accelerated status quo, and progressive political outcomes and a critical juncture, but neither model has assumptions of political direction built in. Normative interpretation of the nature of political space post-disaster is contingent on the perspective of the observer including that of academic analysts and influenced by the timing of the analysis. The core distinction between these two idealized models is between change as an outcome of the successful concentration (accelerated status quo) and contestation (critical juncture) of established political and associated economic and cultural power. Change reveals itself in policy discourse as well as in material or resource flows.

In this paper the term natural disaster is used as shorthand for a humanitarian disaster associated with a natural hazard event. This distinguishes such events from disasters associated with technological hazards, or acts of terrorism and state violence, which are more accepted as being embedded in the political process. For Hewitt (1983), the distancing of natural disaster from development and politics formed a 'disaster archipelago', an attempt to bound disaster from

development. Conceived of as exceptional or unique and with a dedicated management technology, disasters were neutralized as a lens for revealing failings in underlying development processes and raising subsequent questions of legitimacy and culpability among the powerful in disaster causation. The dominance of geophysical science and of positivistic and behavioural social sciences in disaster management has maintained both the exceptionalism and apolitical construction of disasters (Pelling, 2001). Vulnerability analysis has provided a bridge between disaster and development through the application of livelihoods and entitlements approaches which incorporate institutions as key elements in understanding the shaping of human exposure, susceptibility and coping capacity (Birkmann, 2006). While most of this work is aimed at understanding and indicating patterns of vulnerability before disaster, some work has extended analysis to include post-disaster competition for resources and power (Özerdem and Jacoby, 2006) as well as recognizing the co-evolution of disaster risk and loss with human response in slow-onset drought and famine events recast as complex emergencies (Devereux and Maxwell, 2001).

The disaster archipelago means that much of the knowledge on disaster impacts has been generated by practitioners, humanitarian agencies and donors, and coloured by agency viewpoints. Humanitarian NGOs have rebranded post-disaster reconstruction as an opportunity for ‘building back better’ (ProVention Consortium, 2006) – claiming a developmental potential for reconstruction of social and political as well as physical infrastructure in places affected by disaster (eg, UNICEF, 2005), a position which is supported by academic work, but which also justifies humanitarian NGO expansion into the realm of social development. Dominant political actors are even more pointed in their conceptualization of the potential for transformative political space to be opened

by disaster. USAID (2002) describes post-disaster political spaces as:

moments when underlying causes [of conflict] can come together in a brief window, a window ideally suited for mobilizing broader violence. But such events can also have extremely positive outcomes if the tensions ... are recognized and handled well. (USAID, 2002)

Systematic learning from past disasters is further hampered by the uniqueness of each individual event. The social and spatial distribution of human vulnerability, the physical characteristics of the impacted area and the kind and severity of the hazard event vary for each disaster. This makes individual lessons context specific and not easy to transfer. In 1982, while investigating why similar types of environmental crises differentially affected countries throughout the world, Davis and Seitz bemoaned the lack of studies that systematically applied social-political-economic analysis to identify transferable lessons, and the small proportion of investigations in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Davis and Seitz, 1982). Twenty years on, Olson (2000: 265) came to a similar view. He accounted for neglect in this field for two reasons: first, an underemphasis of politics in the analytical lenses deployed by the leading fields engaged with disaster studies – geography and sociology; second, that the normative connotations of a politics of disaster was unsettling for many researchers and most practitioners ‘who essentially believed that there shouldn’t be a politics of disaster’ (Olson, 2000: 265–66).

This paper seeks to reassert a politics of disaster. The legacy of work on disaster politics produced by geographers and related disciplines, in particular development studies, is reviewed in the next section. This is followed by the outlining of a framework for the analysis of tipping points built around rights claims and contestation of the social contract. The framework is applied to the Maramara

earthquake, Turkey. In conclusion, priorities for a renewed research agenda in disaster politics are proposed.

II Disaster politics

Despite the lack of systematic data, a small number of comparative studies have sought to identify general trends or features of disaster politics. Albala-Bertrand (1993) undertook the first systematic survey of long-term political outcomes in developing countries, including cases where regime change appears to have been associated with disaster such as the Managua earthquake of 1972, the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) typhoon, and the Ethiopian drought-induced famines of 1973 and 1974. Albala-Bertrand's findings can be summarized into five general observations:

- The political, technological, social, or economic effects of disasters are explained primarily by a society's pre-disaster conditions.
- Responses to disasters vary according to the political visions of the major power holders (endogenous and exogenous) and tend to reveal dominant political philosophies.
- Government that immediately marshals what material and discursive powers it has may be rewarded with improved levels of popular post-disaster legitimacy.
- The structure of highly centralized governments is conducive to the efficient execution of post-disaster rehabilitation.
- If the political preconditions are fluid, a large, rather than a small, disaster is more likely to promote a breaking point in the political status quo ante.

An example of post-disaster political and policy change arising from a critical juncture and cited by Albala-Bertrand is the Chile earthquake, 1939. The earthquake killed 30,000 people and triggered accelerated policy change including, three months later, the founding of the Chilean Development

Corporation, an early champion for the wave of import substitution economics that soon after swept across Latin America (Gutierrez, 1969, cited in Albala-Bertrand, 1993). In this case, the disaster fed a national critical juncture with regional political-economic consequences.

