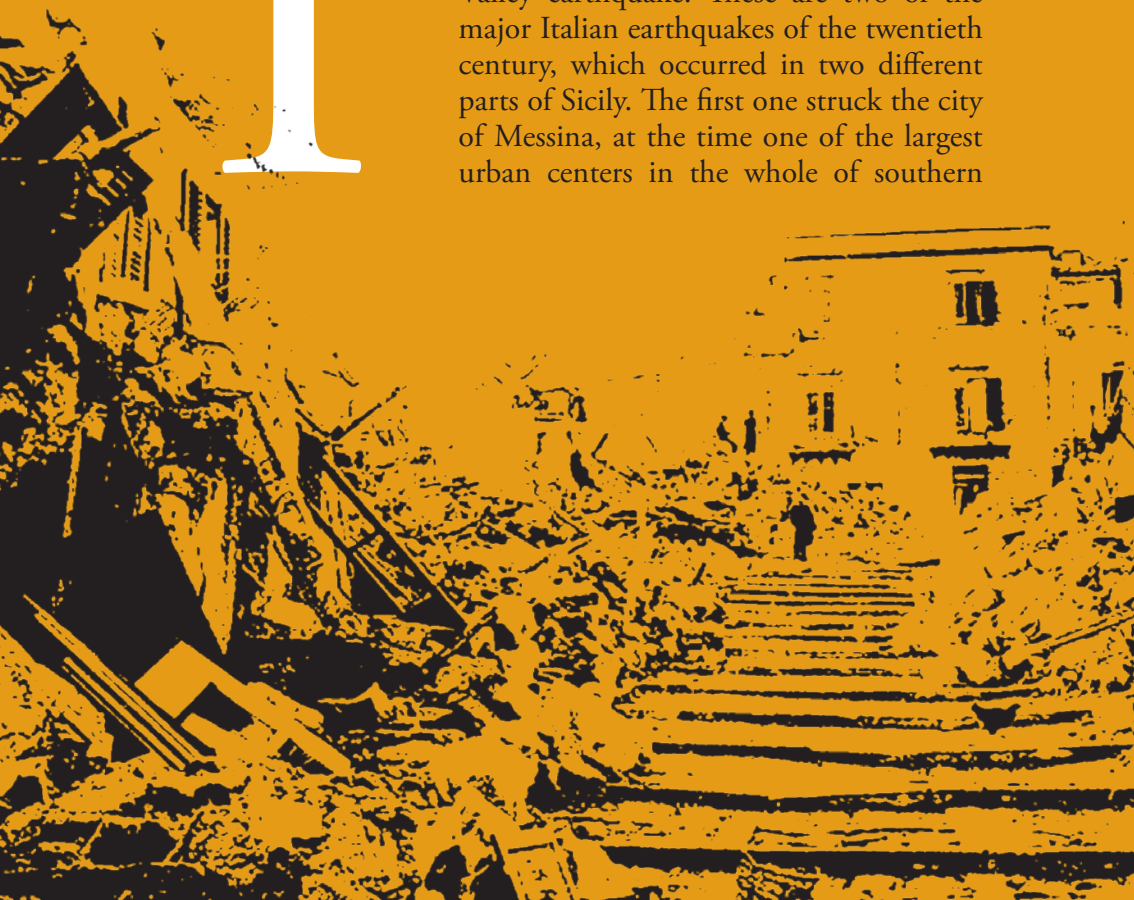


Post-Disaster Migrations and Returns in Sicily: The 1908 Messina Earthquake and the 1968 Belice Valley Earthquake

Giacomo Parrinello

This article explores the relationship between disasters and the population movements through two case studies: the 1908 Messina earthquake and the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake. These are two of the major Italian earthquakes of the twentieth century, which occurred in two different parts of Sicily. The first one struck the city of Messina, at the time one of the largest urban centers in the whole of southern



Italy with more than 140,000 inhabitants. The second struck an inland rural area, the Belice Valley, characterized by a network of small and medium-sized towns inhabited largely by peasants. While they happened in two different areas and in two different periods, the earthquakes share two major characteristics: Firstly, they caused the almost complete destruction of man-made structures and infrastructure over a large area. Secondly, they resulted in massive population movements away from the disaster areas.

Nowadays, so-called forced migration is a central issue on the agenda of NGOs, activists, and social scientists. Studies of this issue have constituted a specific field, with its own scholarly associations, reviews, and meetings.¹ Migration ensuing from an environmental crisis – usually referred to as “environmental migration” – constitutes a sub-category of this field and is distinguished according to the type of hazard (“natural” or “technological”) that propels people to migrate.² Although increasingly adopted in the debate on the social effects of climate change and environmental degradation, the definition of environmental migration remains contested. The central issue concerns the causal link between environmental change and migration, which some scholars view as overstated.³ Recently, social scientists have offered different models of understanding the relationship between environmental change and migration. Some demand the adoption of more sophisticated analytical frameworks capable of taking into account the complex interplay of migration drivers and their interaction with social, economic, and political factors.⁴ Others suggest improving and specifying the definitions and notions used,

¹ For a good overview of existing resources, see <http://www.forcedmigration.org>.

² L.M. Hunter, “Migration and Environmental Hazards,” in *Population and Environment*, 26, 4, 2005, pp. 273-302.

³ O. Dun, F. Gemenne, “Defining Environmental Migration,” in *Forced Migration Review*, 31, 2005, pp. 10-11.

⁴ R. Black, W. N. Adger, N.W. Arnell, S. Dercon, A. Geddes, D. Thomas, “The effect of environmental change on human migration,” in *Global Environmental Change*, 21, 1, 2011, pp. S3-S11; D. Kniveton, R. Black, K. Schmidt-Verkerk, “Migration and climate change: towards an integrated assessment of sensitivity,” in *Environment and Planning*, 43, 2, 2011, pp. 431-50.

by better distinguishing between the types of movements and the various possible causes.⁵ The large majority of the existing contributions in this field, however, deal with case studies from the present or the most recent past. As I will show, a historical perspective can offer different insights into the link between disaster and migration.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of a historical approach is the broader temporal view it allows. A study of past cases entails the possibility of analyzing the connections between an event and its consequences over both the short and long term. This is of particular relevance in the case of so-called natural disasters, such as earthquakes. Although they may occur in a very short period of time, every natural disaster is the result of a complex interplay between socio-cultural factors and geological, physical, and biological phenomena, all of which have different temporalities.⁶ The relationship between earthquakes and migration, then, should be analyzed by considering the complexities of these interplays and overlapping temporalities. This paper addresses such issues, 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 if not, why?

