A Further Species of Trouble? Disaster and Narrative[1]

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A New Species of Trouble

Disasters visit those who don't expect them but they do not strike entirely at random. Discharged along the lightning conductors that protect power, they preferentially strike the underprivileged. 'The issue', writes Charles Perrow (1999:360) in the Afterword to his Normal Accidents 'is not risk but power'. From the horrors of Bhopal (Rajan 1999), through earthquake vulnerability in California (Bolin and Stanford 1999), to the 1995 heat wave in Chicago (Klinenberg 2002), there are many studies that document the processes of differential vulnerability. However none are more eloquent than those of Kai Erikson. His book, Everything in its Path (1976) is a meticulous and chilling account of a disaster visited on Buffalo Creek, West Virginia in February 1972. One dismal wet winter morning a roughly built levée holding back millions of gallons of waste water at the head of this Appalachian valley gave way, and the resulting flood was channelled into a maelstrom of destruction that surged for miles down the valley. 125 died, 4000 out of 5000 homes were destroyed, and the heart was torn out of a closely-knit community in a process that Erikson calls 'collective trauma'. '"I"', he writes, 'continue to exist. "You" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.' (Erikson 1976,154). Erikson (1994), has subsequently explored a wide range of other instances of community destruction caused by technological or human-induced disaster, describing what he calls a new species of trouble. So what is this new species of trouble?

First, it is the consequence of human-induced disaster: a broken dam; environmental methylmercury pollution; the radiation from the Three Mile Island power station. The argument is that unlike natural disasters, those induced by human activity may have preventable causes, 'so there is always a story to be told about them, always a moral to be drawn from them, always a share of blame to be assigned.' (Erikson 1994,142). Second, the new species of trouble involves the destruction of community with contaminating and insidious silent toxins. These, says Erikson, 'scare human beings in new and special ways, … [and] … elicit an uncanny fear in us.' (Erikson 1994,144), Third, it involves the destruction of sense. Nature and society are no longer perceived as orderly. Narrative structures – the Aristotelian sense that plots have a beginning, a middle, and an end – are lost. 'Toxic disasters,' writes Erikson (1994,147), '…violate all the rules of plot' generating epistemological confusion and ontological uncertainty. 'Who am I?' 'What is the world?' 'Why is the world capricious?' 'Why has its order broken down?' They generate questions like these, and then a kind of anomie that extends not only into the rules of the social but also into the natural order. The consequence is demoralisation and the destruction of communality.

Foot and Mouth, 2001

Erikson's diagnostic intuitions resonate in a wide range of circumstances: for instance with the 2001 UK foot and mouth epizootic. Our argument is that this can be understood as an example of his 'new species of trouble', but with some important and instructive differences. It is a commonplace that foot and mouth 2001 was disastrous for many in rural communities[2]. Important is the

fact that a large part of the farming community was economically and socially stressed before the outbreak (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food 2002, 14). Many hitherto prosperous farmers in both the uplands and the lowlands were living on a combination of hope, past earnings and borrowed money. This was a community and an industry in crisis even before foot and mouth. So farmers may have been less isolated than the residents of Buffalo Creek, but the foot and mouth outbreak can in some measure be understood as a version of the new species of trouble. In Devon in the south-west of England and in north Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway it was a catastrophe visited on communities already depressed economically and personally.

In August 2001 BBC Radio Cumbria published a book, Foot and Mouth, Heart and Soul (Graham 2001), composed of personal accounts of the outbreak in Cumbria. Here is an excerpt from the Introduction:

> 'Cumbria was hard hit. Harder hit then any other part of the UK. The virus swept through the north of the county like a tornado, swallowing everything in its path, leaving a smoky trail of misery, disbelief and devastation. Neighbours of the afflicted barricaded themselves in and gazed on in trepidation through the haze of disinfectant, doing all they could to stop such a brutal violation of their own farmsteads. At times it seemed that there would be no livestock left standing between Shap and Moffat. Then came the ripple effect. Except the ripples were more like tidal waves, leaving in their wake a tourist drought, empty hotels, lay-offs, and a rural economy straining under new and unprecedented pressures.' (Graham 2001,5).

In this chapter we our concern is to argue that the epidemics in Cumbria and Devon may be understood as examples of the 'new species of trouble', but with a difference. In what follows we explore the silent toxicity of the outbreak, whether or how it was human-induced, and whether and in what ways it can be characterised by loss of meaning or plot. Finally we consider whether the epidemic led to breakdown of communality. In each case we argue that while Erikson's focus is useful it needs to be adapted and moved from its functionalist foundations.

Foot and Mouth: A Silent Toxin?

