In the wake of disruption and disaster, cooperation among members of a collective is refocused on matters of status, membership and the formation of coalitions. In an important contribution to sociological theory, Hendrik Vollmer emphasizes the processes through which disruptions not only affect, but also transform social order. Drawing on Erving Goffman’s understanding of framing and the interaction order, as well as from a range of insights from contemporary sociological theory and ethnographic, historical and organizational research, Vollmer addresses the dynamics of disaster and disaster response within the framework of a general theory of disruption and social order. It is proposed that the adjustment of cooperation in favour of coalition-forming strategies is robust in both informal and organized social settings and transcends the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ approaches currently favoured by theorists. Offering a systematic sociological analysis of the impact of disruptiveness, this book investigates how punctuated cooperation precipitates social change.

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The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change

*Punctuated Cooperation*

Hendrik Vollmer
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My engagement with the topic of this investigation began with an intuition which, at that time, appeared to be simple enough: in responding to disruptive events, people award special attention to what other people do. When you do not know what you are facing, when you are uncertain about what to do and what to expect to happen next, following the lead given by others appears to be an almost natural and also somewhat reasonable response. I began to look for sociological intelligence supporting, specifying or, possibly, refuting this intuition.

In an initial collection of empirical material, I was primarily looking at organizations in critical situations, and, more particularly, at military organizations on battlefields, thinking that my general interest in the impact of disruptiveness could most effectively be pursued through an investigation of collectives at war. I was struck early on by how personal relationships among members of the organizations I was studying unequivocally appeared to win precedence over more formal aspects of organizational structures and processes. There appeared to be something structural about this kind of change, as organizations confronting disruptions became aggregations of primary groups, coalitions and networks, working much less like bureaucracies governed through formal rules and regulations. Members seemed to effectively redistribute their attention under disruptive circumstances, withdrawing attention from formal regulations, norms or roles and reinvesting attention into one another. This pattern promised to account for a good amount of the empirical findings. Accordingly, I was hopeful to translate, on this basis, my initial intuition about people’s responses to disruptiveness into a more systematic sociological treatise.

The present work is the result of a sustained effort to bring about this translation and to accommodate a good deal of empirical intelligence available in prior sociological research about how collectives respond to disruptiveness. I found a wealth of interesting case studies and a multitude of conceptual leads, but ultimately no prior account would have allowed me to trace the effects of disruptiveness from people’s
temporary responses and adjustments to mid- to long-term collective outcomes without an extensive use of theoretical extrapolation. As a consequence, what started out as an attempt to utilize an apparent convergence of observations in order to develop some seemingly obvious conceptual and empirical extensions quickly turned into a wrestling match with various theoretical concepts and approaches, none of which seemed by its own devices to do justice to the topic, to my initial intuition or to the empirical data which I confronted. Most importantly, I seemed utterly unable to systematically relate the individual and structural aspects of how collectives respond to disruptions and to articulate both kinds of aspects within a single sociological framework. As I was struggling with tentative solutions and with various packagings of theoretical and empirical narrative, trying to stick as much as possible to the exploratory style of discussing empirical cases which I had originally envisaged for the project, the result was more and more turning into an exposition of theory. Through all my efforts to address ‘bigger’ collective outcomes, this theory remained surprisingly ‘micro’, whether I was exploring single social situations, organizations or collectives in a state of war. Despite an academic training to the contrary, I became stuck with a sociology of disruption, disaster and social change that addresses both the small and big collective outcomes of exposure to disruptiveness in largely microsociological terms. I had not anticipated this and it took me a while to accept it.

Finalizing this text for publication, I have gained some confidence that the kind of sociology which the study has to offer improves on what, to me, has remained a very suggestive but disconcertingly dispersed set of sociological evidence, a scattering of diverse ideas and findings. The run of the project has played havoc with a good share of my academic socialization but it has, somewhat ironically, left my initial intuition intact. Any progress I now feel confident to claim depends on whether the study more robustly spells out the implications of the initial sociological intuition, whether it appropriately qualifies the convergence of empirical indications and, ultimately, on whether it renders the sociological intuition and the systematic issues associated with it more researchable.

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