

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

How to cite:

Parrinello, Giacomo. "To Whom Does the Story Belong? Earthquake Memories, Narratives, and Policy in Italy." In: "Sites of Remembering: Landscapes, Lessons, Policies," edited by Vikas Lakhani and Eveline de Smalen, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2018, no. 3, 69–77. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8488.

*RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* is an open-access publication. It is available online at [www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives](http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives). Articles may be downloaded, copied, and redistributed free of charge and the text may be reprinted, provided that the author and source are attributed. Please include this cover sheet when redistributing the article.

To learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit [www.rachelcarsoncenter.org](http://www.rachelcarsoncenter.org).

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088  
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

© Copyright of the text is held by the Rachel Carson Center.

Image copyright is retained by the individual artists; their permission may be required in case of reproduction.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



Giacomo Parrinello

## To Whom Does the Story Belong? Earthquake Memories, Narratives, and Policy in Italy

I started working on Italian earthquake histories in 2008. I have always been aware of the mighty power of earthquakes on human lives and landscapes. Yet I did not anticipate how often I would be forced to reconnect my dusty archives with a shaky present.

In 2009, when I was still trying to make sense of my dissertation, a major earthquake struck the city of L'Aquila. In 2012, I had defended my dissertation and was back in Bologna when another earthquake struck closer to home, in Emilia. In 2016, after I had published my book, it was again central Italy's turn.

It's happening constantly. And yet every time it seems unprecedented.

Every time, Italy rediscovers that the earth can shake. Every time, Italians rediscover that they were not prepared enough. Every time, we witness thousands of homeless people put in tent camps, hotels, huts, and containers. Every time, earthquakes become seismic disasters.

It is not for lack of knowledge.

The year after the 1980 Irpinia earthquake, historian Piero Bevilacqua claimed that we should see earthquakes in southern Italy as “historical agents.”<sup>1</sup> They make history, and they make it often.

Pretty much at the same time, Emanuela Guidoboni was undertaking the first steps of the monumental work that led to the Catalogue of Strong Earthquakes in the peninsula.<sup>2</sup> The evidence painstakingly pieced together by Guidoboni and her team at the INGV (National Institute for Geophysics and Volcanology) was and is overwhelming: the Italian peninsula really does shake, and quite often with disastrous consequences.

1 Piero Bevilacqua, “Catastrofi, continuità, rotture nella storia del Mezzogiorno,” in *Laboratorio politico* 5–6 (1981): 177–219.

2 Enzo Boschi, Emanuela Guidoboni, Graziano Ferrari, Gianluca Valentini, and Paolo Gasperini, eds., *Catalogo dei Forti Terremoti in Italia dal 461 A.C. al 1990* (Roma: Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica, 1997).

Historical knowledge alone is not sufficient for disaster preparedness. Why? I believe the answer has a lot to do with a fundamental disconnect between the memory that is incorporated (or not) in public policies, and memory as embodied in affected communities' sense of place. We need to bridge this gap if we are to address the reasons why seismic disasters continue to happen.

### State Memory

In a series of papers following the devastating hurricane Katrina, historical geographer Craig Colten has shed light on the importance of “social memory”: the memory of disasters (and their lessons) as it is embodied in institutional practices, knowledge, and regulations.<sup>3</sup>

National legislation on anti-seismic building can be seen as example of such “social memory.” Earthquake-proof building codes were introduced on a local basis at least from the early modern period. After the devastating 1908 Messina earthquake, legislators extended such building codes nationwide. This laid the foundation for existing law, which defines seismic risk—and consequently, engineering regulations—based on past occurrences.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the establishment of a civil protection department was a deliberate (albeit belated) act of social memory transmission. This department was created after a devastating sequence of major disasters (Belice 1968, Friuli 1976, Irpinia 1980) that had tragically exposed the absence of a special unit of the state administration charged with managing disaster prevention and recovery. Its history reveals a hard-learned lesson, relayed by the memory of proximate events.<sup>5</sup>

In Italy, however, these forms of social memory have not been matched by a public discourse on seismicity and on disasters as part of the country's experience and collective identity. They do not tell a shared story about an earthquake country.