Contrasting with Albala-Bertrand's political-economy approach, Drury and Olson (1998) undertook a statistical analysis to identify degrees of association between a range of variables and post-disaster political unrest following large disasters between 1966 and 1980. They concluded that political change was most likely when disaster losses were high, when the impacted regime was repressive, and where income inequality and levels of national development were low. Their conclusion that inequality was more important than absolute poverty as an explanation for post-disaster unrest is perhaps counterintuitive, but it is argued that the immediate concerns of extreme poverty prevent people from organized political action. Drury and Olson also confirmed a time decay effect where a disaster may increase political unrest for several years but that attributable effects decay over time as additional political concerns intervene. They confirmed Albala-Bertrand's conclusions that disaster outcomes are path dependent – prior political unrest was positively correlated with post-disaster unrest; and that authoritarian regimes are adept at suppressing post-disaster political unrest.

Based on a qualitative analysis of pre- and post-disaster political trajectories for 14 events from 1899 to 2004, Pelling and Dill (2006) noted that politically peripheral regions (including remote rural regions and informal urban squatter settlements close to the national political core) are often hit hardest by disasters. In this way disasters can highlight regional/ethnic/class inequality and feed into nascent or ongoing political struggles along these lines. The march of Berber communities following the 2004 Moroccan earthquake was a display of open protest against perceived inequality in state

development policy that had taken on a spatial dimension through the earthquake (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 2004). But dominant or state actors can also use disasters to further marginalize groups. One interpretation of aid blocking by the Myanmar state following Hurricane Nargis (2008) was to weaken resistance and force ethnic Karen rice farmers from the fertile land of the Irrawaddy delta – described by one commentator as ‘laissez-faire ethnic cleansing’ (Klein, 2008).

Pelling and Dill revealed the high number of cases where temporary breaks in dominant political and social systems post-disaster open space for alternative social and political organization to emerge. This includes destructive acts of looting or property invasion but also progressive, local organizing in otherwise authoritarian or exclusionary regimes. They also showed the preponderance for local organizing to be interpreted as a threat to the status quo. The rapid closing of political spaces partly explains their invisibility in international and comparative research. In authoritarian regimes, strategies for the repression of local organization included the use of legislative tools (eg, closure of NGO bank accounts) and violence, confirming Drury and Olson’s research. Lack of timely state response for reconstruction following the 1985 earthquake in Chile led to many local reconstruction organizations forming; in aggregate, these were perceived as a threat to the weak dictatorship in power and were subsequently co-opted or demobilized (Pelling, 2003). In democratic, transitional and authoritarian regimes, discursive capture of disaster events was found to be common and to contain unrest. Legislative or violent control and discursive capture enabled the reassertion of the status quo and in some cases an accelerated status quo. Those rarer cases where political change was identified were most likely when popular mobilization was sustained by discursive (ideological), organizational (social capital) and material (financial) support. In each case (and under authoritarian and democratic regimes)

post-disaster change was championed by opposition movements existing pre-disaster.

National political systems do not operate in isolation from international pressures. The potential for international aid to be used by national elites to limit political unrest and so contain change was observed by Drury and Olson (1998) and Pelling and Dill (2006). Using a game theoretic approach to model reconstruction outcomes, Cohen and Werker (2006) made an economic case for the local targeting of disaster reconstruction funded by international actors. They argue that this will minimize state rent-seeking, corruption and the political manipulation of reconstruction. This conclusion is supported by many recent empirical critiques of reconstruction that call for more participation from local actors (ProVention Consortium, 2006). The difference is that Cohen and Werker see local targeting as a way of circumventing the state rather than thickening governance. This raises significant concerns over sovereignty and the accountability of international actors to the state, a particular concern during the first phases of relief and reconstruction when normal levels of scrutiny on humanitarians as well as the state are often relaxed. This work also plays down the influence of internal distortions in the polity including corruption, clientalism and party patronage. As Pelling (1998) has demonstrated in the context of flooding in Guyana, local political elites are well placed to present themselves as local voices to capture funds allocated by external actors for local level risk reduction and so strengthen the status quo.

While an economic analysis is useful, and has purchase with decision-makers, it is partial (reminding us of Olson’s observation that disaster studies lack a political analysis). State actors may well be motivated by rent-seeking but will also desire to control alternative secondary political effects. This is well demonstrated by the Marmara earthquake, Turkey, in 1999, where economic tools – the freezing of NGO bank accounts – were used to achieve a political goal of recovering state

authority which had been threatened by local NGO activity (Jalali, 2002).

Cohen and Werker also argued that states isolated from the international community are forced to invest in disaster prevention to avoid post-disaster unrest because of lowered expectations of receiving bilateral aid post-disaster. Historical examples of Libya (under Qadhafi) and South Africa (under Apartheid rule) are used in defence of this proposition. But other cases point towards more complex relationships between national political pride, legitimacy, disaster management and international isolation. China's earthquake prediction and early warning system was developed in response to the 1966 Xingtai earthquake, not a refusal of aid (Ross, 1984), was specifically designed as a politically powerful statement of autonomy, and was a source of national pride conveying legitimacy to scientific and political leadership. Cuba's exemplary record for disaster prevention and response is a politically powerful statement of autonomy (from US regional hegemony), and a source of national pride (IFRC, 2005). Therefore, although low expectations of international aid may indeed be associated with higher levels of investment in prevention in particular cases, we would strongly argue against any suggestion that it is in all cases causal.

