



**Fabula / Les Colloques**

**Écocritique(s) et catastrophes naturelles : perspectives  
transdisciplinaires / Ecocriticism(s) and Natural Catastrophes:  
Transdisciplinary Perspectives**

---

# Rousseau on Hazard and Habitability. The Beginnings of a Social Interpretation of “Natural” Disasters

**Zev Trachtenberg**

---



## **Pour citer cet article**

Zev Trachtenberg, « Rousseau on Hazard and Habitability. The Beginnings of a Social Interpretation of “Natural” Disasters », *Fabula / Les colloques*, « Partie 1 – À la croisée des catastrophes / At the Crossroads of Catastrophes. Écocritique(s) et catastrophes naturelles : perspectives transdisciplinaires / Ecocriticism(s) and Natural Catastrophes: Transdisciplinary Perspectives », URL : <https://www.fabula.org/colloques/document7809.php>, article mis en ligne le 11 Février 2022, consulté le 05 Juin 2025

---

# Rousseau on Hazard and Habitability. The Beginnings of a Social Interpretation of “Natural” Disasters

**Zev Trachtenberg**

---

Ecocritical thinking about natural catastrophes demands an intense sensitivity to the conceptual ambiguousness of the subject itself. For especially as we peer out from the shadow of the Anthropocene, we discern that we must distrust the idea of the natural. It is practically a commonplace that the idea of natural catastrophe conceals as much as it reveals — in particular, the social contribution to the impacts that are characterized as catastrophic. 2020 provided more than its share of examples: the intense wildfires in Australia, and then in the western US, the extended hurricane season in the Atlantic, and the defining event of the year, the global COVID-19 pandemic, to name just three. Each has been associated with anthropogenic sources — climate change in the first two cases, and habitat destruction in the third. And, the damage that elevates each to the status of catastrophe is tightly associated with human factors — counting not simply the damage to human beings (leaving aside the incalculable toll on other species of the fires), but more tellingly the human behaviors that exacerbated that damage (e.g. real estate development, not to mention poor public health responses).

Catastrophic these fires, storms and disease have certainly been... but natural? To relegate them to a realm of ineluctable, unguided, merely physical causation seems to ignore a conceptual recognition they demand, namely that what makes for a natural *catastrophe* is not the impingement of some extra-social process on society, but the intricate intertwining of human societies with their physical settings, which binds together the natural and social factors that mutually yield catastrophic outcomes. This recognition about catastrophes is a threshold to a more general conceptual understanding: that the linkages between what we might think of as the distinct realms of non-human nature and distinctively artificial society are in fact so tight and complex that we would do better to think with broader, more systemic concepts. In an Hegelian spirit we might better think of nature and society as “moments” of a more inclusive concept like “socio-nature”, which foregrounds interrelationships<sup>1</sup>, and which thus better explain the catastrophic character of so-called natural catastrophes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Manuel Arias-Maldonado, *Environment and Society: Socionatural Relations in the Anthropocene*, Cham, Springer, 2015, p. 55-71. Fabula / Les Colloques, « Écocritique(s) et catastrophes naturelles : perspectives transdisciplinaires / Ecocriticism(s) and Natural Catastrophes: Transdisciplinary Perspectives », 2022

I do not think this outlook unfamiliar, or even contentious. Thus my goal in this paper is not to defend it. Rather I seek to associate it with the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As R. R. Dynes argued twenty years ago, this "modern outlook" on natural catastrophe was formulated as a response to what he calls "the first modern disaster", the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in 1755. In particular, Dynes shows, it is rooted in Rousseau's response to the famous poem on the earthquake by Voltaire. In the first part of the paper I will briefly review that exchange. I will then go on to connect Rousseau's response to Voltaire with the major work he had just recently published, the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*. I shall read the *Discours* ecocritically, as an account of the dynamic process by which human beings interact with their physical surroundings, with the aim of transforming them into a habitable environment. I will conclude with some remarks on how Rousseau's view that habitability is not given but constructed anticipates current thinking about the "risk society".

