

Writing the history of “natural” disasters

The case of Messina

By Lukas Schemper

Though they are called “natural” disasters, earthquakes have a social, political and economic dimension; it is therefore possible to write their history. The 111th anniversary of the Messina earthquake is an opportunity to reflect on the multi-dimensionality of such events, and to outline avenues for historical research on “natural” disasters.

In the early morning hours of 28 December 1908 a 7.1 magnitude earthquake in Southern Italy destroyed the cities of Messina and Reggio Calabria and damaged hundreds of towns and villages in the vicinity. It cost the lives of an estimated number of 80 000 to 120 000 people. With this catastrophe, Messina, one of the most important urban centres of Italy, was destroyed in a heartbeat. In pre-World War One Europe this was an exceptional experience that put into question the dominant confidence in progress of the “urban-industrial civilization” (Parinello).¹ However, unlike the anniversaries of important wars, the anniversaries of “natural” disasters seem to find fewer echoes in the wider media or through public commemorations, and so the 110th anniversary in 2018 passed relatively unnoticed. For historians too, it was until

¹ Giacomo Parrinello, *Fault Lines: Earthquakes and Urbanism in Modern Italy*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2015, 29.

recently not common to make disasters such as earthquakes objects of historical inquiry. What are possible angles to approach disasters as historical objects? Although an earthquake like the one that occurred in Messina is a phenomenon that involves, through plate tectonics, the entire planet and perhaps millions of years, its tangible, destructive side seemingly only manifests itself within the limited timescale of a few seconds. Yet recent years have seen a number of noteworthy publications on the topic of the Messina earthquake by historians and other social scientists that go beyond the immediate local and temporally confined event that an earthquake in particular and a “natural” disaster in general is. Indeed, what transpires from this new research is that the Messina earthquake illustrates almost perfectly the multi-dimensional nature of disaster, both in a temporal and a spatial sense, and shows the way for new possibilities in the historical research on disaster more generally.

The inter-temporal and multi-spatial dimensions of disaster

From a temporal perspective, the impact of a disaster goes beyond the immediate humanitarian or environmental destruction. It can leave a long-lasting impact on the natural and urban environment and might equally disrupt socio-economic and political order in an enduring way. Similar to wars, disasters are events of destruction and re-creation, and in some cases perhaps also of learning, adaptation, change and resilience—although not necessarily. Even when they are not, they still let us reflect on the way a society reacts to them and might give us information about how that society functions. Some dysfunctions might also be responsible for aggravating the impact of the disaster. Let us not be mistaken. So-called “natural” disasters were and are far from being natural. The victims of Messina were not killed by an earthquake, but by the socio-politically constructed vulnerability of Messina’s population. Notably poorly constructed buildings that collapsed killed them. Some of those who could have been saved were not because relief was chaotic and disorganized.

Spatially, the impact of disasters goes beyond the physical destruction of buildings and infrastructure in a given city, community, or region. Even locally confined disasters can have national, transnational, or even global repercussions. The immediate destruction caused by a disaster such as an earthquake or a flood may

transgress regions and borders, and so does the media attention and humanitarian solidarity that follow modern disasters. In line with these observations, the new research that this essay discusses shows that although at first sight public remembrance for “natural” disasters may be less evident than for other historical events, the legacies of the Messina earthquake after 1908 can be found on a multitude of levels, even today.

The urban space in the face of disaster

The immediate, local impact of the 1908 earthquake was humanitarian. In Messina alone, 55,000 people died—that is, 50 percent of its urban population. 9,000 to 10,000 lost their lives in nearby Reggio Calabria. In terms of the number of victims this was the worst seismic catastrophe in European history. Not much was left of these two cities as 98 percent of their houses collapsed, burying many thousands who were still asleep in their homes when the earthquake happened. An ensuing tsunami took further lives and several fires destroyed buildings that had withstood the earthquake.² As the destruction was so fundamental, the impact of the disaster on the built environment of the city is still visible today. As environmental historian Giacomo Parrinello explains in his 2015 book *Faultlines in Italy*, the zone that was affected by the 1908 earthquake had been known to be prone to seismic risk for ages. Several lighter disasters had happened in the three preceding decades. Yet no measures had ever been taken to manage the deregulated urban growth of the city; an adequate building code was lacking. The earthquake thus provided the opportunity to finally rethink the features of urban spaces in order to mitigate future disasters of that kind: this included the horizontal expansion of the city beyond old boundaries (necessary because of lower buildings), the destruction of old neighbourhoods and the creation of wide boulevards and squares, sanitation plans and the restructuring of the city’s water provision. These were all projects that had been debated in the decades prior to the earthquake, but it was the disaster that provided the opportunity to carry them out. These new projects were now largely financed by the state, a novelty at the time. The

