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"Post-Disaster Migrations and Returns in Sicily: The 1908 Messina Earthquake and the 1968 Belice Valley Earthquake"

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This article explores the relationship between disasters and the population movements in two case studies: The 1908 Messina earthquake and the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake. While they happened in different areas and at different times, the earthquakes share two major characteristics. First, they caused the almost complete destruction of infrastructure over a large area. Second, they resulted in massive population movements away from the disaster areas. This paper aims to understand the connection between these phenomena, posing a number of questions: Were the population movements permanent or temporary? Were the disasters solely responsible for the movements? Did the demography of the stricken areas recover from the disaster or not? And why, or why not? To answer these questions, the article draws on historical analysis and comparison, following the population movements not only in the immediate aftermath but also over a longer period of time. This method helps in identifying the characteristics of the movements and in assessing whether they were temporary or permanent, where they were directed, and why. The comparison between the two cases, then, allows conclusions to be drawn about the factors that play a role in orienting the postdisaster population movements, and, in the final analysis, in deciding whether people would continue to live in the disaster area or not. As the article illustrates, while the city of Messina recovered from the post-disaster displacements and soon increased its population, the Belice Valley population remained much smaller than in the pre-disaster years. In order to explain that major difference, it is worthwhile to situate the disaster within a broader narrative, taking into account social, economic, and political factors, as well as overall historical processes. The results of this study, therefore, empirically validate analytical models that account for multiple drivers in post-disaster migration and refute any simplistic connection between disaster and population movements. However, the results can also enrich those models by demonstrating the importance of timescale, and the need to integrate it as a pivotal element in the analysis.

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