## The first modern disaster

The Lisbon Earthquake involved the direct seismic shock which destroyed countless structures; a resulting tsunami which flooded the low-lying areas of the city; and ensuing fires, which consumed yet more buildings<sup>2</sup>. Thousands were killed and practically all who survived, including the royal family, were forced to live outside for months. The disaster struck on November 1, All Saints Day, as the famously pious people of the city were in church. Thus, it was all but ready-made as a test case for questioning theodicy: how could God allow this to happen to His faithful, killed while worshipping Him? Some religious leaders saw the destruction as divine punishment for sins the city somehow permitted. But, as Dynes argues, the event also challenged less sectarian views, in particular the Enlightenment-era "optimism" articulated by Leibniz and Pope. They solved the traditional problem of evil by asserting that the goodness of God ensured that Creation overall is good, hence that any appearance of evil is only apparent, due to our inability to grasp its function within the whole. Dynes notes that a colossal disaster in a major European capital inevitably unsettled this outlook: "the Lisbon earthquake provided an actual concrete opportunity to look again at the assumption that the world is good and indeed the best of all possible worlds"<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Russell R. Dynes, "The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: The First Modern Disaster", in Theodore E. D. Braum and John B. Radner (eds), *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions*, London, Voltaire Foundation, 2005, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View", *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, March 2000, vol. 18, issue 1, p. 102.

Fabula / Les Colloques, « Écocritique(s) et catastrophes naturelles : perspectives transdisciplinaires / Ecocriticism(s) and Natural Catastrophes: Transdisciplinary Perspectives », 2022

© Tous les textes et documents disponibles sur ce site, sont, sauf mention contraire, protégés par une licence Creative Common.

Voltaire composed his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne, ou Examen de cet axiome : Tout est bien* within weeks of the event; it was published in March of 1756. Foreshadowing themes he developed in *Candide*, in the poem he expresses his emotional and intellectual dissatisfaction with the view that human suffering on the scale of Lisbon's can be reconciled with the goodness of the Creator. Emotionally, the suffering simply cannot be accepted, and a decent, humane sensibility should balk at accepting the idea that it can be justified. And intellectually, the mind simply cannot make sense of that demand:

Mais comment concevoir un Dieu, la bonté même,  
 Qui prodigua ses biens à ses enfants qu'il aime,  
 Et qui versa sur eux les maux à pleines mains ?  
 Quel œil peut pénétrer dans ses profonds desseins ?  
 De l'Être tout parfait le mal ne pouvait naître ;  
 Il ne vient point d'autrui, puisque Dieu seul est maître :  
 Il existe pourtant. Ô tristes vérités !  
 Ô mélange étonnant de contrariétés !<sup>4</sup>

To Voltaire the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon shook more than the ground. At minimum it undercut the optimistic effort to mitigate the badness of suffering by reference to some wider good. More dangerously, it raised the prospect of acknowledging suffering as *irredeemably* bad, perhaps even attributing responsibility for that badness to God.

Rousseau could not abide that last possibility. In August of 1756 he replied to Voltaire in a lengthy letter, which ultimately looks beyond the particular case of Lisbon to the problem of evil and the doctrine of optimism more generally. But in some brief remarks addressing the suffering of the city's residents he argues that its source was not God, but their own choices and actions. For, Rousseau suggests to Voltaire, the true cause of the suffering in Lisbon was not the natural seismic phenomenon in itself, but the city's building practices, and individuals' socially inflected motivations — the outlook Dynes labels as "the first truly social scientific view of disaster"<sup>5</sup>.

