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"Respect existence or expect . . . *resilience*?" epistemic reflexivity towards liberated disaster studies

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper proposes a way of reflexing on how we think within critical disaster studies. It focuses on the biases and unthought dimensions of two concepts – resilience and development – and reflects on the relationship between theory and practice in critical disaster studies.

Design/methodology/approach – Premised on the idea of epistemic reflexivity developed by Pierre Bourdieu, and drawing on previous research, this theoretical article analyses two conceptual biases and shortcomings of disaster studies: how resilience builds on certain agency; and how development assumes certain political imagination.

Findings – The article argues that critical disaster scholars must reflect on their own intellectual practice, including the origin of concepts and what they do. This is exemplified by a description of how the idea of resistance is intimately connected to that of resilience, and by showing that we must go beyond the capitalist realism that typically underlies development and risk creation. The theoretical advancement of our field can provide ways of thinking about the premises of many of our concepts.

Originality/value – The paper offers an invitation for disaster researchers to engage with critical thought and meta-theoretical reflexions. To think profoundly about our concepts is a necessary first step to developing critical scholarship. Epistemic reflexivity in critical disaster studies therefore provides an interesting avenue by which to liberate the field from overly technocratic approaches and develop its own criticality.

Keywords Critical disaster studies, Critical theory, Epistemic reflexivity, Post-capitalism, Post-development, Resistance, Risk creation

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

> Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope [. . .]. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. [. . .] I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is. Greta Thunberg at the World Economic Forum in 2019
>
> Don't act. Just think (Zizek, 2012)

Millions of young, engaged people have crowded central public spaces in cities all over the world in recent years. #FridaysForFuture, for instance, has achieved a global presence in its demands for immediate action in the face of climate change. Slogans such as "*System change not climate change*" and "*Respect existence or expect resistance*" [1] are commonplace (Plate 1). The movement is diverse and heterogeneous, and environmental activists themselves present differences in terms of strategies and future transformations (Herbert, 2020). There is a considerable degree of diagnostic consensus regarding the climate crisis. If we do nothing, scientists project that an increase of over 3°C in the Earth's temperature will have catastrophic consequences for the climate, ecosystems and biodiversity (IPCC, 2022). If humanity does not cease gas emissions and eliminate its dependence on fossil fuels, limiting planetary warming to *up to* 1.5°C, this trend is unavoidable. The climate crisis is undoubtedly of interest to disaster researchers [2], as mitigation, adaptation and climate-resilient development become important policy goals, intimately related to disaster risk reduction (DRR) (Islam *et al.*, 2020). Calls by environmental movements to "act now" thus echo the message of our field in regard to the prevention of disasters and avoidance of apocalyptic futures.

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Plate 1.
A banner from a climate-related protest in Barcelona

However, the above statements from Greta Thunberg and Slavoj Zizek represent an impasse between acting and thinking. Surely, the multiple crises we are experiencing demand that research be highly applied and problem-solving. But practice without theory is blind (and theory without practice is useless). The current context demands that we think critically about a way to combine the two domains. Although disaster researchers aim to act and transform the world, it seems that claiming that "disasters are not natural" or developing myriad ways to "enhance risk governance" and "promote resilience" remain some of the only responses the field can offer. In an often technocratic disaster scholarship (Gaillard, 2019), several blind spots and shortcomings in our theory and practice are reproduced, either unconsciously or unintendedly. There lies an important area towards liberating disaster studies and move beyond its reductionist and often uncritical practice. We have to develop not only a way to theorise, but also a way to think about how we theorise.

Lately, the field has developed a less applied and more theoretically-driven approach to studying disaster processes in what is known as critical disaster studies (Remes and Horowitz, 2021; Oliver-Smith, 2022) (see below). Such an interdisciplinary agenda is premised on the "critique of dominant intellectual traditions", beginning with the notion of disaster itself (Horowitz and Remes, 2021, p. 1). Long-standing aims of our field, including to assess and act upon (root) causes of disaster risks or to "*denaturalise*" disasters are, indeed, forms of critique (the latter being taken both literally and figuratively). The criticality of this agenda, however, necessitates a thoughtful consideration of its own terminology, particularly when aiming to cultivate a research practice that promotes liberation. This can be done, in part, by incorporating forms of self-reflection on the inherent criticality of critical disaster studies. In order to expand this dimension of the agenda, we have to remind ourselves that interpreting the world is only half the job – the real point being, of course, to change it (Marx, 1845). However, this cannot be done without (re)thinking our concepts, politics, trajectories and intellectual practice.