² Figures assembled from Salvatore John LaGumina, *The Great Earthquake: America Comes to Messina’s Rescue*, Youngstown, NY, Teneo Press, 2008, 22; John Dickie, “A Patriotic Disaster: The Messina-Reggio Calabria Earthquake of 1908”, in Gino Bedani and B. A. Haddock (dir.), *The Politics of Italian National Identity: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2000, 50–71, 51. Gregory K. Clancey, *Earthquake Nation: The Cultural Politics of Japanese Seismicity, 1868–1930*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, 172.

state also partly expropriated and redistributed real estate, allowing for the creation of two new settlements that were planned as temporary shelter for the homeless. These *barracamenti*, thousands of wooden huts, yet with a functional urban infrastructure, existed alongside un-planned illegal shantytowns. The latter turned out to be more resilient and permanent than initially thought and became neighbourhoods in their own right.³ The 1908 earthquake's impact on Messina's future urban development thus shows that it can be useful in the historical study of disasters to take into consideration the decades *before* the disaster in order to understand urban planning *after*. A disaster might be the enabler of plans for urban development that have existed for some time.

Disaster capitalism

Yet in the case of Messina, reconstruction proceeded slowly and chaotically. In 1917, only a few dozen houses for middle class employees had been built, whereas the rest lived in 17 000 shelters scattered around the city.⁴ However, not only the slow and insufficient reconstruction effort made Messina's poorer population especially vulnerable, but also the way in which this effort was linked to policies that favoured what Naomi Klein would call "disaster capitalism" many decades later. Klein has maintained in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) that power—be it political or corporate—all too often uses the panic and weakness of disaster victims to deliberately implement neoliberal market policies to its own benefit.⁵

It is exactly from this thesis that sociologists Domenica Farinella and Pietro Saitta take inspiration in their 2019 *longue durée* history of the Messina earthquake. To them, the thousands of people who still live in Messina's shantytowns today are an inglorious legacy of the disaster capitalism that has characterised the management of the disaster and its consequences. In addition to forced expropriation and the opening of Messina to northern cooperatives and big enterprises in the real estate and infrastructure business, Farinella and Saitta highlight how a consortium of damaged owners aggravated socio-economic inequalities by only handing out loans to

³ Parrinello, 22, 69, 88-98.

⁴ Parrinello, 98-103.

⁵ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007.

individuals who had been property owners prior to the earthquake. Post-disaster policies such as this one brought a long cycle of marginalization to the city.⁶

The example of Messina thus shows that historians, too, can add to the discussion of disaster capitalism that has further evolved around more recent disasters such as the 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria in the Caribbean, the aftermath of which saw plans for the privatisation of government services and development of mass tourism respectively.⁷ As any other social scientists, historians need to be careful not to simplify the logic behind the concept, however. The fact that certain people make a profit from a disaster situation is not necessarily a problem as long as profits are not spread too unevenly. Without profit from new businesses one can neither provide jobs nor distribute donations, for example. Disaster might even produce opportunity for innovation and necessary investments.⁸

The example of Messina also shows that the historical study of the long term consequences of disaster capitalism can be problematic if the entire socio-urban development of a city, here Messina, is traced back teleologically to a single disaster and type of policies. Surely, the gradual neo-liberalization of the building sector, the decline of Messina as a trading port and the destruction during the Second World War happened independently of the 1908 earthquake. But, as Farinella & Saitta's argue, the disaster was not the sole origin but rather the accelerator of already existing social trends. They claim that the city had already been in urban and economic decline prior to the disaster, notably due to a crisis in the citrus cultivation sector, and that the earthquake accentuated this development.⁹ Hence, what Messina can teach disaster historians is that only rarely are disasters the primary cause of urban crises. Rather they accelerate developments that are already ongoing.

⁶ Domenica Farinella and Pietro Saitta, *The Endless Reconstruction and Modern Disasters: The Management of Urban Space through an Earthquake—Messina, 1908-2018*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 30 & 221.

⁷ Naomi Klein, *The Battle For Paradise*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2018; Gemma Sou, 'Barbudans Are Resisting "Disaster Capitalism"', Two Years after Hurricane Irma', *The Conversation*, accessed 22 December 2019..