On the one hand, Rousseau notes : « [L]a nature n'avoit point rassemblé là vingt mille maisons de six à sept étages, & que si les habitants de cette grande ville eussent été dispersés plus également & plus légèrement logés, le dégât eût été beaucoup moindre &

<sup>4</sup> Voltaire, "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne, ou Examen de cet axiome : Tout est bien" (1st ed. : Cramer, 1756), in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 9, Paris, Garnier, 1877, p. 470-479, p. 474. ("But how conceive a God, kindness himself / Who lavished good on his children whom he loves / And yet who floods them with evils in full measure / Whose eye can penetrate his mysterious designs? / From a perfect being evil cannot spring / Nor come from another, since God alone is king: / Yet it exists. O sad truths! / O astonishing mixture of adversities". Unless otherwise specified, all translations my own.)

<sup>5</sup> Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau [...]", *op. cit.*, p. 106.

*peut-être nul*<sup>6</sup> ». The self-created vulnerability inherent in the mode of human habitation of that place was responsible, that is, for making a morally neutral natural occurrence register as a catastrophe. On the other hand, he observes that even after the danger was revealed by the initial tremor, people refused to take appropriate action: « *Combien de malheureux ont péri dans ce désastre pour vouloir prendre, l'un ses habits, l'autre ses papiers, l'autre son argent*<sup>7</sup> ? » Their desires reflected their values, which, for Rousseau, had to do with maintaining their social identities (their clothes and papers) and position (their money)—all of which are meaningful to them primarily as means for operating within their social environment.

Dynes holds that Rousseau's remarks are noteworthy because they show "that to understand the meaning of Lisbon depended... on an understanding of the social structure and culture in the specific community in which the earthquake took place"<sup>8</sup>. They represent "perhaps the first attempt to conceptualize what is now known as 'vulnerability'<sup>9</sup>". That vulnerability was not simply physical, due to the susceptibility of the buildings to seismic damage. It was cultural as well, due to the victims' sensitivity to status, which made them discount physical danger in order to retrieve material status markers. "In contemporary terms", Dynes notes, "their risk perception had been minimized by their pride and social position"<sup>10</sup>. In both cases, vulnerability was not a brute fact of nature, but rather a resultant of the interaction between natural hazard and social factors. Dynes observes that though Rousseau's insights were not taken up in a systematic way for nearly two centuries, they nonetheless "prefigured current perspectives on disasters"<sup>11</sup>.

Dynes juxtaposes the idea that the Lisbon earthquake is the occasion for Rousseau's very modern outlook on it with the explicit claim that it in fact constituted the "first modern disaster"<sup>12</sup>. An important element of its modernity is political: it is bound up with the emergence of modern state structure in Portugal. It "was the first modern disaster in the sense that the state accepted responsibility for mobilising the emergency response and for developing and implementing a comprehensive plan

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Lettre à M. de Voltaire", 18 août 1756, in *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, tome IV, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 1969, p. 1059-1075, p. 1061. ("Nature had certainly not assembled twenty thousand six or seven storied houses, and if the inhabitants of that large city had been spread out more evenly and lived in less massive structures there would have been far less damage and perhaps none at all.")

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* ("How many unfortunates perished in the disaster because one wanted to take his clothes, the other his papers, another his money?")

<sup>8</sup> Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau [...]", *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

for reconstruction<sup>13</sup>”. Indeed, the reconstruction was marked by a concern for making new buildings earthquake proof<sup>14</sup> — i.e. the recovery effort marked one of the first times the state assumed responsibility for mitigating natural hazards. For Dynes, this feature of the Lisbon earthquake is, however, disconnected from theodicy: he takes it that “the development of the modern state” was “not particularly reflected in the concerns of Voltaire and Rousseau<sup>15</sup>”. I believe Dynes does not do full justice to Rousseau here. For, further examination of Rousseau’s remarks on Lisbon, in light of his wider political theory, reveals that they are deeply informed by political considerations. Let us now consider that wider context.

