The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Politics in Holland and Sweden

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Disasters remembered and forgotten

Many big disasters such as the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, the Bhopal chemical disaster, or major oil spills in Alaska, France, Spain and elsewhere have a major and lasting impact on public health, the environment, and the social and economic fabric of the communities affected (Davidson, 1990; Jasanoff, 1994). Still, despite such objectively recognizable footprints, not all disasters become equally deeply rooted in collective memory. Why are some mass catastrophes more or less 'forgotten'—a case in point is the Chicago heat wave of 1995 that claimed more than 700 lives, but has been practically erased from American public memory, which has retained much more vivid images of much less deadly disasters such as hurricane Andrew and the Lockerbie Pan Am tragedy (Klinenberg, 2001), and more recently has been mesmerized by '9-11'—whereas others are so vividly remembered in monuments, commemorations and public discourse? This general question inspired the research reported in this article. Specifically, we wanted to study how and to what extent people and communities victimized by disaster are able to shape and correct 'official,' governmental efforts at disaster investigation and remembrance.

Our key claim is that the extent and nature of disaster remembrance is not solely a question of physical characteristics such as the number of casualties, nor of the degree of social disturbance they cause at the time of their occurrence; instead it should be viewed as a product of a political encounter between

grass-roots memory and the elite-level, political 'processing' of disasters. To elaborate this claim we connect ideas and concepts from memory studies, which focus mainly on how victim communities remember disasters at the local level, with the literature on the politicization of disasters that concerns itself with the governmental responses and processing of disasters.

Our argument is exploratory, based on qualitative case studies of disaster aftermaths: the 1992 El Al plane crash in Amsterdam, and the M/V Estonia ferry tragedy in the Baltic Sea in 1994. These two cases were selected because they both gave rise to conflict between grass roots and governmental recollections and interpretations of the events. Even though the cases differ in the speed to which the conflict intensified and the duration of the conflict, the governments in both cases were unable to 'forget' the disaster because of continued bottom-up pressures to address unresolved questions. At the same time, the nature of the disaster was such that quite different types of victimization occurred. Hence comparing these cases allows us to study similar outcomes produced by seemingly dissimilar contextual and actor constellations, a strategy that would hopefully enable us to generate ideas about the key variables and mechanisms at work. Data on both cases were obtained from government documents, parliamentary and council proceedings, victim's organizations, mass media, and interviews. Data gathering was targeted especially at chronologically and/or politically significant episodes in the post-disaster phase, including formal commemoration ceremonies, informal commemoration rituals, the (impending) publication of investigation reports and parliamentary debates. In the final section, we shall infer some preliminary theoretical implications from the comparison of both cases.

Remembering disasters: a political process

Disaster scholars often differentiate between a state of normalcy preceding the occurrence of disaster, the acute stage of crisis, and the "aftermath." This implies that crises "begin" and "end" in clearly identifiable ways. The criticism of this view emphasizes the linkages between pre-existing socio-political conditions on the one hand, and the likelihood of disaster occurrence and the nature of governmental disaster responses on the other. What in the early years of disaster studies used to be the 'Risk-Hazard' paradigm has developed into a more holistic approach for understanding disasters by adding vulnerability, that is, the social, economic and political processes that put communities at risk in the first place (Turner, 1978; Hewitt, 1983; Oliver-Smith, 1999; Shaw, 1992; Wisner et al, 2004), and so transform disasters into 'normal accidents' (Perrow, 1984; Steinberg, 2000; Klinenberg, 2001). Likewise, the "disaster after the disaster" is often every bit as intense, intractable, and potentially debilitating as the acute

phase. This insight has been well developed in the social science research on disasters (Rosenthal et al, 2001; Oliver-Smith, 1986; Schneider, 1999). It is often only after the acute threat has abated that the existential uncertainty generated by a disaster begins to show its full significance. Disasters tend to generate public anxiety and sometimes extraordinary levels of collective stress (Barton, 1969). Because of the high stakes and pressures involved, they are times to be remembered (Caruth, 1995).

But are they really, and if so how and by whom? Human experience is commonly supposed to be processed and stored in a person's memory. This 'archive model' of the cumulative qualities of memory (Trouillot, 1995) has been questioned for ignoring social agency and political struggles involved in reconstructing the experience of the past at the community level (Cascardi, 1984; Guber, 1999). While social or cultural memory has often been understood as the collective sum of its individual parts (Wybo et al, 2001), Halbwachs (1980) claims that all individual memory is socially produced, insofar that individuals re-script their memories through the recollection of others. Networks of sociality thus define what experiences are to be recalled (memory) and which are to be forgotten (oblivion).

Foucault (1975: 25) has emphasized the political nature of "popular memory" in terms of political and social control. The concept of social and cultural memory is generally separated from the concept of 'history' as a means of making sense of the past in, and for, the present. 'History' is often associated with the state and official chronicles (Guber, 1999). It has even been accused of being "...perpetually suspicious of memory... [wanting to] suppress and destroy it" (Nora, 1989: 9). Sturken (1997) however, prefers to see cultural memory and political history as entangled processes.

In line with these thoughts, we make some conceptual distinctions.

