

Introduction

Elinor Accampo and Jeffrey H. Jackson

In 1988 John C. Burnham noted a surprising lack of scholarship about natural disasters. Unlike sociologists, natural scientists, and journalists, historians had largely overlooked these traumatic events even though, as Burnham noted, such episodes provoke many historical questions. For instance, he argued, “viewing human institutions under the stress of a natural disaster provides a test of those institutions that otherwise would be unobtainable from the past.”¹ Disasters, in other words, reveal how societies operate—who wields power, how cultural and economic assumptions inform people’s reactions, who is perceived as part of the community and thus worthy of rescue or protection, and how and to whom resources are allocated. The results of disaster are unpredictable, since some societies collapsed in their wake while others adapted and innovated, and that sense of contingency makes disasters interesting subjects of historical study.

In the decades since Burnham wrote, disasters have become more interesting to historians.² In selecting the articles for this special issue,

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Jeffrey H. Jackson is associate professor of history and director of the Environmental Studies and Sciences program at Rhodes College. His most recent book is *Paris under Water: How the City of Light Survived the Great Flood of 1910* (2010). He is coediting a volume on café culture with W. Scott Haine and Leona Rittner, tentatively titled *The Thinking Space: The Café as a Cultural Institution in Paris, Italy, and Vienna*.

¹ John C. Burnham, “A Neglected Field: The History of Natural Disasters,” *Perspectives on History* (April 1988), www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1988/8804/8804vie1.cfm.

² Ted Steinberg has argued that historians still neglect natural disasters: “Historians seem quite content to leave the study of natural disasters to geographers and sociologists. . . . And yet, a profession that defines its mission, in part, around the question of contingency—of why some things happen and some things do not—ought to have something of value to contribute to a discussion about the ultimate unplanned event” (“The Secret History of Natural Disaster,” *Environmental Hazards* 3 [2001]: 32). On societies adapting in the aftermath of disaster, see Anthony

we hope to spark a complex conversation among historians of France about disaster as an intellectual category because it has much to offer about how we investigate the past. Echoing Joan Scott, Jonathan Bergman claims that disaster is a “useful category of historical inquiry” because it can be “a tool of historical study to enhance conventional historiographies and shine a fresh light on traditional topics.”³ As Bergman outlines, historians have focused on the complex causes and social impact of specific disasters. With the growth of environmental history, scholars have explored the human-nature interaction embedded in many catastrophic events, showing how the built environment often turns nature’s events into human disasters and drawing attention to the choices builders made and the risks they took, knowingly or unknowingly.⁴ Historians are also interested in the aftermath of disasters, how people make sense of them, and how people integrate those experiences into collective memory.⁵

Even when disasters do not change social and political structures, they showcase a society’s inner dynamics. Disaster damage often highlights economic, racial/ethnic, and social power, an insight that comes as no surprise to American readers since Hurricane Katrina. The influential disaster historian Ted Steinberg argues: “Natural calamities frequently do not just happen; they are produced through a chain of human choices and natural occurrences, and in this sense they form a legitimate topic for social and historical study.”⁶ In other words, there is no such thing as a “natural disaster.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau made a similar observation in his comments on the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Responding to Voltaire’s catalog of misery in his “Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne,” Rousseau argued that humans caused their own pain by building too many tall buildings and housing people too densely.

Oliver-Smith, “‘What Is a Disaster?’: Anthropological Perspectives on a Persistent Question,” in *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman (New York, 1999); and Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, *Resilient Cities: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (New York, 2005).

³ Jonathan Bergman, “Disaster: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *History Compass* 6 (2008): 940; Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

⁴ “AHR Conversation: Environmental Historians and Environmental Crisis,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008): 1431–65.

⁵ Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister’s important collection of essays *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses* (Lanham, MD, 2009) shows that culture deeply influences how people respond to disasters, leading to a wide range of interpretations about what they mean, how people should react, and how they are remembered. See also Andrea Janku, Gerrit J. Schenk, and Franz Mauelshagen, *Historical Disasters in Context: Science, Religion, and Politics* (New York, 2012); and Pfister, “The Monster Swallows You: Disaster Memory and Risk Culture in Western Europe, 1500–2000,” *Rachel Carson Center Perspectives*, January 2011, www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/download/publications/perspectives/2011_perspectives/rcc_issue_4web.pdf.

⁶ Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America* (New York, 2000), xxi.

