

Review Articles

T. Ricciardi, G. Picone, L. Fiorentino, *Il terremoto in Irpinia (The Irpinia earthquake)*, Donzelli, Rome, 2020, pp. 199; G. Picone, *Paesaggio con rovine (Landscape with ruins)*, Mondadori, 2020, pp. 222

An earthquake is an event that always deeply shakes those involved in it. Yet unlike wars, an earthquake tends to be removed from people's memory, despite their having experienced in a few seconds a shock that can cause great bewilderment in the entire community. This removal has two different meanings. The first concerns the community, because the need to forget is the prerequisite for starting anew, while the second affects the individual, because the earthquake experience is almost impossible to recall with words. This "forgetfulness" is also favored by historians, who often see natural disasters as a sort of "accident" and instead concentrate much more on wars as historical events.

This is why the 1980 earthquake in Irpinia – by far the most catastrophic event in Italy since World War II – is still not fully recognized as a watershed, with a "before" and an "after." Still, the quake did mark a turning point in the State's approach to seismic phenomena, in two main respects. First, a national monitoring and surveillance system was formed, and in 1982 the new position of Minister for the Coordination of Civil Protection was instituted, to avoid having to name a new commissioner for each emergency and re-creating an organizational machine from scratch. Beyond these general reflections, however, it is immediately clear that in the popular mind the 1980 earthquake very soon lost its image as a tragedy, supplanted by mostly reductive images of corruption and the squandering of public money.

Starting from these assumptions, the two volumes reviewed here reaffirm the value of remembering rather than forgetting, framing the earthquake and its consequences in a wide-ranging context along with many documents. From this perspective on the quake's fortieth anniversary the authors of *Terremoto in Irpinia*, whose views and professional experiences are very different – Toni Ricciardi is an historian of emigration, Generoso Picone a journalist and writer, Luigi Fiorentino a sociologist – offer an overview that goes beyond purely journalistic readings; nor do they focus on the “Irpiniagate” scandal, which is to say subsequent investigations spotlighting the corruption that marked the long and troubled reconstruction. In *Paesaggio con rovine* Generoso Picone deepens the reflection, presenting this story as a “mirror” for Southern Italy and for the country as a whole. His focus is above all on the people involved, starting with himself: “I realize that in these forty years [...] in every book I have read, whether it was a novel or an essay, in every page that could contain any reference however remote in space and time, in every place that has recorded a similar experience, I have searched for the answers to the questions that arose that evening.”¹ The need for historical analysis of these events is underscored by the authors, who note the many and readily perceptible “fractures” caused by the earthquake: 3,000 dead, 9,000 injured and 300,000 homeless, plus the material losses of over 77,000 dwellings destroyed and 275,000 severely damaged. This event also imposed the need to redesign entire inhabited centers in a different way from the traditional urban physiognomy of the small cities and towns of Irpinia. This urban physiognomy, in the light of the current Covid epidemic, calls into question long-standing dualisms that have dominated Italian history. “In other words” – as the authors say in the epilogue to *Il Terremoto* – “we no longer have an underdeveloped, retrograde South in contrast with a rich and advanced North, but instead an empty Italy that – from

¹ G. Picone, *Paesaggio con rovine*, p. 32.

Piedmont to Calabria – should claim a strong symbolic role with respect to the full part of the nation” (pp. 165-166).²

Beyond a renewed reflection on the kind of settlement that has taken over in modern Italy and created an alternative between “empty” and “full” areas, one of the main drives here is the need to “measure pain.” This is a way to escape from the logic of “forgetting in order to keep on living” and “until the next disaster” (these, in fact, are section heads in Picone’s first chapter, significantly entitled “Autobiography of an earthquake”). This analysis of the 1980 earthquake can also help us better understand the contemporary reality now threatened by the pandemic.³

Actually the localistic political climate that accompanied reconstruction contributed substantially to the mostly scandalistic interpretation of the events. Reconstruction became the source of a harsh confrontation, one might even say it marked the birth of the North-South clash that has been present in Italy since then and has come down to today’s world with increased force. The comparison focused chiefly on the inability of the mayors in the small Irpinian urban centers to manage the substantial reconstruction funds – which came to about a quarter of the over 60 trillion lire – but it reveals how much these extreme arguments can be politically exploited in the current debate. Instead there is a need to take account of the starting point, the broader scenario that made this conduct possible and the different cases that nevertheless existed and that should be interpreted in the framework of a more rigorous analysis.

