

THE UNQUESTIONABILITY OF RISK: SOCIAL VULNERABILITY AND EARTHQUAKE RISK WITHIN TOURISTIC DESTINATIONS

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Before the 1980s, the natural hazard analysis and management specialized literature was dominated by the so called “dominant” or “technocratic” view. Such perspective had established that natural disasters are extreme physical events caused by a whimsical nature and that these events are external to society. These events required technological and management solutions developed by experts. On one hand, the mentioned dominant view started to be questioned when the role played by the social vulnerability in risk production was recognized and, on the other, when exclusively technologic solutions started to be seen as insufficient, ineffective and, in many cases, counterproductive.

The vulnerability viewpoint, regarding environmental risks, states that: a) the disasters are socio-cultural phenomena (unnatural disasters); b) therefore, socio-historical factors also act in their production; and c) their effects are unequally distributed among the population. Thus herein, vulnerability is understood as individual or group features linked to the capacity of anticipating, surviving, resisting and recovering from impacts caused by natural hazards.

The current article aims at addressing a new explanatory component in the hegemonic persistence of the technocratic view. Such assumption was based on the “unquestionability of the risk” concept.

The city of Torrevieja, Spain, was taken as a case study to show the role played by the “unquestionability of the risk” in management plans and practices as well as the consequences associated to it. The case also shows the guidelines used to steer the development of the city’s Municipal Acting Plan on Seismic Risk (MAP).

THE HEGEMONY OF THE DOMINANT VIEW

Many authors highlight that - besides the insistent statements about the virtues of the vulnerability approach - practices on risk management remain dominated by the hegemonic view. The dominant view is part of the anthropocentric western paradigm which features human beings as a distinct and superior species in regards to the other ones. Thus, humans got the right to dominate nature by being unlimitedly confident on science and technology to achieve such goal of control. The structural explanations refer to economic and other types of benefits given to certain groups or lobbies in exchange of using the dominant view in managing disasters.

THE UNQUESTIONABILITY OF THE RISK

The current article shows a third argument, the unquestionability of the risk. It is stated that the “unquestionability of the risk” is the overall incapacity and neglect of experts, scientists and decision makers to identify and act over the deep causes of risk production, since it would make them question the normative imperatives and the demands from the elite as well as the life style in nowadays globalized socio-economic system.

The aforementioned socio-economic system lies on three imperatives: 1) continuous growth based on controlling nature; 2) the science and technology, which give experts the control over more and more complex systems; and 3) the market, as an agent able to sustainably manage the relationship set among society, economy and environment. According to Blühdorn, these three imperatives became universal and unquestionable. However - and this is the central contradiction the modern progress myth has fallen in -, the triad holding continuous growth, science and technology as well as the market, produces unsustainability and risk. Therefore, it ends up undermining the system itself.

Thus, on one hand, society faces the risk of a global environmental crisis and, on the other, undergoes the impossibility of questioning the basis and production modes which generate such global risk. Systemic imperatives and life styles acquire non-negotiable status of.

THE CASE OF TORREVIEJA’S SEISMIC RIESK

The town, located in the Costa Blanca tourist region (Alicante- Spain), is an especially adequate case to analyze the “unquestionability of risk” process because of: 1) its location within a high seismic hazard zone; 2) its socio-urban model focused on the residential touristic sector featured by intensified vulnerability production based on fast growth; and 3) the launching of a anti-seismic risk program developed by local technicians. As for an analysis over the unquestionability of risk concept, it is highlighted that the Torrevieja’s Municipal Acting Plan (MAP) on Seismic Risk is built under the post-ecologism ideological presuppositions, since: 1) it was designed to reinforce the role played by the local technicians; 2) appeased the social alarm generated by the earthquake of Lorca, in 2011; 3) followed the new judicial regulation for natural hazard management; and 4) did not question the socio-urban development model which, after all, lies on the vulnerability production.

THE SEISMIC RISK

Torreveija lies on the *Bajo Segura* fault line, one of the most active ones in the Iberian Peninsula for the past 500 years, being particularly remarkable the 1829 seismic series known as Torreveija Earthquake. According to PELSISCAV, the expected maximum seismic intensity degree increases from 0.5 up to 1.0 when considering the ground effect in return periods set between 500 and 1000 years. It increases the possibility of turning a damaging earthquake (of intensity VII) into a much more destructive one (of intensity X).

