

Giacomo Parrinello

Urbanization and Disasters: The 1908 Messina Earthquake and the 1968 Belice Valley Earthquake

This research aims at understanding the relationship between so-called natural disasters and modern urbanization processes. Over the last decades, literature on natural disasters in the humanities and social sciences has stressed that these events are always the result of interplay between social, cultural, or economic processes with bio-geophysical dynamics. For that reason, they offer a unique perspective that may reveal the most essential features of such interplay. The environmental implications of modern urbanization, on the other hand, have been largely studied from the viewpoint of human manipulation of the natural environment: alteration of landscapes, incorporation of resources, pollution, and so forth. Natural disasters, however, may offer a different perspective: raising the issue of the role of non-human forces and features, they encourage us to conceive the relationship between humans and the environment in terms of interplay also in urban settings. As revealed by some recent studies, natural disasters can be a relevant player in the making of modern urban environments: from the physical destruction they may cause, to the strategies developed to prevent or cope with them.

The research addresses this issue by means of two empirical case studies: the 1908 Messina earthquake and the 1968 Belice earthquake. These major twentieth-century Sicilian earthquakes share some basic characteristics, namely the geophysical agency co-responsible for the disaster, horrific consequences in terms of structural destruction of inhabited areas, and a vast number of people affected. Moreover, these case studies are good examples of two of the major urbanization processes that took place in Europe over the last two centuries: the substantial transformation of *ancien régime* cities into modern urban environments, and the urbanization of former rural areas, by means of deep structural changes. Based on these case studies, I try to answer the following questions: How the earthquakes interact with the urbanization processes? Did they produce substantial historical discontinuity? Is it possible to consider earthquakes as active players in the making of modern urban environments, without falling into environmental determinism?

In order to answer these questions, I adopt a method based on temporal “disarticulation”. I take into consideration the seismic disasters over the short-term in order to bring into focus the events, their “social” and their “natural” causes and impacts, and the immediate reactions to them. Then, I analyze separately the processes of urbanization not only after the earthquakes—as in most similar studies—but also before them, in order to understand if and until what point the disasters produced a true discontinuity. This approach will allow for distinguishing the role played by the earthquakes, considered in their complexity of “socio-natural” disasters, from the environmental features of urbanization processes over the *longue durée*, which might be only partially affected by the disasters. The research, already presented in the form of a doctoral dissertation, is aimed at completing a manuscript tentatively entitled *Disaster Urbanism: Earthquakes and the Making of Modern Urban Environments*, which I hope to discuss and perfect during my stay at the Center.