The end result of this mistaken approach is the dominance of the present to the detriment of memory, along with simplistic, de-historicized interpretations that are linked to partisan interests instead of a complex chain of events. Indeed, as noted in the prologue to *Il Terremoto*, a

² T. Ricciardi, G. Picone, L. Fiorentino, “Epilogue”, in *Il Terremoto in Irpinia*, p. 165-166.

³ *Paesaggio*, cit., pp. 14-32.

collective history of the 1980 tragedy “is still struggling to take shape today.” This omission appears to be anything but an exception. In the case of the 1956 Marcinelle mine disaster in Belgium, in which 262 miners died, 136 Italian migrants among them, over forty years had to pass before the proclamation of a “National Day of the Sacrifice of Italian Labor in the World” (p. 21). Also, in the specific case of the 1980 earthquake we tend to forget because events clearly ran counter to the success stories of “made in Italy” exports and “Italian lifestyle” that became dominant in the 1980s.

Thus the widespread image of political corruption, which coincides with clientelism and dishonesty, took over the memory of the tragedy and was identified in the first place with the ruling group of the Christian Democratic Party in the Campania region. This picture, not supported by any in-depth analysis, concealed the fact that “works were contracted almost exclusively to large Northern companies,” an omission that was functional to the birth of the “Northern question.” As Ricciardi states, to acknowledge this reality is not to deny that there was waste, which became more substantial when the decree proclaiming the state of emergency was converted into law, extending the relief area well beyond the so-called crater, the original 36 municipalities of the three most seriously affected provinces – Avellino, Salerno and Potenza – with the addition of five more provinces – Naples, Benevento, Caserta, Matera and Foggia. It is also known that because of the earthquake the Camorra criminal organization underwent a radical evolution into a “criminal entrepreneurial holding”, an element that would become an obligatory reference in research on this issue. Without denying these elements, the authors concur that analysis on this subject must necessarily be more complex and must be set in the historical scenario of those decades. The authors draw on various sources, including music, information and stories, to describe a context of poverty and marginalization and define Irpinia as “an unhappy state of mind, representing an inferno of discontent, a kind of ‘secret nightmare’” (p. 49).

It is understandable that in the face of so much literal hunger there was also a great hunger for modernity, as other Italian regions had staged extraordinary transformations in the short span of a few decades, which would persist in the 1980s, during the post-earthquake reconstruction. However, this desire for radical change in the urban and socio-economic fabric could not resolve the dramatic problem of Irpinian emigration: in 2010, 30 years after the earthquake, 55 municipalities in the province of Avellino had lost at least 10% of their residents, and 31 more than 20%, with peaks of 40% or even 56%. Thus not only demographic “thinning” but also the rapid aging of the population became inevitable: in 2020 the old-age index was 178.4 at national level and 134.7 in the Campania region, but in the province of Avellino it was 185.7.

Emigration, as Ricciardi demonstrates, has been a constant in Irpinia since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Originally it served as a sort of “safety valve” and did not become massive until the aftermath of the Second World War. Indeed even during the extraordinary intervention of the Southern Italy Development Fund (*Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*), migration remained the only viable way to significantly improve one’s socio-economic condition. Manlio Rossi-Doria, one of the most famous Southernists of recent decades, saw this tendency as “irreversible and substantially liberating.”⁴ Immigration, however, as the numerous testimonies reported in Ricciardi’s essay reveal, was a choice that imposed very substantial costs, so it is no coincidence that the most common expression among the tales of Irpinian emigrants was “They treat us like slaves.”

From this perspective the combination of emigration and earthquakes (four major quakes hit the Irpinia region in the twentieth century) can be seen as the true, intimate essence of the history of the Apennines. This area, however, as Generoso Picone notes, has long remained in

⁴ T. Ricciardi, “History and stories of a territory between migration and earthquakes”, in *Terremoto*, cit., p. 83.

shadow, save for such events as the Avellino football team's promotion to Serie A. The earthquake of November 1980 finally brought out, into the light, the region's mountainside "nativity-scene" villages, the men with their characteristic caps, and the veiled women dressed in black: "the chorus of this countryside tragedy," as Alberto Moravia wrote.

