

Theorizing in catastrophic times

Nordic summer university and Stockholm university, Department of Culture and Aesthetics.

Stockholm – March 15 – March 17, 2023.

In a recent publication in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* (Kemp, August 1, 2002) a group of eleven researchers concluded that the worst and most catastrophic climate change scenarios are underexplored, and urged the international scientific community to set to the task. But what happens to theory, and not the least social theory, when it is faced with a catastrophic future? In this workshop we ask for contributions that delve into the problems and possibilities of social theory in catastrophic times.

Vociferous climate movements are proclaiming that the world is no longer just headed towards catastrophe but already in the midst of one. Fears of environmental disasters related to climate, biodiversity, food, peak oil, radiation and other forms of pollution are everywhere, as are fears of financial collapse and political breakdown. In tandem with this, new ideas and cultural orientations are forming, as are practices and modes of organizing. However, climate catastrophe (and other related catastrophes such as the collapse of the social order and war) always come with large uncertainty, and may even constitute an absolute limit beyond which we cannot predict outcomes. In the light of this, we ask what are the appropriate and necessary ways of representing – in literature, art and social theory – as well as modes of organising needed in order to convincingly orient ourselves and theorize about the future?

Firstly, despite its prevalence, the awareness of catastrophe has arguably still not penetrated sufficiently into contemporary life. As pointed out decades ago in relation to the nuclear threat, the philosopher Günter Anders pointed out that we are continually “outrun” by our own technology. This produced a situation of “apocalypse blindness”, an inability to grasp the apocalypse that was grounded not so much in intellectual as in emotional limitations. “It is not as thinking beings that we are ‘limited’, but as *emotional* beings – ‘limited’ in a most fateful manner. We are beset by ‘emotional idiocy’” (Anders 2019: 135). These observations appear to be as true today as they were during the Cold War and are pertinent not least to what has been referred to as the “paradox of the Anthropocene”: the fact that environmental

degradation continuous unabated despite high levels of environmental awareness and a scientific consensus about the causes of this degradation (Stoner & Melathopoulos 2015: 18).

Contributions to the workshop might ask: *How it is possible to think and act on the possibility of a catastrophic development in the midst of an institutional setup that discourages such ideas?* How are catastrophes interrelated with inequality and what are the possibilities of a politics that might ensure a “democratization of survivability” (Hamilton)? What artistic representations and political myths (if any) are required in order to theorize about the future beyond the catastrophe? How do people organize in preparation for coming hardships? What movements can be expected to rise in reaction to catastrophes – to protest, to protect and to construct alternatives – and what are the risks of a rise of reactionary movements? What role can literature and art play in constructing social theory in front of the uncertain?

In addition to the question of how to think and act on the catastrophe is the second, and equally important question of *what the system-critical implications are* of the idea of the present as catastrophic. How can this idea inform a critique of the presently dominant systems (economy, politics, culture) that are predicated on continuous progress without succumbing to defeatism and hopelessness? What, then, are the possibilities of combining an awareness of catastrophe with effective political practice? With what hopes can it go along? What concrete utopias are possible in a catastrophic present? What resources can we find in critical social thought for such a critique? What need do we have of rethinking fundamental to “modern” societies such as progress, linear time and modernity itself? Ethically, what is the best way to act when suffering increases and hope in progress may be unavailable? What are the possibilities of social theory in the light of the catastrophe?

We encourage proposals from the social sciences, humanities as well as natural science and in particular young scholars to contribute to the debate!

Proposals should be sent to karolina.kallgren@idehist.su.se before December 15th 2022.