In this paper, I argue that critical disaster studies can gain from developing a practice of epistemic reflexivity. This concept, coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), can help us consider how we think in our disaster research

practice. In particular, by using the notion of epistemic reflexivity, this conceptual paper reflects on two issues relating to the aforementioned climate emergency and environmental mobilisations: the politics of agency, and imaginations. In relation to these, I analyse two potential blind spots in the field: how resilience portrays agency and, thus, who acts in the world; and the notion of development and how it limits what we deem possible. This introspection expresses a critique of certain normative and teleological premises of the field, which critical disaster studies is able to advance but has, so far, not reflected. Ultimately, reflexivity contributes to the liberation of disaster studies not just by comprehending the trajectories of our concepts but also by recognising how our terminology either challenges or perpetuates oppressive structures.

In the next section I discuss the need to develop reflexivity in our field, especially in the case of more critical paradigms, and introduce the work of Pierre Bourdieu to advance this. Then, I explore two central concepts – resilience and development – to reflect on their usages and more critical perspectives. I go on to discuss how this exercise constitutes an example of epistemic reflexivity and argue for a shift in critical disaster studies towards greater (self-) critique and theoretical development. I conclude by reflecting on the tension between thinking and practice and how it can move critical disaster studies forward.

The need for reflexivity in (critical) disaster studies

Disasters, knowledge production and liberation

This section analyses disaster studies and the field's (self-)reflexive character. This requires that we define it as an academic field with particular edges – no mean feat given its somewhat fluid and interdisciplinary nature. Disaster researchers share a particular trajectory and recognise a common set of concepts and terms, including vulnerability, disaster risk, exposure, capacities and resilience (Staupe-Delgado, 2019). At the risk of over-simplification, our field has historical roots in the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake (Dynes, 2000), it developed with Samuel Prince's analysis of the Halifax explosion of 1917 and continued with a phase centred around military research during the 1940s and the establishment of the Disaster Research Center by Quarantelli in 1963. This was followed by a human ecology/behaviourist perspective centred on hazards (initiated by White, 1945), and then one concerned with vulnerability (Hewitt, 1983; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). The current scope of the field is more diverse and wide-ranging [3]. In addition to research and practical efforts to change language and *denaturalise* disasters (O'Keefe *et al.*, 1976; Chmutina and von Meding, 2019; Gaillard *et al.*, 2014), the "*Power, Prestige & Forgotten Values*" Manifesto puts forth questions on *who* is actually producing disaster-related knowledge and *who benefits* from it [4]. While these examples represent exciting advances for the field, questions on the *criticality* of disaster studies and its concepts remain open.

Take, for example, vulnerability: a "boundary concept" which arguably remains the field's central term (Marino and Faas, 2020, p. 33). Although its position as part of the social scientific and critical stance in the field is undeniable, its usage has been somewhat ambiguous. Many authors have treated vulnerability as an underlying condition of groups (more than the expression of structural inequalities), reducing it to maps and "hotspots" based on structural and/or demographic data (Cutter *et al.*, 2003; Birkmann, 2013). Beyond its initial connection with critical development scholarship, the more radical content of vulnerability has dissipated, with the concept "emptied of its political and social essence" (Gaillard, 2019, p. S10). The growing treatment of "symptoms instead of causes" (Gibb, 2018, p. 332) has made vulnerability a highly technocratic, apolitical and even anti-political concept (Gaillard, 2019; Bankoff, 2001; Jacobs, 2019). The uncritical adoption of concepts such as vulnerability and resilience, argues Oliver-Smith, "has led to their dilution and distortion" (2022, p. 36), which has particularly been the case for applied research and policy contexts.

I consider this to be a central limitation to self-reflection in disaster studies, as overly technical, apolitical, applied and policy-oriented research still predominates. The problem with solely applied perspectives is that theoretical and political reflexion is abandoned for the sake of "doing something". After all, as argued above, it is "the time to act". This form of knowledge production that eschews theoretical reflexion leads, in part, to preservation of the status quo. Researchers in the field assert that disasters and the reproduction of their underlying risks show that something is wrong with the world today. There is a need for profound societal transformations given the multiple threats we currently face, such as disasters, climate change and resurgent fascism. But using technical, non-reflexive and lukewarm concepts does nothing to advance such change and instead merely accommodates scientific practice to present conditions. As stated by political ecologist Alf Hornborg, "we needed a revolution, we got resilience" (cited in Slater, 2021, p. 51).