The fault, he believed, belonged not to nature but to the residents of Lisbon.⁷

Rousseau's discussion signaled an evolution in the way many people in the West thought about disasters. Religious explanations, which often reinforced the power of church leaders and monarchies, were gradually shed in favor of scientific ways of thinking about such events. The discipline of seismology began after the Lisbon earthquake, which, as Gregory Quénet has shown, sparked furious discussion among many philosophes in France. Quénet argues that a modern concept of risk emerged as French scientists began to seriously study their land's seismicity in the 1740s and make rational sense of centuries' worth of small quakes. For Quénet, the Lisbon disaster did more than simply set in motion a process of secularization; it accelerated a historical way of thinking by showing disaster as a "contingent event occurring at a specific place and time," since it forced both ordinary citizens and Enlightenment thinkers to come to terms with the experience of living through an earthquake.⁸ An accompanying shift took place in expectations about human responsibility.⁹ Proponents of modern technology often promised to engineer a way out of disasters through better construction. Scientific management of the environment offered the possibility of taming the landscape for human use. Once people began to believe that God was not punishing sinful humanity with disasters, they increasingly blamed engineers and technicians when infrastructure collapsed in a moment of crisis. Jeffrey H. Jackson, in *Paris under Water*, demonstrates how the devastating 1910 flood of the Seine caused the city's sewers, subways, railroads, telegraphs, electricity, and gas lines to fail. That crisis led people to doubt the broader project of technological improvements in city life even as it rallied them during a time of collective need.¹⁰ Samuel Temple shows how fifty years' worth of government-initiated forestation altered ecological and social conditions to help produce devastating fires in southwestern France, thus calling into question the project of forest management.¹¹

⁷ Rousseau to Voltaire, Aug. 18, 1756, in *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4, ed. J. A. Leigh, trans. R. Spang (Geneva, 1967), 37–50.

⁸ Gregory Quénet, *Les tremblements de terre: Aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles; La naissance d'un risque* (Paris, 2005); quotation from Quénet, "When Geology Became a Real Catastrophe: From Theoretical Earthquakes to the Lisbon Disaster," in *Histoires de la Terre: Earth Sciences and French Culture, 1740–1940*, ed. Louise Lyle and David McCallam (Amsterdam, 2008), 55. See also Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas, eds., *L'invention de la catastrophe au XVIIIe siècle* (Geneva, 2008).

⁹ Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783* (Baltimore, MD, 2006).

¹⁰ Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Paris under Water: How the City of Light Survived the Great Flood of 1910* (New York, 2010); Jackson, "Envisioning Disaster in the 1910 Paris Flood," *Journal of Urban History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 176–207.

¹¹ Samuel Temple, "The Natures of Nation: Negotiating Modernity in the *Landes de Gascogne*," *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 3 (2009): 419–46.

Although the term *disaster* may immediately call to mind tsunami, floods, or earthquakes, other events, such as the meltdown of a nuclear plant, have little to do with the forces of nature. Such traumatic events also severely breach ordinary experience to reveal fundamental strengths or contradictions in a society's inner workings; moreover, they can reorient politics, economics, and culture. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster, for example, exposed the potentially nightmarish outcomes of using nuclear power. Some scholars have argued that it destabilized the Soviet Union at a crucial moment by revealing official neglect and subsequent cover-up of the extent of the explosion. The collapse of communism was not caused by the Soviet government's response to Chernobyl, but it may have further delegitimized the government.¹²

Scholars engaged in disaster studies seek to bring some intellectual coherence to understanding the ruptures that create social and cultural crises, including both natural forces and purely human disasters. This interdisciplinary field emerged out of sociology, social psychology, and organizational theory, and researchers examine the effects of calamities on human experience, what societal responses reveal about social organization, relationships between humans and the natural world, and how people organize and perceive risk.¹³ Definitions of *disaster* are still widely debated, especially since not all disasters function the same way; a quarry collapse strikes suddenly, while a heat wave may take weeks to unfold silently, often leaving victims and officials unaware of the danger.¹⁴ One influential definition follows the work of E. L. Quarantelli, the founding director of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware and one of the field's pioneers. For Quarantelli, disasters are sets of extraordinary circumstances that force individuals, governments, and organizations to operate in unusual and stressful ways. They often require a loss of personal freedom to enable mass evacuations, provide security, or redistribute resources. They may also pose political or economic crises depending on how a society

¹² Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York, 2009). In retrospect, Mikhail Gorbachev has argued that Chernobyl was decisive in the collapse of the Soviet Union ("Turning Point at Chernobyl," Apr. 14, 2006, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/turning-point-at-chernobyl).