3 Craig Colten and Amy Sumpter, “Social Memory and Resilience in New Orleans,” *Natural Hazards* 48, no. 3 (2009): 355–64.

4 Sergio Castenetto and Massimiliano Severino, “Dalla prima normativa antisismica del 1909 alle successive modifiche,” in Guido Bertolaso, Enzo Boschi, Emanuela Giudoboni, and Gianluca Valentini, eds., *Il terremoto e il maremoto del 28 dicembre 1908: Analisi sismologica, impatto e prospettive* 425–40 (Bologna: Bononia University Press).

5 David Alexander, “The Evolution of Civil Protection in Modern Italy,” in John Dickie, John Foot, Franck M. Snowden, eds., *Disastro! Disasters in Italy since 1860: Culture, Politics, Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 165–85).

A national discourse on earthquakes does exist. Past seismic disasters are sometimes commemorated at symbolic anniversaries in official ceremonies, with the participation of the highest officers of the state. These commemorations are an opportunity to discuss the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the state's response to the past emergency, or to the reconstruction.

Rarely, however, on such occasions is there any discussion of the enduring hazards and the reasons for the recurring disasters. Most importantly, these events commemorate something that happened to *them*—the communities affected by the earthquake—not *us*, the national community commemorating it. Earthquakes arguably killed more Italians than mafia or terrorism, but we do not talk about them as if they were part of our story. They belong to someone else.

### Local Memories

These are not easy memories to bear. Not only because they are memories of suffering and death, but also because they speak of failures and injustice: the failure of the state, and the injustices that contributed to the uneven effects of seismic disasters, such as lack of adequate infrastructure or unequal access to income.

Local communities, however, can hardly escape the burden of memory. From the very beginning, they are called to make hard choices about whether and how disaster memories are inscribed in landscapes and into institutional practices and regulations. Yet the transmission of social memory has not necessarily always been the first preoccupation of the communities, or at least of their representatives.

In 1968, for instance, the inscription of many localities of southwestern Sicily into the maps of seismic risks was the subject of a heated conflict. At first, lured by the access to reconstruction funds, many communities wanted to be included, even if they had experienced only light damages. However, as soon as it became clear that it entailed much more rigorous building regulations, they demanded to be excluded.<sup>6</sup>

6 Consiglio Superiore dei Lavori Pubblici, "Dichiarazione di sismicità dei Comuni della Sicilia colpito dai terremoti del gennaio 1968. Riesame," 22 November 1968, box 1, Terremoti 1968 Classificazioni zone sismiche, Archivio Storico della Protezione Civile.

The case of Palermo, in Sicily, is perhaps the most striking. The inhabitants experienced the tremors in 1968 and fled their homes in panic. The city had not been on seismic maps until that moment. This occurrence suggested that it needed to be.

Someone, however, believed otherwise. Municipal authorities put up a hard fight against the state and its experts to avoid inclusion in seismic risk maps, claiming this would harm the local construction industry. The city administration won its battle. But there was a price to pay: the memory of the 1968 earthquake was not transmitted in building regulations.

Should we conclude that forgetfulness is unavoidable, if not necessary for communities to move forward? Perhaps. But as memory-making is a process rather than a condition, nothing is decided once and for all. Individual, collective, and public memories can resurface, transformed, in the shape of the landscape, or in the stories that people tell. Such narratives help people come to terms with the disaster and to incorporate it into a renewed sense of place.

### **Storied Landscapes**

In the Belice Valley, as in many other earthquake disasters before and since, several communities had to abandon their settlements and relocate them to different sites. Nowadays, these abandoned towns embody multiple and sometimes radically opposite forms of memorialization.

In the 1980s, the ruins of old Gibellina were converted in a gigantic land artwork by sculptor and painter Alberto Burri. Burri's *Cretto* (meaning crack, or fissure) is now one of the main attractions of the area (figure 1). While many survivors have opposed the project, perceiving it as a definitive break with their former lives and memories, others have celebrated it as a meaningful example of art in the service of public memory.