## Constructed habitability: Rousseau’s genealogy

Rousseau’s remarks to Voltaire on Lisbon in themselves might seem to have been made almost in passing — for this reason it is essential to appreciate their immediate context, which points outward to the wider context of his political theory. These contextual clues appear just before he mentions human culpability in Lisbon, when he refers to the theory of human development he had presented a year previously in the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*. There, he reminds Voltaire, he had “shown men how they brought their misfortunes on themselves<sup>16</sup>”, in particular through their patterns of social interaction. In Rousseau’s account, society shapes individuals’ actions through the motivational dynamics of a particular form of self-love, which he refers to as “*amour propre*”. Under the influence of *amour propre* people value themselves only to the extent that they think themselves valued by others; he contrasts *amour propre* with a more primordial form of self-love, *amour de soi-même*, which in being experienced immediately, without consciousness of any other person, represents for Rousseau a kind of emotional autonomy. According to his conjectural history of humanity in the *Discours*, as people come to experience *amour propre*, under its influence they are motivated simultaneously to affiliate, abandoning what he posits to have been their earlier, solitary mode of life, and to compare themselves with others. This sets up an alienating competition for status which Rousseau theorizes as the source of evil in human life.

<sup>13</sup> Russell R. Dynes, “The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 [...]”, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Russell R. Dynes, “The Dialogue Between Voltaire and Rousseau [...]”, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> “[...] je montrais aux hommes comment ils faisoient leurs malheurs eux-mêmes”, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Lettre à M. de Voltaire”, *op. cit.*, p. 1061.

Note that in locating the source of evil within human beings themselves Rousseau is *not* offering to solve the problem of evil with what is called the "free will defense" — the argument that God is not responsible for the evil that enters the world through human beings' freely willed, but sinful, choices. Rousseau acknowledges, indeed celebrates, humans' metaphysical freedom. But he does not identify it as the immediate and necessary source of evil — an inherent, structural flaw in human nature. Thus, Rousseau's strategy for absolving God of responsibility for human suffering is not to point to something like Original Sin — an idea Rousseau notoriously rejected.

Rather, to Rousseau, the reason evil is not attributable to God is that it is fundamentally *contingent*. It is neither part of an inscrutable plan, a necessary element whose part within the whole our frailty prevents us from grasping, nor the tragically inevitable consequence of our freedom, which is necessary for us to be moral. Rousseau's signature doctrine of "the natural goodness of human-kind" holds that humanity left the hands of its Creator morally good — albeit marked by a non-social mode of life — and would have remained so if it had not encountered certain "fatal accidents" which forced people to live in closer proximity, initiating an extended process of self-fashioning in response to the opinions of others. Rousseau's "*l'homme de la nature*" — the child of God — does not experience the evils that are the fate of "*l'homme de l'homme*" — the person molded by socialization to depend on other people's esteem. Rousseau's characterization of humanity as its own product makes clear that, for him, the people we see around us are not God's creation; as John Scott argues<sup>17</sup>, we can thus read the *Second Discourse* as a theodicy which shifts responsibility for evil from God to human beings, not as such, but as they have made themselves through their societies.

Thus, to Rousseau, evil involves another layer of contingency. After people were thrown together, he concludes, it happened to happen that their interactions came to allow for the unchecked development of *amour propre*, the baleful result of which is what we observe in our actual experience. But Rousseau argues that it was not *necessary* for the process to unfold that way, leaving *amour propre* unchecked and dangerous. His political theory envisions the counter-factual possibility that *amour propre* could be managed, largely through cultural practices, resulting in societies not condemned to alienation and inequity<sup>18</sup>. It is this possibility (to be sure unrealized) that grounds his observation that suffering of the sort experienced in Lisbon is not inevitable; people who lived under a better social order would not have built fragile structures in a seismic zone, or failed to escape danger in order to

<sup>17</sup> John T. Scott, "The Theodicy of the Second Discourse: The 'Pure State of Nature' and Rousseau's Political Thought", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 86, issue 3, 1992, p. 696-711.

<sup>18</sup> Zev M. Trachtenberg, *Making Citizens: Rousseau's Political Theory of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1993.