To move away from this requires theoretical reflexion on our knowledge production practice and raises ethical questions: criticality, by definition, aims to emancipate human beings from exploitation and oppression. A (self-)critical examination of the concepts of disaster studies should beg the question of justice, freedom, utopia. In a sense, we are talking about liberation from a diversity of structures of domination, including capitalism, racism, patriarchy, homophobia and so on. To reaffirm epistemological questions within critical theory thus requires reflexion on the politics of knowledge: not only where concepts come from but also what they are doing and, critically, whether they are indeed the right concepts. As Audre Lorde (1984) famously stated, *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. Hers was a call to assert the different experiences of being a woman, especially in academia, and an inviting reflexion on undoing racism, patriarchy, homophobia and other forms of oppression as part of our social practice.

However, are vulnerability, hazard, risk or even resilience truly the "master's tools"? Surely, uncritical and over application of these concepts can produce harm in the world. There are, for instance, many examples of exclusionary reconstruction processes and preventable disasters (Lizarralde, 2021). Nevertheless, a number of works in the field do use these concepts critically. For instance, Marino and Faas (2020) assert that vulnerability can be a site of contestation and emancipatory action. More recently, von Meding and Chmutina (2023) advance a new theory of vulnerability that reasserts the power present within collectives (as opposed to the typically depoliticised applications found in neoliberal contexts). Similar work and reframing is being done for resilience (see below). It seems that we are, for better or worse, stuck with certain concepts within the field [5]. Regardless, we must develop a means of differentiating between harmful and liberatory concepts. We need to develop reflexivity.

Criticality and reflexivity in critical disaster studies

Scientific development does not advance in a linear manner. In each field's trajectory there are *cracks* that open up how we think, forcing us to examine our research practice. Gaillard (2022) stresses this for our field when he describes how each paradigm evolves and emerges from the former (i.e. vulnerability from human ecology/behaviourism, resilience/capacities from vulnerability and so on). Awareness of those leaps can enhance the promise advanced by more critical perspectives of changing the world, which requires a theoretically-driven and reflexive research practice.

Critical thought and critical theory are commonly rooted in the work of the Frankfurt School of Social Research (the *Institut für Sozialforschung*) (Jay, 1996; Horkheimer, 1972). According to Max Horkheimer, its founder and leading figure, there is a difference between traditional and critical theory. Unlike traditional theory, in which scientists work in isolation from their facts, separating value and research, critical theory maintains an awareness of the

historical context from which it emerges and thus is able to judge and transform it. As Horkheimer stresses on the relation between judgment and history, critical theory can claim that "*it need not be so*" and, moreover, society "can change reality, and the necessary conditions for such change already exist" (1972, p. 227n, emphasis added). In the case of disasters, Oliver-Smith argues that "critical" means "the analysis of systemic structural aspects of disasters as opposed to the purely technical, always recognising that the technical may in fact be the outcome of deeper structural causes" (2022, p. 28). Using a linguistics analogy, he argues that while mainstream disaster studies focuses on the "surface structure", critical disaster studies analyses the "deep structure" of disaster causation. Critical disaster studies, by definition, therefore, has to do with politics: we must consider how risk, vulnerability, resilience and disasters "shape and are shaped by contests over power" (Horowitz and Remes, 2021, p. 3).

Research has linked disasters to power for decades and in multiple ways (Hewitt, 1983; Olson, 2000; Pelling and Dill, 2010; Guggenheim, 2014). Different strands of research on disaster politics engage with critical theory, including feminist, Marxist, postcolonial and critical race theory (Watts, 1983; Jacobs, 2019; Remes and Horowitz, 2021; Oliver-Smith, 2022; Gaillard, 2023; von Meding and Chmutina, 2023). Such efforts push towards social liberation goals, including anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal and other egalitarian objectives, all of which are coherent with the emerging paradigm of critical disaster studies. While it is only now that a number of published works in disaster studies have explicitly adopted the label of "critical disaster studies" (e.g. Hagen and Elliott, 2021; Usón and Stehrenberger, 2021; Tironi *et al.*, 2022; Fuentealba, 2023; McGowran *et al.*, 2023), all of these strands, in their unique approaches, examine the "deep structures" of disaster creation. For that reason, Oliver-Smith (2022) questions the extent to which this is a truly new paradigm, since, in his opinion, critical perspectives on disasters have existed for decades in academia, among NGOs, within various agencies and so on. Beyond the explicit usage of the label or not, this research approach represents a theoretical and empirically rich practice, although less concerned with immediate problem-solving.