- The *past* here refers to the gamut of events, actions, thoughts and feelings that have occurred before the 'now' in which crisis actors find themselves. Understood in this way, the past is like a giant database.
- Parts of the past settle in *memory*, which we define as individual and collective representations of the past. Collective memory is expressed in and shaped by formal and informal remembrance practices and investigations. Formal and informal memory may be different. Some parts of the past may still be remembered informally by individuals and in particular (local) communities, but may nevertheless be deemed uninteresting or too sensitive by professional historians, journalists, film makers and other actors shaping formal memory at the national level (Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Sturken, 1997).
- A pivotal part of collective memory is *history*, which is referred to in this article as interpretations of the remembered parts of the

past which have been selected as authoritative by a dominant coalition of   actors, and which have been melted into a story that is perpetuated in official investigations of the past, official commemoration practices as well as mainstream history books (Butler, 1989; Foote, 1976).

The linkages between these three phenomena are complex and manifold. Some past events and episodes generate intense efforts at commemoration and history writing, both of the official and informal, grass-roots kind; others are not seen as worthy of remembering by any significant group of contemporaries, leaving it up to future historians to 'uncover' them. Moreover, only for some parts of the past that generate efforts at remembrance, investigation and history-writing a dominant `history' actually emerges. Other parts of the past remain unsettled, continuously subject to historical revisions and controversies (Schudson, 1997).

Hence if we talk about the past and 'organize history', we should more carefully ask which parts of the past, whose memories and what histories are involved. The social process of remembering—here referred to as memory-work (Küchler and Melion, 1991: 34)—refers to both grass-roots, cultural and elite-level political practices that shape a society's understanding of past events in light of present-day conditions (and vice versa). These practices are socially enacted through "technologies of memory", referring to objects, images and representations such as oral and written narratives, physical places, ceremonies, and architecture (Sturken, 1997: 9-12). Memory work is not a self-evident or value-neutral activity. In fact, key questions that arise in the wake of a disaster—'what happened?', 'why?' and 'how did we react?'—are likely to be a source of dispute and negotiation. We should therefore explore the 'entangled process' of political remembrance a little more closely, with particular reference to the remembrance of disasters.

How do political actors, governmental policy makers in particular, remember the past? How do they organize memory and 'make' history? Various types of political actors drive political remembrance, each with different motives. Incumbent office-holders may view the past as a potential source of lessons for the future, and they may encourage efforts to preserve it. They may, however, also see particular parts of the past as potential threats to their current position and preferred policies, or they may not want to be reminded of any of their policies that turned out to be a failure. Memory of certain pasts may be discouraged, for example by the curtailing of free speech about them. Memory may also be erased physically, i.e. by the shredding of documents or, in a more macabre fashion, killing witnesses. Such active forgetting occurs when remembrance is considered inconvenient, embarrassing, or even dangerous for—and by—powerful actors in a society, as analyzed so powerfully by George Orwell in *1984* (c.f. Parenti, 1999; Smith, 2001).

Governments and their policy-makers are, however, not the only and in many cases not even a dominant actor in the arena of political memory, at least in democracies. Retrospective sense making is an integral part of the political experience in a society, and this sense-making goes on outside government as well, both at elite and community levels. Especially with unsettled, or unsettling, parts of the past (such as disasters), policy makers can expect 'alternative' memories and interpretations of the past to be put forward by critical citizens, interest groups as well as their political rivals. Moreover, unscheduled and socio-economically disruptive events have tended to become subjects of social, political and legal controversies regarding accountability, blame and restitution (Douglas, 1992; Green, 1997). People and groups that feel victimized by these events or by alleged unsatisfactory government action in relation to these events may organize and be quite vocal about what happened, how government should pay up, apologize or otherwise take remedial action. Also, affected communities and victim groups will engage in memory work as part of their post-traumatic coping process. They will construct shrines, conduct ceremonies, erect websites, and other things designed to 'work through' their experiences, and in doing so they may also seek to obtain public attention, respect and perhaps active support for their plight. Especially when voices like these are out there at the community level, journalists are likely to take an interest, and may keep on or resume covering the story of the disaster. In this process, facts and interpretations about the past are put forward that are at odds with those put forward by the government, or that challenge government to reopen a case declared to be in the past.' At the very least media, parliamentary and court activity co-shape the political remembrance of disaster: sometimes the accounts produced there coincide with official pronouncements and history writing, but sometimes they do not. In some cases, post-disaster scrutiny by accountability forums makes or breaks political careers and organizational reputations ('t Hart and Boin, 2001).

An additional complication in the memory work surrounding disasters derives from their often unexpected and boundary-less nature. To some extent, many disasters hit people who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. These people are not necessarily always part of a pre-existing community that has well-defined resources and practices of coping with disaster. The Tsunami tragedy is a case in point: its vast geographical scope made it affect multiple countries and within it multiple local and regional communities as well as large numbers of transients (tourists, seasonal workers). Given this huge scope and variety of victims, how will this disaster be remembered? Social anthropologist Liisa Malkki addresses the issue of the nature of transitory social phenomena (a disaster for example) that bring people together in 'accidental communities of memory'. This term refers to a kind of ad hoc community haphazardly bound together by a

"...biographical, micro historical, unevenly emerging sense of accidental sharing of memory and transitory experience" (Malkki, 1997: 91). She holds that the importance of these communities lies not only in the psychological and emotional scars, but also in their capacity to shape identities, ideas, desires and beliefs, "...all powerfully formed and transformed in transitory circumstances shared by persons who might be strangers" (Malkki, 1997: 92). To what extent are these strangers capable of getting their voices heard in the official process of history writing and 'management' of the 'aftermath' that governments engage in?[1]

Let us now take a closer look at how the 'memory work' in two respective cases of disaster in Western democracies evolved. We identify the different communities and actors involved, and then map their efforts to remember and forget the disaster episode.

