

Call for papers

International conference

“Disaster, Environment and Property: historical approaches, 19th-20th centuries”

Paris, 2-3 December 2015

Organisers: Marc Elie, Fabien Locher

Supported by ANR project GOVENPRO

Property systems are essential operators in the anthropization of environments. The transformations they cause or enable often contribute to increasing societies’ exposure to natural hazards. Conversely, historical research shows that some forms of ownership and inheritance law can help to avoid the occurrence of disastrous events, such as avalanches in mountainous areas. Central and local authorities have also long sought to constrain property rights in order to prevent the occurrence of disasters and alleviate their effects, for example by compulsory purchase or the restriction of individual property rights.

Taking a historic perspective focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, the conference will explore the interactions between property systems, resources and environments, and the particular class of socio-ecological processes that is disasters. The concept here is understood broadly to include “natural”, “industrial”, “demographic” and “ecological” disasters. Property systems are taken as the whole range (individual property, public ownership, common property and commons, servitudes, intellectual property) with particular stress on the actual practices (technical, legal, scientific, enforcement, etc.) that underpin their existence and combine to make them operate as historical institutions.

Disasters, in their short- and long-term effects, reshape the operating conditions for private and public actors, enabling them to affect the *distribution* of property and its *workings*, i.e. its rules of acquisition and transmission and the rights it entails.

A disaster is an occasion for the transformation of property in ways that may have many purposes and motivations: economic, political, ideological. It is also likely, by design or chance, to produce, at a relatively small scale of space and time, an “emergency situation” for property as ordinary rules are relaxed or relief must be provided. Disasters are also a motive for action, often as part of public policy, affecting property rights in order to prevent a catastrophe in advance, or mitigate or repair its effects afterwards. These three aspects (opportunity, emergency, management) interact and overlap to produce a complex set of processes of historical co-construction of property and disasters that the conference will address.

Issues addressed will include, *but are not limited to*,

- 1/ The disaster as a “state of emergency” for property: relaxation of regulating mechanisms, requisitions, “return to order” of ordinary property;
- 2/ The disaster as an opportunity to appropriate environments and resources, for private actors (private enclosure, speculative sale and purchase, concentration of ownership) via, in particular, market mechanisms, public action, violence or the threat of violence;
- 3/ The place of property in disaster prevention policies and preparation for disasters: servitudes, zoning, planning rules, expropriation, compulsory or voluntary purchase;
- 4/ Property and post-disaster repair and reconstruction programmes;
- 5/ Property, vulnerability and resilience: relationships between property distribution and regulation, and unequal exposure and response; disaster, property and poverty;
- 6/ Disaster, property, insurance: insurance mechanisms, assessment of damage and size of disaster; role of insurance in policies of prevention, preparation and reconstruction; insurance and permanence of property rights in emergencies;
- 7/ Disasters in the long history of theoretical discourse on environment/property relations: claims that some forms of property are linked to the occurrence of acute ecological crises, such as the so-called “tragedy of the commons”, criticisms of private property; discourse on the decline, fall and collapse of societies, seen in terms of the environment and property.

The conference will be held on 2-3 December 2015 at EHESS, 190-198 Avenue de France, 75013 Paris. Working languages will be English and French.

Proposed papers (in French or English) should be submitted by email to conference.disaster.property@gmail.com by 15 May 2015 at the latest.

Each proposal must include the first and last names and email address of the speaker; a CV of no more than one page; a title and proposal text of no more than 600 words. The selected speakers will have their travel and accommodation expenses paid.

Responses to the proposals will be sent out by 15 July 2015.

Background texts to the papers will be requested by 1 November 2015 so as to be circulated among speakers in advance of the conference.