I will approach the case studies from such a perspective, using the analytical advantages of comparison and extending the temporal

⁵ A. Oliver-Smith, "Disasters and Forced Migrations in the 21st Century," in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, 2006, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Oliver-Smith/>; K. Warner, M. Hamza, A. Oliver-Smith, F. Renaud, A. Julca, "Climate change, environmental degradation and migration," in *Natural Hazards*, 55, 3, 2010, pp. 689-715.

⁶ See G. Bankoff, "Time is of the Essence: Disasters, Vulnerability, and History," in *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 22, 3, 2004, pp. 23-42; A. Oliver-Smith, "Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture," in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, S. Hoffman, A. Oliver-Smith (eds.), James Currey, Oxford 2002, pp. 23-47. That is the reason why Christian Pfister suggests the term "nature-induced" disasters instead of "natural" disasters, see C. Pfister, "Learning from Nature-Induced Disasters: Theoretical Considerations and Case Studies from Western Europe," in *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies Toward a Global Environmental History*, C. Mauch, C. Pfister (eds), Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland 2009, p. 18.

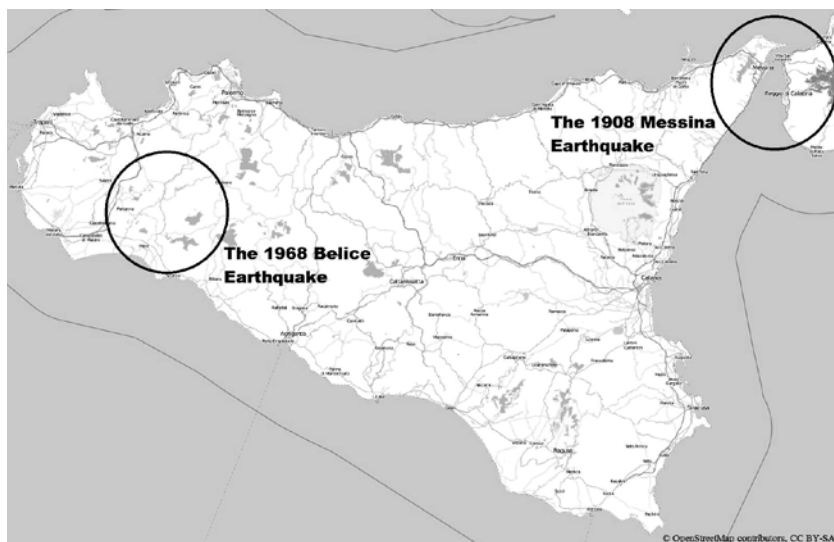
scale of the historical analysis. In both cases, I will follow the population movements not only in the immediate aftermath, but also over a longer period of time. This method will help in identifying the characteristics of the movements: whether they were temporary or permanent, where they were directed, and why. The comparison between the two cases will allow conclusions to be drawn about the factors that were significant in orienting the post-disaster population movements, and in deciding whether people would continue to live in the disaster area or not in the final analysis. As I will illustrate, while the city of Messina recovered from the post-disaster migration 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, I will situate the disasters within a broader narrative, showing that in both cases the characteristics of post-disaster population movements were deeply influenced by social, economic, and political factors, and that the migration pattern that resulted from the disasters was in accordance with overall historical trends of migrations.

This paper is made up of four parts. The first brings into focus the population movements in the aftermath of the disasters and the responses of public authorities. The second part analyzes the movements after a few months, their consistency and direction. The third section illustrates the demography of the two disaster areas in the following decades, reflecting on long-term tendencies. In the last and final section, I will draw some general conclusions about the relationship between disasters and population movements in the light of the results obtained.

The Aftermath

The Messina earthquake that occurred on 28 December 1908 had a magnitude of 7.1 on the Richter scale. That disaster is considered the most tragic in the whole history of modern Italy and certainly was the greatest catastrophe that the young Italian Liberal monarchy had ever faced: not only was Messina affected, with more than 90 percent of the buildings destroyed, but also Reggio Calabria, on the other side

Figure 1. Disaster areas



Source: elaboration from *Open Street Map*

of the Strait, and hundreds of smaller towns and villages.⁷ After some delay, the Royal Army was sent to manage the crisis and martial law was declared in the disaster area. The number of dead is still disputed. For Messina alone, estimates range from 30,000 to 60,000, out of a population of approximately 140,000 inhabitants.⁸ This problem is the first to be taken into consideration when discussing the question

⁷ G. Bertolaso, E. Boschi, E. Guidoboni, G. Valensise, *Il terremoto e il maremoto del 28 dicembre 1908. Analisi sismologica, impatto, prospettive*, INGV, Protezione Civile, Roma-Bologna 2011.

⁸ The more recent estimates on this have been made by L. Caminiti, “Fonti per la ricostruzione della popolazione messinese nel terremoto del 1908,” in id., *La Grande Diaspora: 28 dicembre 1908 la politica dei soccorsi tra carità e bilanci*, GBM, Messina 2009, pp. 249-55, who calculates no more than 30,000 dead; and by G. Restifo, “Il vortice demografico dopo la catastrofe: morti e movimenti di popolazione a Messina fra 1908 e 1911,” in Bertolaso et al. (eds), *Il terremoto e il maremoto cit.*, pp. 295-304, who maintains the validity of the traditional estimate of 60,000 dead.

of post-disaster migrations, since the reliability of data and numbers on population displacement can be seriously affected by different estimates. Nonetheless, there are no doubts about the fact that in the aftermath, a large stream of people left the area.