¹³ One of the best surveys of the field is Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York, 2009). See also Michael K. Lindell, "Disaster Studies," *Sociopedia.isa*, 2011, www.sagepub.net/isa/resources/pdf/Disaster_Studies.pdf; and E. L. Quarantelli, "A Half Century of Social Science Disaster Research: Selected Major Findings and Their Applicability" (Preliminary Paper 336, University of Delaware Disaster Research Center, 2003).

¹⁴ Ronald W. Perry, "What Is a Disaster?," in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Havidán Rodríguez, Enrico L. Quarantelli, and Russell Dynes (New York, 2007), 1–15; Ronald W. Perry and E. L. Quarantelli, eds., *What Is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions* (Philadelphia, 2005); Ted Steinberg, "What Is a Natural Disaster?," *Literature and Medicine* 15, no. 1 (1996): 33–47; and Lindell, "Disaster Studies."

responds. Catastrophes are even more severe, presenting fundamental challenges to basic modes of social operation and affecting vast swaths of population and infrastructure. In a catastrophe, most aspects of the normal routine are suspended, perhaps indefinitely.¹⁵

Events that might not be considered disasters in any conventional sense perhaps should be. Baron Haussmann's massive rebuilding of Paris in the 1850s and 1860s was disastrous, since it shattered aspects of the normal operation of the city, reorienting basic facts about how it worked, where people lived, and how they associated. The physical space of Paris was in ruins for years as streets were torn up and rebuilt, and the city was not the same afterward.¹⁶

With this broader definition in mind, many scholars argue that, far from being freak events, disasters are normal occurrences.¹⁷ People have become accustomed to living with the idea of risk, a concept that refers to the perceived possibility for hazard, loss, or danger—in other words, the potential for disaster.¹⁸ Taking certain kinds of risks can lead to disaster, and risk avoidance comes from the belief that one can control events so that one's society or personal life will not collapse under stress.

Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have been among the most influential scholars describing what Beck calls a "risk society," in which modernity's fundamental paradox is that by attempting to control risk through purportedly greater scientific, technological, and politi-

¹⁵ E. L. Quarantelli, "Emergencies, Disasters, and Catastrophes Are Different Phenomena" (Preliminary Paper 304, University of Delaware Disaster Research Center, 2000).

¹⁶ Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge, 1990), 201. See also Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago, 1995); and Peter S. Soppelsa, "The Fragility of Modernity: Infrastructure and Everyday Life in Paris, 1870–1914" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009).

¹⁷ Lee Clarke, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (Chicago, 2006); Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).

¹⁸ For general discussion of risk, see Deborah Lupton, *Risk* (London, 1999); Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, trans. Rhodes Barrett (New York, 1993); Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*, rev. ed. (London, 2002); Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers* (Berkeley, CA, 1982); Charles Perrow, *The Next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, and Ben Wisner, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters* (London, 1994); Gregg Bankoff, Georg Ferks, and Dorothea Hillhorst, *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development, and People* (London, 2004); François Walter, *Catastrophes: Une histoire culturelle, XVIe–XXIe siècle* (Paris, 2008); François Walter, Bernardina Fantini, and Pascal Delvaux, *Les cultures du risque (XVIe–XXIe siècle)* (Geneva, 2006); Bruno Ledoux, *Les catastrophes naturelles en France* (Paris, 1995); and Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* (Washington, DC, 2006). For an alternative perspective, see Florent Guénard and Philippe Simay, "Du risque à la catastrophe: A propos d'un nouveau paradigme," *La vie des idées.fr*, May 23, 2011, www.laviedesidees.fr/Du-risque-a-la-catastrophe.html?lang=fr; and Gaëlle Clavandier, "Faire face à la catastrophe," *La vie des idées.fr*, Apr. 19, 2011, www.laviedesidees.fr/Faire-face-a-la-catastrophe.html?lang=fr.

cal authority, we have created more uncertainty by hiding risk from public view, thereby making it more tolerable.¹⁹ The modern carbon-based economy that fueled the domination of the natural world, for instance, has probably created global warming with unknowable consequences. When most of humanity perceived disasters as God's will, there was little need to understand why the disasters happened outside a theological context. With the development of a scientific conception of the world, including the desires to understand natural and social principles and to raise living standards through technological advancement, Western society developed the notion of risk as a set of mathematical probabilities by which to guide future action. This view was in part an attempt to balance material progress against the growing likelihood of industrially generated accidents. Risk and the perception of risk have a history, demonstrating how humanity's understanding of the possibilities for disastrous ruptures has evolved along with our technological, scientific, political, and cultural systems. Beginning with shipping and navigation, insurance brokers attempted to mitigate risk through the market. Today we use the idea of risk to describe a wide range of possible failures or potential problems.²⁰