⁸ An illustration of this is provided by Rozario, who shows how disaster were welcomed by middle- and upper-class Americans during the Gilded age and the Progressive era: Kevin Rozario, 'What Comes down Must Go up. Why Disasters Have Been Good for American Capitalism', in Steven Biel (dir.), *American Disasters*, New York, New York University Press, 2001, 72–102.

⁹ Farinella & Saitta 23, 28 and 101.

Local disaster, national aftermath

One other merit of Farinella and Saitta's book is that they are occasionally changing the scale by seeing the disaster within the Italian nation and larger debates about the "Southern Question" that the disaster makes visible: two different representations of Italians emerged after the disaster. On the one hand the modern, active and generous North coming to Messina's rescue and on the other hand the backward, passive, and irrational victims of the South. Rather than blaming the insufficiency of the relief and rehabilitation efforts, the authorities frequently accused the victims themselves as being the problem. When local inhabitants refused the relocation of their houses, for instance, authorities in the North perceived this as a sign of ignorance.¹⁰

The inequality of North and South should not disguise the importance that the disaster had for Italy as a whole within the context of the formation of the young Italian state. Research published by John Dickie around the centenary of 2008 gives evidence of how the disaster saw the emergence of patriotic feelings in an unprecedentedly cohesive fashion.¹¹ Italian newspapers ran special editions on the situation in Messina. Italian volunteers descended from around the country or offered shelter to what we would nowadays call internally displaced disaster refugees. Civil society, from automobile clubs to choral societies, collected donations. Specific civic committees were also formed in various Italian cities to help the victims. In reaction to that, the government created a central relief committee to coordinate donations and voluntary aid. As Dickie has demonstrated, the outpouring of solidarity was an expression of patriotic rather than humanitarian feelings.¹² In a number of staged appearances, the royal couple visited the disaster scene and reinforced the image that this was a national affair. Dickie's research ultimately also raises the more general question as to what extent disasters have the potential to accelerate processes of nation building. As Dickie himself concedes, patriotism in the face of catastrophe did not equal political unity and

¹⁰ Farinella & Saitta 46.

¹¹ Dickie has published several articles and chapters on the subject such as Dickie 2000 and John Dickie, 'Timing, Memory and Disaster: Patriotic Narratives in the Aftermath of the Messina-Reggio Calabria Earthquake, 28 December 1908', *Modern Italy* 11, no. 2 (2006): 147-66, 50-71. His most comprehensive account is John Dickie, *Una catastrofe patriottica: 1908, il terremoto di Messina*, Roma, GLF editori Laterza, 2008.

¹² Dickie (2000), 51-58.

the Messina earthquake has not remained an important part of national memory in the years and decades after, despite the patriotic mobilization at the time.¹³

Transnational disaster relief

Interest in the disaster went beyond the nation-state and the Messina earthquake also appears as a topic in recent historical scholarship that does not specifically deal with Italy. The audience in other countries was variably moved with compassion for the victims, fascinated by the horror generated by the disaster or interested in the scientific explanations of the earthquake. Earthquake science and engineering had improved significantly over the 19th century. After the 1908 earthquake this knowledge was mobilized to explain the occurrence of the disaster and, at the same time, to prevent new seismic disasters from happening. Immediately following the disaster, an eminent Japanese seismologist, Fusakichi Omori, assembled a research team to go to the site of the earthquake and published a first preliminary report on Messina in the bulletin of the Imperial Earthquake Investigation Committee (IEIC) in Japan. In it, he blamed the poorly constructed houses in Messina for the large number of casualties and emphasised the relative superiority of Japanese wooden constructions.¹⁴ But even beyond scientific circles the interest in the disaster was widespread: the telegraph and a well-developed printing press immediately carried the information around the world. Press coverage was extensive, postcards and even early films circulated widely. The devastating effects of Messina sold so well that the German weekly *Simplicissimus* joked that journalists were “paid by the corpse.”¹⁵

The high degree of mediatisation also contributed to the unprecedented wave of transnational relief that followed the disaster. The entirety of this aid has never been studied as a whole and even the study of individual aid contributions has been largely limited to single national case studies. The landscape of transnational humanitarian aid providers included the American, Austrian, French, German and Swiss Red Cross as well as the Turkish Red Crescent societies. The American, British, French, and

¹³ Dickie (2006), 149 & 157.

¹⁴ Clancey 172-174.

¹⁵ Deborah R. Coen, *The Earthquake Observers: Disaster Science from Lisbon to Richter*, Chicago, University Press, 2013, 46.