Writing from an international relations perspective, Kelman and Koukis (2000) and Kelman (2003) have studied the impacts of disaster diplomacy – the contribution of interstate cooperation in the aftermath of disaster to diplomatic relations. Overwhelmingly the evidence suggests that disaster diplomacy may provide additional momentum but does not catalyse diplomatic initiative, and often is an opportunity missed (Gaillard *et al.*, 2008). The South Asian earthquake, 2005, impacting on Indian and Pakistani Kashmir, can be interpreted as a missed opportunity for peace building in the face of a shared tragedy. This case also highlights the working-out of global political struggles in local places post-disaster with aid being

provided by organizations classified as terrorist or developmental by competing extra-local actors (Moench and Dixit, 2007).

It is at the subnational scale that struggles for political power are most clearly associated with disaster, as Albala-Bertrand (1993), Drury and Olson (1998), Pelling and Dill (2006) have observed. Reflecting on reconstruction following earthquakes in Kobe, Japan, and Gujarat, India, Nakagawa and Shaw (2004) showed that limited national political change can mask a good deal of movement at the local level. In these events local social organizations both served to lead and structure local reconstruction efforts and successfully leveraged new political as well as technical space through reconstruction. Özerdem and Jacoby (2006) examined Kobe and Gujarat alongside the Marmara, Turkey, earthquake and identified a tense relationship between the state and local civil society with reconstruction characterized as a period of heightened discursive and material competition as actors seek to position themselves for political advantage. In these cases civil society organizations were acknowledged by the state as legitimate political stakeholders, but there was limited evidence that new political space or alternative discourses for reconstruction and post-disaster development were generated; rather the disaster and associated reconstruction provoked competition for discursive high ground and influence over material assets within the established political space. Trigger points for critical junctures were successfully suppressed.

III From describing outcomes to understanding processes of change

This section develops a framework to guide analysis of processes of political change associated with disaster. This takes forward the preceding discussion, which has focused on outcomes and causal relationships rather than the intervening and historical process of change-making. The framework presented here provides a language and structure to focus analytical attention on the moments

of transition that can act as tipping points towards concentration or contestation of political power. Politics is understood as being embedded within social relations (Scott, 1976); consequently the object of interest includes sociopolitical systems and power in addition to electoral outcomes or formal political regime structure and change.

In any one political regime the balance between competing security interests is presented as an extension of the social contract. In its classical formulation this is a contract between citizens and the state. As we will see later the metaphor of a social contract can be extended to describe power relations between any group that has incomplete domination over another – including between different social groups within a state, but we are primarily interested in, and outline the significance of the social contract for, disaster politics with relation to citizen-state relations. In this formulation, the social contract is held in the social and spatial distribution of rights and responsibilities between citizens and the state. This is arrived at and maintained with varying degrees of inclusion or coercion, in which individual and collective rights are ceded to (or captured by) the state in return for some level of stability and security. It is in the articulation of rights claims that the political is revealed (Isin, 2002). Private, hidden and tacit expressions of discontent (Giddens, 1984) and resistance such as poaching, squatting, vandalism and linguistic resistance (Pred and Watts, 1992) have been noted in even the most unequal of relationships. Hirshleifer (1995) separates social contracts that are authoritarian and vertical in the sense of Thomas Hobbes, from those that are horizontal, democratic and built on popular consent, as advocated by John Locke (Murshed and Tadjoeeddin, 2008). Where the social contract is contested post-disaster by the state, citizenry or subgroups, regime instability opens up (with scope for progressive and regressive change). It is at this point that the rights claims that legitimate the institutionalization and distribution

of security in the social contract (between the state and citizens and also between different non-state actors) are tested and can be renegotiated. Negotiation of security may be through discursive or more physical acts of competition and violence. In this way disasters demonstrate a manifest failure in the social contract and open space for renegotiation in the values and structures of society. Our interest lies in the extent to which this space is politicized, whether it is populated by new or existing social organizations and how quickly and in what manner the state and other dominant social actors respond. Is there a redistribution of power in governance – for example through decentralization (or centralization) or in changed civil society/state relations? Or, as Murshed and Tadjoeeddin (2008) argued, where a national polity has a framework of widely agreed rules that govern the peaceful settlement of grievances is this sufficient to contain change at the technical level or local scale? A critical juncture is arrived at when change initiated at this moment is made concrete in a revision of the social contract, or at least in the balance of underlying institutions.

Understanding a polity as a broad set of social relations moves analysis to an assessment of the distribution and implementation of rights and responsibilities pre- and post-disaster. This highlights the distinction between national and human security in legitimizing the social contract. These two ways of thinking about security are the source of tension for many post-disaster polities. The concept of human security was first elaborated in detail in UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report and emphasized people's freedoms, values, rights and responsibilities (Anand and Gasper, 2007). Booth (1991) argued that national and human security need not coincide. States cannot be counted on to prioritize the security of their citizens: some maintain at least minimal levels in order to promote regime legitimacy but are unmotivated to go farther, others

are financially or institutionally incapable of providing even minimal standards, while still others are more than willing to subject entire sectors of society to high levels of insecurity for the economic and political benefit of others who then use their power to support the regime. Studies of environmental degradation and climate change show a vicious cycle where human insecurity (limited access to rights and basic needs) generates vulnerability to environmental change and hazard, the impacts of which undermine livelihoods and capacity to adapt and survive future threats (Nordås and Gleditsch, 2007).

