

An aerial photograph of a town in Japan, likely after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The town is densely packed with buildings, many of which are destroyed or severely damaged. The foreground shows a large area of rubble and debris, with some remaining structures and a few people visible. The background shows a steep, forested hillside. The overall scene is one of devastation and loss.

AFTER FUKUSHIMA

The Equivalence of Catastrophes

JEAN-LUC NANCY

Translated by Charlotte Mandell

After Fukushima.

After Fukushima.

The Equivalence of Catastrophes

J E A N - L U C N A N C Y

TRANSLATED BY CHARLOTTE MANDELL

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His heart,
in childhood, always delighted
in every leaf, every slice of sky,
contemplating his village. This future
was unaware that today
the horizon aligns itself with other
indifferences. Everything has happened:
in us, by fate,
we are prisoners of regret
for our innocence.

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Europa”

*After Fukushima:
The Equivalence
of Catastrophes*

Preamble

*T*he subtitle should not mislead: Not all catastrophes are equivalent, not in amplitude, not in destructiveness, not in consequences. A tsunami without repercussions for a nuclear installation is not the same as a tsunami that seriously damages a nuclear plant. Negligence in managing this plant opens up yet another register of gravity.

Nuclear catastrophe—all differences military or civilian kept in mind—remains the one potentially irremediable catastrophe, whose effects spread through generations, through the layers of the earth; these effects have an impact on all living things and on the large-scale organization of energy production, hence on consumption as well.

The “equivalence” of catastrophes here means to assert that the spread or proliferation of repercussions from every kind of disaster hereafter will bear the mark of that paradigm represented by nuclear risk. From now on there is an interconnection, an intertwining, even a symbiosis of technologies, exchanges, movements, which makes it so that a

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flood—for instance—wherever it may occur, must necessarily involve relationships with any number of technical, social, economic, political intricacies that keep us from regarding it as simply a misadventure or a misfortune whose consequences can be more or less easily circumscribed. This is even truer for a chemical catastrophe such as the one in Bhopal in 1984,¹ the human, economic, and ecological effects of which are still visible today.

The complexity here is singularly characterized by the fact that natural catastrophes are no longer separable from their technological, economic, and political implications or repercussions. Simple accident: The cloud from a volcano blocks aviation over at least a quarter of the planet. Real catastrophe: An earthquake shakes up not just the ground and the buildings on it but also an entire social, political, and moral situation. The question already raised by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755—itself felt from Morocco to northern Europe—which was at the time called the question of “Providence,” this question, subtly renewed by Kiarostami as the question “Does Allah allow that?” posed by a character in his film on the Iranian earthquake of 1990,² this question can no longer bear that name. We cannot deny telluric or meteorological forces. Nor can we deny the inextricable tangle of technologies, politics, and economies with the movements of these forces. Rousseau wrote to Voltaire, in 1756, “Concede, for example, that it was hardly nature who assembled twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and housed less densely, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all.”³ Rousseau could imagine the construction of a city planned differently. But today all our efforts of

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imagination concerning cities, transportation, energy are led inexorably either toward an increase in technological, social, and economic complexity and interdependence or toward the problems and obstacles raised by complexities already in place and the necessities they impose.

The complexity of interdependent systems (ecological or economic, sociopolitico-ideologic, technoscientific, cultural, logical, etc.) and the existing chains of constraints (electricity, gasoline, uranium, all the rare minerals, etc.)—and their implementation (their civilian and military, social and private uses, etc.)—depend on a general interconnection: that of the money by which all these systems function and to which, in the last analysis, they lead back, since any operation of fabrication, exchange, or distribution must lead to profit. This interconnection expresses an economy guided by the production and self-production of wealth, from which streams an incessant production of new conditions, norms, and constraints of life—not by the reproduction of conditions of existence or the extravagant hoarding of vainglorious wealth. The morphing of the second into the first was the product of what we call “capitalism”—that is, as we know, the process engendered by the accumulation of capital destined for profitable investment and not for vainglorious ostentation.

Marx called money a “general equivalent.” It is this equivalence that is being discussed here. Not to think about it by itself, but to reflect that the regime of general equivalence henceforth virtually absorbs, well beyond the monetary or financial sphere but thanks to it and with regard to it, all the spheres of existence of humans, and along with them all things that exist.

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This absorption involves a close connection between capitalism and technological development as we know it. More precisely, it is the connection of an equivalence and a limitless interchangeability of forces, products, agents or actors, meanings or values—since the value of any value is its equivalence.

Catastrophes are not all of the same gravity, but they all connect with the totality of interdependences that make up general equivalence. What's more, we must not forget to include wars in this interconnection, more particularly all the modern transformations of the concept and practices of war: "partisan" war, guerrilla warfare, "total" war, "world" war, police operations called "wars," and so on—the systematic development of both heavy and light armaments that favor the proliferation of war and its effects on so-called civilian populations as well as on cultures, herds, soil, and so on. Not to ignore economic warfare, which constantly agitates the system of general equivalence from within.

In brief, it is this equivalence that is catastrophic.