The administrative sources are very clear about this. The relief operations started two days after the event. From then on, many survivors left the city for other destinations, escaping from devastation and death in search of assistance and shelter. On 5 January 1909, the Central Committee established in Rome to coordinate relief operations sent three telegrams to local representatives of the government in the main Italian cities. The first one was directed to the authorities in the main coastal cities, requesting the creation of a systematic register of all those arriving by boat. The second was directed to the cities where the largest groups of displaced were already settling, asking local authorities how many more people they could still accept. The third telegram, directed to all the main Italian cities, asked for information on how many people they were disposed to shelter.⁹

These telegrams illustrate well how concerned the public authorities were about unexpected and sudden population movement. This should not surprise us. As was first argued by Michel Foucault and many subsequent scholars, one of the most relevant characteristics in the history of modern states was the development of administrative knowledge and control over population and territory, aimed at increasing the life in and the wealth of the state.¹⁰ According to James C. Scott, the production of standardized information has been an essential part of modern state rule: social (and natural) facts were reduced to codified knowledge in order to make them read-

⁹ Telegrams n.1268, n. 1371, and n.1373, 5 January 1909, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Interno (MI), Comitato Centrale di Soccorso per i danneggiati del terremoto calabro-siculo del 1908 (CCS 1908), b. 25, f. 10.1.a.

¹⁰ Especially in his 1977-78 course at Collège de France: M. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)*, Gallimard, Paris 1983. See also G. Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, the first of a long series of studies based on Foucault's concept of "governmentality" and on the account of its genealogy he provided.

able and manageable, although at the price of obliterating their local complexity.¹¹ Sudden displacements perturbed both the order of population in space and the order of knowledge on which state rule was based. Therefore, it is not surprising that such an unanticipated movement was seen as a direct menace: suddenly the Italian state had to manage what it perceived as an unknown and uncontrolled population of unemployed and homeless migrants.¹²

Evacuation, nevertheless, was needed to facilitate rescue and recovery operations. In order to control and direct the evacuation as much as possible, authorities tried to gather information about the identities and social conditions of the people leaving the disaster area. While the accuracy of this information did not meet the expectations of the central authorities, it offered at least a general overview on the numbers and locations of the displaced. The largest community was in Catania, the major urban center near Messina, on the eastern coast of the island. According to the first survey made by the local *prefetto* (local representative of the central government), more than 20,000 refugees were living in the city a few weeks after the quake. Other substantial refugee communities were established in Palermo (11,000), Naples (8,000), and Syracuse (2,600). As a result of the attempts by the national government to distribute the people across the national territory, smaller groups were registered in all Italian cities, with very few exceptions.¹³

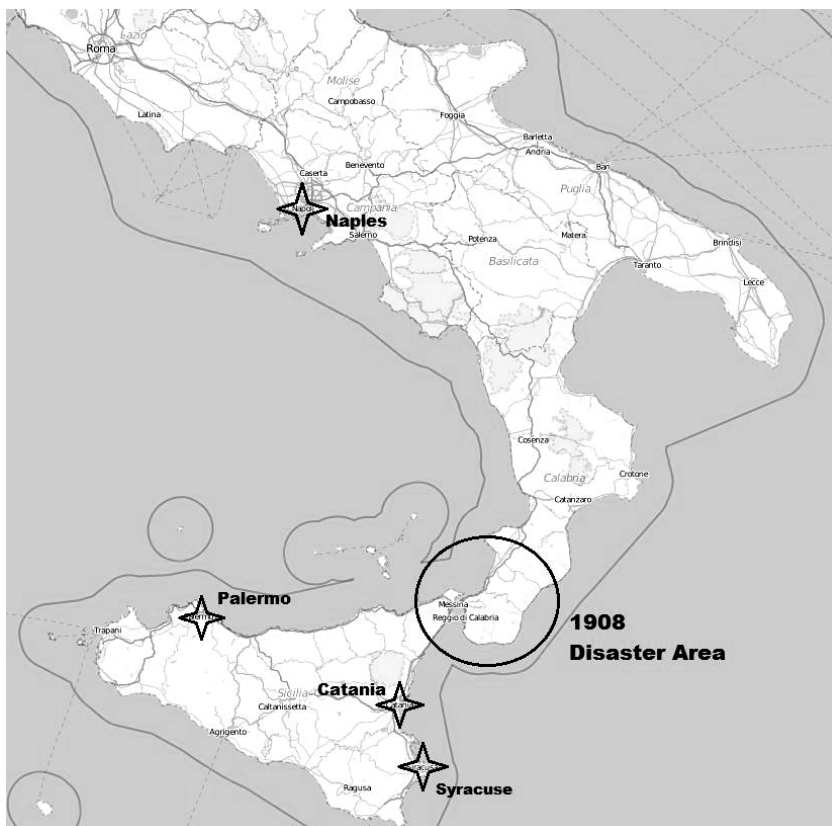
The location of the biggest groups can be easily explained by their geographical proximity to Messina. The chosen cities were those at the nearest railroad terminals – such as Catania and Palermo – and/or the nearest ports, such as Naples. These destinations do not reveal a migration strategy, but rather a sudden escape, probably made with the intention of coming back later. The fact that the large majority of the survivors ended up in nearby cities suggests that state efforts

¹¹ J.C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, New York 1998.

¹² Caminiti, *La Grande Diaspora* cit.

¹³ “Tabella su Movimento profughi per provincia: arrivati e partiti,” in ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b. 25, 10.1.e.

Figure 2. Main destinations of displaced in 1909



Source: elaboration from *Open Street Map*

to disperse people across the country were largely ineffective, and that escape from the disaster area was largely spontaneous. Population displacements during the first month following the disaster involved no less than 40,000 individuals.¹⁴

Some survivors did attempt international migration. We do not have reliable quantitative data, but we do possess some qualitative

¹⁴ Caminiti, “Fonti per la ricostruzione” cit., pp. 249-55.

evidence: for instance, the Italian ambassador in the United States was provided with a list of potential emigrants who wanted to reach family or friends in Boston, Massachusetts.¹⁵ It was an extremely difficult path to take. In 1909 American legislation forbade those who were classified as “assisted” from entering the country. Since most of the survivors had received a monetary allowance from the Italian authorities, the US authorities considered them assisted persons. Therefore, the Italian authorities did not encourage migration to America.