The tensions between state and non-state constructions of security and a reframing of vulnerability as a concern for human security have become increasingly prominent elements in critiques of post-cold-war development theory and policy. Two lines of critique are of particular relevance to disaster politics: the first revitalizes environment-security concerns and flags the political nature of technology; the second sees development itself as in danger of being captured by the security narrative. Parallel thinking on the environment-security nexus ranges from neomalthusianism (Homer-Dixon, 1994) where insecurity is constructed as an outcome of population, technology and administration, to political-economy viewpoints arguing that national and international structures shape the use of technology and local distributional inequalities and risk (Peet and Watts, 1996). This has perhaps been most developed in critical hydropolitics – for example, the work of Mustafa (2007) that sees the social construction of water security in the Indus Valley rooted in technological-epistemic and political communities at the subnational level, albeit with strong linkages to the international. The securitization of development particularly after 11 September 2001 has seen increased military spending and the overt use of post-disaster aid as a tool for winning minds. More broadly, Duffield (2007) interprets securitization as a deeper shift in the dominant motive for

international development. This he argues has moved from one of meeting postcolonial global responsibilities for human rights to one of protecting the global core through the extending of basic needs or, if this fails, military power to subdue and contain surplus populations in the global periphery. This provides a powerful metanarrative for disaster politics and in its recognition of multiple discourses of development echoes the work of post-development scholars (Escobar, 1995).

Within disaster politics, the renegotiation of rights to security around the social contract is usefully grounded by comparing the political outcomes of two earthquakes. In Nicaragua in 1972, an autocratic regime imposed a social contract onto its citizens offering little human security in exchange for rights. Corruption and theft of relief and reconstruction aid catalysed popular armed struggle. This fed into an ongoing political opposition movement which resulted in an armed revolution and a new social contract. Mexico City, following the 1985 earthquake, experienced an opening of political space and an assertion of new political rights through a coalition of workers, middle-class liberals and academic activists. Sustained popular activism forced a reconfiguration of urban politics and changed priorities around struggles for social housing, protecting the rights and human security of low-income survivors and effectively repositioning the social contract for governance in the city (Robinson *et al.*, 1986, cited in Oliver-Smith, 1986).

In the neoliberal period, privatization of security and the shrinking of the state mean that non-governmental actors including those from the private sector and international NGOs have taken on increasingly influential roles in designing, disseminating and directing programmes for disaster mitigation, response and relief. These new actors need to be included in accounts of maintenance and change in the social contract which puts stress on pre-existing state-based legal structures for accountability. International, private-sector response in Sri Lanka following

the Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004, was overwhelming. Despite the efforts of large, established humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies to partner the state and coordinate actions, smaller unaccountable private organizations mushroomed to undertake disaster relief work generating a ‘second tsunami’ (Wickramasinghe, 2005). This new landscape of autonomous, often temporary, private organizations threatened the sustainability of local institutions, eroding accountability and undermining the legitimacy of the state, replacing it with the logic of competing private interests (TEC, 2006).

Figure 1 presents an analytical framework around which to examine the social forces at work in shaping the social contract and human security post-disaster embedded within ongoing development. Four moments are identified to help draw out the cycle of disaster and political change, and to identify tipping points that shape the future political trajectory towards an accelerated status quo or a critical juncture. For heuristic purposes the cycle is presented as linear but on the ground elements of each moment will coincide and are likely to unfold at different paces or be blocked or backslide in specific locales or