The aforementioned earthquake happened in May 21st, 1829 and was the most devastating one in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula in the past 500 years (Lázaro, 1829). After such catastrophic event, the road engineer José Larramendi (1829a, b) suggested a series of urban-architectural actions to be taken in order to reconstruct the city and adapt it to seismic events.

A NEW SOCIO-URBAN MODEL

The new residential touristic model implemented in Torreveija since the late 1970s is characterized by its high real estate production, strong tourist seasonality, lack of urban planning, environmental degradation, a demographic change due to high immigration and aging rates, and finally it is associated to an opaque local urbanism management linked to different and striking corruption cases. Its product mixes the local sunny beaches and the tens of thousands of touristic-residential housing specifically built to be sold to foreign and national retirees as well as to families in vacations.

Such unorganized urbanism led to a tangled and confusing road network highly dependent on private vehicles. It faces high saturation peaks during summer. Thus, the growing of the tourism-residential model has changed the old city's urban morphology which was designed in the XIX century. However, it is right to state that within the contour-urban zone an condominium model based on one or two floors housing with extended common areas and wide roads meets Larramendi's proposals.

The new urban morphology increases not just the architectural vulnerability but also the social one when we think about seismic risk. The demographic changes within the municipality led to the rise of new vulnerable groups. The arrival of groups of elderly migrant residents and immigrant workers from different nationalities and languages, alongside with the high demographic peaks caused by vacation seasonality are factors to be considered when we reason about social vulnerability production.

Such urban growth does not come from an organic process or from mistakes in the planning. Studies on the Spanish tourism-residential phenomenon have shown the evident connection among fast socio-urban morphology growth, null integral planning and the interests of political elites.

However, the scenario started to change in 2012 due to the elaboration of the Torreveija's Municipal Acting Plan (MAP) on Seismic Risk . MAP was boosted by a new legislation developed by the Valencian government for seismic risk¹ and two other seismic events: the Lorca earthquake in May 11th, 2011 and the Torreveija one in March 23rd, 2012.

According to MAP's operability, the consulted local technicians highlighted that the plan was based on four axial lines: 1) sensitivity, information and training; 2) information technologies; 3) technical evaluation; and 4) the diagnosis and mobilization of human and material resources. Thus, the Torre Vieja's Municipal Acting Plan represented an important and innovative effort. Nevertheless, MAP's main concern lies on the development of organizational, operative and information technology structures to be applied to seismic emergency managing. They also pinpointed the development of the Safety Based Radio-electric Emission Program (BASEMRAD).

DISCUSSION: MAP AND THE DOMINANT VIEW

MAP represents a pioneer project in the region and it is praiseworthy due its prevention and resilience efforts to face seismic risks. It is worth to highlight the efforts done by a local administration of a touristic municipality in order to break the traditional passivity common to seismic risk management and policies. However, a critically pro-active analysis over MAP recognizes that its focus is unbalanced in terms of the importance given to social vulnerability management. Thus, it is possible to link MAP to the dominant view: 1) the persistence on planning a management model based on hierarchies and authorities according to a top-down approach; 2) addressing the threat through the use of engineering, technology and science; 3) physical damages reduction and post-disaster management as the most important points in program regarding risk management; and 4) the focus on the threat's physical process and its superficial consequences.

MAP does not question the deep urban and socio-economic causes of risk production, i.e., the hyper-development of the residential touristic sector leads to vulnerability elements such as the urban planning model and municipality's overcrowding during high summer.

This last MAP's feature calls the attention to a second central analytical argument to the development of the current study: the unquestinability of the risk. Nor MAP neither its writers –the claim-makers– can question the deep causes responsible for seismic hazard vulnerability production in Torre Vieja. The seismic risk is minimized for: a) protecting the continuous functioning of an economic growth machine based on real estate development; and b) promoting a more and more private territory management to favor accumulation policies process by political and entrepreneurial elites. Questioning such urban model should be a major requirement for implementing risk management programs, since it would be possible to identify the deep causes of vulnerability production: wrong urban planning regarding seismic risk. In its turn, the role played by science is crucial to this process once it presents claim-makers as agents able to generate future certainties and to allow nature control. Moreover, science and technology work as social anxiolytics that offer safety within high uncertainty and risk scenarios.

In regards to MAP, agreed decisions on risk management are headed to the control or techno-scientific handling of threats and try to minimize the most superficial and local vulnerability conditions. The vulnerability and risk production factors related to unsustainable urban development are dodged once they would put in check local and regional elites' accumulation model.