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Why Kassandra's prophecies fail

Catastrophes and apocalyptic prophecies.

All cultures provide for references to decay, disaster and death, as they do for references to creation and the genesis of the sacred cosmos, or to heroes venturing out to the unknown to stand dangers and demons.

But the increasing attention to coming catastrophes in contemporary public spheres, in particular in Western Societies, is striking. The once dominant heroic narrative about victories and triumphs, progress and revolution seems to be replaced by the reference to traumatic memories and catastrophic expectations. Traumatic founding myths get increasing salience for the imagination of national identities, victims become the icons of heightened subjectivity, expectations of catastrophes and disasters are playing the impersonal counterpart to the traumatic memories of victims and perpetrators.

Even the triumphant memory of revolutions and collective heroism fades out in western societies. Occasionally we still project it to late comers in modernization as for example to the arabellion of last year and we disregard that we are backing an islamicist cause that insists on separating busses and subways genderwise. Much more spellbinding than the fascination of collective heroism is, however, the spread of apocalyptic expectations of disaster and decay.

However, even the most famous predictions about incoming disasters and catastrophes

fail occasionally:

Remember for example:

Club of Rome: Europe under ice. Starvation wars in Europe

In the eighties: the gradual disappearance of European forests due to acid rain

At the same time: every fourth westerner will be affected by aids

after 9/ 11: closing the gates to Terrorism

After 2008: the global financial collapse

Y2 k

Bird's flu

Exhaustion of energy resources

All of these predictions were based on a linear or even progressive function assuming an frightening increase of the number of people affected by the catastrophe in question.

Many predictions failed just because they did not account for changes in human behavior, for humane inventiveness or for positive contingencies that curbed the statistics of the disaster.

In the following remarks I will, however, not deal with the difference between realistic and exaggerated prophecies. Actually I am interested not in the truth of these prophecies, but, instead, only in the social and emotional conditions fostering the public attention to apocalyptic predictions. These apocalyptic expectations, do, however, not exclude activism in order to prevent the disaster. They correspond, therefore more to prophetic warnings with respect to Gods wrath than to a calm certainty with respect to

the future end of the world.

Why do we listen to doomsday prophets in spite of failed predictions?

Looking for social conditions fostering the above mentioned shift from triumphant expectations to catastrophic ones lets go back to the original myth of Cassandra.

Kassandra, the beautiful daughter of Priamos (the king of ancient troy), was adored by Apollon who gave her the gift of foreseeing the future. Since she did not return his love he put a spell on her: nobody should pay attention to her warning calls. Cassandra represents the melancholy of intellectuals: intellectuals claim to know about the coming disaster but they are unable to get the attention of those endangered by it, let alone to intervene and to prevent the disaster. Entangled in practical concerns and down to earth businesses everybody pursues her own interests, and by this very entanglement we all are doomed to perish.

If we disentangle Kassandras situation and spin out the social options involved in it we discover that Cassandra faces a very special dilemma:

First branch of the dilemma: if people would listen and pay attention to her prophecies, they could change their behaviour and, thus, prevent the catastrophe. In this case Cassandra's predictions will fail and, consequently, Cassandra's believability as a

prophet may be questioned. Obviously she was not able to predict accurately the course of history.

Second branch: If, however, the people concerned would - following Apollon's spell - not listen to her predictions, they would certainly perish. To put it to the extreme :Nobody would be left to testify the truth of Cassandra's predictions.

3. Cassandra's dilemma can be overcome, however, if there is a group of people who, although listening to Cassandra's predictions, survive the announced disaster. These people can consider themselves to be interested in the prophecy - they identify mildly with the possible victims, but think that they are not directly concerned. They assume that the prediction of disaster refers to other people, while we ourselves, by contrast, are not directly concerned by the danger. Consequently they do not panic or flee, they are, by contrast, fascinated and attracted by the sensation of disaster.

This split between the **external observers** and the **endangered people** allows for **strong emotions** of awe, compassion and a hidden malicious joy - what in the German tongue is called "Schadenfreude". Watching the misery of others stirs up strong emotions and a weirdly triumphant feeling: it is not us, but them who are struck by disaster and death. We narrowly escaped. Because we consider this emotion between joy and fright to be a little bit unethical we do not admit to it or talk about it, but it is a

very powerful emotion. Few things are as attractive as the misery of others.

And this attraction is not just an individual feeling but it is a matter of collective emotions.

Watching the misery of others is embarrassing if it is performed by a single person but, if there is a chance to hide in a crowd or a group, it might become a highly attractive option. This hints at the affinity between collective emotions and public communication.

Collectively shared emotions move, drive and center communication in public spheres.