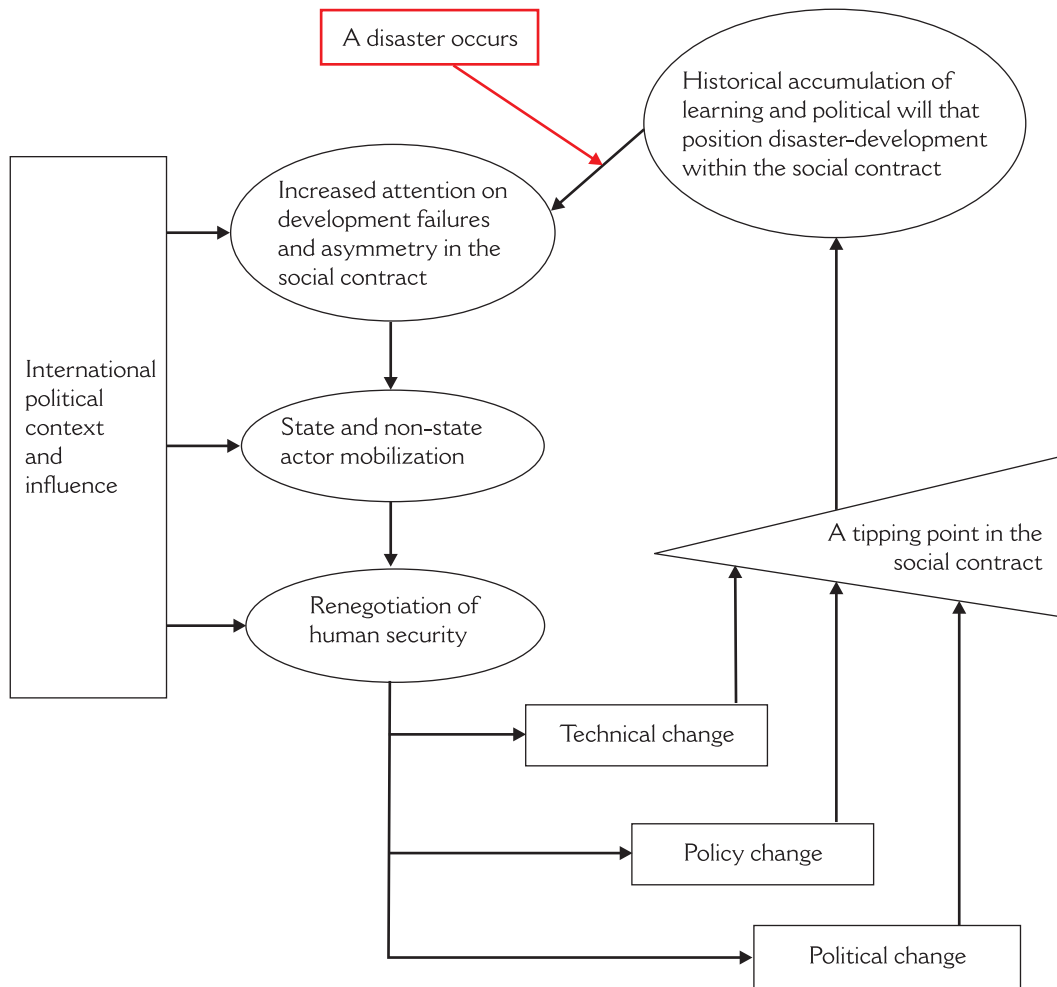


Figure 1 The cycle of disaster and political change

policy sectors. The aim with this framework, and its illustration below, is to take the wide view. Because the framework situates disaster impacts within the unfolding development history of a polity, it opens scope for analysis beyond the crisis period. Data limitations make this challenging with background noise from competing pressures and processes pre- and post-disaster meaning the disaster-specific political signal is harder to discern with increasing temporal distance, but the possibility remains. Temporal phasing is built into the framework through those moments immediately post-disaster (moments one and two) where rights discourses can be mobilized and those more distant moments (three and four) where renegotiated claims may be institutionalized.

The framework begins and ends with ongoing development, including the historical accumulation of learning to meet disaster risk management aims (including missed opportunities, inequalities and failures as well as socially progressive outcomes). This is constrained by political will, a product of the wider social contract. The first moment post-disaster focuses attention on how unequal social and spatial distribution of losses can lead to a questioning in discourse of underlying development failures and of asymmetry in the social contract. The second moment draws attention to the mobilization of non-state and state actors to champion, direct, counter or capture evolving critical discourses. Institutionalization of discourse into policy and legislation is captured by the third moment which then feeds back into development (the fourth moment) through a renegotiation of human security. Institutionalization takes place through three (potentially reinforcing) domains – the technical, policy and political. Each domain can contribute to a critical juncture in the social contract (progressive or regressive for human security). Scope for political change increases in likelihood from technical through policy to new political settlements. These responses to disaster feed back into the historical

accumulation of learning, completing the cycle of disaster and political change. Foreign powers, international private-sector and non-governmental actors and the global-historical context within which national and local post-disaster political change unfolds also influence the scope and direction for change.

IV Tipping points and change in Turkey following the Marmara earthquake

Can the Marmara earthquake be said to have led to a critical juncture in the social contract – and if so what were the tipping points that opened up or constrained change as revealed through the framework outlined above? Figure 2 supports the following narrative account and summarizes the experience of the Marmara earthquake. Two potential tipping points are identified, one driven from the bottom up by civil society and the other a top-down product of international diplomacy. This assessment was constrained by the limited range of evidence (most accounts were restricted to physical impacts and managerial concerns) and the ideological bias of data sources. Furthermore the selection of evidence and its presentation, as in any work, was influenced by the viewpoint of the observer – including the author (Poovey, 1998). To this end the analytical language and framework described above provided a basis of structure and transparency for the analysis. The presentation in the following narrative of direct quotations from multiple journalists and commentators aims to retain a sense of the messy, unfolding political trajectory, and to limit capture by a single observer's voice.