Returning to Horkheimer and the idea of criticality, while critical disaster studies is oriented towards human emancipation, it also needs to think profoundly about its practice. To maintain a critical position against dominant traditions, it should (perhaps first and foremost) engage in an exercise of self-reflexivity. Not only does scientific knowledge shape part of society and thus influence (and is influenced by) other social dimensions; it is, in itself, a space of intellectual production with particular power distributions. It is paramount that we develop ways in which to incorporate reflexivity on our research: to apply the scientific process to science itself. The need to develop this has been asserted previously in disaster scholarship. For instance, Gaillard draws on postcolonial studies to argue that disaster studies faces "opportunities (. . .) to (re-)examine the concepts we use, our ways of knowing, and the ways in which we design our policies and actions towards reducing disaster risk, to challenge both the universal dimension of Western ontologies and epistemologies and the existence of other world views/senses and ways of knowing" (2022, p. 41). Based on the premises of critical disaster studies, I intend to advance our field's self-critique following the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

Thinking the unthought with Pierre Bourdieu

Recent work by disaster researchers has used the thought of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (see, e.g. Uekusa, 2017; Uekusa *et al.*, 2022). His central concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capitals* [6] raise important questions about social inequalities and the uneven experience of disasters (Nguyen-Trung, 2023). Examining his sociological thought, I focus on his concept of reflexivity, which Wacquant (1992, p. 36) defines as "the inclusion of a theory of intellectual

practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society". Epistemic reflexivity is about considering the social and intellectual biases that exist in a particular field [7], many of which go unnoticed by researchers but nevertheless influence their work. This way of considering reflexively has different levels: it is about the individual analyst and their origins as a researcher (class, gender, ethnicity, etc.); the position occupied by the researcher in the field of knowledge production and the "*social* and *intellectual unconscious* embedded in analytic tools and operations" (Wacquant, 1992 p. 36, emphasis in original).

The latter level, which Wacquant (1992) argues is the most original contribution in Bourdieu's reflexivity, can help us to explore the biases and blind spots inherent to us as researchers. This notion implies that reflexivity is a collective undertaking that invites scholars to contemplate profoundly our way of thinking. In the words of Bourdieu, such reflexivity requires the systematic exploration of the "unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought" (Bourdieu, 1982, cited in Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Those *unthought* thoughts, biases, blind spots and intellectual shortcomings can be addressed by instituting "mechanisms of training, dialogue, and critical evaluation" within the collective practice of social scientific knowledge production (Wacquant, 1992 p. 41). It is therefore both an attitude and a set of activities to be incorporated and developed to understand where our categories come from and what they do.

Critical examination of the concepts, questions and methods is a requirement of any reflexive research endeavour. This includes the social conditions that make certain categories (and not others) the "object" of scientific enquiry, the selection of the concepts we use and their practical and meta-theoretical assumptions, the methodological tools we use and develop and the spaces of incidence we consider legitimate and why. Reflexive researchers can assess where certain problems come from, how they focus on them and why and, critically, which alternative problems they could focus on. If issues that occupy a central position in dominant and mainstream outlets were to be put in parentheses and reflexed upon critically, we would be able to consider, for example, whether our intellectual practice is inspired by social justice and liberation. Use of certain concepts is not necessarily a problem, but there is inherent risk in their continued application without due reflection. If vulnerability (and risk, hazard, resilience) are here to stay, it (they) must be approached as a question (Faas, in press). This way of thinking about concepts – of providing insights on how particular terms occupy certain positions – can help to advance theoretical knowledge in a field that remains under-theorised in issues such as (in)equality and (in)justice (Watts, 1983; Tierney, 2007; Reid, 2013; Shrestha *et al.*, 2019). Questions of epistemological and knowledge production remain important. I will now offer some examples of this.

Towards critical self-reflection in critical disaster studies

The politics of disaster agency: re-centring resistance

Developing resilient societies is a globally agreed upon goal in DRR policies and initiatives (UNDRR, 2022). The Sendai Framework for DRR, for instance, aims to prevent new disasters by implementing multiple measures that will increase preparedness and recovery, and therefore strengthen resilience (UNISDR, 2015). Resilience always brings a positive mindset and constructive policies. Originating in ecology thinking and translated into social thought, resilience remains a highly contested term (Manyena, 2006) and its conceptual and practical problems are well known (Fainstein, 2015; Cheek and Chmutina, 2022). Its implicit neoliberal logic obscures the "trade-offs involved and the resulting distributions of costs and benefits" (Fainstein, 2015, p. 157). Resilience policies necessitate a constant actualisation of threats, and with that they "police" and "colonise" politics, creating particular subjectivities and citizenships (Evans and Reid, 2014). Critical disaster studies researchers must keep in mind

the underlying agency of resilience, particularly in regard to their assumptions about subjects and their policy consequences.