Fabula / Les Colloques, « Écocritique(s) et catastrophes naturelles : perspectives transdisciplinaires / Ecocriticism(s) and Natural Catastrophes: Transdisciplinary Perspectives », 2022

© Tous les textes et documents disponibles sur ce site, sont, sauf mention contraire, protégés par une licence Creative Common.

hold on to items that function only to enhance their status in that society. The choices the victims made were entirely explicable, perhaps unavoidable, in light of the facts of their social lives. But they *could* have been different, with less catastrophic consequences, under different social circumstances<sup>19</sup>.

Now a familiar element of Rousseau’s political theory is its account of political right. This is the stated topic of *Du Contrat social* (1762), which argues that the General Will — what the political community seeks for itself — is the standard for the legitimacy of political institutions and their actions. Perhaps less familiar is the way that Rousseau’s political theory, in particular in the *Discours*, incorporates an implicit understanding of the *environmental* dimension of politics. Illuminating that dimension is a central thread in the *Discours*’ speculative genealogy of modern society, which culminates in the founding of the liberal, capitalist order projected by Locke’s political theory<sup>20</sup>. That genealogy is a dialectically structured account which conceives humans’ relationship with the physical environment as recursively mediated by their capacities for social interaction; as these mutually unfold, human beings’ social practices of habitation transform their surroundings from raw nature into their own proper habitat<sup>21</sup>.

In particular, Rousseau describes how human beings activate latent cognitive capacities, including capacities to communicate and cooperate with others, by interacting in increasingly complex ways with their physical surroundings. He imagines a starting point for the process in a pure “state of nature,” in which solitary human beings survive by simply taking what their environment affords them, leaving their environmental conditions essentially unchanged. But he stipulates that the environment “soon presented them with difficulties<sup>22</sup>”, forcing humans to develop physical and mental skills. Their newly developed skills, in turn, enabled people to make use of objects they find as tools. Tool use prompts improved cognition; these mutually allow for more intensive environmental exploitation, facilitating another round of cognitive development, and so on.

At this early stage humans’ environment is strictly physical — they have yet to establish on-going relationships with others. The creation of a *social* environment comes with the invention of language — and, “traversing multitudes of centuries in one stroke<sup>23</sup>”, Rousseau envisions how, within the social environment constituted by

<sup>19</sup> Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> Evidence that Dynes is incorrect that Rousseau was not concerned with the development of the modern state.

<sup>21</sup> Zev Trachtenberg, “Rousseau and Environmentalism”, in Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (eds), *The Rousseauian Mind*, New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 485-495.

<sup>22</sup> “[...] il se présenta bientôt des difficultés”, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondemens de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1st ed.: Marc-Michel Rey, 1755), in *Œuvres complètes*, eds Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, tome 3, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”, 1969, p. 111-223, p. 165.

Fabula / Les Colloques, « Écocritique(s) et catastrophes naturelles : perspectives transdisciplinaires / Ecocriticism(s) and Natural Catastrophes: Transdisciplinary Perspectives », 2022

© Tous les textes et documents disponibles sur ce site, sont, sauf mention contraire, protégés par une licence Creative Common.



small human communities, the dynamics of *amour propre* are activated. But even at this intermediate stage, human transformation of the physical environment is limited, due to the still limited degree of human interaction. Human interaction extends and becomes more intensive with the emergence of an economy marked by division of labor and exchange — between agricultural workers, and tool makers whose products make farmers’ efforts productive enough to provide for both groups. Economic relationships in turn make possible inequality of property — the stated subject of the *Discours*. This yields a social environment that is complex and hierarchical, and which can mobilize the power of human beings to transform their physical environments radically. At this culminating stage, in Rousseau’s words, “vast forests were changed into smiling fields”<sup>24</sup>.