The Turkish polity is deeply influenced by its Ottoman and Turkish Republic legacy, generating an autonomous, paternalistic state and a passive political culture (Heper, 1994). The secular Turkish polity is set within a society with a strong religious identity, generating a three-way political cleavage with economic, party political and cultural dimensions. Elements in civil society as well as the military are highly conservative and

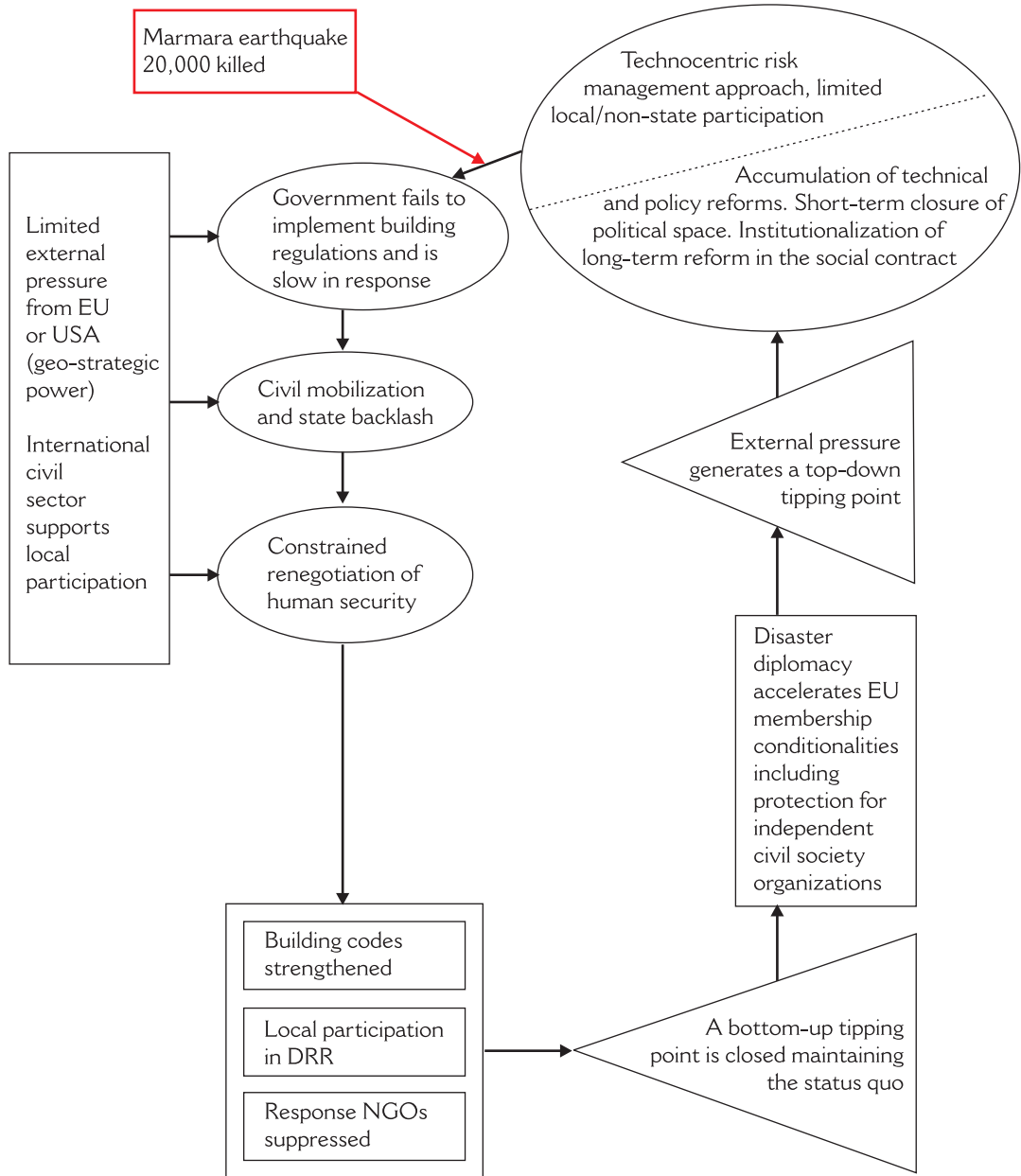


Figure 2 Progression and tipping points in the Marmara earthquake, Turkey, 1999

anti-democratic (Secor, 2001). Civil society itself is split along ethnic and religious lines and further between well-established organizations with close connections to the state, and more fragile and independent voluntary associations (Mardin, 1995). Within this

political structure, pre-Marmara disaster management was centralized with the state regulating safe construction, land-use planning and leading on response through civil defence and the para-statal Red Crescent. The Marmara earthquake struck 90 miles

from Istanbul during the early hours of 17 August 1999, and it measured 7.4 on the Richter scale. The Turkish government recorded 20,000 dead, 48,901 injured and 377,897 buildings damaged or destroyed.

For the first weeks after the earthquake citizens were surprised by the inability of the state to provide aid or direct the hundreds of national and international volunteers streaming into the region:

The relief-and-rescue efforts were mainly supplied by neighbours, relatives, individuals (from rich businessmen to university students from outside the area), spontaneously formed volunteer groups (such as the student-led relief initiative of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara), political parties, foreign rescue teams and more-established NGOs (such as AKUT and the Turkish Medical Association). (Jalali, 2002: 125)

Inadequate state response was compounded by the growing realization that the state failed to implement the regulation of building standards pre-disaster. Erosion of trust in the state opened a policy and political gap, provoking increased attention on underlying inequalities and inefficiencies in governance. Jalali observed that as the days wore on it became clear that the central government had little to offer the survivors and that the first response mobilization was led by civil society. The media arrived after 17 hours of road travel. The Red Crescent stunned everyone by its absence for the first five days, and two full weeks after the earthquake state presence remained limited. Given its inability to provide services for the survivors, the state limited its presence and allowed civil society to take charge of search and rescue and primary humanitarian aid (Kubicek, 2002). However, relinquishing control was seized upon by critics of the status quo as a sign of state weakness moving a policy gap into a public discourse on development failure:

In the first days after the earthquake, NGOs were praised for their efforts. The Search and Rescue Association (AKUT) was particularly

visible, rescuing over 200 people from the rubble and becoming a media favourite ... three dozen NGOs made an effort to coordinate their activities by establishing a Civil Coordination Centre (CCC) and using an independent radio station to match donors with people in need. Many groups established their own tent cities and soup kitchens, which served thousands of people. (Kubicek, 2002: 767)

As the discourse built momentum, the mobilization of civil society was first presented by the media as a positive extension of the state's paternalistic reach but then as signifying its limited capacity to act. Foreseeing a potential crisis of legitimacy, the Turkish government's interest in containing popular criticism and mobilization in civil society led the Health Minister to reverse his initial praise of civil society's quick action with an accusation that AKUT had acted irresponsibly, embarrassing the state and not helping the people (Kubicek, 2002). The disaster rapidly became a symbol for political positioning; the *Washington Post* reported on government fears that Islamic organizations would benefit politically from the disaster:

The contest – partly a gathering war of words, partly a matter of power politics and muscle-flexing – involves the government's apparent unease over emergency relief programs mounted by Turkey's main Islamic-oriented political party and a host of Islamic humanitarian relief organizations. The government's fear, now being expressed explicitly, is that pro-Islamic politicians will be able to turn the quake, and the authorities' fumbling response to it, to their advantage. (Hockstader, 1999)

Competition over discourse soon led to state mobilization and active repression of non-state-approved NGOs that failed to channel funds through the state-aligned Red Crescent agency Kisilay. The state began to freeze bank accounts:

Some Islamic groups such as Mazlumder and the Human Rights and Freedom Foundation complained that the government overstepped its authority by closing not just special relief accounts but general operating accounts of

organizations. Officials from Mazlumder saw political motivations in the government's activities, as their bank account had been shut down but that of a 'Kemalist' [ie, closer to the state] group remained open. (Kubicek, 2002: 767)

This is the moment where a potential bottom-up tipping point, driven by civil society claims was, in the short term at least, controlled by the state and arguably used to strengthen state authority through the closure of bank accounts of independent civil society organizations – a potential critical juncture shifts towards an acceleration of the status quo. Jalali (2002) wrote that while government agents claimed that the sudden centralization of services was enacted to increase efficiency and functionality of the aid process, the motivations driving the decision were decidedly political:

What was not said openly was that the government, ruled by an unstable coalition of three political parties with major ideological differences, feared that if the state did not deliver and public criticism of their performance continued, it would completely undermine public confidence in the state, and even lead to the loss of power for all the three ruling political parties in the next elections. The government also feared that a loss of confidence in the three parties would be a gain for other political parties, particularly the Fazilet – an Islamic party very active in the first few weeks in the disaster area. That party has a strong grassroots network and a formidable reputation for delivering services in many major Turkish cities, particularly in slum areas. (Jalali, 2002: 128)

NGOs responded in turn, taking their case to the public and keeping the new political space open:

On September 1, over one hundred NGOs published a manifesto in all the major newspapers, calling on the state not to centralize relief efforts and to extend gratitude to NGOs instead of belittling them. It heralded 17 August as the beginning of a 'new era', one in which national and moral values would be preserved thanks to grassroots initiatives and NGOs. (Kubicek, 2002: 767)

Despite this action the medium-term outcome of the Marmara earthquake was for the state to close political space and increase the centralization of disaster management. Key to this was the passing of an amendment to Article 8 of the Civil Defence Law (December 1999), which obliges all volunteer groups to coordination by the Ministry of the Interior, and in 2000 by the establishment of the Emergency Management General Directorate as an overarching body to control disaster management (Özerdem and Jacoby, 2006). Medium-term technical and social policy changes were more progressive, providing simultaneously a positive set of reforms and a justification for reduced attention to political reform as a measure for risk reduction. Progressive technical advances included new university programmes in disaster management and NGO training for local disaster wardens – often with international NGO and UN agency support. New social policy included a Neighbourhood Disaster Support Project, in the province of Kocaeli, which commenced in 2000 and brings together state and non-state actors with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – again demonstrating the positive (but limited) influence of international actors engaging with the state through disaster management.

In summary, the high level of public attention garnered by civil society during the crisis, and high rates of volunteer mobilization, opened a potential tipping point for a critical juncture in the social contract with a larger role for independent volunteer groups alongside established civil society and state actors. This opening was quickly (if messily) closed by the state where political change was perceived as a threat to the delicate balance between the secular, democratic state and more conservative elements in civil society that any opening might support.