The Amsterdam 1992 air crash: from accident to creeping crisis[2]

The disaster and its victims

On Sunday evening, 4 October 1992, a Boeing 747 crashed into the Bijlmermeer, a suburban area, southeast of Amsterdam. Just minutes after the Israeli El Al freighter's departure from Schiphol airport, it lost two of its engines. In an attempt to return to the airport the Boeing 747 crashed into two apartment buildings tearing a gaping hole where the buildings once conjoined. The first impact immediately swept away 27 apartments, setting the remainder of the two 10-story buildings afire. The crash killed 43 people and injured 26.

The evolving nature of the crisis (see below) makes it extremely difficult to determine the exact social impact of the disaster. The number of individuals killed or physically hurt by the first blow was relatively low, even though the crash destroyed 266 apartments. Boeing and El Al paid close to 46 million Euros in damages to victims, the municipality and the housing authority. During the first twelve months after the disaster, over 700 individuals asked for care at the local psychiatric services.

In 1994 a new category of victims presented itself. Bijlmer residents living outside the zone of danger, search and rescue workers and other personnel that handled the remains of the plane started complaining that they had gotten ill. Among these victims many have lost their jobs, been declared (partially) unable to work, have suffered divorces or experience concentration problems at school. While the causal relation between these problems and the crash are hard to determine, the concerned individuals feel that there is no question about it.

The crash initially affected predominately Bijlmer residents. The Bijlmer population did, however, not constitute a homogeneous community. In 1992,

the sub-area of the Bijlmermeer where the plane crashed housed 31,032 individuals. The affected residents originated from all corners of the world. The non native-born Dutch residents were mostly first and second-generation immigrants and some did not speak the Dutch language. The socio-economic position of most inhabitants in this public housing area was relatively weak. The average income was significantly lower than the national average, in part caused by a high unemployment rate and the number of social benefits recipients. With an average stay of 4 years at a registered address, the population composition changed constantly.

Immediately after the crash the Amsterdam authorities and operational services commenced a large-scale response operation. The first hours and days were spent controlling the fire, searching the site for survivors, sealing the grounds, identifying the victims, arranging shelter for survivors and searching for evidence pertaining to the cause of the crash. The officials struggled to compose an official missing-persons list. One of the reasons was the general assumption that the Bijlmer accommodated quite a few illegal immigrants, not registered in official municipality records. When it became apparent that victims without a legal status were afraid to ask the municipality for help, the city adopted and propagated the principle of the "caring government." The mayor of Amsterdam declared that the city would not discriminate against race and/or legal status. The "caring government" principle also entailed the promise that the city would provide the victims with psychological and material relief as long as deemed necessary. The municipality was later praised for its apt response to the disastrous accident. Official reports and the media were generally positive about the performance of City Hall.

This recollection of the Bijlmer disaster as an unfortunate, but well managed, acute crisis did not last, however. The seeds of this change were shown shortly after the disaster. On 18 October 1992 a local resident found tattered remnants of the airway bills near the sight of the crash on which the words "military ordnance eqp" were printed. The discovery caused much arousal because the official statement had been that the cargo of the plane merely contained flowers and perfume. What appeared to be an unimportant incident was the beginning of endless inquiries and questioning concerning the cargo of the plane. During the subsequent years the acute crisis gradually transformed into a creeping crisis as rumors went round about the mysterious toxic cargo of the plane and residents (and rescue workers) claiming that they had developed all sorts of health problems as a result of the crash. The Bijlmer disaster slowly developed into a confidence crisis, as the city of Amsterdam and the national government were not able to satisfactorily disprove the rumors and take adequate action to take away the persistent uncertainty.

Memory groups: organization, resources and political salience

In the hours after the crash most victims were brought to the Bijlmer Sports Center. When the victims trickled in, it soon became apparent that the Surinamese, Dutch-Antillean and Ghanese communities had been struck hardest. The ethnic organizations of these and other Bijlmer communities set up crisis relief units inside the center within a day after the crash. The number of languages and the various cultural backgrounds involved caused the city to organize its care and information provision according to ethnicity or nationality. The ethnic community organizations assisted their members with emotional relief and physical support.

On Sunday 11 October, exactly one week after the crash, the first official commemorative ceremony was held in remembrance of the victims. The city of Amsterdam in cooperation with various community organizations and churches, organized a silent procession as well as an assembly. Over 15,000 people joined into the ceremonies, which were broadcast live on television. During the assembly the mayor of Amsterdam and the Dutch prime minister pledged that the surviving victims would be taken care of for as long as needed. In addition to the official commemoration ceremony, different ethnic communities and churches organized their own remembrance activities. Bijlmer residents spontaneously started to use a tree that had been standing near the site of the accident and somehow survived, as a memorial monument in remembrance of what had happened.