An important and direct objection to resilience came from Tracie Washington, an activist in post-Katrina New Orleans: "*Stop calling me resilient. Because every time you say 'oh, they're resilient", [it actually] means you can do something else, [something] new to [my community].*" She continues: "*We were not born to be resilient, we are* conditioned *to be resilient. I don't want to be resilient . . . [I want to] fix the things that [create the need for us to] be resilient [in the first place]*" (Feldman, 2015; cited in Kaika, 2017, p. 95). The issue concerns, on one hand, the symbolic power exercised on a whole group that is represented as "resilient" or "vulnerable" (see, e.g. von Meding, 2021). This especially applies to groups along lines of class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on, who tend to suffer more during and after disasters. To call a group resilient assumes a particularly static subjectivity, a passive agency, as these groups are recipients of policies and external representations. That is why, on the other hand, Tracie Washington calls out *against* the conditions that force them to withstand negative impacts such as disasters.

Based on this, disaster researchers must consider and reflect upon the myriad agencies involved in the concept of resilience. *Who* is subjected to resilience, *what* it does, *when*, *where* and *why* – these are all important questions that lie at the core of more critical policy and planning approaches (Meerow and Newell, 2016). Resilience typically demands that individuals "accommodate" to "capital and the state, and the secure future of both, rather than *resist* them" (p. 7, emphasis added). Drawing on Tracie Washington and aiming for a more reflexive stance, the call to "resist" and be "against" resilience must be brought to the fore (Bracke, 2016). Researchers use resilience in relation to collective mobilisation and initiatives of *resistance* (Katz, 2010; Cretney and Bond, 2014; Boano, 2017; Ciccaglione, 2019; Sou, 2022). This approach stresses resilience beyond the physical environment and points to justice movements that challenge dominant narratives of recovery and policy (Ciccaglione, 2019). This perspective allows marginalised groups to refocus and regain their voices, power and agency.

Individuals and collectives are not passive but active agents in disaster processes. This agency extends beyond critical and disruptive moments, encompassing the everyday creation and reproduction of risks (Nguyen-Trung, 2023). Armed with such agency, individuals can develop critical practices that challenge the hegemony of capitalism (Cretney, 2017), and many have argued that such emerging actions of resistance relate to resilience (Sou, 2022; Reid, 2012). As Gemma Sou (2022) demonstrates, some acts typically associated with resilience can have political potential. In the context of colonialism in Puerto Rico, this includes food sovereignty and local recovery strategies post–Hurricane Maria. Resilience and resistance can therefore be reconciled by following a perspective focused on grassroots and everyday politics. An alternative work on *resilience-as-resistance* comes from Camillo Boano (2017). Inspired by Jacques Rancière's philosophy (1999), Boano develops resilience from a perspective that presupposes equality. Resilience can thus be subverted and transcend the traditional view of it as a goal, instead recognising its incipience in artistic practices or struggles for justice. Far from an "end point", resilience requires a "continuous verification" of equality that emancipates, for instance, "through a collective production of an urban environment" (2017, p. 149). Drawing on Roche (2012, cited in Boano (2017) this is called resi [lience]stance. Ultimately, these works carry an explicit goal of going beyond state-centric views of resilience (albeit without shifting the state's responsibilities) to highlight *everyday* acts that politicise the conditions that (re)produce risks.

These approaches and usages of disaster resilience-as-resistance help develop self-reflection in critical disaster studies. This work can reassess agency by pointing to the structural causation of risks from the perspective of those suffering. Resilience is not a state or a characteristic of a population, but a process that emerges from the multiple axes that

produce vulnerability, which are, by definition, structural and collective. Researchers mobilising this conception of resilience can transcend the bias of passive resilient subjects and reflect on more critical perspectives, including challenging the hegemony of capitalism and other sources of oppression (Cretney and Bond, 2014; Cretney, 2017). As such, this view of resilience can enhance the immanent power of those in situations of injustice to explore and transform these from below. From this stance, such experiences can re-centre and enhance critical agency, showing and imagining (more) liberated lives, such as in the case of a Puerto Rico free from the colonial control of the US (Sou, 2022). By focusing on the critical prefiguration of activists and social mobilisation, as well as spontaneous initiatives of mutual aid, resilience-as-resistance can move towards a future where everyday instruments of domination are contested, transformed and overcome. This is because social mobilisation helps to highlight common situations of injustice; as (allegedly) argued by Rosa Luxemburg: "Those who do not move, do not notice their chains".