The fear of potential disaster associated with risk often sits at the point of disjuncture between perceptions about how a modern society should function and how it actually does. For centuries the predominant cultural narrative has emphasized our mastery of nature and ourselves. But when levees break, communications lines fail, buildings collapse, or weather predictions fall short, we are frequently surprised, even though we willingly take risks.²¹ Governments often allow developers to build near fault lines or in flood plains, catering to market demands rather than stiffening building codes. Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud has noted that "urban catastrophe . . . [is] a discontinuous moment that reveals the maladjustment of the city to its environment or to its socio-economic relationships."²² Since modern bureaucracies are designed for normal operations rather than unusual circumstances,

¹⁹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London, 1992); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA, 1991); Beck, *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*, trans. Amos Weisz (Cambridge, 1995).

²⁰ Walter, *Catastrophes*; Uwe Lübken and Christof Mauch, "Uncertain Environments: Natural Hazards, Risk, and Insurance in Historical Perspective," *Environment and History* 17, no. 1 (2011): 1–12.

²¹ Kevin Rosario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago, 2007).

²² Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, "Introduction: The Urban Catastrophe—Challenge to the Social, Economic, and Cultural Order of the City," in *Cities and Catastrophes: Coping with Emergency in European History*, ed. Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, Harold L. Platt, and Dieter Schott (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), 13.

governments are often unsure how to respond when top-down decision making might be better replaced with ground-level choices.²³

This perception of disaster as a shock to the system is closely related to the conceptual category of risk in modern life, a recurring theme in these essays. Several authors in this issue write about how disaster was as much a potentiality as an actual experience. The possibility for disaster is, in many ways, as significant as a disaster itself, since it asks people to consider the limits to safety even as they seek to make the world less risky through greater technological manipulation and scientific understanding.

What do historians learn from studying disasters? As Jonathan Bergman puts it, “Disaster is now rightly understood as an artifact of culture. The contours and color of disaster, and the pace and shape of reconstruction are appreciated as unique by-products of society.”²⁴ Indeed, each article in this issue highlights these by-products. Ranging from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, the articles primarily address human-generated disasters, recovery and adaptation, and the changing nature of risk in modernizing France. Florent Mérot’s contribution examines the response to war-related devastation following the Fronde in the agricultural valley and forests of Montmorency. Through systematic pillaging, plundering, raping, and killing, peasants suffered both demographic catastrophe and the complete destruction of their agricultural environment. While most historians of this war limit their analyses to its collateral damages, Mérot demonstrates that this destruction transformed the peasant mentality and thus the agricultural destiny of this valley and its forests. In the aftermath of war, cultivators profited from the absence of seigneurial restrictions and taxes to abandon cereal for grapevines and wine production. Recovery depended on an ingenious ability to readapt to the environment and create an entirely new “microsociety.” Most telling about this particular example of disaster recovery is peasants’ capacity not only to overcome adversity by taking advantage of an emerging capitalistic market economy but to do so without state or church intervention. The seventeenth-century peasants of Montmorency thus adapted to the consequences of disaster in surprisingly modern ways.

The four subsequent contributions to this issue concern disaster and risk in the context of urban growth, an increasingly market-

²³ Marc Landy, “Mega-disasters and Federalism,” *Public Administration Review* 68, supp. 1 (2008): 186–98; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT, 1998).

²⁴ Bergman, “Disaster,” 940.

oriented economy, technological revolution, and the complex relationships among political administrations, entrepreneurs, and public opinion. In the eighteenth century, the building of Paris created, in the words of Frédéric Graber, “[un] théâtre d’accidents spectaculaires et meurtriers” (a theater of spectacular and murderous accidents) as a result of plaster excavation. Thomas Le Roux analyzes the dangers that underground quarries posed for inhabitants living above them. A series of accidents in the mid-1770s stoked fear among Parisians about the dangers that lay beneath, driving public authorities to impose a system of regulation. Le Roux marks this decade as the moment that, in public opinion, responsibility for disasters and their prevention shifted from Providence to public authorities. Parisian police seized on this opportunity to reform urban government and administration; the series of accidents led to institutional quarry inspection. Le Roux suggests that the initiation of this system bears the mark of Enlightenment thinking in its concern for public welfare and the establishment of state apparatus necessary for regulation; his analysis points to this series of accidents as a turning point in which risk and disaster prevention became politicized.