For the following 8 years the city district continued to organize the annual commemoration ceremony at the Bijlmer. The city made plans to erect an official monument with the "tree that saw everything" at its center. As the years progressed the number of people attending the ceremonies decreased, a couple of incidents gave rise to some agitation among the victims. The official commemorative ceremony held exactly one year after the crash was rudely disturbed by the sound of several airplanes passing over in spite of promises by the authorities that the airspace of the Bijlmermeer area would be cleared. In 1997 an alternative commemoration ceremony was held by residents that felt that the city had not recognized all victims of the crash. In their protest they released 44 balloons, one for each official victim and one for the victims that had not been recovered. As the residents grew more impatient with the government an independent resident association was set up to organize official commemorations.

After the first chaotic weeks communities, churches and residents' associations set up self-help groups. These groups were initially visited mostly by people living in the near vicinity of the struck apartment buildings. Many victims that

had lost their loved ones and/or their houses isolated themselves from the out-side world. Clergymen and social workers tried to retrieve victims from their isolation and arranged for meetings with fellow-victims. These groups came in all different forms and shapes. As time went on some of these groups dissolved, others changed. Also, personnel of the various operational services were debriefed at their place of work and were offered psychological counseling.

In addition to the self-help groups, issue groups dealing with various aspects of the aftermath were created. Schiphol Airport safety was one of these issues. What used to be a nuisance to many Bijlmer residents became an ago-nizing reminder of what had happened. In the years before the crash several residents' associations had unsuccessfully lobbied to decrease the number of flights above the Bijlmer. In November 1992 these residents' associations joined each other in setting up an association to fight against air traffic above the Bijlmermeer area.

Another issue was the cargo. As rumors started spreading about toxic cargo, several residents became very interested in the content of the plane. These individuals soon joined each other in founding an association with the aim to possibly link their health problems to the crash on that October night. Although this organization was very active during a period of time, it dis-solved as a result of personal conflicts and differences with regard to the approach and aim of the association.

In sum, during the aftermath of the crash many formal and informal vic-tim associations were erected. The patchwork of victim associations was the result of the heterogeneity of the Bijlmer population and the gradual expan-sion of the circle of people defining themselves as victims. It was a seemingly weak starting point for effective political action. Nevertheless in the years to come, the Bijlmer air crash saga became a political firestorm that eventually almost swept away an entire government.

Contested memories

The official political account of the disaster as well as the image of the crash portrayed by the media has been subject to many changes over the past years (Boin et al., 2001; Rosenthal et al., 2001). The first televised images of the burning apartment buildings and the gaping hole shocked and horrified the nation. The image of the event, as unanimously reported by media, was one of an ill-fated national disaster hitting a disadvantaged area.

From mid October onwards, however, a new image of the disaster emerged as the 'caring government' principle propagated by the municipality, started to backfire. The nondiscriminatory policy for aid implicitly held that victims

without a residence permit would be legalized. As word got out, the number of illegal immigrants registering themselves as victims increased rapidly. When the images of queues in front of the Population Register appeared in the media the public and politicians alike were astounded that people were abusing the disaster for their own advantage. Ultimately, a total of 55 immigrants were identified as victims and received a residence permit.

As the months went by, media coverage diminished but did not end completely. The issues relating to the aftermath of the crisis were slowly handed to policy makers and experts. The city launched an extensive aftercare program for the victims and evaluated its performance. The National Aviation Board continued its inquiry into the causes of the accident, which lasted exactly one year after which the minister of Transport studied the report for another 12 months.

During those two years a few journalists, local activists and a few members of parliament started questioning the content of the cargo. In October 1993 a Dutch nuclear research center declared that the Boeing had carried depleted uranium as a counterweight in the tail and that part of it was missing. Immediately, public discussion arose about the possible harmfulness of the uranium. After several investigations expert agencies and the Transport minister unanimously ascertained that the health dangers were negligible. The findings satisfied parliament, but the investigations did not sooth the residents, as foreign experts contested the findings. Operational service personnel and KLM personnel that had worked in the hangar where the remains of the Boeing had been stored, also began to experience health problems, and began linking them to the air crash episode. The issue kept simmering but did not obtain a prominent position on the public and political agenda.

The cargo issue slowly developed into a public health crisis as rumors about the toxic content of the Boeing persisted. The main focus of the media, with regard to the cargo issue, shifted to the airfreight bills. It became clear that the airfreight bills presented earlier by the Minister of Transport had been incomplete. The persistent uncertainty about the cargo, a testimony of an Israeli expert that evaporated uranium could cause cancer, and a confession by the aviation authorities of a 1985 U.S. warning against depleted uranium forced the minister to promise a health investigation in 1997. In March 1998, a Swedish investigation, commissioned by a small victim group, concluded that there was a direct connection between the illnesses of the examined Bijlmer residents and uranium radiation. Dutch specialists contested these assertions claiming that the research methods used were invalid, but many victims had lost trust in the authorities long before.