The politics of disaster imagination: from development to post-development alternatives

The second dimension I want to reflect on is that of development and imagination, particularly in regard to risk creation and what (and how) we consider what is possible. The connection between disasters and development has been discussed for decades (Cuny, 1994) and it is commonly accepted that disasters represent "failures" of development. Hence, it has been argued that disaster research, and DRR practice more widely, should be more connected to development goals (Collins, 2009, 2018). More structurally, scholars have asserted that current development models are drivers of risks (Wisner *et al.*, 2004). These models have produced and perpetuated vulnerabilities, failed to relocate exposed communities, lack prioritisation of knowledge pertaining to hazards, allowed the use of poor construction materials and so on. As such, proponents of this perspective contend that an alternative, more sustainable approach to development is imperative (UNGA, 2015).

At the core of mainstream development agendas there is nevertheless an assumption of eternal economic growth and infinite production (Escobar, 2011). As a result, not only does a typically Eurocentric linear evolutionary thinking prevail, but many of its consequences are overlooked, including social marginalisation, exploitation, ecological extractivism and, with them, the generation and persistence of disaster risks. In response, some critical scholars have questioned the social and political need to pursue development, particularly the capitalism-based variant (Escobar, 1988; Escobar and Esteva, 2016). More than development alternatives, they argue, we need "alternatives to development" as a means of refusing the premises of this paradigm (Escobar, 2011). If disasters are, in reality, failed development processes, what is the scope for the field to engage with these post-development discussions and thus imagine a different world?

Imagination in general is grounded in cultural politics: its meanings and representations are in contestation and depend on the interests of those involved. In that sense, imagination is not the expression of social structures, but corresponds with particular political-economic formations. The future that we forecast today is not the same as that foreseen at the beginning of the twentieth century: we are far from Rosa Luxemburg's *socialism or barbarism* (2010). That is one of the crucial cultural dynamics of today: we are enmeshed in the logic of late capitalism, postmodernism or capitalist realism (Jameson, 1991; Fisher, 2009). Imagination of the future and a post-development landscape, including the present praxis and how to get there, is challenged by what we deem possible under the current rule of neoliberal capitalism. However, we know that capitalism and other sources of oppression will not last forever. The kind of development we have had is not eternal and it is already changing; as argued by Graeber (2012, p. 381), "there is very good reason to believe that, in a generation or so, capitalism itself will no longer exist . . .".

For this and other reasons, the field needs to improve engagement with critiques of linear development. Maintaining the status quo constitutes a blind spot that depoliticises our knowledge production. This contribution can include postcolonial analyses of whose voices and terminologies are hegemonic to research on disaster processes (Gaillard, 2022). But again, if disasters are indeed failures of development, then we can participate more closely in discussions about socio-ecological transformations. Centrally to our field, many post-development analyses use the notion of ongoing and upcoming "ecological disasters" as a cautionary tale (Victor, 2008; Alexander, 2020). For example, in "*Post-capitalism by design not disaster*", Alexander (2020) stresses that the currently predominant capitalist trajectory will eventually come to an end and that there is (still) a space in which to *plan* this transition. To keep things as they are, he argues, will inevitably lead to disaster. But the notion of disaster here is not a well-defined concept, and instead a pessimistic and catastrophic imaginary. It is used strategically as an abstraction to represent a future threat. Hence, we as disaster scholars can reflect, criticise and expand the notion of disaster beyond abstract representations. And relatedly, we can think about ways to design and advance more egalitarian and ecocentric economies, transitioning to a society that is rocked by fewer disasters.