Russian navies dispatched ships to the disaster scene to assist (or already happened to have them stationed there).¹⁶

The most generous external relief actor, however, was the United States, and its role is the most thoroughly explored by recent scholarship, in particular through Salvatore J. LaGumina's 2008 book on American aid for Messina. He describes how over the months following the earthquake, Americans donated a staggering amount of one million dollars for the earthquake victims through the American Red Cross (ARC). In addition, the US Congress, in an equally unprecedented fashion, allocated 800 000 dollars in public funds, invoking obligations to humanity as a whole and the civilization of Italy in particular. Several navy ships were dispatched to transport aid to Messina, with the additional objective to demonstrate the swiftness of the US Navy. This operation could link naval strength with a humanitarian agenda.¹⁸

How can we explain and understand the importance of these American actions? LaGumina emphasises the role of the Italian Diaspora in the fund-raising effort. Albeit poor, a large number of Italian-Americans, horrified by the idea of their relatives' death and suffering, donated alongside wealthier members and organisations of the Italian-American civil society.¹⁹ In addition to the role of the Diaspora, historians of humanitarianism—notably John Hutchinson and Julia Irwin—have emphasised the diplomatic and humanitarian potential of the catastrophe. In the early 20th century, Italy had become a more important European player and humanitarian aid could be used to strengthen diplomatic ties. But more importantly, Messina became a testing ground for the new principles of American scientific philanthropy. These principles consisted in establishing order, encouraging discipline and turning disaster into an opportunity for reconstruction.²⁰ Who would be a better target to test these principles than the inhabitants of Southern Italy, perceived by Americans as underdeveloped, ignorant and “dark” as opposed to the more developed and lighter-skinned Italians from the North?²¹

¹⁶ LaGumina 85-87; 91-92; *Bulletin International de la Croix-Rouge*, 40e année, 1909, 8-10, 57-59, 150-152.

¹⁸ LaGumina, 140-164; see also Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening*, Oxford, University Press, 2013, 40.

¹⁹ LaGumina 103-140.

²⁰ John F. Hutchinson, “Disasters and the International Order: Earthquakes, Humanitarians, and the Ciraolo Project”, *The International History Review* vol. 22, n° 1, 2000, 1-36, 4 & 13; Irwin 41; LaGumina 6.

²¹ On the American racism directed towards southern Italians around the time of the Messina earthquake see the recent opinion piece in the New York Times: Staples, Brent. ‘How Italians Became “White”’. *The New York Times*, 14 October 2019, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/12/opinion/columbus-day-italian-american-racism.html>.

What more general observations can we draw from this research of transnational aid? First of all, the international relief and rehabilitation operations after the Messina earthquake were a defining moment for the way in which the United States would perceive its role in international disaster relief throughout the 20th century: a monopolistic role. The above account of relief also gives evidence of the part that the military, both foreign and Italian, played in delivering aid, foreshadowing an increasing militarization of disaster aid in the later decades of the 20th century. The military had the necessary equipment to deliver relief, to search for survivors or bury the dead. But disaster was and is also often considered a security risk. In Messina, likewise, General Mazza, who was entrusted to lead the relief efforts through the military, received extraordinary powers after it was reported that escaped criminals were looting the city. He declared a state of siege; 11 000 soldiers were placed under his command and survivors were subjected to martial law. Anyone suspected of an illegal act could be executed immediately.²² The fear of governments, militaries or elites of looting and other criminal activity following disasters had existed before (for example after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906) and continued to re-emerge repeatedly after large scale disasters (for example after Hurricane Katrina in 2005), but the question whether the actual practice of looting after disasters is a myth or a reality is an on-going debate among disaster researchers.²³ Little evidence exists to empirically substantiate that looting is a widespread and systematic phenomenon after disaster, and the collection of more historical evidence on this topic might be able to settle the question once and for all.

Internationalisation of disaster governance

Despite the presence of the military as an agency to restore order and a national central relief committee, contemporary accounts of the way in which aid was being delivered to disaster victims were damning. While the Italian government gratefully accepted most of the offers for aid, the magnitude of the donations delivered from inside and outside Italy created a chaotic situation and revealed the problem of uncoordinated international aid, a feature that would become a recurrent problem of disaster relief in the 20th and 21st centuries. Americans involved in the rehabilitation

²² Parrinello 25.

