The previous chapter addressed the question: why should sociologists study disasters? Two connected reasons came to the fore: to aid the enterprise of sociology and to assist with our comprehension of social reality. We noted how disasters lift veils. Here we offer an extended meditation on this theme of disasters and revelation. It is one of the literature’s most recurring motifs and it is central to this publication. As noted, studying disasters returns us to core business. It also returns us to the origins of social science.

Of earthquakes and enlightenment

Thinkers of various persuasions have long held that the truth only reveals itself in moments of rupture (Foucault, 1977, p. 146; Virilio, 1999, p. 89; Baudrillard, 2005a, p. 16; Žižek, 2008b, p. 144). Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan (2012, p. 4) go so far as to suggest that rupture, those radical breaks understood as revolutionary change in the widest sense, permit the ability to think differently (Solnit and Cleaver noted as much in our previous chapter). They are moments when the impossible manifests. Consequently, they are also the progenitors of much philosophical thought. These existential shifts create new values, classificatory systems and power distributions. Eisenstein and McGowan cite numerous examples of fundamental philosophical shifts in worldviews and lived experience. Two of the more momentous include the shift in thinking that our planet is the centre of the universe to being but one in a universe with no centre, and from it being populated by a naturally hierarchical social order to one in which we could potentially all be equal. But the emergence of language and the capitalist mode of production are taken to be the most decisive ruptures of all.
That is, until the very end of the book, when the ultimate rupture is revealed, natural disaster, which is when nature is ruptured from itself.

Their expansive survey goes all the way from Plato and Aristotle to Agamben and Žižek. Jean-Jacques Rousseau appears, fleetingly, as a footnote to Immanuel Kant. We can bring him centre-stage by bringing the discussion back to disaster studies.

Arguably, the origins of modernity, and the attempt to make sense of it through a properly human science, emerge from disaster: the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Earthquakes were not unknown to Europeans, but for many of them they were known to strike elsewhere. This one struck at the edge of the modern world. Portugal was a global power, Lisbon its richest city. It shook this major European centre to its foundations, at a time in which the modern nation state was beginning to take form, with new ideas developing regarding its proper roles and responsibilities. Tectonic shifts in knowledge and economics were also taking place. The natural sciences were emerging, with their worldview based on a knowable universe. The workings of the physical world could be explained without God. Miracles were dispensed with in favour of the mundane workings of nature. A new bourgeois economic order was also growing in confidence. It advocated a rationalized system of reward in which talent replaced inherited privilege. These two outlooks, economic and scientific, both encouraged belief in, and commitment to, a transparent order of things, a sensible world.

Lisbon inspired something else besides: ‘The very project of modernity is born out of the desire for a world without surprises, a safe world, a world without fear’ (Bauman in Bauman and Gałecki, 2005). The Lisbon earthquake was the first time in which the state took charge of disaster response and reconstruction (Dynes, 2003), although we are still waiting for a world without fear. Marie-Hélène Huet (2012, p. 6) suggests that Enlightenment thought bequeathed us a very specific form of fear: fear of, and the desire to control, recalcitrant nature (for a sense of how this has gone see Chapter 5).

The earthquake, then, struck in the heart of Europe amidst Enlightenment debates about society’s future trajectory. Arguments raged over issues like progress versus tradition, reason and religion, freedom and authority. In each case, the earthquake tipped the scales in favour of the former. Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant all made interventions. For example, Kant claimed that earthquakes have natural rather than supernatural causes. If there was a lesson to be learned from Lisbon, it was this: the world was not made for our benefit (Neiman, 2004, p. 245). Disasters continue to be central to our thoughts. ‘Our