Assuming rational argumentation, moral judgement or the pursuit of individual interests as the driving forces of public debates is misleading. Instead, it is the contagiousness of collective emotions, the mutual reinforcing of emotional attitudes, that remain fragile when performed alone, the mirroring of the others expressions, in short: the collective effervescence in the Durkheimian sense, that is at the core of emotions in public spheres.

The same feeling that brings passbyers to stop in front of a traffic accident and to watch injured persons or damaged cars from a close distance also stimulates our attention in catastrophes reported in the media. It is frequently the **misery of others** that attracts our attention since we consider us, as private persons, to be exempted from the danger - although, by principle, the misfortune could also occur to us.

We may ask, of course, whether this collective emotion generated by watching a disaster from close range is a special contemporary phenomenon – otherwise it could not explain the contemporary shift from triumph to trauma. The answer is: it is, of

course, nothing totally new, but today's media of communication have extended the range of possible observers considerably and they have also alleviated the collective emotions as compared to the feelings experienced by bodily presence on the site of the disaster. The feelings triggered off by bodily presence are much more intensive and overwhelming than those that are generated by compassion with distant suffering.

But there are even more profound motives for the fascination of disaster.

In a way we are ignoring our possible being concerned as we are disregarding our own **mortality in everyday life**. As adult persons we know, of course, that we are mortal but we try to ignore this existential condition and we succeed in doing so because we do not know the exact date of our death. It is our ignorance about the date of our death that allows us to continue our everyday life. In a similar way we fuse our general concernedness „it could have hit us too“ with the certainty: this time it did strike others. Perhaps, in a psychoanalytical phrasing, we also project or translate our **existential certainty** of being doomed to death into the visible world at hand and shift the uneasy feeling of our mortality to another person in front of us: She is dead; our own death is far ahead. Thus we convert an unspecified fear about our own death into a specified observation of an object in the world in front of us. Rene Girard had this in mind when he outlined the process of scapegoating: we shift our own diffuse existential concernedness to a concrete object and thus drive it out. This cathetic construction of objects in front of us

5. Predictions of coming catastrophes have to be **vague, equivocal and ambivalent** in order to allow for these powerful emotions of standbys: if the catastrophe would be precisely dated and expectable, it would be turned from an extraordinary challenge into a regular event that does not stimulate emotions, but that could be coped with by routinized techniques. Oracle and prophecies may not exclude the possibility of a next day, of a future, of a hope. Because of this essential and constitutive vagueness of prophecies we can listen to Cassandra's prophecies and assume that she is not talking about our own future. We are fairly certain that our own situation will be spared from misfortune whilst others are seriously endangered. These endangered others are not just strangers, instead, we identify mildly with them and pretend to be moved by compassion which can be understood as fascination by the misery of others in ethical disguise.

6. The idea that we assume the position of an external observer is also supported by the remarkable bifurcation between **public care and private concern**. Whoever warns with respect to coming catastrophes can exempt herself neatly from this as a private person. The general public situation is usually depicted in gloomy colors, but the speaker considers her own situation to be fairly well. This can be illustrated by several examples: Everybody talks about shrinking resources of nonrenewable energy but few people move into smaller apartments in order to save heating costs, abstain from using aircraft

transportation, skip daily showers or car washing at weekends. The big financial crisis in 2008 that was publicly presented as a kind of economic apocalypse did not change the consumer behavior of Germans or their readiness to save. In the same vein people expect the European welfare state to take care for an ever growing range of problems but nobody will agree to pay higher taxes to cover additional expenditures etc.

Again we may ask whether this bifurcation of public and private is just a contemporary phenomenon or why triumphant events that were still celebrated in the newspapers in the 19th century do not attract the attention of global media today. For reasons outlined above most people do not like to watch the triumphs of others while they are attracted by distant suffering and misery. Media reports about the triumphant victories of others can be annoying not only because the victory of others can imply ones own defeat. Before global media coverage was available people rarely had this annoying experience: newspapers reported about the triumphant experiences of ones own community and abroad nobody was feeling offended because the images and news about the memorial celebration of victories were simply not available to foreigners abroad. Today, these reports about triumphs of others would be regarded as offensive for those who had been defeated, annoying or at least boring for third parties who were not involved in the conflict or competition. Take the march of the Orange order through catholic neighborhoods in North Ireland as an illustration.