Note that Rousseau’s account makes clear that the social environment overlays the physical environment. His genealogy has society emerge as human interaction with the environment involves more and more people acting in more and more coordinated ways, enabling their collective interaction to be more and more transformative. That is, the interpersonal interactions which constitute the substance of the social environment are themselves interactions the people involved have with the physical environment: the interlinked, socially structured efforts that collectively draw, modify, and distribute resources from nature. In this sense Rousseau can be said to theorize the classical notion of “second nature”. The social environment arises as people collaboratively modify the physical environment, changing it from its primordial condition into a manifestation of society itself. But more than simply seeing the human hand in the physical condition of the landscape, Rousseau makes explicit the purpose motivating its efforts: humans modify the landscape to make it more conducive to their survival.

By way of contrast, recall that the pure state of nature immediately affords people their organic needs; raw nature thus serves as a direct habitat. But this is, in effect, a pre-historical condition — a kind of Eden. Rousseau’s conjectural history begins with the “difficulties” mentioned above; now nature no longer provides spontaneously, but people must interact with it for it to serve them. Exiting Eden, people must labor to survive. Rousseau’s genealogy thus foregrounds the labor people undertake to make their surroundings *habitable*. Indeed, we can frame the historical development described so far as people’s *construction* of habitability: they transform their surroundings to make them better support the modes of habitation their social interactions lead them to prefer. Rousseau’s account, therefore, makes salient not only that, for humans, habitat is constructed, but further that its physical and

<sup>23</sup> “Je parcours comme un trait des multitudes de siècles”, *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> “[...] les vastes forêts se changèrent en des campagnes riantes”, *ibid.*, p. 171.

social features are inextricably bound, as mutually influencing aspects of a single system.

## Habitability & risk

It would be an exaggeration to hold that Rousseau’s constructivist account of habitability includes an elaborated understanding of hazard. Rousseau may prefigure current perspectives on disasters, but in fact he does not say much on the topic beyond the brief remarks on Lisbon. Nonetheless, in virtue of its dialectical conceptual structure — that is, its pairing of social development and environmental interaction as mutually reinforcing — the account we have surveyed of the construction of habitability offers a way of framing hazard which, I suggest, can be taken to anticipate Ulrich Beck’s conception of the “risk society”.

In general terms, hazard is a threat to habitability — a possible source of rupture in the systems which afford the requirements of life to their inhabitants. Rousseau’s constructivist account of habitability foregrounds the role of social factors in the distribution of that impact, helping to explain, for example, inequities in suffering and survival. To further analyze ways social factors play a role, let me offer a rough distinction, between (with respect to those social factors) exogenous and endogenous hazard. Rousseau’s remarks on Lisbon clearly treat the seismic event as an exogenous hazard. It was itself causally independent of the social dynamics which led, for example, to dangerous construction practices — nothing about *amour propre* made the event itself more or less likely. The *impacts* of the earthquake should not be considered purely natural facts, of course, because the exogenous movement of the terrain was transduced by social factors into the horrors the people of Lisbon experienced. These constituted a catastrophe—but not one we should use the category of “the natural” to conceptualize.

What then would count as an endogenous hazard? Though Rousseau does not speak this way, it seems consistent with his theory to frame inequality of wealth as hazardous. Though rooted in differences among individuals, inequality of property manifests as a paradigmatically social fact. It is only in virtue of social structures — division of labor and exchange — that material inequality can arise. Rousseau adds that there can be no moral basis, grounded in an appeal to nature, for such inequality: « *il est manifestement contre la Loi de Nature [...] qu’une poignée de gens regorge de superfluités, tandis que la multitude affamée manque du nécessaire* »<sup>25</sup>. Rousseau’s genealogy depicts inequality as a background condition that yields

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194. (“It is manifestly against the Law of Nature... that a handful of men burst from excess while the masses starve from lack of necessities.”)

catastrophic consequences — the disastrous state of war, and the perverse social contract that gave force of law to the advantages of the rich over the poor. This result is no less catastrophic than the Lisbon Earthquake, but the underlying hazard that leads to it is not only *propagated* through social structures, it is itself substantially the *product* of social dynamics. The conceptual pattern Rousseau establishes here can be seen in contemporary cases. For example, we might frame racism as an endogenous social hazard — a socially generated background condition that manifests through social processes in inequitably distributed catastrophic results, such as excess mortality for racial minorities.