Post-development paradigms, discourses and movements share goals regarding the construction of more egalitarian socio-ecological relations. Within the critique of linear development, they tend to converge in criticising the separation between society and nature, which is also common to our field (McGowran and Donovan, 2021; Faas, 2023). Post-development imaginaries, however, are not a unified perspective (Kothari *et al.*, 2019). The question of post-capitalism is complex and varied, and there are contrasting views on a variety of issues, such as the means (e.g. the role of technology) and goals (e.g. the scale of social organisation) of the transition (Robbins, 2020). Assuming such a plurality, theoretical and practical debates on alternatives include imagining bio-cities (Chatterton, 2019), more convivial human-environments (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020) and degrowth (Kallis *et al.*, 2020). The latter, for instance, constitutes an important political discourse arising from social movements (Demaria *et al.*, 2013). Degrowth scholars argue that the current planetary crisis is the consequence of the pursuit of growth (Kallis *et al.*, 2020). The practical problem with infinite economic growth is the associated usage of material resources and their multiple socio-ecological impacts. By halting the increasing consumption of materials and by constructing institutions that promote life without growth, proponents state that "degrowth ideals call us to shift productivist ambitions and consumerist identities towards visions of good life characterized by thriving and conviviality among humans and ecosystems" (Kallis *et al.*, 2020, p. 19).

Nevertheless, degrowth has hardly been discussed in the field of disaster studies (see, e.g. Ajulo *et al.*, 2020). Economic growth and the creation of risk go hand in hand. According to Tierney (2014), actors seeking growth prefer fewer limitations on profit, resenting restrictions on development in hazardous areas. Moreover, "growth machine coalitions" tend to "deemphasize the risks associated with places" (Tierney, 2014, p. 127), leading them to downplay the importance of hazards. If economic growth and mainstream development models have been accounted for in risk creation, we could make a better effort to incorporate degrowth and post-development. As in the case of resilience-as-resistance, critical disaster researchers can embrace the notion of *resisting* disaster risk creation (RDRC), as proposed by Wisner and Lavell (2017). According to this idea, we must not only reflect on how risks are created but also imagine alternatives. Reflexing on post-development in all its diversity contributes to rethinking the context in which we act, along with the wider societal goals pursued. With that, it plays a supporting role in imagining a different way of organising society.

Discussion: should disaster research be more theoretical?

To describe and understand the trajectory of the scientific field in which one works is a prerequisite to advancing knowledge therein. Epistemic reflexivity is one way to unpack the trajectory of disaster studies, focusing on the usage and wider societal context of our concepts. My argument is particularly important for critical disaster studies and aims to expand knowledge production that is transformative in the context of current and all-encompassing neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005). We have to project a way forward. In the words of Anthony Oliver-Smith regarding the future of critical disaster studies, this agenda should:

> . . . adopt a methodology that is creative about possibilities of resistance against the neoliberal logic that not only continues to generate and naturalise risk, but denies the viability of any other possible future. (. . .) [the paradigm] thus must tap into the full array of resources, past, contemporary, and imagined, for guides for making alternative futures beyond the current relentless construction of risk (2022, p. 43).

More reflexive and critical concepts can contribute to creating such futures. We have to stop applying the same uncritical concepts and frameworks disaster after disaster. Along with efforts to resist depoliticising frames, such as those that portray disasters as natural or unprecedented events, we should also expand our conceptual repertoire to explicitly consider and prefigure alternative societal configurations. The field has to go beyond its solely applied and technocratic traditions and contemplate the possibilities that lie ahead for local communities, places and knowledge systems, strategically charting the course to reach these envisioned futures.

I have focused on the two dimensions of agency and imagination because critical engagement with both can help in moving critical disaster studies forward. Currently, we are pressured to act upon risks and provide solutions that are grounded in *realpolitik*. As with any social and economic system in the history of humankind, capitalism and its current extreme neoliberal logic will not last forever. In spite of this, following Fredric Jameson (2003), it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Acting uncritically within this context represents a pathway towards depoliticising disaster risks. If disasters are not natural and are created by vulnerability, who truly *opposes* the reduction of risks? Who is *against* alleviating vulnerabilities or enhancing resilience? This line of enquiry mirrors Mark Fisher's (2009, p. 14) questions on poverty: in the context of anti-capitalist demands within hyper-corporate events such as Live 8, he asks, "who is it who actually wants poverty?" In this sense, questions about the politics of disasters in relation to agency and imagination gain significance. If those actors who create vulnerability or benefit from it are not identified and held to account, vulnerability analyses will continue to be reduced to humanitarian practice, charity work and the securitisation of subjects (Chmutina *et al.*, 2022). Such considerations necessitate profound self-reflection regarding the roles played by our concepts and frameworks in relation to society.