²³ For examples of this fear see Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disasters*, New York, Viking, 2009, 235. The two sides of the debate are succinctly summarized in: *Natural Hazards Observer* vol. 31, n° 4, 2007.

process of the city blamed the confusion on the Italian's incapacity to coordinate relief. "Never was there a more striking demonstration of the importance of centralized authority and a unified system of relief," wrote Ernest P. Bicknell of the American Red Cross, who led the relief operation in Italy. However, the magnitude of international aid was unprecedented and no international organisation existed to coordinate relief. The only well-established international humanitarian organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), created in 1863 to coordinate aid to wounded soldiers, refused to take responsibility, as it did not consider it as its mandate to be active during a peace-time disaster.²⁴ Some Italian observers also criticized the unprofessional and chaotic organization of relief, notably Senator Giovanni Ciruolo, a native of Messina. Once president of the Italian Red Cross, he proposed, after the First World War, the creation of an international governmental organisation to manage disaster relief and prevention internationally.

As I have noticed in my own research on the history of international organisations for disaster management, the supporters of this project often used one recurrent justification: the memory of uncoordinated relief for Messina. In a lobbying brochure for his project, Ciruolo starts out with a recollection of his personal experiences during the relief effort for Messina in 1909:

"The human solidarity manifested itself with a sincerity and force which I fondly remember. But I could not claim that the organization was at the level of the devotion, the efficiency of relief proportionate to the generosity of the helpers, that the utility of all the interventions was equal to the sincerity that inspired them."²⁵

As Henry Dunant had used his recollections of the battle of Solferino in 1859 to suggest the creation of the Red Cross, Ciruolo used his recollections of the Messina earthquake to propose the creation of a similar organization to deal with disaster.²⁶ The plan was notably supported by the Italian fascist government, which used the rehabilitation of Messina as an example of the "successful" reconstruction of a destroyed city. At the conference that finally created Ciruolo's international organisation in 1927, an Italian delegate proudly claimed that from the start of the Fascist rule onwards, 1.6 billion lire had been spent on the reconstruction of Messina

²⁴ *Bulletin International de la Croix Rouge*. 39e année, 1908, 9.

²⁵ "La solidarité humaine se manifesta avec une sincérité et un élan dont je garde le souvenir ému. Mais je ne pourrais affirmer que l'ordre ait été à la hauteur du dévouement, que l'efficacité des secours ait été proportionnée à l'élan des sauveteurs, que l'utilité de toutes les interventions ait été égale à la sincérité qui les inspirait." (author's translation)

²⁶ *Aperçu général de la proposition présentée par le Sénateur Giovanni Ciruolo à l'Assemblée Générale de la Société des Nations*. 1924. ICRC/IRU archives CR 107 – 356.

and 2.5 billion lire on Reggio as opposed 150 million lire on the reconstruction of Messina and 188 million on Reggio in the time before.²⁷ He omitted, however, that living conditions did not improve in the shantytowns with high population density and lacking sanitary facilities—something that both Parrinello and Farinella and Saitta point out in their books. Ciruolo's international organization, baptized International Relief Union, came into existence, but had to face the historical context of rising nationalism, underfunding, and institutional rivalries between humanitarian actors. It never managed to assume the global coordinating role of disaster relief that it aimed at performing. Nevertheless, in some sense this represented the start of a difficult and irregular process of institutionalisation and internationalisation of disaster governance. Although their efficiency remains contested, today, two UN organisations exist that coordinate disaster relief and risk reduction on a global scale respectively: the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR).²⁸

Conclusion

The Messina earthquake of 1908 is a clear example of the multiple spatial and temporal dimensions that historians and social scientists can study in disasters. Too often we only see the immediate local humanitarian impact of disasters, when consequences reach from urban development to nation building or to transnational activities. Disasters may also serve as a magnifying glass through which to study social relations and attitudes, again from the local to the global level. The list of issues discussed in this essay is not exhaustive. In particular, the work of Parrinello and Farinella and Saitta shows that the analysis of a disaster can and should take place over an extended period of time before and after a disaster takes place. If the historian or policy maker wants to understand the socio-economic or political conditions that render populations vulnerable to disaster they need to go further back. Likewise, policies to manage disaster—be it necessary disaster prevention or exploitative disaster capitalism—are likely to have existed as ideas or projects before the disaster already. Finally, if we want to seriously understand the consequences of disaster and

²⁷ League of Nations Conference for the creation of an International Relief Union. Minutes. July 1927, ICRC/IRU archives CR 107-9, 21.x

²⁸ Lukas Schemper, 'Humanity Unprepared—International Organization and the Management of Natural Disaster 1921-1991' (Doctoral dissertation, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2016).

the outcomes of disaster management strategies, both the creation of new vulnerabilities and forms of resilience, we need to adapt a *longue durée* approach and look decades ahead.

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