7. But it is not just the Schadenfreude of distant standbys or the awareness of being

watched by an immensely large audience that drives the increasing attention for disaster and victimhood in the modern media. The shift of public attention towards disaster and catastrophes is also fostered by the logic of communicating with an anonymous public audience. This logic differs strongly from the one that governs oral face to face communication. Here the presence of others not only allows for an elementary communality of those corporeally present but also for an elementary form of turntaking and for utterances of confirmation or doubt. Nodding and shaking the head, frowning or mumbling "yes, yes" notifies about confirmation or rejection of the speakers communication. These signs of communality or response are lacking in translocal communication with an anonymous audience. Here we are speaking to a muted and faceless audience. Following the tradition of Parsons and Habermas we assume that the basic communality of these translocal (and internally diverse) audiences is constructed by appealing to a consensus about values. But value commitments are a volatile and fragile basis – there are always dissenters, abstentions and exceptions, deceptive and hypocritical commitments etc . Furthermore this disembodied consensus remains invisible. It can of course, be performed by public confessions but this engenders the risk of hypocrisy and deception. Primordial attributes like descent, gender and race, by contrast, are seen as existing beyond the arbitrary consent of the people: you have the attribute or you don't, denying or claiming does not help. They are, therefore, also especially apt to be used as a reference of an assumed communality in public communication that has to be empathized by a speaker in order to overcome the lack of

confirming signs. The assumed communality of an anonymous audience must be beyond question and doubt. And one of the most sensitive references of primordial communities is the common threat by a weird and invisible danger, by an invisible demon, by a coming catastrophe. In contrast to collective memories or promises of future victories the threat of disaster requires swift and immediate action. There is no time left for deliberation and doubts. In face of danger for life and health people tend to panic and this panic generates a primordial communality, in which the distinction between individual persons and the community melts away, hesitation and deliberation will only increase the danger. Catastrophes have the temporal signature of suddenness. The sudden appearance of the demon, his unexpected invasion, the dissolution of everyday certainties generate emotions that have to be excluded in everyday interaction. A translocal community of danger emerges because we can assume that this feeling is shared by many others who mirror our emotions as we do mirror theirs.

And this fear of danger and disaster is magnified not only by the suddenness of its actual occurrence but also by the invisibility of the threat: the virus diagnosed only by experts is seen as more dangerous than the flooding that everybody can perceive. Behind the harmless and well known façade a weird and uncanny abyss is hiding. The mythologies of soulstealing, sorcery, pollution and witchcraft are fuelled by the invisibility of the demonic threat: the well known surface of regular citizens covers a weird abyss,

deception reigns, nobody should be trusted.

But the expectation of catastrophes in modern public spheres are not only based on strong suspicions, they are also associated with contingency and uncertainty. Only Cassandra knows exactly the catastrophes to come and the dates of its occurrence. For her the contingencies are gone - the omniscient observer knows – like God - every event in advance. For her there is no crisis, threat or danger: everything takes its due and expectable course. Whoever talks of danger, contingencies and threats, can do so only because she is entangled in practical interests and, thus, is lost for the view of the whole picture that is presented by intellectuals albeit unsuccessfully.

But Cassandra is, although powerless, not devoid of any identification. She is moved by compassion. Faced to the alternative between decline and disaster proving her prophetic power, and failing prophecies saving her people she opts for the refutation of her prediction. If the endangered people would respect her warning they could escape misfortune and disaster by something that we may call enlightenment and they would turn the victory over danger into a strong feeling of communality. But most times the curse of Apollon seems to work: people listen to Kassandras ´ warning but disregard it. Some of them, however, those who are particularly open to the doomsday prophecies of kassandra, join her in expecting a gloomy apocalypse. Cassandra is increasingly gaining adherents in the west and we might, again, ask what drives this increasing inclination to take apocalyptic expectations for real. We have mentioned the feeling of being a distant

standbyer, the gap between private and public concerns, the logic of media communication and the construction of communality by external threats. All these conditions although, by principle independent from each other, coalesce in fostering a turn towards apocalyptic framing. What we, however, did not mention yet, is the increasing adaption of an intellectuals perspective on public issues. This perspective is based on the conviction that the intellectuals know about the course of things but also that they are excluded from the power to intervene and to change it. It presupposes a melancholic separation of intellectual insight from political power. Instead of taking the citizens stance, that is to try to participate in public issues in order to influence or shape it, we tend to retreat to the intellectuals passivity: we know what kind of evil is driving the world but every attempt to overcome it is doomed to failure.

This “vanitas vanitatum” of political citizenship is apparently supported by the occasional discovery of scandalous behavior by political representatives. These scandals rarely surprise the disenchanting citizen. They just confirm what she allegedly always knew: the political center is irredeemably rotten, the politicians are corrupt, the power to change is minuscule. This attitude of the disenchanting citizen repeats the peoples disdain for the monarchy in ancient regimes. If it continues in a lingering and oppressed mode it can explode into a violent uprising, in bloodshed and arbitrary killings, but it can also generate apathy and retreatism .

The occasional scandalization allows for a relief from this pressure, it allows for a symbolic decharismatization of the political center, and this decharismatization is at the

core of democratic mythology. Instead of proving the rottenness of the democratic institutions it testifies the contrary: the performative self constitution of the demos in acts of distrust and rebellion.