Did foot and mouth come like a silent toxin? And the answer is yes. In part it did. But perhaps only in part.

Like methylmercury it came silently to the farms. And worse, it spread erratically, capriciously. No one was safe. By the time it was detected it was far too late. It was time for the vets to call the slaughtermen. And even worse than methylmercury, it was infectious. The danger lay everywhere, uncertainly. Friends, neighbours, the milk lorry, the postman, the vets, the wind itself. Here is an excerpt from the Cumbria County Council investigation:

> '… families tended to become confined to their farms even before this became enforced by the FMD restrictions. Children were sent to stay away or kept off school. Diversified off farm businesses were closed or kept in operation by the 'away posting' of one member of the family.

> Visits to family, friends or social venues virtually came to a standstill.' (Cumbria Foot and Mouth Disease Inquiry 2002,76)

This, then, sounds like silent toxicity and its social consequences. But there are two ways in which the foot and mouth virus is not quite like the toxins described by Erikson. One, it didn't and doesn't infect people. And two, once it finally went away, it really went away. The citations document the horror of the uncertainties that led farmers to barricade themselves into their farms and try to avoid all contact during the course of the epizootic. But while the psychological and social scars may remain, the epizootic indeed came, in the end, to an end.

This suggests that the narrative effects are subtly different from those described by Erikson. The Aristotelian demand for a beginning, and particularly a middle, to the plot were indeed not met. But strangely, there was, months later, an end to the disease-related part of the story. With the virus gone the story of its contamination came to an end. Perhaps, then, the possibility of sensemaking was restored, albeit after an agonising period of suspense.

Foot and Mouth: Caused by Human Action?

As we have seen, in Erikson's account the new species of trouble results from human action that is therefore in need of an account or an explanation. If this fails to appear then orderliness and trust are undermined. This argument intersects with his attention to silent toxins. Combine human agency and silent toxins, and the malevolent mix undermines trust in order and its accounts (Erikson 1994,154). Absence of trust appeared often in the course of the foot and mouth epidemic:

> '"...night after night on television news we had Jim Scudamore or Mr Brown, sometimes the Prime Minister, Professor King, it is under control, it is completely under control, it is definitely under control and we felt absolutely insulted and patronised by these lies that we were told. And furthermore it did a great deal of lasting damage because it meant that we are all now so completely cynical about anything the Government says. It has destroyed trust, trust takes years and years to build up and it can be destroyed overnight, and that is one thing that happened."' (Foot and Mouth Disease 2001: Lessons to be Learned Inquiry 2002,81)

So the presenting symptom is lack of trust in experts. But why does the public not trust scientists and other experts? It is sometimes argued that failure to value expertise reveals a deficit in the competence of the public: if only people <u>properly</u> understood science then, or so the argument ran, they would appreciate its self-evident benefits. The work of Brian Wynne (1996) and his collaborators shows that this hope is quite misplaced. People, they argue, are not dim, unenlightened and uninformed. They tend to know perfectly well what they think about experts. And this means that they also tend to be sceptical, assuming that experts play their paymasters' tunes. Further, they find that on the ground experts reveal a lack of practical expertise. The conclusion is that it is better to talk of 'the public <u>interpretation</u> of science' than to assume the public don't understand the arguments in the first place.

What should we make of this in the context of disaster and its causes? In response to this question we want to make two brief points. The first is a theoretical and empirical commonplace: the credibility problems of experts in technoscience are part of a larger process. Narratives about the undermining of foundational certainties in modernity suggest that this erosion has occurred for a variety of reasons, including the existence of many competing sources of authority (Beck et al. (2003), Beck (1992)). People consult friends, relatives, the media, general practitioners, alternative healers, women's groups, trade union meetings and the internet, not to mention their own local experience and practice. Here is a speaker from Cumbria:

> 'MAFF had the insensitivity and audacity to send farmers a booklet telling them about the "Welfare of the ewe at lambing time" at the very time when heavily pregnant and actually lambing ewes were being driven up the tail boards of wagons to go for slaughter, dropping their lambs as they staggered up. Farmers were also obliged to stand by and watch lambs drowning in waterlogged fields, not being allowed to move them to the homestead to care for them.' (Almond 2002)

The second point follows from this. It is that the boundaries between the natural and the social are being eroded in practice if not in theory (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Thus there is much evidence to suggest that the explanatory divisions between nature and culture don't hold up: that we live in natureculture. This is a point that has been explored in 'risk society' studies which consider the way in which what counts as nature is no longer seen as 'natural', coming instead with social relations already attached. In this way of thinking what was natural comes to act unpredictably in part precisely because it is caught up in the social, and it works in ways that are opaque and contested. The divisions between nature and culture are no longer systematically and consistently sustained