The second case study presents some important differences, which are already apparent in the dynamics of the disaster. The Belice Valley disaster resulted from a sequence of several medium-intensity earthquakes, which started on 14 January 1968, and lasted for several months. The earthquakes occurred in a poor, rural, and little-known area of western Sicily, located between the cities of Palermo, Trapani, and Agrigento. It was not the first nature-induced disaster to hit Italy in the postwar decades, but it was certainly one of the worst that the newly established Republic had to face. The earthquake almost completely destroyed 14 towns and affected 10 percent of Sicilian territory and a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants. Lack of organization and infrastructure delayed rescue and recovery operations for several days. While the disaster killed far fewer people (less than 400) than the 1908 earthquake, it displaced a significant proportion of the population.

The central authorities tried once again to monitor the displacements by counting and identifying the people leaving. It is not clear how many people left their homes for nearby destinations during the first, frantic days, as survivors spontaneously evacuated the destroyed towns before the rescue and recovery operation reached the valley. Even after public officers arrived in the area, information on displacements remained limited, and attempts to register the population movements seem to have been even less effective and coordinated than those in 1908. According to existing records, more than 7,000 people passed through the railway station of Messina – the main connection between

¹⁵ See ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b. 25, f. 10.6.8.

the island and the continent – between 17 and 23 January 1968.¹⁶ Refugees could be found in almost every Italian city, but the biggest groups were located in Milan, Turin, and Rome. That affected populations were displaced farther north than after the 1908 Messina earthquake was due in part to the increased accessibility of long-distance transportation compared to the early twentieth century, but also, as we shall see, to the different attitudes of both authorities and survivors.¹⁷

While in 1909 the authorities neither expected nor approved of the population displacement, in 1968 displacement was explicitly used as a government strategy in order to cope with the emergency. As revealed by official records, at least from 20 January 1968, the public railroad company issued free tickets to all those who wished to leave the island.¹⁸ Moreover, the *prefetti* issued passports with expedited procedures, thus encouraging survivors to move abroad.¹⁹ In accordance with this deliberate policy, the stream of people was directed towards the traditional destinations of southern emigration: the industrial cities of northern Italy and the wealthiest countries of northern Europe, such as France, Switzerland, and Germany. This caused some friction with the authorities in these countries, especially in Switzerland. Immigrants arriving there were expecting full assistance, claiming that Italian authorities had promised this at their departure. Yet no measures were actually in place and the Swiss authorities had no intention of making any. After a couple of weeks of indiscriminate immigration and formal protests directed to

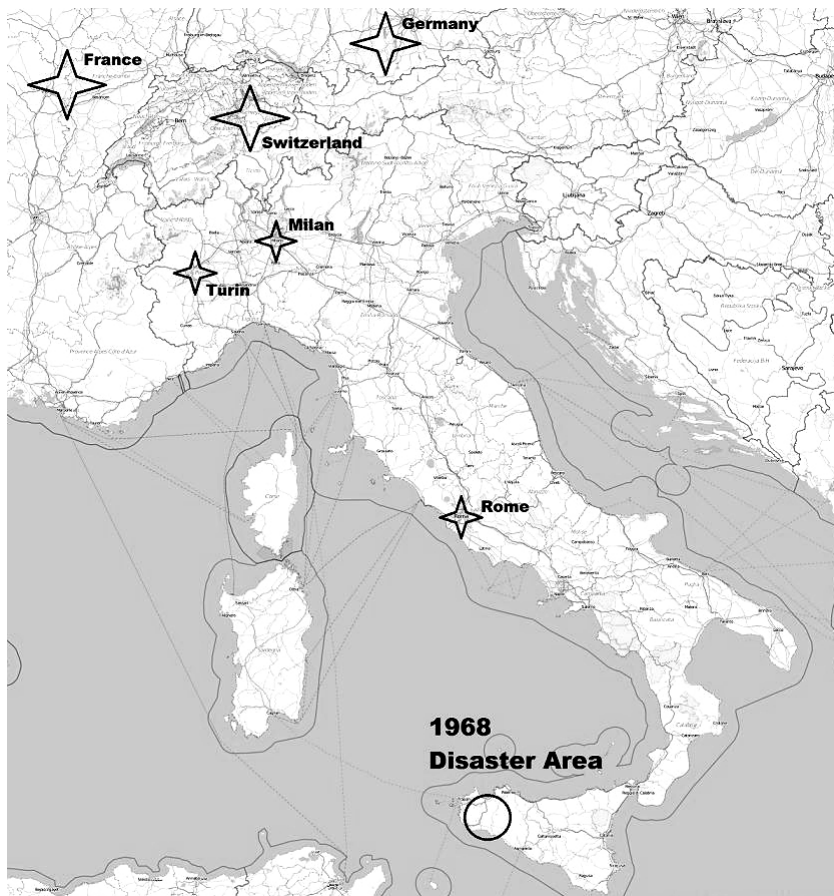
¹⁶ “Prefettura di Messina, Assistenza profughi delle zone terremotate, Messina 23 gennaio 1968,” in Archivio Storico Protezione Civile (ASPC), MI, Direzione Generale Protezione Civile e Servizi Antincendio (DGPCSA), 112, b. 2.

¹⁷ See the documents in ACS, MI, Gab 1967-1970, b. 253, f. 14519/98/1/7, s.f. 2.

¹⁸ “Telegramma del Prefetto di Palermo Ravallo al Ministero dell’Interno, 21.01.1968, n.35151,” and the following of 22.1.1968, 11:50, and 22.1.1968, 13:30, in ASPC, MI, DGPCSA, 112, b. 5. On 28 January, the *prefetto* wrote that in Palermo “the well-known assistance point activated in that station” had released 10,600 free tickets up to that day.

¹⁹ The *prefetto* of Agrigento on 14 February 1968 wrote that by then the prefecture had issued 2,409 passports; in ASPC, MI, DGPCSA, 112, b. 14 “Terremoto in Sicilia genn. 1968,” f. 16 “varie.”