Creating an inspection system, however, was a far cry from effective regulatory implementation. Graber’s article extends Le Roux’s story to the effort to establish public safety around quarries six decades after the inspection system went into effect, and his findings detail the complexities of implementation. The 1830s proved critical as accelerated urban growth, the expansion of underground plaster excavation from Paris to Montmartre, and unstable abandoned quarries all caused cave-ins and building collapses. In Montmartre the government administration attempted to impose security by regulating the distance between quarries and buildings. Graber argues that the method, not simply the fact of regulation, is key to understanding risk reduction. In the case of *distance de sécurité*, he demonstrates that as risk grew, regulation actually became more relaxed because this particular method and its complicated procedures were so difficult to implement. The administrators, moreover, favored excavators over threatened building proprietors. They deemed plaster excavation essential to Paris and profited from the *octroi* they could collect. As inhabitants of Montmartre expected their government to eliminate the risks of excavation, authorities instead sought to manage it on a case-by-case basis and even then failed to implement regulations. Ironically, the existence of regulations eased the way for further industrial progress, because it created the illusion that risk could be managed. Risk therefore became normalized.

If risky plaster excavation contributed to making Paris the “capital

of the nineteenth century,”²⁵ universal expositions helped cement the city’s reputation as such. Third Republic expositions further advanced the rebuilding that Haussmannization had begun under the Second Empire. Peter Soppelsa illuminates a darker side of the 1900 Paris Exposition by revealing its calamities and misfortunes: not only does he uncover horrific accidents and public health crises associated with the exposition’s infrastructure, but he also demonstrates that the conservative press attempted to portray many of these incidents as “disasters” to undermine the Third Republic politically. He reminds us that the definition of *disaster* rests on perception, itself highly subject to influence by mass media. Fear of risk associated with urban modernity could undermine confidence in the protective power of the Third Republic at a time when citizens’ expectations for state responsiveness had risen. Combining exposition and disaster studies, Soppelsa shows how the “envirotechnical” complexities resulted in accidents and threats to public health; new risks showcasing technological progress, according to many journalists, presaged future disaster and “endless crisis.”²⁶

Slightly more than one hundred years after the 1900 Exposition, Paris—and much of France—suffered a disaster when fifteen thousand people died in a heat wave. Richard C. Keller’s contribution to this issue examines the 2003 event that proved so shocking precisely because deaths could have been avoided. Like Soppelsa, Keller focuses on the built environment and shows that Haussmannization—one of whose goals was to improve public health—ironically was a leading cause of mortality. Tracking down victims and investigating the spaces in which they had lived and died, Keller explores how the built environment created a “differential valuation of life”: housing structures dating from the second half of the nineteenth century pushed marginal people, the elderly, and the poor into *chambres de bonnes*, small rooms under the roofs of tall apartment buildings and sometimes accessible only by seven-story staircases. Architectural forms obstructed patterns of sociability. Unventilated top-floor apartments increased already high temperatures and isolated heat-wave victims from neighbors and street life. Nineteenth-century urban planning and global warming created twenty-first-century death traps. The city itself was (and is) not necessarily a pathological environment, but certain spaces within it became pathological as a result not just of the environment but also of social, cultural, and political factors.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1979), 146–62.

²⁶ On the concept of the “envirotechnical,” see Sara Pritchard, *Confluence: The Nature of Technology and the Remaking of the Rhône* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

This poignant collection of essays suggests that the growth and expansion of technological, scientific, and political authority at once increases risk and renders it invisible through purported management, thereby offering important insights for coming to grips with disaster in contemporary society. Mérot demonstrates that adaptation in the wake of horrific events can lead to unexpected advances in living standards; early modern peasants experienced the disasters they suffered with greater agency than modern Parisians, suggesting indeed that risk management in modern society is increasingly complex and politicized. Le Roux highlights how the state became obligated to regulate public risk, but Graber unveils the intricate complexities in the implementation of that regulation, thus reminding us of current contentiousness in risk management. Following Graber's important points about the reluctance to regulate risk in favor of profit, Soppelsa demonstrates the pitfalls of France's effort to showcase its technological progress, instances of which could be politically manipulated. Finally, and perhaps most forebodingly, Keller suggests that certain socially created spaces in the modern city can render potential victims of disaster invisible. These essays invite us to reconsider the spatial and temporal dimensions of disaster and risk, to learn the lessons of adaptability and innovation, and to study the processes by which risk can become contested and effaced amid competing interests. Since the Enlightenment, France has been in the vanguard of technology, engineering, and universal rights, positioning itself for risk and the possibility of disaster at every turn. We hope that these articles will initiate profitable exchanges about how the study of such events lends further insight to its history.