We cannot pursue this point in detail here but in the context of foot and mouth it deserves two brief comments. The first is that it is more or less impossible to offer an account of the causes of the outbreak if we insist on a clear boundary between natural and social. The virus was, yes, 'natural' – but even this needs qualifying since the variant that caused the epidemic appeared in South India in the early 1990s almost certainly in a mutation arising from the domestication of animals. It spread slowly from South India to reach the UK in 2001 as a result of international trade. And it caused an outbreak in the UK as a result of WTO rules which distinguish between countries with foot and mouth disease, those free of it with vaccination, and those free of it without (Rweyemamu and V. 2002). The status of a country in terms of this classification has drastic trade and economic implications. This was why the UK had unvaccinated herds running into tens of millions of beasts; why those were so vulnerable to the virus once it arrived; and one of the reasons why the epizootic was not controlled by vaccination. And (to blur the division between the natural and the social still further) it is also partly why it made sense for the cattle industry in the UK to breed herds able to grow, and produce quantities of milk beyond the dreams of third world farmers (Woods 2004).

If the boundary between the natural and the social is obscure, contested, and unsustainable in general, then the search for simple causes is chronically

open-ended. This is our second point. The reason for this is that there are so many candidate contributory causes to the epizootic. Or, to make the same point in a different idiom, it is because the whole is better seen as some kind of emergent effect which defies explanatory reduction into either nature or culture. Indeed, the major 'Lessons to be Learned' Inquiry (2002,7) takes this position:

> 'The nation will not be best served by seeking to blame individuals. Rather we should seek to apply the lessons to be learned in a manner that will contribute to changes in collective attitudes and approaches. In that way we can, in future, approach the shared task of being better prepared and better able to respond with speed and certainty.'

This quotation begs a variety of contested issues about the competence of MAFF (later DEFRA), but the larger point is spot-on. If natureculture is complex and emergent it becomes difficult to fix particular causes. All become contestable. And on some accounts, non-experts also recognise this (Poortinga and others 2004).

At first sight this seems to undermine Erikson's argument about the role of human action and responsibility for the case of foot and mouth. If human action was <u>not</u> clearly responsible for the outbreak, then perhaps the outbreak does not count as a version of the new species of trouble? But things are a little more complicated. This is because what lies behind Erikson's interest in human or social agency is not simply the discretionary character of the latter, but also the insight that <u>uncertainty</u> helps to produce this new species of trouble with its lack of trust in the regularity of the natural and the social. And though Erikson doesn't put it in this way, the <u>confusion of natureculture precisely works to erode the certainties</u>. It fits – indeed contributes to – the new species of trouble.

Foot and Mouth: Loss of Sense, Silences and Community

Did the foot and mouth outbreak lead to a loss of <u>sense</u>? This is the third part of Erikson's argument about the new species of trouble. We will need to nuance this, but our first answer has to be yes. In the explanatory vacuum generated by ontological and epistemological uncertainty many commented on the silence of the land and the farm (Wrennall 2002). A witness wrote into the Devon Inquiry to say that after the culling: 'We had a silence around us, a dog with no work, hay silage and straw with nothing to feed or bed.' (Mercer 2002,77) Silence is, well, silent. It does not witness itself in words. Or only indirectly. And the words, when they come, may be distressing. As we read them we risk a kind of voyeurism. Here, for instance, is a fifteen-year old girl, the daughter of Cumbrian farmers:

> 'My brother went to stay at my gran's as he didn't want to be at the farm when the animals were destroyed. He found the situation very distressing. Even now he doesn't want to talk about it and told gran he would try to think we had sold them so he wouldn't have to think about what had really happened. Going home on the Sunday afternoon was very strange. The farm was so quiet with no animals, just empty sheds.' (Beattie 2001,64)

For those involved in farming words were lacking. The Aristotelian narratives of farming went into suspension: ‘Short term: my children didn’t eat, sleep, learn, play or do anything ‘normally’. I sympathise with every refugee I see on the News now; like them I was living in fear for my family and home’. (Mercer 2002,53) Many of the normal plotted practices of life were no longer relevant. And we can see this too in the sequences of photos that document the emptying of farms, the process of slaughter, and the silence left behind (Chapman and Crowden 2005). A lost farm dog not knowing what to do. A plot, indeed, that had been lost: depression, the threat or the reality of meaninglessness, a lack of sense. This is part, then, of the new species of trouble.