Figure 3. Main destinations of displaced people in 1968



Source: elaboration from *Open Street Map*

the Italian authorities, the Swiss authorities started accepting only those who could prove a relationship with an immigrant already established in the country. Only after this change of attitude did the Italian authorities stop distributing free tickets and passports.²⁰ By

²⁰ See the documents in ACS, MI, Gabinetto (Gab) 1967-1970, b. 253, f. n. 14519/98/1/7, s.f. 2.

that time, almost 30,000 people had transited through the station of Roma Tiburtina heading northwards.²¹

To be sure, displacement was a painful experience for many. Interviewed by a journalist for a documentary on emigration, one of the Belice survivors waiting in an overcrowded train station claimed that the authorities had abandoned them, complaining that “they do not know what the situation in Sicily is like; there is only hunger and misery, only hunger and misery.”²² To leave, for him, was more a necessity than a choice. The hunger of which he spoke was older than the earthquake and the path he chose to escape by was the same as for hundreds of thousands of his compatriots, along the well-traveled road of labor migration.

Return

Sources on the aftermath of the 1908 Messina disaster attest that the stream of people leaving the disaster area reversed after a few months. While in the first week Messina had no more than 15,000 inhabitants, by the end of February the population had increased to 20,000, reaching a peak of 45,000 in March.²³ According to records, it seems that people from the surrounding villages also affected by the earthquake soon started moving to the city ruins and settling there, seeking shelter and assistance.²⁴ General Mazza, who com-

²¹ In the rail station of Rome *Tiburtina*, indeed, where all the trains heading northward had to transit, a special unit of the police was put in charge of counting all the people from the Belice valley. According to their calculations, up to 6 February 1968, almost 30,000 people had passed through the station. See Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale della Protezione Civile, Comunicazione n. 15, Roma 6 febbraio 1968, in ASPC, MI, DGPCSA ,112, b. 5.

²² L. Perelli, *Emigrazione 68: Italia oltre il confine*, 00:32:00, b/w, sound, Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico.

²³ See N. De Berardinis, *Relazione letta dal Commissario Straordinario Cav. Avv. Nicola De Berardinis, Consigliere Delegato dalla Prefettura di Messina, letta il 14 febbraio 1909, prima seduta del Consiglio Comunale dopo la catastrofe del 28 dicembre 1908*, Tipografia Vitale & De Francesco, Messina 1909.

²⁴ See manuscript letter written on letterhead of the Comitato Centrale di Soccorso dated 22/07/09, in ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b. 25, f. 10.1.f.

manded the rescue and recovery operation, saw this migration towards the city as an obstacle to the successful management of the operation. In his opinion, migration was caused by the distribution of free food rations, which attracted survivors from the surrounding areas. To stop this trend, he suspended free food rations.²⁵ In spite of Mazza's actions, however, this migration continued, contributing to the quick rise in population. These people, who had formerly not been part of the urban population, settled permanently in the ruined city and occupied the shelters that were built there.

The main cause of the growth in urban population, though, was the return of many of those who had left the city after the disaster. Once the situation in the disaster area had been stabilized and barracks set up, the authorities started to encourage the displaced to come home. The presence of displaced all over the country was considered more and more dangerous for public security and the economy, especially given their condition as "assisted" people. The distribution of a monetary allowance, indeed, was a complete novelty for the authorities of the Liberal state, who did not regard such "emergency welfare" with any favor, fearing that it would undermine work ethic. Accordingly, the groups of displaced still present in many cities were pressured to abandon their sites or camps, by cutting allowances, closing shelters or, in some cases, by financing the construction of barracks or camps in the ruined city.²⁶ The results of this pressure are clearly shown by the same surveys that recorded the presence of displaced all over Italy: the numbers communicated by the *prefetti* to the central government were dropping steadily while the population in the city was increasing. At the end of January, the *prefetto* of Catania reported that the "*profughi*" (refugees) in his city had dropped from 25,000 to 12,000, and a similar decline had occurred in both Palermo and Naples.²⁷

²⁵ F. Mazza, "Relazione sull'opera del R. Commissario Straordinario Tenente Generale Mazza nelle regioni sicule colpite dal terremoto del 28 dicembre 1908," in ACS, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM), 1909, b.380, f.4.

²⁶ See Caminiti, *La Grande Diaspora* cit., p. 224 ff.

²⁷ "Tabella su Movimento profughi per provincia: arrivati e partiti," in ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b.25, 10.1.e.

Nonetheless, not everyone wanted to return home. For instance, among the over 1,000 occupants of a recovery center in Naples interviewed by a public officer at the end of April 1909, more than 500 stated their intention to leave the disaster area for national or overseas destinations, especially the United States, in order to join relatives or find better jobs. According to the officer, 117 wanted to leave Italy permanently, including “104 to the United States of North America, nine to Argentina, one to Uruguay, and three to Europe.”²⁸ Some of them had also stated their desire to move to cities like Milan or Rome, but the officer did not take their demands into consideration, since they lacked “any proof of success” and were “supported by nothing but simple hope.”²⁹ Others wanted to settle permanently in the city where they had been sheltered in the aftermath. When interviewed by the officer Bianchi, typographer Luigi Caruso declared his desire to remain in Naples and asked for assistance in recovering his machinery and transporting it there in order to start his activity anew.³⁰ We do not know if Caruso succeeded, but it is certain that many others tried to follow a similar course: according to the local prefetto, a community of almost 5,000 people intended to remain in Catania.³¹

In 1968, a proportion of the displaced population came back to the Belice Valley only after a few months had elapsed. On 5 February 1968, the Ministry of Home Affairs authorized the release of free tickets for those who could prove their status as displaced and wanted to return home.³² It was the same kind of measure as those taken in the first days to encourage the exodus, but now applied to encourage resi-

²⁸ “Napoli-Albergo degli emigranti-Sfollamento,” Report by Ispettore Bianchi, Rome 27 April 1909, in ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b. 25, f. 10.3.36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Napoli. Profughi ricoverati all'albergo degli Emigranti,” attachment to “Relazione Napoli-Albergo degli emigranti-Sfollamento, Ispettore Bianchi, Roma 27 aprile 1909,” in ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b. 25, f. 10.3.36.

