

## Editors' Note. Introduction to the Symposium on 'Preparedness in an Uncertain and Risky World'

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### Abstract

This is an introduction to the Symposium on “Preparedness in an Uncertain and Risky World”.

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If uncertainty, complexity and unpredictability have been long theorized by sociologists as a characteristic of the contemporary society, they have become a very tangible cypher of the present. Disasters and catastrophes are no more rare events or “pathological” moments but a condition increasingly experienced on an everyday basis by a growing number of human beings. The Covid-19 outbreak, the last in a line of insurgent or resurgent infectious diseases, as well as the societal challenges related to climate change, encapsulate the relevance of the governance of socio-ecological uncertainty. The failures to adequately address them call for the rethinking of science and innovation practices, leading to the need for renewed approaches combining science, technology, public action and social organization.

The approaches to disaster risk reduction and management have stressed the importance of developing resilience, a notion that has been the subject of animated debates in the social sciences, but the concept of preparedness has also gained traction in the last years. First developed in regard to military issues (nuclear threats, bioterrorism), it has subsequently been extended to the management of crises related to disasters, health threats and climate change. Considered a style of reasoning, an ethos and a set of governmental techniques for reflecting about and intervening in an uncertain, potentially catastrophic future (Lakoff, 2017), preparedness has been analysed as one logic of action that is growing relevance in different spheres of society, inspiring tools that are being adopted in various fields.

In this respect, the essays of this Symposium of *Sociologica* tackle the concept of preparedness addressing its societal implications in terms of power, inequalities and vulnerabilities, connecting preparedness to the uncertainty that characterizes society-environment relations and focusing on the role of knowledge and its uses in governing the unexpected and the unpredictable.

The lead article by Bifulco et al. (2021) entitled “For Preparedness as Transformation” is a theoretical statement on preparedness that introduces the symposium. Starting from the literature on disaster management, it reconstructs the shift from disaster as an external threat to disaster as an internal process along with a valorization of uncertainty as a fundamental characteristic of the social system. This shift advocates for the creation of “boundary infrastructures” for knowledge production, able to deal with both incomplete and uncomfortable knowledge and to detect the unexpected in the ordinary, while promptly responding to potential threats. But it also calls for a territorial approach able to consider the socio-ecological interdependencies that take shape in a particular context, so as to try to tackle the existing vulnerabilities. The article concludes with a reflection on how a transformative preparedness calls for a territorial governance grounded on tools able to promote and enhance the ability to generate and share knowledge, information, and socio-technical solutions.

In “Preparedness Indicators: Measuring the Condition of Global Health Security,” Lakoff (2021) reconstructs the genesis and rationale of the Global Health Security Index, tracing it back to the post-war period. Its point of departure and main question is the discrepancy between the index ranking and the actual performance of the United States when facing the Covid-19 pandemic. The article focuses on the failure of such index in anticipating national performances in a real emergency, addressing the definition of “health security,” its formulation and the choices made about how to measure it. In the end, the author highlights that the goals of the index drove it into measuring certain issues and disregarding others that proved to be crucial in the Covid-19 pandemic.

The topic of human-non human relations is addressed by Keck in his article “Preparing and Repairing: The Conservation of Heritage after the 1997 Bird Influenza Outbreak in Hong Kong” (2021). Keck analyses public health rationalities in Hong Kong in the measure imple-

mented to prepare for an influenza pandemic coming from birds: the author shows how those work together with conservation, alongside or in conflict with each other. Focusing on the role of memory, experience and heritage in preparing for future pandemics, the article points out the tensions in managing risks of transmission at the frontiers between species as a space where humans and non-humans share a common vulnerability. Showing in this way the existing connections “between preparing for future disasters and repairing vulnerable environments as two perspectives on the same event” (p. ).

Pellizzoni & Sena (2021) in “Preparedness as Governmentality: Probing the Italian Management of the Covid-19 Emergency” address preparedness through the Foucauldian concept of biopolitical governmentality to highlight how its security rationale shows a “post-securitarian” take on threats. Through a focus on the Italian management of the Covid-19 emergency and the main regulatory provisions issued in this time span, the authors reflect on the securitarian framework of responses based on prevention (or precaution). The authors highlight the inconsistency of these measures, which were developed through a mix of disciplinary tools and preventive techniques with a limited role played by preparedness, obscured by the post-securitarian implications of measures designed to chase rather than precede the virus. A situation turning out to aim at the governmental goal of the — potentially endless — crisis modulation: a constant readjustment of the emergency government to the fluctuations it itself contributes to engender in the socio-material collective comprised of humans and the virus.

The thresholds of catastrophe, which guide the measures conceived to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, are at the core of the article by Folkers (2021), “Preventing the Unpreparable: Catastrophe Thresholds from Covid to Climate.” It demonstrates that in both cases the thresholds are identified and operationalized through the interaction between prevention and preparedness that comes to operate in the same security assemblages, and it is only the transgression of the catastrophe threshold that marks the point when the crisis becomes uncontrollable. In addition, the article illuminates how the thresholds contribute to silence death and suffering below them, while failing to provide guidance when the threshold is already overcome, claiming for a shift from the pre- (prevention, preparedness) to the re- (carbon removal, ecological remediation and reparation) in the contemporary politics of environmental security.

The Symposium closes with the paper by Caselli et al. (2021) “Prepared to Care? Knowledge and Welfare in a Time of Emergency” which reflects on the social emergencies that followed the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy and how to deal with them. The article develops a dialogue between the sociology of disasters and the sociology of public action focusing on the role and the forms of knowledge in welfare policies. The authors show how the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a process of visibilisation of diverse form of precarity and social injustice that are structurally inscribed in the Italian social fabric and that are not actually tackled by the current welfare system. Welfare unpreparedness facing the social emergency is thus addressed by the article as a problem about informational basis of welfare policies construction and recognition, that can be overcome through a certain take on preparedness able to reinvigorate the democratic and inclusive nature of welfare with a perspective based on care ethics.

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