The following month parliament eventually established a working group to investigate the unanswered questions and to advise on the necessity of an

official parliamentary inquiry. The working group was unable to answer any questions and parliament left the decision about an inquiry to the new parliament (elections were scheduled for May 1998). In October 1998, the new parliament decided to instigate a full parliamentary inquiry, albeit 'guided by indifference rather than strong convictions' (Rosenthal et al., 2001). The political expectations for the inquiry were rather low. The composition of the committee was deemed 'light' and the party in line to chair the inquiry waived its rights for it considered the inquiry of not enough importance.

The inquiry committee started its public hearings in January of 1999. The hearings, broadcast live on television, attracted a lot of public attention. 'The hearings soon generated a political crisis as the stream of "normal" coordination errors and new revelations severely undermined governmental credibility' (Boin et al., 2001). Disclosures about El Al asking air traffic control on the night of the crash to keep the content of the plane a secret, the aviation board withholding information about the presence of uranium, and the autonomous and inviolable position of El Al at Schiphol Airport caused much arousal. The parliamentary committee seemed to be directed at finding fault with the government and the El Al authorities. The committee chairman repeatedly asserted that he saw it as his main task to provide clarity and justice for the victims.

The committee concluded that the cargo did not contain hazardous materials, but that other toxic substances had been released when the plane crashed and most probably had caused many individuals to get ill. This causal relation ran completely counter to the expert opinion of almost every Dutch medical specialist. The committee went even further in stating that mismanagement and negligence on behalf of the government had presumably worsened the health problems. The conclusions produced a fierce political row, but none of the responsible ministers stepped down, as they argued with some success that the committee had overstated its case. The committee's methods and its product became the subject of intense discussion.

Despite this controversy at the time, the committee investigation does seem to have produced a catharsis. The Bijlmer disaster disappeared from the political agenda soon after the final parliamentary debate. A comprehensive community health study was started whose final results, published in 2004, were that no significant exposure-related health problems could be found (MOVB, 2002, 2003, 2004). Media coverage of the Bijlmer crash story has since been restricted to reporting the annual commemoration ceremonies that take place at the local level. Erstwhile local activists have not been heard of since. Nationally, the Bijlmer case has begun to fade from collective memory, and it is doubtful that it will retain a prominent place in national history.

The M/V Estonia ferry accident: from national disaster to political struggle[3]

The disaster and its victims

The passenger and car ferry M/V Estonia, with 989 people (crew and passengers) onboard left Tallinn harbor in the early evening hours on September 27 1994. It sank around 01:48, about an hour after the ship had begun to tilt in high waves, costing 852 people their lives, 459 women and 393 men. Victims came from many far away countries but the largest groups were Estonians (such as the major part of the ship crew) (347 people) and above all Swedes (501). They were students, professionals, clerks, pensioners, truck drivers, ferry crew, public servants, nurses, police officers. The Swedish passengers came from all over the country, from villages, small towns and the mayor cities. Some communities were particularly struck, since entire work forces or social clubs from these places were on the voyage. One department of the Stockholm police lost 63 of its 68 employees. Hundreds of families were bereaved. In total 94 bodies were rescued from the sea, whilst the other 758 were declared missing. Only 137 people (51 Swedes) survived the nightmare.

All these victims, dead and survivors, were part of social networks within their own local communities, and had relatives and friends in their countries of residence and abroad. In all, several thousands of people were directly or indirectly affected. Taken together these constituted a potentially extensive 'accidental community of memory.' In reality many, smaller, communities of memory came into being, practicing different kinds of memory work. We will here focus on the institutionalized communities of memory in Sweden.

Memory groups: organization, resources and political salience

As the news of the disaster spread, community-level crisis centers were set up by regional and local governments in different locations all over the country, offering both professional and volunteer post-traumatic assistance in hospitals and other public settings. In addition to the public centers, more "spontaneous" crisis groups were started, particularly in the heavily affected communities. Most of the civil associations that would organize in the months to come would begin in these crisis centers and at the work places most affected.

Within a month from the tragedy, nearly twenty "close relatives groups" were constituted in different parts of the country by relatives of the victims, and by survivors. Among these, nine groups eventually transformed into civil associations. In doing so, they followed a long-standing tradition in Sweden dating back to the early labor movement and the free religious movements.

The different associations gathered different numbers of people, from only a few families to one with three thousand members. In 2003, seven were still active, including one constituted in June 2002 (Estonia Litigation Association). The activities of these associations were financed by private donations from their members but also by the Swedish state. On two occasions (1994 and 1999) the Swedish government decided to grant them a non-recurrent amount of 320,000 Euro to be shared among them.

The aims of the associations have varied. For example for the Cooperation Movement group, the Support Association in Uppsala and the ST-Police Union Relatives Association one important issue has been the claim for compensation from the maritime insurance company Skuld, which was reached within a year. The largest association, DIS, focused also on the compensation issue, but intended to pursue an international lawsuit in France against the M/V Estonia's German shipyard and the certification company Bureau Veritas that had certified the seaworthiness of M/V Estonia. Due to internal problems this association was dissolved in January 2002, but a new association (ELA) was constituted in order to proceed with the lawsuit. The survivors' association, Neptunus, has focused on helping its members to resume their lives by offering psychological assistance and facilitating meetings among the 54 Swedish survivors.