We should not conclude from this, however, that capitalism is the evil subject of this work with which it might be obvious what good subject—or what good *subjectivation*, as people like to say today—it should be contrasted with (a "more human" subject, for example, or one that is "more natural" or "more moral," "more spiritual," or anything having to do with a "resurrected culture").⁴ We are not opposing or proposing anything. Nor are we offering a solution for energy problems (phasing out nuclear energy, revolutionizing its management, limiting its expansion, etc.). But we are suggesting that the interdependent totality of "civilization" and its "globalization" must be understood

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as itself dependent on a profound orientation created over several centuries—without conscious decision, without deliberation—by a humanity that is now headed toward a generalized catastrophe, or at least is now capable of one, and hence is summoned less to rectify this orientation (by reforming it, channeling it, or impeding it) than to think about what this strange business [*histoire*] can mean that it has given rise to and consequently, quite simply, the existence of the world or worlds of which humans seem rather earnestly in charge.

Fukushima, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, revives fears and questions that the twentieth had unleashed for the first time on a large scale and that the century before it had manifested, the century that emerged from the two-fold industrial and democratic revolution, the century of the “conquering bourgeoisie.”⁵ This conquest has changed—into a domination no longer by the “bourgeois” but by the machine they had served and into a dissipation of what seemed to give meaning or value to that conquest. Meaning and value—which Marx called alienated under general equivalence—themselves become catastrophic, following the Greek etymology of *catastrophe*, upheaval, reversal, overturning, collapse.

The dénouement of Greek tragedy in *katastrophē* carried the play both to its extremity and to its resolution—purification, expulsion, conjuration, abreaction, liberation, release, as you choose: The history of interpretations of *catharsis* is endless. But this history is also the history of our obsession: We have never found the meaning of tragedy, supposing there is a meaning to find, and that “meaning” is always what is invented, but is never what is recovered.

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We live no longer either in tragic meaning nor in what, with Christianity, was supposed to transport and elevate tragedy to divine salvation. Nor can we take refuge in any sort of Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist wisdom: Equivalence does not allow it, despite all our good intentions. We are being exposed to a catastrophe of meaning. Let's not hurry to hide this exposure under pink, blue, red, or black silks. Let us remain exposed, and let us think about what is happening [*ce qui nous arrive*] to us: Let us think that it is we who are arriving, or who are leaving.⁶

“*To philosophize after Fukushima*”—that is the mandate I was given for this conference.¹ Its wording inevitably makes me think of Adorno’s: “To write poetry after Auschwitz.” There are considerable differences between the two. They are not the differences between “philosophy” and “poetry” since we know those two modes or registers of spiritual or symbolic activity share a complex but strong proximity. The differences, of course, are those between “Fukushima” and “Auschwitz.” These differences should certainly not be ignored or minimized in any way. They should, however, be correctly understood. I think that is necessary if I want to give the question I was given a conscientious answer.

First of all, we must remember that Auschwitz has already been several times associated with Hiroshima. The outcome of what is called the Second World War, far from being conceived as the conclusion and peace that should mark the end of a war, presents itself rather as a twofold inauguration: of a

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scheme for annihilating peoples or human groups by means of a systematically developed technological rationality, and a scheme for annihilating entire populations and mutilating their descendants. Each of these projects was supposed to serve the aim of political domination, which is also to say economic and ideological domination. The second of the two was, moreover, linked to the first by the fact that the war of the United States with Japan entrained the one in which America engaged with Nazi Germany and also induced anxious relations with the Soviet Union.

As we know, the Nazi agenda was animated by a racist and mythological ideology that carried to its height a fury of European, Christian origin, that is, anti-Semitism (which was extended in the name of a fanatical “purity” to include the Roma, homosexuals, Communists, and the handicapped). In this respect, the Hitlerian madness was a product of Europe and is markedly different from the dominating ambition nurtured by the United States as a power conceiving of itself as the *novus ordo seclorum*, “the new order of the world,” proclaimed by its seal.

The fact remains, however, that Auschwitz and Hiroshima are also two names that reflect—with their immense differences—a transformation that has affected all of civilization: the involvement of technological rationality in the service of goals incommensurable with any goal that had ever been aimed at before, since these goals embodied the necessity for destruction that was not merely inhuman (inhuman cruelty is an old acquaintance in human history), but entirely conceived and calculated expressly for annihilation. This calculation should be understood as excessive and immoderate compared with all the deadly forms of violence

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that peoples had ever known through their rivalries, their hostilities, their hatreds and revenges. This excess consists not only in a change of scale but first and foremost in a change in nature. For the first time, it is not simply an enemy that is being suppressed: Human lives taken en masse are annihilated in the name of an aim that goes well beyond combat (the victims, after all, are not combatants) to assert a mastery that bends under its power not only lives in great number but the very configuration of peoples, not only lives but “life” in its forms, relationships, generations, and representations. Human life in its capacity to think, create, enjoy, or endure is precipitated into a condition worse than misery itself: a stupor, a distractedness, a horror, a hopeless torpor.