The *Cretto* forms a sharp contrast with other abandoned towns. In Poggioreale, the remains of the streets and buildings have been (artificially) preserved exactly as they looked at the end of rescue and recovery operations, and the ghost town is now a favorite destination for semi-official disaster tours (figure 2). Montevago, another re-



Figure 1.  
Source for all  
photos: Giacomo  
Parrinello



Figure 2.

settled community, has been completely abandoned to the injuries of time and illegal waste disposal (figure 3). The new town of Santa Maria Belice is slowly reabsorbing the abandoned town, one restructured building at a time (figure 4).

While dealing with the confounding text of these landscapes of ruins, the Belice Valley communities have also started to tell their stories. In 2007, a museum of memory was established in Santa Margherita. The museum, hosted in a former church that was



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

destroyed in 1968 and recently rebuilt, showcases pictures and other items about the Belice Valley towns prior to the earthquake, as well as the survivors' everyday struggles and their return to normal life (figure 5).



Figure 5.

The CRESM (Center for the Economic and Social Study of Southern Italy), a nonprofit organization whose roots go back to the 1970s, has been at the forefront of memory initiatives. In 2009, the CRESM launched a campaign of oral history recollection among earthquake survivors and activists from the popular movement for social justice and development that was very active in the 1960s and 1970s in Belice Valley. This oral history initiative culminated in 2011 in the establishment of Epi/Centro, a permanent multimedia exhibition on the earthquake and how the community mobilized in response to it (figure 6).<sup>7</sup>

When I visited these exhibits a few years ago, I was struck by the profound difference in the stories they tell: a story of individual struggles for normalcy versus a story of collective mobilization for justice. I had the same impression from the disaster landscapes: a narrative of irreparable fracture in Gibellina's *Cretto*, of suspension of time in Poggioreale, of reappropriation in Santa Margherita, and of rejection in Montevago.

<sup>7</sup> Epi/centro della Memoria Viva, accessed 22 May 2018, <http://www.epicentroblice.net/>.





Figure 6.

These differences are important. They point to the difficulty in dealing with the memory of trauma and the multiple (and sometimes conflicting) ways of remembering. They can reveal or conceal the injustices that are such an important part of this landscape, as Serenella Iovino forcefully reminds us.<sup>8</sup> Stories are not all equal.

But despite their differences, these examples have one thing in common: the effort to incorporate the earthquake and its memory in a renewed sense of place. Burri's land artwork and Poggioreale's suspended ruins, Gibellina's EpiCentro and Santa Margherita's museum of memory recount the earthquake as a fundamental feature of place. They contribute to its inscription into the hi/stories of people and landscape.

8 Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

## Conclusion

I don't believe in the mystique of the local. As the case of Palermo in 1968 clearly shows, local actors can work against the transmission of social memory. Yet local communities are also extraordinary producers of memories and narratives about disaster.

In that, the Belice Valley is by no means unique. Communities in other disaster areas have promoted similar initiatives to mourn, repair, or simply remember past events. Oral historians such as Gabriella Gribaudo, often working in connection with these affected communities, are promoting the relentless collection of individual stories from seismic disaster areas and establishing online repositories.<sup>9</sup>

We need to start from these stories.

We need to start here because local actors play such a crucial role in the transmission of social memory. But also, and perhaps more importantly, because what we lack in Italy is not so much the awareness of past earthquakes, or detailed seismic maps. We lack stories that can translate knowledge into a renewed sense of place and cultural identity. Local communities know how to do it. They offer an impressive repertoire of examples and practices from which to draw. And they teach us how delicate the work of storytelling about disasters is. They tell us stories of struggle for justice, or a return to normality. They teach us about stories of loss. They tell us about the contradictions and complexities of remembering and forgetting. They teach us about the possibility of living *differently* on (and with) an unstable earth.

We need to acknowledge and embrace the power of these stories: the power of moving beyond the realm of knowing, and into the realm of belonging.

But local stories are not enough—they cannot suffice alone. We need policies that encourage, support, and weave together storytelling; policies that acknowledge earthquakes as part of place and community. We need policies that help to scale up these narratives countrywide and exploit the medium (from museums to oral history repositories) to remember and recount the histories, and losses, of an earthquake country. We need this to lay the foundation for a renewed sense of place. Because the story belongs to all of us.

9 Archivio Multimediale delle Memorie, accessed 22 May 2018, <http://www.memoriedelterritorio.it>.