The issue of what to do with the shipwreck and the missing bodies quickly became a central issue, reaching the political agenda only days after the accident. The newly appointed Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson declared in the media that all efforts should be made to get the ship up, no matter what, as did his outgoing predecessor Carl Bildt. The General Manager of the Swedish National Administration of Shipping and Navigation emphasized that such an operation would be perfectly possible from a technical point of view. While a Joint Commission of Inquiry (JAIC) with representatives from Sweden, Estonia and Finland was immediately appointed by their Governments to investigate the causes of the catastrophe, the Swedish Shipping and Navigation Agency was also given the task to investigate the juridical, technical and economic conditions for raising the ship.

At this point the Government was still recognizing the possibility of engaging in salvage of the wreck, but the Minister also expressed a range of arguments *against* it. These included opposition from some of the relatives to missing victims, the risk of damaging bodies when turning the ship right, the risk of not finding all bodies. Over time these ethical arguments of the enterprise overweighed in governmental discourse, expressing concern about the traumatizing impact of the operation on the divers and identification officials. Thus, another investigation was commissioned, including mandatory advice from a government-appointed Ethical Committee. Two months after the accident the Shipping and Navigation Agency's second report was made public. Based on this report,

the Ethical Committee one week later advised against undertaking a salvage operation. It suggested instead that the shipwreck area should be protected by law as a grave and be put under custody. The wreckage was to be sealed in order to prevent eventual plundering. The government followed these recommendations deciding that the shipwreck would not be salvaged and proposing that the site officially be declared a grave, which would ban any marine and submarine activities in the protected area. This bill was approved in parliament six months later. In January 1996, the government hired a private contractor to cover the wreck in concrete, at a cost of 32M Euro.

The nexus between the disappeared bodies and the commemoration of the victims was the subject of intense discussions in Swedish society and in the mass media. For example, the Swedish (protestant) Church initially claimed that the relatives must have their dead back on land and buried in the Christian tradition ("earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"). A planned joint Swedish, Finnish and Estonian memorial service at sea, for November 26, 1994, was cancelled at the last moment by the Swedish archbishop. He feared the service could be interpreted as a burial ceremony and thus as a statement in the ongoing salvage-or-not debate. The service was finally held anyway, organized by the Finnish and Estonian churches. The Swedish Church later on changed its stance and began supporting the idea that the sea was to be the grave for the missing.

A media study of the issue during this period showed that a large majority of the newspaper editorials supported the government position. Experts' opinions, which in reality were not at all that homogeneous, were depicted in the media as providing "scientific support" for the government's policy. In contrast, the memory work of the relatives' associations (street manifestations, exhibitions, expositions on the accident and collections of signatures organized nationwide) was depicted as emotional, based on grief and thus "irrational" and in opposition to the official, "rational" policy.

Contested memories

In terms of memory work there has been tension between the Swedish government and the victims' communities. The government sought to put an end to the tragedy by declaring the sea to be the grave and to give the Swedish National Public Art Council the assignment of creating a national memorial somewhere in Sweden. This symbolically precluded any further salvage attempt. Parts of the victims' communities were inclined to accept this, while others could not even bear the thought of transforming the disaster site into a last resting place and not having an individual grave to visit. One widower employed a diving crew to find the body of his missing wife, just days before

the law declaring the site a grave was to take effect. His mission failed, but its dramatic story was filmed by a German film crew and broadcast on Swedish and German TV.

Annual commemorations of the anniversary of the catastrophe take place all over Sweden. Various memorials at churchyards and other places operate as spaces where the memory of the tragic event is reconstructed and shared. On commemorative occasions, the official and victim communities' memory work converges as many political representatives participate actively in them and thus temporarily transcend the rift between the associations and the government.

The underlying sources of the tension have been, on the one hand, prompted by the initial political assertions that the wreck and the missing bodies would be salvaged. The lack of fulfillment of this "promise" was what created the distance between the social and the political sense making in the wake of the tragedy. The decisions to *not* salvage and cover the ship with concrete prompted the Relatives' Associations to claim that this should be halted until knowing the results of the Joint Accident Investigation Commission in order to avoid the losses of potential evidence. Under pressure from various sides, the government halted the coverage operation in June 1996.

The other contested issue has concerned the investigation of the causes of the accident. The government-appointed Joint Accident Investigation Commission presented its report more than three years after the catastrophe, providing a detailed description of the accident but refraining from giving a full-blown explanation. While the Commission most of all emphasized the role of construction factors, their stance was harshly contested by German experts (commissioned by the German wharf that had built the M/V Estonia) who argued that lack of maintenance had triggered the tragedy. In addition, two other, independent publications attributed responsibility to the classification systems of sea worthiness. Other public voices were very critical of the JAIC report and conveyed deep distrust of the Swedish government. This 'battle of reports' led to the creation of a new civic association (AgnEf (the Working Group for the Investigation of the M/V Estonia shipwreck)) whose main purpose is to stake a claim for a new governmental inquiry of the matter. The Swedish Government declined this claim on February 11, 1999.