³¹ Telegram n. 3688, 16 January 1909, in ACS, MI, CCS 1908, b. 25, f. 10.3.15.

³² Telegram to Fercompartì, n.1824, 5 February 1968, in ACS, MI, Gab 1967-1970, b. 253, f. 14519/98/1/7, s.f. 3.

dents to return. To be sure, the difficulties in managing the presence of displaced people, especially in the cities where the largest groups were settled, played a role in determining this choice. On 28 January, for instance, a representative of the Milan Municipal Administration complained that more than two thousand displaced were homeless, dispersed through the city, and many more were arriving from the Swiss frontier following the closure of the border by the authorities.³³ The presence of displaced was becoming a public order problem within the national territory; by allowing them to return to the disaster area, the state could help to keep the situation under control.

At first sight, the communications between the central Ministry and the peripheral branches of the government attest to a gradual reduction of the displaced in the major cities in February, March, and April 1968. To be sure, some of the displaced had returned home. Yet in July 1968, according to a survey by the Ministry of Home Affairs, there were still more than 3,500 people in Milan and 2,000 more in other Italian cities. Moreover, this data took into account only the “assisted” people – those who received a monetary allowance – and so automatically excluded those who had found a job in their new locations. Thus, it is possible that the number of displaced decreased just because they had changed status rather than location. Other data gives us a clearer picture: according to the first of a series of periodic surveys of the population in the disaster area, at the end of July 1968, almost 21,500 people had left the Belice Valley for other destinations in Italy and abroad. This data did not change in the following months, thus demonstrating that the majority of those who had emigrated did not come back.³⁴

Some qualitative sources add detail to this overall description. In January 1969, the Italian consul in Sydney wrote to the Ministry of Home Affairs presenting the case of some households who had emi-

³³ “Appunto per il Ministro,” 28 January 1968, in ACS, MI, Gab 1967-1970, b. 253, f. 14519/98/1/7, s.f. 3.

³⁴ “Situazione al 30 Luglio 1968,” attached to a letter from G. Renato to G. Giordano of the Minister Bureau, Rome, 30 July 1968, in ACS, MI, Gab 1967-1970, b. 253, f. “rapporti dei Prefetti.” The following surveys are in the same file.

grated to Australia after the disaster but now wanted to return. These households claimed “difficulties in adaptation” and declared that their relatives in Sicily had informed them the reconstruction had started and there were new job opportunities in the Valley. The Ministry, however, blocked such returns. For officials, it was preferable that they remained in Australia, as there were no real opportunities in the disaster area.³⁵ While not significant from a numerical point of view, this case illustrates the Italian government’s attitude towards post-disaster population movements, confirming that in 1968 the public authorities encouraged displacements as an opportunity to permanently alleviate demographic and economic pressures in the disaster area. Even the return tickets released after 5 February were probably nothing more than a temporary tactic for dealing with people who could not be absorbed by the local job market. Others would not be encouraged to return.

Long-Term Trends

As anticipated in the introduction, return migration is probably the most striking difference between the two case studies. The relevance of this phenomenon, though, becomes evident only by means of long-term analysis. To perform such an analysis, we cannot rely on the same kind of sources used thus far. The reliability of the numbers of migrants reported in official records is indeed questionable. A recent and informed essay on the sources for the post-disaster demography of Messina states that the list of displaced excluded many of those who were not officially “assisted.”³⁶ Similar considerations apply in the case of Belice as well. The Messina prefetto, while sending the first list of the people passing through the local station en route to continental Italy to the Ministry of Home Affairs in January 1968, wrote that “it is probable that some people have been registered twice.” At

³⁵ See the telegram of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 January 1969, “telespresso” n. 093/57/69, and the answer of the Ministry of Internal Affairs 20 February 1969, n. 14519/98/1, in ACS, MI, Gab 1967-1970, b. 253, f. 14519/98/1/7, s.f. 1.

³⁶ Caminiti, “Fonti per la ricostruzione” cit., pp. 253-54.

the beginning of 1969 the Ministry of Internal Affairs asked Istat (the National Statistical Institute) for a survey of the Valley's population, citing limited official knowledge of the survivors.³⁷

These official records do offer an appreciation of the population displacements – their consistency, direction, and the like – but in order to obtain a more precise picture of these phenomena we must rely on other sources, namely demographic surveys and censuses. The examination of these valuable sources may help us understand the significance and impact of post-disaster population movements on the demography of the disaster areas over the long run.

The first national census after the Messina disaster was conducted in 1911, three years after the earthquake. At that time, the city had been rebuilt only in the temporary form of wooden barracks, which were located on the site of the former city. While in 1901 the city counted a population of 147,106 inhabitants, the 1911 census registered 127,398 inhabitants. A recent contribution to Messina's demographic history has examined this difference, taking into account the number of dead and comparing them with the probable increase of the population without the disaster. It concluded that, even taking into account the lowest estimate of dead, the 1911 statistics clearly show an intense “counter-exodus” towards the city.³⁸ This is a further confirmation that post-disaster migration was only a temporary strategy: the majority of the displaced came back home, soon repopulating the settlement even though a proper city had not yet been rebuilt. Most people probably only left the ruined city because any form of organized life was nearly impossible. Once basic urban organization had been restored, most of them returned. Subsequent censuses confirm a tendency of population increase. In 1921, the population had increased to 177,000.³⁹ By 1936, when most of the city had been rebuilt, the population had risen to

³⁷ Letter from the prefetto of Messina, 23 January 1968, “Assistenza profughi dalle zone terremotate,” in ACS, MI, Gab 1967-1970, b. 253, f. 1.

³⁸ Restifo, “Il vortice demografico,” cit., pp. 295-304.

³⁹ Ministero dell'economia nazionale, *Risultati sommari del 6° Censimento della popolazione eseguito il 1° dicembre 1921*, Società anonima Scotti, Roma 1921-1927.