Political events also unfolded at the international scale and successfully changed the formal institutional landscape in Turkey, enhancing legal protection of civil rights to independent association and so deepening

this element of human security. Political reform hinged on improved relations between Greece and Turkey following the Marmara earthquake and a smaller earthquake that hit Athens soon after. Bilateral post-disaster aid was offered and received by both countries despite long-standing media and popular suspicions. Trust built up through this shared response to the earthquakes generated popular legitimacy for quiet diplomacy that had been in place several months earlier, culminating in Greek support for Turkish candidacy to the EU. Popular legitimacy for bilateral negotiations provided impetus for rapprochement, but without the solid base of diplomacy preceding the earthquake gains are unlikely to have withstood EU membership candidacy negotiations, hung as they were on long-standing tensions surrounding Cyprus (Ker-Lindsay, 2000). Specific rights reforms came with the subsequent acceptance by Turkey of nine harmonization conditions required for EU membership. These may provide the long-term institutional glue to fix rights claims that spontaneous civil society response to the earthquake could not achieve and in this way represents a top-down tipping point for change. Reforms include a Law on Associations (2004) preventing state intervention in the activities of private associations. Bikman (2004: 116, cited in Özerdem and Jacoby, 2006) has claimed these reforms will 'shape a new [social] contract between government and citizens'.

V Conclusion

The political impacts of disaster unfold at multiple scales from individual questions of citizenship and rights claims, through local social organization, to questions of state legitimacy and international diplomacy. Some impacts unfold during reconstruction, others may be felt only at distance or indirectly – feeding into, yet influencing, ongoing development trajectories. Political impacts are at times coded or hidden, distorted by media coverage or rapidly suppressed by the powerful. Given these challenges for making

politics visible it is perhaps not surprising that geography, and other disciplines, have been criticized for failing to include a political lens in studies of disaster impact and response. The discomfort caused to the humanitarian community by a political or developmental reading of disaster risk reduction and response, for good strategic reasons, has also helped to move the gaze of disaster analysis away from politics and towards the economic, social and physical impacts of disaster.

Recent large disasters (the Indian Ocean tsunami, the south Asian earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Nargis and the Sichuan earthquake) have highlighted both the importance of political context and the possibility that disaster impact and response can influence subnational, national and international politics. These events have coincided with the rise of a security discourse in policy and academic communities which has repositioned extreme events, especially those associated with climate change, as threats to national and human security.

Responding to the recognized gap in the geographical study of disaster politics and rising interest in the influence of disaster shocks on political systems, this paper has reviewed the legacy of existing knowledge and proposed a framework for analysis built around competing rights claims and the metaphor of a social contract. Disaster shocks open political space for the contestation or concentration of political power and the underlying distributions of rights between citizens and citizens and the state. The focus has been on national and subnational politics and sociopolitics, but it is also important to recognize the influence of international actors and global historical context in shaping national and local political and social life, as the case study of Turkey has shown.

This paper argues, and exemplifies through the case of the Marmara earthquake in Turkey, that the moments that rights are claimed or denied can be seen as potential tipping points for political change. How such claims are made and interact over time and

space, whether others are silenced (through self and social policing), and responded to, contributes towards an understanding of the processes by which sociopolitical forms adapt, resist or collapse following extreme events. How polities respond has implications for the social and spatial distribution of goods during reconstruction and for the underlying social contract shaping vulnerability to future shocks, whatever their triggering mechanism. Turkey, a democratic, paternalistic regime, at first welcomed civil society organization as an extension of the state during response. When this threatened to open political space and advantage for civil society groups that potentially threatened the centralization of power in the state, the space was closed. Simultaneous rapprochement with Greece, popularly legitimized by bilateral support post-disaster and leading to EU membership candidacy status has increased pressure on Turkey for internal political reform including protection for the independence of civil society organizations of a kind denied following the earthquake. This case demonstrates well the multiple scales of political change and the need to follow processes of change through time. Change in the social contract did not come as a direct result of civil society pressure during the disaster response period, but from the additional popular legitimacy given to rapprochement and ongoing international diplomacy. The former provided evidence and impetus to support the latter but was not sufficient alone to provoke change in the social contract in the short term.

This discussion of the emerging research agenda for disaster politics points to three research priorities:

- An assessment, through comparative analysis, of the tipping points and thresholds that open political space and lead to critical junctures in the social contract, and how far dominant political trends associated with areas at high risk from the impacts of

climate change (weak and failing states, regimes in transition to democracy, regimes undergoing a reassertion of authoritarianism or facing economic restructuring) shift these trigger points for change. This responds to the IPCC (2007) call for work to help understand processes shaping adaptive capacity and action and in particular the extent of sudden tipping points that can shift socio-ecological systems from one equilibrium state to another.

- A renewed engagement with the global political-economy of disaster reconstruction to critically examine the impacts of increased privatization and globalization. Susman *et al.*'s (1983) theory of marginalization used global political economy to analyse the role of disaster aid in perpetuating vulnerability. There has been little follow-up of this approach despite the globalization and privatization of the global disaster economy (Klein, 2005) and concerns that this has meant opportunities are being missed for building local political and economic capacity into reconstruction (ProVention Consortium, 2006).
- An exploration of the implications for human security of humanitarian practice – examining how far developmental activities such as participatory disaster risk reduction can foster local social and political institutions during reconstruction. This change in practice reflects an ongoing but incomplete shift in the balance of values from the neutrality of humanitarianism to a politically engaged developmental approach as disaster response agencies integrate disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation into their work.

Together, these research priorities build on a legacy of geographical work to offer a contemporary engagement with the politics of disaster. They respond to the call for work to unpack the interaction of contemporary development trends such as urbanization and the local and national impacts of climate

change with the politics of development (Barnett and Adger, 2007) and do so at a time when climate change and global economic crisis mean disaster loss and potential for political change are increasing.

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