At the same time a great solidarity movement was set in motion, thanks in part to the powerful denunciation by Sandro Pertini, the President of the Republic, of the delays and failures of emergency relief and the full-page headline of the Neapolitan newspaper *Il Mattino*, "Be quick", conceived by Andy Warhol. The whole country was united as never before and for many this experience became "a formative youthful passage."⁵ Yet before the eyes of the many who came to help, an unbelievable scene unfolded: "No one could imagine" – Picone notes – "that in the Italy of the 1980s there might still be a part of the territory in such apocalyptic conditions" (p. 100).⁶ At the same time migrants from Irpinia organized countless fund-raisers, while their employers did what they could to offer hospitality to relatives from the disaster area. Although it had been originated by a tragedy, on the whole this climate was promising. Picone comments that in those days he perceived – "perhaps with naïve optimism" – not only that the earthquake might give rise to "a new and better model of life" but also that all of Italy had learned the lesson.⁷

But this perception was soon to dissolve: already on the occasion of the first anniversary, many voices critical of the reconstruction areas were heard, eventually culminating with the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry established in April 1989 and chaired by Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. "The results of his work" – Picone highlights – "represent the point of caesura between the solidarity movement that had united South and

⁵ *Paesaggio*, cit., p. 32.

⁶ G. Picone, "A province between stereotypes and trauma: self-representation of a territory", in *Terremoto*, cit., p. 100.

⁷ *Paesaggio*, cit., p. 32.

North and the split that led the North to distance itself from the South"⁸ (p. 103). "Irpiniagate" was officially born, targeting the political class of Campania, which in those years held positions of power in the national government and in the country's leading political party, the Christian Democrats. In the collective consciousness, what prevailed was an image of waste and corruption, while the apocalyptic catastrophe that had buried 2,914 people was forgotten.

It was inevitable, then, that the reconstruction increasingly came to resemble a wasted opportunity: "Isn't there a risk," Picone asks, "of everything being sucked into the maelstrom of ideological conflict?"⁹ Abuses and corruption certainly existed, as is clearly shown in the two volumes, but the point is: how could it be that the word "tragedy" was totally supplanted by the word "scandal?" In other words how could "the overflowing wave of solidarity without political distinction but exclusively in the name of humanity invoked by President Pertini ... be overturned, transformed into resentment and indistinct accusation of waste, corruption and parasitism that feeds clientelism, bad governance and bad business?"¹⁰

Beyond the significant issues relating to the rise in public spending without the expected benefits, another point that caused perplexity mixed with bitterness was the adoption of passively accepted, top-down urban planning models. The places reconstructed appear as "villages without a soul," and this aspect was aggravated by the lack of collective participation in the architectural and urban-planning choices made. Overall, the urban planner Vezio De Lucia offers a highly suggestive summary of the rebuilding process. In choosing the title for one of his reports following a trip to the earthquake areas a decade later, in 1990, he used the following formula: "I saw a massacre,

⁸ G. Picone, "A province between stereotypes and trauma: self-representation of a territory," in *Terremoto*, cit., p. 103.

⁹ *Paesaggio*, cit., p. 32.

¹⁰ *Paesaggio*, cit., pp. 136-137.

they called it reconstruction."¹¹ This element, however, is one that Irpinia holds in common with other quake-struck areas, as in the cases of Umbria, L'Aquila and the Marche region; except that nowhere else as clearly as in Irpinia has the representation of the earthquake as tragedy, from the victims' point of view, been replaced by accounts of the transformations of the territory and its anthropological mutation. This even though, as Fiorentino points out, inefficiency was not always dominant on the operational or the legislative level.

More generally, it is clear that "the earthquake had a significant effect in the paradigm change of the extraordinary Southern development intervention."¹² In 1980, indeed, the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* had ceased to play any role, so the earthquake became an opportunity to continue the extraordinary intervention in the more backward areas of Italy, in order to obtain financing to build infrastructure. After all, despite the building of some important industrial plants in the 1960s, Irpinia continued mainly "to provide a workforce for factories, farms and mines in Northern Italy and Europe and also semi-finished intellectual products."¹³

In practice, the most important need today is to institute policies that promote "staying," i.e. to offer reasons why it is worth staying in a context marked by the sale of villages and more generally by the demographic crisis that is becoming the hallmark of the "Southern question." This is a challenge that cannot be postponed, because it is decisive for the very future of Southern Italy.

This is an issue, as the two books briefly reviewed here indicate, which even in its most tragic aspects, such as the Irpinia earthquake of November 1980, must be the subject of accurate historical investigation, in order to serve as sentinel to prevent the discussion from slipping

¹¹ *Paesaggio*, cit., p. 32.

¹² L. Fiorentino, "The reconstruction work between civil commitment and clichés", in *Terremoto*, cit., p. 149.

¹³ *Paesaggio*, cit., p. 32.

into the already overflowing repertoire of stereotypes and misleading readings that are only suitable for instrumental and spurious purposes. It is for this same reason that these two books are highly laudable, insofar as they re-establish, through careful reflection, the true terms of the greatest tragedy in the history of the Republic of Italy.

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