And with this, with the silences, came the erosion of community and communality also described by Erikson. Here is testimony from Devon:

> ‘People withdrew from the nurturing of the community. The dangerous “not us” became wider and bigger: farmers, walkers; MAFF/DEFRA; those with no bio-security and those with excellent bio-security; … Suspicion, guilt, panic, fear and abandonment were all apparent. What is left is lack of confidence, depression, lack of ability to respond, and despair.’ (Mercer 2002,58)

This, then, sounds like Erikson’s new species of trouble. There is isolating and distancing, withdrawal, fear, confusion, loss of sense and erosion of community.

Silences and Accounts

But something else is happening too. Alongside the silences and the isolations and the erosions there are also endless <u>accounts</u>. The BBC Radio Cumbria book brings together fifty, but it is the tip of a huge iceberg. There are thousands more. By those who lost their stock. By those living near the landfill sites. By vets, slaughtermen, neighbours, ministers and sub-postmasters. Many people <u>wanted</u> to make some sense of this cruel disruption. So there are diaries, tape recordings, letters, submissions to Radio Cumbria, to official investigations like the ‘Lessons to Be Learned’ Inquiry. There are drawings. Games invented by children. There are photos. There are books. And there is poetry. It is as if this deficit of meaning called out a rush of narrative to try to fill the vacuum.

There are narrative themes at work here (Bailey and others 2003; Nerlich/Hamilton, and Rowe 2002)[3]. Paradoxically, at the same time, the stories also tend to resist attempts to sum them up. Here is a part of a poem that became iconic in Cumbria, written by Peter Frost-Pennington, a temporary veterinary officer.

> ‘I have to believe this mass sacrifice of animals I love
> Is worth it.
> Or is it the farmers who are the real sacrifice?
> Like the animals, they take it meekly and obediently
> Often thanking me for doing it.
> After I had killed all 356 cattle in one family’s dairy herd
> They sent flowers to my wife.

> These are the people who are giving up all, in the hope it will save others.' (Frost-Pennington 2001,7-8)

Frost-Pennington's words are joined by millions of others, all trying to make sense. For it is our suggestion that in this proliferating version of the new species of trouble there is no lack of meaning or language, but rather (or also) meaning and narrative in excess[4] – in fact both within and beyond language, for instance into art, performance and photography. In which case this version of the new species of trouble is not simply about losing sense when the narratives of life or community disappear. Rather, or in addition, it is about meanings that exceed the available narrative technologies. Or, possibly it is about narratives that do not form a single whole but craft multiple and non-coherent modes of sense. Perhaps, then, this is the distinctive character of this version of the new species of trouble: that, in one way or another, it defies summary.[5]

Creativities, Ambivalences and Grand Narratives

Three brief observations that follow from this. First, alongside the fragmentation and loss of meaning, there is also an extra-ordinary creativity at work. This is literary, pictorial, social, political, spiritual, material and economic. In his normal job Frost-Pennington works in tourism at Muncaster Castle in lower Eskdale in Cumbria. Perhaps he writes poetry in his spare time, but he would not have written this particular poem unless he'd been caught up in the foot and mouth epizootic. Just as this anonymous farmer would not have said: 'We have to use this as a way to improve on things – from farm practice to markets, to supermarkets, to our relationship with customers who buy what we produce. We're listening; talk to us, tell us what you want us to do and we'll do it.' (Brough 2001,195)

So there were creative changes and endless kindnesses:

> 'networks appeared almost as a natural consequence of need, vital to bring some confidence, purpose and practicality in our responses. Yet for the farming community, marginalised, isolated and confused, the very act of listening and trying to understand has seemed so important.' (Humphries 2001,192)

The anger and the losses were real. But, or so we want to say, these hurts were accompanied by creativities, perhaps in some kind of balance – or perhaps not.

And this is the second point. One of us has written about ambivalence in health care (Singleton 1996; 1998). But foot and mouth was also about ambivalence. Meaninglessness, silence, loss of livelihood and narrative coherence were complemented by a fragmentary and extraordinary creativity. They were complemented by a process of groping towards new narratives, new meanings, new and renewed ways of living. One person, a slaughter man distressed by his part in the mass killing, said 'It's part of a cycle' (Brough 2001,195). We do not want to say that foot and mouth worked out alright in the end, if only because there is no end, there is no summing up, there is no bottom line (Law 1994; Singleton 2005). But perhaps the movement and complexity implied in the metaphor of the cycle also catches something

important: a movement <u>between</u> moments that are good and moments that are bad, between different narrative forms; the capacity to make and move with them in order to carry on with life.

