

## Environmental Risks: For Another Reading of Territories

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The Val d'Isère avalanche on February 10, 1970, left 39 dead and 37 wounded.

Source : [Archives du Dauphiné Libéré](#)

While environmental risks are now part of both the academic and public landscapes in the context of climate change, the connection between the two terms was not always so important. The work of the Group for the History of Forests (GRHEF), the Nature Protection Association (APHNE), and the Association for the Prevention of Natural Catastrophes (AFPCN) bears mentioning, as does that of the PIREN programs of the CNRS. There are extensive national and international studies that were conducted separately, as well as others that now use a cross-cutting approach. However, alongside theoretical research, this field very early on included the finalized aspect of interdisciplinary research on projects in connection with territorial stakeholders. Reflecting on this topic raises the question of how academic knowledge is constructed, as well as the complex subject of how societies have over time experienced, accepted, anticipated, and countered the risks they faced, in addition to how they now include the environmental question, which is henceforth combined with the sense of urgency connected to climate change. This is a good way to understand how societies envision risk and the environment at a particular point in their history, for their definitions and attitudes evolved depending on the local or global context.

Before authors unequivocally cited the work of Ulrich Beck, the question of risks was

initially an economic and insurance related matter. "The loan for the *grosse aventure*" (great adventure), which was contemporary with transatlantic trade and the exploitation of Latin American empires, included within its practices the risk of a crossing subject to the hazards of not only storms, but also and especially to European wars that promoted buccaneering and other acts of piracy. Explored in the 1970s by early modern economic historians such as B. Benassar, the subject gradually migrated toward other historical periods, as well as the study of catastrophes. The latter were considered from the perspective of the period's calamities (war, plague, famine) as so many elements that explain political and social crises or are the result thereof, in connection with the historical moment of the French Revolution. E. Le Roy Ladurie's climate history since the year 1000, an original work, chiefly corresponded to a desire to explain the crises of the late eighteenth century through weather conditions. Using the serial source of *bans de vendanges* (authorizations to begin harvesting grapes), he reconstructed climate data over the *longue durée*, thereby broaching the trajectory of economic, political, and social conditions of Ancien Régime societies. This inter-topical approach long remained original, and with the exception of C. Pfister's work did not impact other research until recent explorations relating to new climactic and environmental approaches.

The traditional definition of risk involves the potential occurrence of an event that can take a serious turn, up to and including catastrophe, which is to say an event that can lead to material damage and human loss. A distinction is generally made between natural risks reducible to physical hazards, and technological, industrial, and health risks, whose consequences on the environment are generally experienced in a more visible, powerful, and direct manner. This distinction is present in the historiographies and branches of environmental history.

### **Natural Risks and the Environment: An Approach Dominated by the Geosciences, Focusing on the Question of Hazards**

When economic, insurance-related, and medical aspects are excluded, studies focus on natural hazards. The geosciences long dominated the field and continue to do so today, with a focus on physical hazards such as earthquakes, floods, rockslides, avalanches, torrential lava, and storms. This involves measuring, assessing, and understanding in the effort to anticipate solutions for protection and prevention when catastrophes happen. Alongside works of fundamental research, especially in times of catastrophe, came a rise in targeted research programs led by institutions such as the BRGM or Cemagref, for purposes of town and country planning. A few events, or series of events, have marked the chronology of programs and studies, and have even given rise to major legislation. For example, the avalanche in the val d'Isère in February 1970 led to updated and systematized investigations to understand avalanches. The series of catastrophic storms and floods in 1981 led to the CatNat law of July 1982 regarding the compensation of victims of natural catastrophes; those of the early 1990s, especially the potential collapse of the Séchilienne mountain (Isère), directly exposing the city of Grenoble to a catastrophic flood and the risk of the chemical site (Seveso risk) located uphill from the city, led to the Barnier law of February 1995 regarding increased protection for the environment and populations threatened by major natural risks. While these programs were often at the initiative of the Ministry of Ecology/Environment, most of them were not directly connected to the environment as the term has been understood since the year 2000. With the emblematic example of Séchilienne, the Barnier law very much included this dual dimension of natural

and environmental risks, and faced with the need to take populations into consideration, prompted the geosciences to call upon the HSS.

### **From Hazards to Vulnerability: The Contribution of Historians and the HSS to Natural Risks**

Historians, who were slower to engage with the topic than other HSS disciplines, firstly conducted their research in connection with interdisciplinary programs often led by geographers, sociologists, and archeologists, and bringing together multiple universities, such as the program on the flooding of the Vilaine River, which grew out of the Riclim research group. Historians gradually specialized in this topic, with a number of dissertations being defended during the 2000s and 2010s. At first it was medieval and early modern scholars such as J. Berlioz, C. Desplat, and R. Favier who studied well-known catastrophes, and who were always cited as references: the Lisbon earthquake, the collapse of Mont Granier, and the major floods of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. A series of conferences and seminars were held during these decades, followed by regular publications. A few isolated works, notably relating to forests, included the dimension of risks, especially after the great storm of 1999. Some specialists of urban history included the topic of floods after the spates of 1990 and the early twenty-first century.

When the geosciences call upon historians, it is firstly to inform of past events in order to reconstruct the chronological series of events as part of efforts at modelization. One of the central issues is to understand how all archives are incomplete constructs with an orientation, even when they provide factual elements. Another key issue is the particular orientation. Historians are interested more in vulnerability than hazard, one that results as much from the territory as it does from human activity. This dynamic, and especially the growing awareness of societies and their memory over the *longue durée*, call for revisiting the so-called traditional analysis of societies that emerged in the eighteenth century. Far from being passive populations in the face of events, recent research has shown that they were always capable of managing the risks and dangers inherent to territories, in accordance with the technological possibilities and empirical knowledge they transmitted. In parallel, the need to develop and equip territories with industrial and urban development from the nineteenth century onward made territories more vulnerable, just as scientific knowledge was developing, emerging, neglecting vernacular knowledge, and dispossessing populations of risk management.