Hence the title of this section: should disaster studies endeavour to cultivate more theory and embrace more critical approaches? And what should be the relationship between theory and practice? My analysis represents an affirmative response, advocating for an approach steeped in reflexivity, constantly mindful of its transformative potential. As long argued by Michael Watts (1983), some traditional hazard approaches "have no social theory capable of addressing social process, organisation or change" (1983, p. 240). Rejecting complacency towards established concepts serves as a means to address inherent biases and to comprehend the trajectories of these concepts and the research positions they occupy. Continual refusal to take concepts for granted fosters a nuanced understanding of the interplay between theory and practice. The cultivation of critical theory, characterised by an acute awareness of its normative and teleological dimensions, presents an avenue by which to

transcend capitalist realism within disaster studies. The failure to envision an alternative society underscores a significant shortcoming. For critical disaster studies to progress towards the goal of liberating society from oppression, it must engage in profound reflexion on these lacunae and other blind spots.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for epistemic reflexivity in (critical) disaster studies. Based on previous research, I have focused on two ideas that are central to our field and highlighted the need to think about certain biases and discuss their political edge. The first of these ideas concerns how resilience portrays agency and how focusing on resistance can help to transform the structural conditions from the perspective of those suffering them. The second concerns how development portrays risk reduction and how bringing discussions about post-development can help to transform our political imagination and what we deem possible. Thinking about these unthought categories and how certain issues gain significance in our knowledge production can help us to better understand the categories we use and, potentially, use them more critically. Engaging in this reflexive practice can contribute to the liberation of disaster studies from technocratic, naive and uncritical terminology, challenging the ways in which we employ and develop our conceptual frameworks.

My endeavour so far remains embedded in core disaster studies concepts. Still, re-centring the discussion on the political nature of our concepts constitutes a means of transforming disaster studies using its own terminology. Thinking about thinking is far from a wasted exercise, especially in critical disaster studies. Perpetual self-reflection on the terms we use is also a way of dismantling the master's house. The strand of reflexivity used here is clearly one of many. For example, to maintain a critical position in terms of positionality is a relevant way of understanding what is being researched, where researchers come from and who benefits from those processes (Gaillard, 2019). The Bourdieusian strand of reflexivity, I argue, allows the development of insights into the field of disaster studies in connection to other academic fields, to policymakers and bureaucrats on the ground and, critically, to people affected by disasters. It is a perspective to be applied to our own intellectual practice, including our thinking and collaborations, our methods and funding and our relationships with our contexts.

Ultimately, epistemic reflexivity contributes to the connection between theory and practice. The climate emergency provokes multiple anxieties and doubts about a doomed future. The context compels us to act now and transform society. But this is far from self-evident. Should we enhance people's capacity to withstand disasters, to be accommodated in a highly unequal world? Or maybe we could intervene on the multiple scales at which disasters are (re)produced and, critically, help to resist and imagine an alternative world? Even in the midst of multiple crises, thinking remains a relevant activity. Thinking about how we think, even more so. The collective endeavour of reflexivity helps us to understand our biases and move our field towards liberation. By scrutinising the field's unthought terminology, we can think about different potential futures for disaster studies. As such, this also serves as a caution against unreflexive critical disaster studies: the paradigm should maintain a self-reflexive attitude by definition, turning in on itself as an intellectual practice. Such a reflexive praxis can develop the criticality premised in critical disaster studies. The upcoming trajectory of disaster studies is unknown, but I hope we can advance ways towards social liberation. Therein lies the true potential of *critical* disaster studies.

Notes

1. While I recognise the commodification, re-appropriation and potential de-politicisation of the slogan, its usage continues to be associated with progressive change, including climate strikes (Bowman,

2020), women's marches (McClelland-Cohen and Endacott, 2020), Black Lives Matter (Vance and Potash, 2022) and trans rights (Martz and Kramer-Urner, 2019).

2. Climate change is not a straightforward cause of increasing disasters, but it will dramatically affect certain hazards such as flooding and drought (IPCC, 2022).
3. A number of handbooks and articles cover this trajectory. Recent overviews include Perry (2018), Tierney (2019) and Gaillard (2022).
4. Find it here: https://www.radixonline.org/manifesto-accord
5. Of course, this does not preclude the transfer of concepts from other fields and debates to that of disasters. Disaster studies as a community of practice is porous by definition and always open to other terms. My point here is that any concept in any field must be adopted critically, which can be achieved through reflexive practice.
6. Introductions and references to these concepts can be found in Bourdieu (1982, 1990), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Grenfell (2014).
7. I use the term colloquially to refer to scientific paradigms and not in the Bourdieusian sense.

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