191,000.⁴⁰ On the eve of the Second World War, the urban population had recovered not only from the post-disaster migrations, but also from the great losses caused by the earthquake, exceeding the pre-disaster population within less than 15 years.

The explanation for this phenomenon leads us far away from the disaster. As numerous historians have shown, urban population growth was a phenomenon common to all the biggest Italian cities during the years between the two world wars.⁴¹ It was mainly the result of regional migrations from small towns and villages in the countryside, which the Fascist dictatorship tried unsuccessfully to control by means of anti-urbanization legislation and policies.⁴² Narrowing the focus to only Sicily, one notes that Messina, as well as Catania and Palermo, the other two biggest cities on the island, grew consistently during the first decades of the century, thanks to the massive urbanization of the rural population of the hinterland. When taking into account this overall historical process, therefore, the connection between the population movement and the disaster over the long run becomes less clear. Urban population growth was ongoing before the quake and continued after it, as part of a broader long-term trend, largely independent of the disaster.

The national censuses can also be used to analyze the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake, by taking into consideration the 14 towns that were classified as completely or severely destroyed. In 1961, the total population of these towns was 100,527, while in 1971 it had dropped to 89,150. According to a demographic study led by a team of researchers from the University of Palermo, this decrease in population was mainly due to the effects of migration, but it is not possible to attribute the difference between 1961 and 1971 entirely to post-

⁴⁰ Istituto centrale di statistica del Regno d'Italia, 8° *Censimento generale della popolazione: 21 aprile 1936*, Failli, Roma 1936.

⁴¹ See F. Ramella, "Le migrazioni interne. Itinerari geografici e percorsi sociali," in *Migrazioni*, P. Corti, M. Sanfilippo (eds), Storia d'Italia, Annali, 24, Einaudi, Torino 2009, pp. 425-47.

⁴² See the classic study by A. Treves, *Migrazioni interne nell'Italia fascista*, Einaudi, Torino 1976.

disaster migration.⁴³ Labor migration started in the late 1950s, reaching unprecedented proportions during the first half of the 1960s. The difference between rates in 1961 and 1971, therefore, was due to a continuous migratory movement. In order to assess to what extent the post-disaster displacements can be considered responsible for the population decrease, these scholars took into consideration the biannual variations over a 15-year period from 1960 to 1975. Based on that method, their conclusion was that the disaster produced a remarkable increase in migration rates with respect to the overall trend in the period under examination. Accordingly, after the disaster, a significant part of the population had resorted to migration as a permanent strategy, never returning home. Subsequent national censuses confirm a long-lasting demographic decrease in the whole of the disaster area. In 1981 the population of the 14 most damaged municipalities was 87,388 inhabitants. In 1991, when most of the towns had been rebuilt, the population had dropped to 85,011, and in 2001 it had further decreased to 80,516.⁴⁴

Once again, though, the long-term trend cannot be entirely related to the disaster. The depopulation of rural inland areas during the post-World War II decades is a phenomenon typical of the whole of southern Italy. During these years of tumultuous economic development, millions of people left their homes and headed northwards, to the industrial cities of northern Italy and to countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and France.⁴⁵ This new wave of migration, if not encouraged, was certainly not hindered by the governments of the Italian Republic, which removed the legal obstacles to internal and

⁴³ C. Pennino, A. Pennino, A. Carbone, *Analisi demografica dei Comuni della Valle del Belice colpiti dal sisma del 1968*, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Palermo 1978.

⁴⁴ Istat, *12° Censimento generale della popolazione: 25 ottobre 1981*, Istat, Roma 1982-1989; id, *13° Censimento generale della popolazione e delle abitazioni: 20 ottobre 1991*, Istat, Roma 1992; id, *14° Censimento generale della popolazione e delle abitazioni*, Istat, Roma 2002-2006.

⁴⁵ For a general overview of post-war migrations in Italy see E. Sonnino, "La popolazione italiana: dall'espansione al contenimento," in *Storia dell'Italia Repubblicana, II: La trasformazione dell'Italia: sviluppo e squilibri, 1: Politica, economia e società*, F. Barbagnano (ed.), Einaudi, Torino 1998, pp. 531-75.

international migration created during Fascism.⁴⁶ From this viewpoint, the demographic history of the Belice Valley does not differ markedly from that of other rural areas of the Mezzogiorno; it is not by chance that Milan, Turin, Germany, and Switzerland – traditional destinations of southern emigrants in the 1950s and 1960s – were also the favorite destinations of most of the disaster survivors who joined relatives or friends already established there. As in the case of Messina, therefore, the Belice Valley post-disaster demography can be situated within a longer-term historical trend: depopulation as a consequence of migration was ongoing well before the earthquake and continued afterwards.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of these case studies has offered us some interesting evidence on the connection between disasters and migration. Both earthquakes directly caused massive population movements: they were hugely destructive and brought about a general state of fear and disorder that compelled many people to leave their homes. In both Messina and the Belice Valley, it was materially impossible for most of the inhabitants to continue living in their former houses, which had been totally or partially destroyed. Moreover, in both cases, although with some differences, minor earthquakes continued to cause damage for several weeks. The immediate reaction of the survivors was in both cases a mass exodus. This exodus was in all respects a coping strategy: in 1908, as in 1968, people evacuated the destroyed cities and towns first and foremost in order to be (or feel) safe from the multiple threats posed by ruined urban environments, as well as the pending menace of new tremors.

These exceptional situations posed a dilemma for the authorities. On the one hand, such massive and sudden population movements were potentially disruptive phenomena that had to be controlled. On

⁴⁶ The anti-urbanization law promoted by the Fascist dictatorship was formally abrogated in 1961: “Abrogazione della legislazione sulle migrazioni interne e contro l’urbanesimo nonché disposizioni per agevolare la mobilità territoriale dei lavoratori,” Legge Ordinaria n. 5, 10 February 1961.

the other hand, the disaster area was unsuitable for assuring assistance and shelter to all, and the state encouraged evacuation in order to manage relief operations more effectively. In both cases, in spite of different political settings and different historical periods, the national authorities resorted to the registration and counting of displaced persons. This technique sought to restore effective information on population and residency, one of the bases for the modern state's administrative rule. Yet the data produced only provided a general overview of the number and location of the displaced, and not the detailed individual files that administration sought to gather, revealing that mass evacuation in the aftermath was in both cases a phenomenon largely out of control.