During the nine years that have passed since that disastrous September night, the collective memory of the M/V Estonia shipwreck has evolved from an image of national disaster to one of a political conflict. Up until now, every anniversary heightens the victims' communities' attention, because of their personal involvement, the organized commemoration services, and the recurring coverage of the M/V Estonia issue by the mass media. Non-settled issues such as the allocation of responsibility of the accident and the fate of the missing bodies have fuelled the ongoing memory battles.

And the story continues. In August 2000 the same German TV producer that covered the earlier private salvage operation, now undertook one of her own, financed by a North-American millionaire fuelling the myth of a conspiracy around the shipwreck, involving Russian mafia and weapon smuggling. This TV producer is currently working on a movie about the catastrophe. Also new alleged evidence presented in 2002 by an independent commission (the Independent Fact Group) prompted four members of parliament to present a formal accusation against the Swedish Government for neglecting new evidence. The Swedish Commander's decision to salvage the Swedish DC-3 plane that was shot down by Soviet air force in 1952 in the Baltic Sea and discovered in June 2003, also prompted strong feelings among the victims' associations, in light of the repeated disappointments they have had in the pursuit of their cause. In November 2004, a retired Swedish customs employee revealed on the news that the Estonia ferries in the 1990s were used for secret transports of military electronic equipment, which allegedly could have been implicated in the 1994 shipwreck. Yet another government investigation was commissioned, but no relationship was proved. Victim groups, fuelled by yet another distant explanation by the authorities, immediately countered the official statements on their web pages, launching different theories of conspiracy.

Finally, interesting to observe is the effort by the Swedish Government to end this memory battle, by establishing a *memory bank*. The purpose is to gather all "relevant" information on the M/V Estonia disaster to be accessible to the public. What information is "relevant" is under discussion at the Board and in dialogue with the victims' and relatives' associations. This would not only appear as a more democratic way of memory work, but it can also be seen as a striving for consensus and, as such, a strategy to "cease fire" and end contestation.

Disaster politics and memory politics revisited

This paper started out with the question how and why some disasters are 'remembered' collectively, and the role of grass-roots victim groups in this process. Studying the organization and modus operandi of victim communities as they try to place, or keep, disaster-related problems and remembrance issues on the political agenda, we have reconstructed in both cases how they voiced their needs and claims, and what channels they used for exerting influence on the relevant public agencies and political decision-makers. Our skewed sample of two explorative cases is of course quite insufficient to generalize from, but we can make some preliminary observations, to be probed further in future research.[4]

The two cases highlight that, even in comparatively affluent, democratic societies, some (parts of) communities are simply better equipped to absorb and deal with the consequences of disasters than others (Elderstein, 1987; Reich, 1991).

This of course questions the notion of "homogeneously composed developed societies' and rather points to their social, political and economic heterogeneity, and thus vulnerabilities.[5] Hence we may expect patterns of memory work to be related to the social stratification of victim communities. Moreover, in line with political science theories of agenda-setting and community power, we should also expect this social stratification to affect the victims' ability to 'keep the disaster alive' in the political-bureaucratic domain. *Ceteris paribus*, the issues and problems resulting from disasters affecting poor, disenfranchised communities are more likely to be 'forgotten', than those affecting affluent, resourceful ones (c.f. Bachrach and Baratx, 1970; Cobb and Elder, 1983; Reich, 1991).

However, the notion of 'community' as a territorially and historically bounded social entity, and the assumption that as such it capitalizes social cohesion for a "successful,' i.e. agenda-setting, memory work, is questioned in light of the two cases. Whilst the Bijlmermeer community was a "preexisting" one, its social composition was hardly an asset in political terms. The Swedish victims on the other hand, were more of an "accidental community of memory" in Malkki's (1997) sense, although in effect there were some fairly homogenous regional sub-communities within the victim population. As we shall see below though, social, economic and political capital is far more important than preexisting social cohesion for community memory work to be politically effective in terms of agenda setting.

It would appear from these preliminary findings that the more institutionalized and the more resourceful a victim community, the more effective it is in politicizing disaster memory and post disaster issues. This notion is, as will be recognized, not new, but relates to the thrust of classic community power research in political science (see also Polsby, 1980). Applied to the context of disaster politics in the nineties, it proves remarkably relevant, as highlighted by recent work in public policy and mass communication research.[6] In the Estonia case, the victims were overwhelmingly white, middle-class, well-integrated and bureaucratically competent citizens. Moreover, the state provided them with incentives to organize and with resources to sustain these organizations. Not surprisingly, Estonia victims were continuously able to make their voices heard in the political arena. In contrast, the Amsterdam air crash hit a poor, multiracial, socially marginal community. State support for self-organization was absent. As seen in other studies of disaster politics (Reich, 1991), these constraints impaired their effectiveness as political agenda-setters. Consequently it took several years of sheer perseverance of a few individuals, as well as the political entrepreneurship and media savvy of a single MP sympathetic to the cause of the victims to renegotiate the initial benign memory of the crash as a well-managed, closed case.

