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The Revolutionary Disaster / The Disaster of Revolution

Andrew Culp

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***Our world is awash with disaster.** The cheapest explanation would be to dismiss it all as wish fulfillment. That account takes the apocalypse to be the playing out of impossible fantasies. On the one hand, it delivers the satisfaction of revenge, entitlement, or wickedness without forcing one to face the consequences of it actually happening. Or on the other, it offers the powerless an imaginary situation in which all their problems have disappeared. But neither are the real disaster, only a dissimulation. The real disaster has already happened, is happening now, and will happen in the future.

***The disaster is an ongoing presence without being present.** History in turn seals it with a beginning and end. For this reason, there are histories of the disaster but they remain outside it. Disastrous waves continue to strike the shore long after the ships of the transatlantic slave trade ceased setting sail. Too impatient to wait, history gets used to holding Black non/being captive, confining it to the past in an ongoing effort to commit it to irrelevance. Against this, Christina Sharpe challenges thought to stay in the wake. Wake work does not futilely at-

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tempt recovery. It interrupts the idea that even the most restrained disaster is complete.

*Laruelle: philosophy proves its inadequacy through its obsession with the World and Man. With the World, philosophy concerns itself with a bad faith inquiry into “what everything turns around” (*Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, 5). In Man, philosophy poses its answer to all problems: Man as subject of salvation. Both result in an idealist anthropology designed only to evade thought.

*No one thing is *the* disaster. Nor are the things that make up the disaster analogous. It is not possible to wrap slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, capitalism, and climate change into just one thought. Nonetheless, the disaster demands we think.

*The disaster is the outside. It is not a constituent outside concealed by the frame, like a gust that blows in through an open window. It is not the revenge of a repressed as if there was something unthought, ignored, or otherwise unaccounted for thing asserting its nagging presence. At one time the outside was seen as the necessity of contingency, which is to say, those elements that reveal how every system is incomplete – but that made it seem too much like a space of possibility. It has a much more passive character; “where being lacks without giving place to non-being” (*Writing the Disaster*, 18).

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*What to do with disaster when it is what makes this world intolerable – disaster is capitalist strategy – but it also offers an opportunity to break from such a world?

*The disaster, coming from the Italian *disastro*, literally means the tearing asunder of the stars. It suggests something different than waywardness. It is not the temporary disorientation of lost compass points, forgotten as quickly as it passes and, subsequently, a course correction is called. Nor is it simply the opposite of the sky, as if a fall from the sky inevitably leads to a tumble down onto *terra firma*. Without the framing gods who hold up the sky, the division between

day and night cease to exist, from which the chthonic gods derive their power. Rather, it is the utter suspension of the whole cosmos the only type of revolution worthy of the name. Neither an evolution nor a seizure of power. It is a structural subversion that dismantles the whole system. It offers no “instead,” no something-else to be put in its place.

*The revolution of the disaster, the disaster of the revolution. It would be easy for disaster to be treated as just another word for tragedy. Following from an error at which Nietzsche sneered – to mistake something for its origins – the temptation is to take the writing of the disaster as a metaphor expanding from the death camps. But what if the disaster is always more abstract than it is concrete? The totalizing impulse of the disaster then tends toward the rupture of all relations, a disorientation so absolute that it suspends the world, and with it, the good and the bad.

*The end of the world stands at the threshold of indiscernibility between utopia and dystopia. “Communism: that which excludes (and is itself excluded from) any already constituted community,” Blanchot writes, “between the liberal capitalist world, our world, and the present of the exigency of Communism (a present without presence), there is merely the hyphenation of a disaster, of a change that is astral [*un changement d’astre*]” (Blanchot, “Disorderly Words,” 203- 204).

*The utopian disaster of communism and the horrifying disaster of slavery overlap in their mutual destitution – a point where relations are not affirmed or negated but simply break apart. As a break, could they be the same type of disaster?

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*The disaster is silent. It has nothing to say in the face of interrogation, it cannot account for itself. There are not legitimate and illegitimate varieties of the disaster. This is because the disaster is not any particular affirmation that can be refuted, as if its legitimacy could be revoked in a way that would make

it cease to exist. It is the event in which even negation itself is suspended, the moment when all relations collapse.

*To think the disaster does not mean laying the foundation for a new form of thought. It provides no new methods, theories, or knowledge. Like Nietzsche, it takes thinking to be a form of suffering tied to the great human capacity for forgetting (“Have you suffered for knowledge’s sake?” he asks). The point being that not only the most athletic (or destitute) are fit to breathe the rarefied air of knowledge. Rather, to think the disaster means to apprehend our own ignorance. As a force, it demands that we forget what has henceforth been called thinking, a result of the realization that no amount of thought was able to prevent the disaster.

*Asking the disaster to teach us anything would already be asking too much. As Isabelle Stengers notes, the disaster intrudes with indifference. This is not cowardly or narcissistic indifference. Quite the opposite. It is the indifference of something too powerful and too otherworldly to even know to care. She speaks of Gaia, a god so primordial as to remain unmoved by the fate of humans. Perhaps even a name as transcendent as Gaia grants the disaster a presence still too familiar. No amount of knowledge about the disaster can conjure its power, its forces too radically inhuman.

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*Even if the disaster produces subjects, there is no subject of the disaster. It cannot be issued from a subject’s capacity. No doubt there are politicians of the disaster who loudly declare their support or opposition. But unlike the law, the disaster is neither the product of authority nor the result of assent. The disaster carries subjects within it, just as clouds carry rain.

*Paraphrasing Tiqqun, it would be easy to assume that the disaster confronts us like a subject. But what if we encounter it like an environment that is alien to us? It does not face us, even if we try to imagine it as speaking in a foreign tongue. Rather, its alchemy of forces cannot be directly experienced.

Its mode of hostility is not antagonism but alienation, acting as a solvent that makes us strangers to ourselves and others, preventing subjects from forming solidarities.

*If the disaster acts with the force of non-relation, then its arrival renders meaningless the politics of being for or against. It is an event that could care less about who brought it about. No amount of ‘justice’ can reverse it. Its reach so wide-ranging, its consequences so complete, it is written in the language of death. For those who re-emerge on the other side are never the same...

Maurice Blanchot, “Disorderly Words,” trans. Michael Holland, in *The Blanchot Reader* (Blackwell, 1995):200-227.

Maurice Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

François Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith (Univocal, 2012).

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).

Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R Galloway and Jason E Smith (Semiotext(e), 2010).