But Rousseau’s innovation was to think nature and society together — to blur the edge between the categories in a way this distinction between exogenous and endogenous hazard might obscure. I conclude, therefore, by considering a form of hazard that integrates features of both categories. This proposal goes beyond Rousseau’s own examples — but his account makes it conceptually available.

Specifically, Rousseau does not directly address the possibility that human activity produces physical hazards, which might seem to be exogenous to the social structures which propagate their consequences. But his theorization of the interlinking of social development and environmental transformation makes that possibility manifest. Again, for Rousseau social development is recursively paired with humans’ interactions with the physical environment. It is utterly in keeping with his outlook that human activity will reach deeper and deeper into natural processes, from macro even to micro scales. It is thus consistent with his view to consider that phenomena which act like exogenous hazards because they are physical, not social processes, at the same time act like endogenous hazards because they are socially generated, and their impacts are distributed through social channels. Climate change provides a clear example. Anthropogenic carbon emissions work through strictly physical processes to raise the probability that coastal cities will suffer inundation. Is the flooding hazard exogenous or endogenous? In fact it is both, and a full understanding of it shows the necessity of transcending the distinction.

This conceptual pattern was articulated for our time by Ulrich Beck in his landmark 1986 work, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Beck argues that the very processes by which technological society pursues well-being at once generate threats to well-being. These threats operate through physical processes, like dangers to health, which are characterized, if not indeed discerned, by natural science. They therefore are experienced as, in our terms, exogenous hazards — and matters for technological remediation, not systemic social analysis and change.

Beck analyzes the complex dynamics of risk in modern society; we must pass over the details of his account. It is notable, however, what he places at the philosophical

core of his view: "*the end of the antithesis between nature and society*"<sup>26</sup>. Beck argues that that antithesis has "been nullified by the industrialization process itself, *historically falsified*, one could say"<sup>27</sup>, yielding a nature that must be understood in social terms. Thus, he holds, "the concept of the (industrial) risk society proceeds from 'nature' as integrated by culture, and the metamorphosis of injuries to it is traced through social subsystems"<sup>28</sup>. The overarching risks associated with modernization "are the conceptual arrangement, the categorical setting, in which injuries to and destruction of nature, as immanent in civilization, are seized upon socially"<sup>29</sup>.

Beck holds, that is, that 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial growth reveals to society the underlying truth about the environmental hazards produced by a technologically driven, modern way of life — that they are neither purely natural, not purely social, but a hybrid of both. I believe that at least an anticipation of this revelation came two centuries earlier, as modernization was getting underway. For, as I have argued, Rousseau's genealogical account of the construction of habitability already worked to dissolve the nature/society antithesis. His theory, further, seems to contain the conceptual ingredients for something like the idea of the risk society — uncombined in his own work, but present nonetheless. As a theory of habitability, Rousseau's constructivist view can readily articulate the prospect that the processes of habitation can interfere with physical as well as social features of the system that supports habitability. Framing a pattern of thought developed by Beck, that is, Rousseau offers a framework for seeing disaster not simply as the intrusion of nature into society, but instead a danger when habitation puts habitability at risk.

<sup>26</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Mark Ritter (trans.), London, Sage, 1992 (1st German ed.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 80 (emph. in original).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* (emph. in original).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

## PLAN

---

- The first modern disaster
- Constructed habitability: Rousseau's genealogy
- Habitability & risk

## AUTEUR

---

Zev Trachtenberg

[Voir ses autres contributions](#)

University of Oklahoma

Courriel : [ztrachtenberg@ou.edu](mailto:ztrachtenberg@ou.edu)