And third, there are related questions to do with <u>grand narrative</u> and Aristotelian plot. This is because grand narrative, no doubt in an Aristotelian form, sits uneasily with the creative effusion of accounts of pain, anger and redemption. Perhaps it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the two do not exist in the same universe. Grand narrative smoothes things off, makes them follow a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end. But this is not what the effusion of accounts and meanings is about, even though they individually show narrative themes with beginnings, middles and ends.

That there is a yawning gap between the big stories and the upwelling of local forms of testimony is evident on all sides. There was anger and frustration in Cumbria and Devon about the big policies invented in London. There was an endless sense that outsiders didn't really get it, that those who had not lived through it could not know what it was really like, and further, that they could not understand local circumstances (Bickerstaff and Simmons 2004). The sense was widespread that any attempt to sum it up, to catch it in a policy or an overview, was necessarily doomed to failure. But the sense of this gap between the complexities on the ground and the story-like accounts of the grand narratives lurks also in the grand narratives themselves. The report compiled by Ian Mercer for the Devon County Council deals with this head-on:

> '[Many] are … aware of the emotional atmosphere which surrounded the exposure of personal tragedy. There are also undoubtedly those who have not yet found it possible to express their feelings in writing or in person. What follows is necessarily for the present purpose as objective and pragmatic as we can make it, but none who have suffered should be in any doubt that their experience and their present plight is not diminished in any way by that'. (Mercer 2002,2)

This is about the loss of words. It is about the disparity between local and emotional words and the reporting of those words. And then, very interestingly, it is also about the uneasy division between the 'objective and the pragmatic' on the one hand, and the experience of individuals on the other. It is about the division between certifiable knowledge that resides in the public domain, and the equally real construction of the private – and the fact of their mismatch.

The sense that the grand narratives don't catch it runs through some of the other big reports. For instance, the <u>Lessons to be Learned</u> report (Foot and Mouth Disease 2001: Lessons to be Learned Inquiry 2002) literally marginalises personal testimonies by locating these in the margins. So what are they doing there? Two possibilities suggest themselves. Perhaps they work to strengthen the grand narrative of the report by legitimating it in an expression of sensitivity to suffering. Perhaps, then, their presence is a way of marginalising personal testimony figuratively as well as literally. Or perhaps, alternatively, they are a typographical recognition of the report's limitations. That it speaks, but in its managerial and policy-related smoothness, it also knows that it does not speak the truths and the silences, the realities, that are

generated in this version of the new species of trouble. Because, precisely, they cannot be summed up.

Conclusion

In the face of disaster we are confronted with the question: how does a world hang together for its participants? One possible answer is that it is integrated: that it can be summarised in families of narratives that fit together, and that it is when these fail that meaninglessness results: that epistemological and ontological uncertainty generate the new species of trouble identified by Erikson. An alternative that we have suggested though not developed here, is that people's stories and plots don't entirely fit together, but that there is no crisis in meaning, no embodied crisis, so long as these are held apart or intersect only in carefully crafted ways[6].

The issue is largely empirical and moves us beyond our present argument. In any case, disaster visited on an underprivileged Appalachian community is no doubt different in form to the species of trouble that visited Devon and Cumbria in 2001. It seems likely, for instance, that the farming communities were less isolated. But whatever the context, it is our argument that the foot and mouth catastrophe can in part be understood as a kind of narrative implosion where there was not simply meaninglessness, but also too much meaning, an excess. The hurt cannot be well described. But alongside this, the creativity of this implosion is also moving and exciting. Arguably it also generated new community strengths. Perhaps it was part of a process of change, both tragic and innovative. Creativities as well as traumas grew out of this further species of trouble.

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Endnotes

[1] We are grateful to Cathy Bailey, Annemarie Mol, Maggie Mort, Kath Smart, Laura Watts and Sue Wrennall who have helped us to formulate many of the arguments that follow.

[2] We are grateful to farmer and sociologist Sue Wrennall. Our account of the economic and social circumstances of Cumbrian farmers reflects her comments in several important respects.

[3] On trauma and the conventional character of 'ineloquence' in legal testimony see Berlant (2001).

[4] In the literatures influenced by post-structuralism, emptiness is understood as excessive, proliferative, and generative. See, in very different modes, Rotman (1987) and Berlant (2001). On the relation between (the limitations of) discourse and the generative character of extra-discursive figure, see Lyotard (1984).

[5] We are also tempted to argue that the new species of trouble is about the collapse together of different circuits of meaning, narrative forms, or ways of life, that are held apart under normal circumstances. This, however, takes us beyond the materials we are discussing here.

[6] This is implied by Annemarie Mol's work on health care practices, though her account explores not only epistemological but also ontological multiplicity. See Mol (2002). For a related argument in the context of foot and mouth see Law (2007 forthcoming).