Emphasis was henceforth placed on territorial management (planning) that was implemented to render acceptable the risks and fragility of current societies, which are dependent on scientific and technical knowledge, and have often lost the relation to the territory in which they live.

### **The End of the Illusion of “Zero Risk” and the Return of the Culture of Risk**

The series of catastrophic events (floods, storms) at the turn of the twenty-first century challenged the notion of “zero risk” that held sway until the late 1990s. This challenge came from governmental departments, as well as pressure campaigns by insurers, who had to contend with recurring events and increased demands imposed by laws. The reversal of perspective was especially visible in the mid-2000s, when the pressing need for a culture of risk was emphasized, one that had to be rebuilt and shared.

Similar questionings and changes were present among the communities conducting this research in European countries. Emphasis was placed on the management and acceptance of risks by populations, as well as the social systems entailing the vulnerability of territories and societies. The reversal was considerable, for it identified this vulnerability as a key element in the initiation or reality of a risk, and/or its transformation into a catastrophic event.

Since the late 2000s, the concept of “resilience,” which grew out of humanitarian catastrophes and wars, was adapted to environmental risks and catastrophes. It is not surprising to see research taking an interdisciplinary approach to the notion of catastrophe, whose extraordinary nature is reflected in both its occurrence and its intense human, material, real, and symbolic destruction. However, the media makes excessive and indiscriminate use of the term catastrophe, sometimes designating simple events as such. The primary effect of this overmediatization based on emotions and immediacy is to make awareness of danger temporary, and to postpone a real culture of risk.

### **Connecting Environment and Risks: The Impact of Catastrophes on Territories**

The 2000s were important in the emergence of an environmental history that encompasses natural risks. A number of factors contributed to this connection, including the presence of powerful academic institutions on these topics, such as the Rachel Carson Center, which was very involved in the creation of the European Society for Environmental History (1999), whose founding members work on the two categories of risks, namely natural and industrial. The occurrence of a number of industrial catastrophes revealed the fragility of society, such as the major industrial catastrophes of Chernobyl in 1986, and the AZF factory in 2001. Some connected natural and industrial risks, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and especially Fukushima in 2011. Initially a tsunami, it became a large-scale industrial catastrophe due to the presence of a nuclear power plant on the coast, one that was insufficiently calibrated to resist an earthquake of such magnitude. There were also major storms such as the series of tsunamis/floods in Thailand and Indonesia, or earthquakes in Haiti or Mexico (Mexico City in 1985, and a series of them during the 2010s). With the affirmation of ecology as a science as well as a political and social movement, research concentrated on industrial and urban pollution, and sporadically on rural pollution as well. A series of books and programs revolving around a new structure, the Ruche (Academic Network for Researchers in Environmental History), founded in 2008, revisited industrialization and urbanization via this prism, especially that of the 1960s, which became the Trente Pollueuses (The Polluted Thirty) after being glorified as the Trente Glorieuses (The Glorious Thirty). Others endeavored to inscribe these industrial risks in the *longue durée*. This rereading resulted from awareness of the delayed effects of pollution, which were long left unexamined, neglected, or hidden by a discourse on progress, or by the direct invisibility of these effects. The transformation of territories and landscapes contributed to this visibility and awareness of categories of risks, even though they did not necessarily share the same temporality in terms of impact.

### **From a “Weak Signal” to The Constant Presence of Environmental, Natural, Industrial, Technological, and Health Risks**

Within a rapidly expanding environmental history, which is reflected in an abundant production exploring various subjects from a cultural, political, and social (but paradoxically

not a fully economic) perspective, the topic of environmental risks has taken its rightful place and covered the entire field. It is in keeping with the current context, which thinks of future dangers for the planet as dangers for society, with the urgent need to protect the environment with “civic actions” that use social media to convey this environmental awareness.

Jointly working on vulnerability in all its forms and manifestations, and grasping its evolutions, is one way of resituating the contribution of historians in this understanding of the phenomena involved. It is important to move beyond the distinction between natural and technological risks, and to connect approaches in order to better understand the effects on territories and populations in terms public health. While the great difference between what are called natural and technological risks is their immediate/delayed visibility—a rockslide or a flood can be seen and experienced, whereas pollution cannot always be seen—the organization of contemporary societies that closely imbricate nature and culture requires this global awareness of risks, in accordance with their respective parameters.

This is one way to “cool” the effect of the present in the apparent increase of events and the mobilization of populations. Behind this global approach, the ways in which societies engage with their environment can be analyzed through studies conducted on specific territories, which take into account all aspects of territoriality, risks in all their dimensions, as well as the management/prevention/protection of risks by all stakeholders. This can help gauge the reversal of priorities in accepting or refusing industrial and technological risks, as was the case for natural risks. The apparent fragility of earlier societies, in addition to the real fragility of contemporary societies, reappears in other forms.

It is crucially important to explore the contours of this notion of environmental risks when it is used without distinction or is globalized, and all the more so with the change in perspective. Now it is landscapes and, even more so than territories, the entire planet that is under consideration. While there is a societal awareness, this dynamic can dispossess individuals of their responsibility in the future of their territories, for speaking of environmental risks first and foremost involves changing the scale of one’s perception and analysis. It is essential to always connect scales in space and time, and to integrate the interactions between territories and the environment via risks, in order to better understand societies and their future in the face of major concerns.

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