



What a calamity!

Description

Calamity, cataclysm, catastrophe, crisis, catalysis and cacophony bear no common etymology as far as I can see, though they sound as though they should. A calamity derives from the idea of a corn harvest gone bad. A cataclysm is a deluge. A catastrophe is an overturning. A crisis is a moment of decision. A catalysis is a loosening, and a cacophony is a discordant combination of sounds. That adds up to disaster.

Adopting one of the philosopher C.S. Peirce's sign categories, a calamity presents as a class of sign that is raw, immediate, sudden, emanating from the object, with an obvious cause, with immediately accessible qualities, and that doesn't look or sound like its source: a flash of light from a faulty circuit, an explosion from a firecracker, the sound of a tray of dishes crashing to the floor. (See post: [Semiotic shock](#)). Extend the time dimension and you have something like an earthquake, war or pandemic.



Calamities afford material disruption to the lives of people and all living things that ripples through communities and populations – at least amongst those who survive. The word *calamity* is a bit of an antique. The sociologist Pitirim Sorokin addressed calamity in his appropriately titled book *Man and Society in Calamity*. It was published in 1942. So, he had WWII in mind. In the preface he summarised his main conclusion:

calamities are not an unmixed evil: side by side with their destructive and pernicious functions they play also a constructive and positive role in the history of culture and man's creative

activities. With human beings as they are, catastrophes are great educators of mankindâ• (10).

He outlines the very worst and â??the bestâ• of calamities, referring to pestilences, plagues and epidemics, for which â??there is a brighter side â?? namely, an intensification of the moral and religious sense manifested by the reaction of another section of the populationâ• (177).

Disruptor myths

Iâ??ve read at least one article reviving Sorokinâ??s observations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The operative term is *disruptor*. Sorokin says,

â??Although when the emergency is over, many a society rapidly recovers (reestablishing its equilibrium, its unity, its institutions, its system of social relationships), nevertheless it is never the same as the one that existed before the calamity. â?! For good or ill, calamities are unquestionably the supreme **disruptors** and transformers of social organization and institutionsâ• (121).

The idea of disruption is current in several disciplines, e.g. *disruptive technologies* force innovation in certain directions. [Blockchain technologies and cryptocurrencies](#) disrupt how some of us think of money, banks, finance, exchange, and community, even if the technology is not yet adopted widely, if ever. See post: [Life-changing technologies](#).

Itâ??s not necessary to ascribe positive benefit to a calamity to see it as a disruptor. COVID-19 presumably disrupts across many dimensions: thereâ??s profound tragedy, individual lives are affected, jobs are lost, economies shrink. Less severe: people change the way they do things, they invent and adopt new practices, new ways of learning, teaching, running a business, communicating and travelling.

Disruptors instil new ways of looking at the world. They bring into relief the nature of community, place, space and mobility. Not least, the current pandemic frames the climate crisis in a particular way. See how clean the air is if we suddenly reduce car and air travel. See how the developed world can rally towards the same goals out of necessity, and however flawed the response. To disrupt is to expose, reveal, provoke, catalyse, inhibit and create in the midst of whatever we think is the status quo. It implies a singular identifiable calamitous event, sequence, product or person. What we choose to identify as calamities are more complicated than that, implicating a web of connections, causes and contexts. Furthermore, whatâ??s a calamity for some may be other peopleâ??s normality.

You could say *calamity* is a rhetorical device, a myth to gather up concerns, to focus attention, to stir action or promote inaction, and to distract.

References

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Notes

- In celebration of cacophony see Luigi Russolo  s 1913 manifesto, the *Art of Noises*. He listed the sounds of machinery and animals: roars, thunder, explosions, bangs, booms, creaking, rustling, humming, crackling, rubbing, shouts, screams, shrieks, wails, and hoots in its typology of sounds for composition. He was in the company of other Futurist composers who celebrated machine noises, the   nonsymbolic   and the   alogical.   See Russolo, Luigi. 2004. *The Art of Noise (Futurist Manifesto, 1913)*. Trans. Robert Filliou. ubuclassics. Originally published in 1967 as a Great Bear Pamphlet by Something Else Press. Also see Russolo, Luigi. 1986. *The Art of Noises*. New York: Pendragon Press; and Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- At least on the first pages of a Google image search on   calamity   all I could see were depictions of   Calamity Jane.   That perhaps accounts for the word  s steady decline in usage according to Google Ngram: <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>
- Disruptors test leadership in some places and exposes its strengths and flaws. Commentators used to call Trump a disruptor. That  s less interesting as a proposition now. COVID-19 is one of several calamities that have disrupted that particular disruptor myth, i.e. exposed the particular status quo he and his compatriots represented and unleashed.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. catastrophe
2. covid-19
3. disruptor

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