

Ecological crisis and nature management: the virtualization and actualization tension in Doñana's disaster

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"Al igual que los espacios del mundo, percibidos o vividos,
los espacios sociales se deslizan hacia lo virtual,
para que podamos levantarle mapas, flotantes"
(Serres 1995, 184)

Presentation

We live in increasingly complex societies. Since the very beginning social thought has tried to answer that question: what holds us together? Social thought has assumed profoundly this challenge. We have found some good tools to understand it, but also we have learned that this is a never ending work. In order to understand how the social is produced in contemporary societies we want to reflect on the usefulness of new concepts to rethink the question concerning the social.

We think, as we said before, that the virtual/actual tension is useful to answer some of the questions raised because of this complexity. Nowadays it seems clear that we cannot avoid answering, mostly in new terms, the question of what holds us together. Mainly if we have in mind the heterogeneous and complex ways in which we organize our contemporary societies. The virtual/actual tension can be a useful tool to understand our present, in which there is a high awareness regarding the impact of science and technology in the organization of societies.

This working paper is an attempt to answer to these questions. For this, we will present some empirical data collected from an ecological crisis occurred in the South of Spain in 1998. This paper pretends to be a brief picture of an extended work in which we develop this concepts more profoundly.

Social psychology and events

The event has been frequently unconsidered as a way of understanding the social. When an event occurs something new happens. Something that breaks some established coherence. Fixed boundaries (natural-social, order-disorder, local-global, inside-outside, and so on) are challenged. Some disruption has occurred. Disorder breaks down the previous order. The event demands a new order and raises new grounds for social relations. Then we have good opportunities to detail how order is produced, how society is bounded. A social psychology of events can be a good opportunity to reconsider the way we produce order and it can be a useful tool to avoid the modern backgrounds of understanding social order.

An event unfolds a problematic field that looks for solutions. When an event happens we only have multiplicities, a reality characterized by tendencies. That is precisely what the virtual/actual tension helps us to understand.

Ecological crises, in this sense, are good opportunities to reflect on what constitutes social order in contemporary societies. They illustrate contemporary complexity, the problems arising in our changing societies and the hybridity in which we live.

What we want to show is how a specific event, the Doñana's pollution in 1998, can be understood in its very complexity by paying attention to the virtual/actual tension it unfolds.

An event opening the virtual/actual tension: the Doñana's disaster

See the CNN description of Doñana's Disaster.

What happened?

Doñana's environmental disaster produced lots of reactions in public opinion.

26 April 1988.

About 2.30 AM, the dam at the huge open-pit mine at Aznalcóllar, near Sevilla, owned by the Swedish-Canadian firm Boliden, breaks down. The water, crushed ore and chemicals left behind after metals like zinc, lead, copper, and silver have been removed, is dumped in this dam since 20 years ago. A 50-metre-wide breach in the dam sent 4 million cubic meters of acidic water and silt down to the Agrio River, heading straight for Doñana. Frantic bulldozing diverted the flood wave into the Guadalquivir River and into the Atlantic. Mining engineers and naturalists fear that land outside the park may have been contaminated with enough heavy metals to poison the entire region for years to come. Press immediately reports on the accident, which reaches spectacular dimensions and goes beyond the limits of its geographical localization.

Its symbolic importance in Spain and the different actors and regions damaged demanded an urgent diagnosis concerning the real limits and effects of the disaster. Doñana is important as an obligatory point of passage for thousands of birds coming from northern Europe towards Africa. From the very beginning, the troubles to define what happened became the node of a controversy.

What is going on?

Since the break-down, different kind of actors and institutions arrived to the zone trying to deal with and define the uncertainty provided by this event. They tried to answer to crucial questions:

Which are the damages?

Who is involved in it?

What are the real effects of the dam breakdown?

How can we manage the disaster?

Which are the limits of Doñana?

How far does Doñana reach?

The answers raised different positions in relation to the definitions of what was happening. Questions that reflect on the question concerning the social and that question directly how we can manage that multiplicity unfolded by the event.

All along the controversy positions were radically confronted, not only in their view of Doñana's disaster but also in their notion of order, society and political agenda needed to deal with. In order to show this complexity clearer we have divided them in two main positions. We have the position of governmental agencies and classical institutions of ordering and governing the social: politics and institutional scientific. We have the position of environmental agencies: mainly ecological movements. The former defines what happened in terms of minimal effects that we can manage rapidly and in a secure way. The later has a radical position that claims that what happened is an authentic disaster with global and latent effects where the worst is yet to come.

The public controversy

Since the very beginning the public controversy appears in media, in scientific papers and political discussions. But, what are the real effects of the dam breakdown?

The governmental agencies say: "The worst is over now".

"Fortunately, we can manage the disaster if we clean the polluted area. Doñana will be in a few months what it was before the dam breakdown. We have enough resources to control its environmental consequences."

Whilst environmental movements remember: "The worst still has to come".

"We do not know how the disaster will affect us. The disaster is not under control because the technology is useless to manage it and because its effects can be deferred and global."

Changing the terms of controversy

At first glance, we could think on the controversy in terms of who is right. We actually have two competing accounts trying to convince a big audience. We could think that each part has its own interest to convince and to define Doñana's disaster in a particular way and that both are only competing visions of what happened.

These two definitions are incommensurate and they show not only a contest for truth, a scientific controversy that we can solve with more and faster research. They show two forms of understanding the complexity unfolded by that event. Different ways of ordering the disorder that nature, usually left aside of our contracts, has introduced to culture and to politics. Nevertheless, these differentiation arises profoundly political issues.

From a representationist point of view, correctness has to do with correspondence with reality. So it would seem that one account is real whereas the other is not. These are, in part, the arguments that the main scientific and governmental institutions are trying to put on. They are trying to define the controversy in terms of rightness.

But we want to look at the controversy from another point of view, a symmetrical one, assuming that both sides are talking about real Doñana; they are just offering different ways to manage complexity. That is why we can focus our attention in how ecologists introduce complexity to the governmental definitions, transforming what happened and introducing new ways of explaining their effects and that what holds us together.

Our aim, then, is to understand these different ways of accounting for Doñana as an evidence of the tension between the virtual and the actual. These tensions allow us to deal with this controversy in different and useful terms.

As we said before, the different strength to that complexity opened by the event and the different solutions provided to it show a different understanding of that tension. Whilst the governmental agencies focused their political actions, scientific definitions and technological solutions on the actual, the environmental movements focused their action and political strikes on the virtual.

Referencia

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