The Amsterdam air crash episode evolved from a municipal governmental success story into a political nightmare for the national government because

there was a fundamental breach of images and experiences between the authorities and the residents. From the initial, limited number of immediately affected inhabitants of the buildings, who were socially marginal and politically ineffectual, the 'disaster after the disaster' mobilized a much larger coalition of Bijlmer residents, government and airport personnel reporting persistent health problems. Confronted with an initially small but steadily growing groundswell of skepticism and suspicion, local and national governments could not sustain their version of history, i.e. that the response to the disaster had been comprehensive and that public health considerations had been adequately dealt with. Ultimately a parliamentary inquiry managed to achieve some closure by striking two flies in one stroke: authoritatively discrediting the more esoteric conspiracy theories that had been circulating around the victim community, yet also legitimizing the victims' assertions that the government had been sloppy in getting full information about the nature of the cargo and at best indifferent in addressing residents' health problems.

Similarly, in the Estonia case, the gulf between social and political memory grew as the government could not deliver what the survivors and the relatives wanted most badly: their dead back and an authoritative account of why they had died in the first place. In this case, the political revision of history is still going on. There is not yet an end to the cascade of investigations into the disaster, in large part because among the Estonia victim community, core groups are articulate enough to keep the public spotlight on their unresolved questions and grievances.

The two case experiences suggest another more general proposition: the bigger the disjunction between victim-level memories and claims, and the government's post-disaster policies, the more likely it is that the history of a disaster will be revised over time. The reasoning here is as follows. In the wake of a disaster intense efforts are being made by journalists, political leaders, public agencies and other organizations involved in the response process to compile accounts of what has happened. Memory is here in the process of being negotiated. More than before, authorities today face almost instantaneous critique and they will seek to pre-empt or counter these re-constructions by putting forward their own. Debriefings and public investigations provide arenas for political memory work. Victims, aid workers, experts, and response leaders are interviewed and invited to submit briefs. Sometimes, public hearings are held, often televised. The conclusions and recommendations of the investigation are bound to elicit mixed responses from actors with different positions and stakes. Investigations may have a cathartic effect on the disaster as a political issue, yet they seldom manage to close the book on a disaster entirely. In many cases of disaster, we may therefore expect that in the longer run, i.e., well after there has been some sort of official political closure on the case, a re-negotiation of established political

images and understandings of a certain disaster takes place, or is at least attempted. This tends to be a bottom-up process: it originates from among the victims and seeks its way upward to the elites and the mass public.

Based on these two case studies we can conclude that future students of the politics of disaster aftermaths would do well to take into account the subtle and stratified nature of victim communities. Moreover, irrespective of their social backgrounds, victims are prone to contradictory feelings and impulses: they may seek to keep the memory of the disaster alive, while at the same time wanting to get on with their lives; they may seek to obtain compensation, or may simply want to know why it all happened. The two cases also highlight the fact that victims are merely one category of stakeholders active in the post-disaster phase, and they are not in control of its agenda. In both cases, multiple inquiries took place, and victim associations were responding to as much as they were feeding media activity, political entrepreneurs, or the legal dynamics of litigation.

What if anything will become the dominant battlegrounds in the clash between grass roots and official versions of disaster history is hard to predict. In both cases, governments were reminded by victims that they were breaking promises made in the initial disaster response phase. The 'caring government' of Amsterdam turned out to be indifferent to long-term health issues and its national counterpart in the Hague was conspicuously less than energetic in 'getting to the bottom' of the causes and ramifications of the disaster. Likewise, the Swedish government reneged on its promise to recover the missing and was not very vigorous in seeking to establish the cause of the disaster either. Rumor and collective stress filled the gap, and created a climate conducive to political mobilization and legal bickering. The paradox of disaster politics in democracies is that as more and more information about disasters becomes public as assertive victim communities and other stakeholders work the democratic process and employ its checks and balances on government power to investigate, it becomes harder instead of easier to arrive at some form of joint remembrance and consensual history writing, and thus create some space for society to 'forget' (see McLean and Johnes, 2000).

Notes

1. We should note that this question probably plays out quite differently in democracies and non-democracies. In the latter, government means to evoke and suppress grass roots `memory' are probably much bigger than in democracies with freedom of speech, organization and information. Hence, our analysis and subsequent generalizations remain limited to the democratic realm.

2. This section is based on official investigation reports, parliamentary documents, independent investigation reports, community and government

newsletters, a media analysis of one local and two national newspapers (1992-2004) and interviews with community members.

3. This section is based on official investigation reports, parliamentary documents, independent investigation reports, documentary films, interviews with members in the victims' and relatives' associations, and participant observation at the significant memory sites of the M/V Estonia disaster in Stockholm.

4. It should be noted that the propositions that follow apply only to what is commonly referred to as 'acute' emergencies, as opposed to 'chronic', 'creeping', 'invisible' disasters, such as poverty, famine, and soil pollution, where victim groups and other stakeholders face hard struggles to even gain public and political recognition that a disaster has occurred or is taking place.

5. In saying this, we are not by any means denying that there would be a distinction between so called developed and so called developing countries in terms of economic and institutional resources, rather we are advocating for a more nuanced view in general when talking about societies, countries, nations, Western, Northern, Southern as categories.

6. Compare, Birkland (1997) and Cobb & Primo (2003) who also draw on the agenda-setting tradition in political science and policy studies to analyze the post-crisis dynamics of disasters.

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