The earthquakes, however, were not responsible for the characteristics of population movements, their directions, and their timing. Other important elements must be taken into account, such as the role played by the public authorities. The strategies adopted by the authorities in 1908 and 1968 differed considerably. In the aftermath of the Messina earthquake, the authorities of the Liberal monarchy were concerned with the monitoring of those among the displaced who wished to attempt permanent migration: archival records reveal the control and verification of final destinations, the economic means of the potential emigrant, the presence of relatives, and the like. As we have seen, in Naples an officer refused to consider the demands of those who wished to move to Rome or Milan since they were supported by "nothing but simple hope." That was consistent with the policy and attitude of the liberal authorities of the time who scrutinized the position of potential emigrants.⁴⁷ This is in sharp contrast with the government's strategy in 1968, when the authorities explicitly used migration as a way of releasing the pressure on the disaster area, distributing free train tickets and issuing passports indiscriminately. Unlike 1908, no kind of control or check was performed to screen the potential emigrants; in 1968, "simple hope" was enough to leave. This difference mirrors the change in migration

⁴⁷ See M.R. Ostuni, "Leggi e politiche di governo nell'Italia liberale e fascista," in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Partenze*, P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, E. Franzina (eds), Donzelli, Roma 2001, p. 310.

policies between 1908 and 1968. From the late 1950s the governments of the Republic reversed the policies adopted during the Fascist dictatorship, and favored national and international mobility. Following the principles of the democratic constitution as well as responding to the needs of economic growth and industrialization, previous restrictions were replaced with almost uncontrolled mobility. The strategy adopted in 1968 had an important effect on the characteristics of post-disaster population movements that, from the very beginning, were directed towards the traditional long-distance destinations of emigrants from southern Italy. Policies in the countries of destination also proved to be of significance in orienting (and obstructing) the stream of people. In 1908, restrictive policies in the United States actually discouraged transatlantic migrations, creating obstacles and pushing Italian authorities to limit access to that country. In 1968, the change in policy by the Swiss government after the first weeks consistently reduced the arrivals in this country.

Government policies, however, cannot entirely explain the characteristics of the displacements. In this regard, the importance of people's autonomous choices should not be overlooked. In the case of Messina, despite the efforts made by the authorities to regulate the displacements, most of the displaced were concentrated in the nearby cities. Such a distribution suggests spontaneous escape rather than planned evacuation. The telegrams from the Central Committees indirectly confirm that mass evacuation was already under way well before the government attempted to manage the displacement. Furthermore, these people did not wish to abandon their homes permanently; most returned in the following months. Even in the case of the Belice Valley, despite governmental policies to encourage long-distance migration, the importance of people's autonomous choices must not be downplayed. The fact that so many people took the free tickets and passports offered by the authorities shows that they were willing to move immediately to long-distance destinations; in all probability, the authorities' efforts to direct the population merely bolstered an effective disposition to migrate and provided people with an opportunity to move to what they considered better places to live. This hypothesis is confirmed by two facts: firstly, the destinations chosen correspond-

ed to those of pre-existing migratory streams; and secondly, most of those who left in the aftermath never came back to the valley. To sum up, population movements must be considered as the result of both individual and collective strategies to face the risks – and opportunities – presented by the post-disaster situation, strategies consistent with the experiences and expectations of the survivors.

The long-term perspective makes the connection between disaster and population movements even more complex. When observed over a period of 30 years, the two case studies diverge completely. In the case of Messina, the post-disaster demography of the area looked positive and the population soon exceeded the pre-disaster population. In the Belice Valley, on the other hand, the decades following the disaster witnessed a steady demographic decline. In both cases this was entirely consistent with general demographic trends: urbanization from the hinterland in the 1920s and 1930s, and depopulation of rural areas from the late 1950s onwards. The disasters, from this viewpoint, acted as accelerators of ongoing processes for which they were not responsible.

Such a consideration, however, is not sufficient. Disasters modified the conditions in which demographic trends were taking place: it is not obvious that these trends continued almost unchanged afterwards. In this regard, I believe that a sounder explanation must also take into account the social and economic dynamism of the disaster areas. Before and after the disaster, Messina was an important coastal city with significant social, cultural, and economic resources that allowed it to remain attractive despite a remarkable decrease in maritime commerce. The same cannot be said of the Belice Valley, at the time of the disaster one of the most depressed areas in the whole country. The earthquake merely enhanced an already ongoing socio-economic decline; despite some agricultural and touristic development between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, the Belice Valley did not have enough resources to reverse the decline and stop the migration. The economic and social vitality of the disaster areas, therefore, also influenced the resettlement of the population, and comparison of the case studies suggests that urban areas possess resources for recovery that rural areas lack.

To sum up, it would be wrong to maintain a direct connection between disasters and all characteristics of population movements.

Though a relationship between these phenomena exists, it should be interpreted in the light of a much more complex interplay of factors. From this viewpoint, the differences in terminology raised in the introduction are pivotal. The notion of “forced migration,” generally used to identify these phenomena, tends to unify a plurality of compartments under a sole causation. Although we can claim a direct connection between the earthquakes and massive evacuation in the immediate aftermaths, things become much more complicated when we examine medium-term displacements that might be influenced by government policies, individual choices, pre-existing migratory streams, and the like. Furthermore, only in some cases did displacements turn into national and international migration and have a permanent impact on the demography of the areas. In most of these cases, the disaster often acted more as a “catalyst” for other processes than as a “primary cause”: it created an opportunity for movements that obeyed a deeper logic than mere forced escape from the disaster area. This conclusion, therefore, supports the position of social scientists who call for more complex interpretative frameworks for “environmental migrations,” which take into account the interplay of various drivers. The passage of time has proved crucial in distinguishing these movements and identifying their rationales: as we have seen, differences become clear only over decades. The historical perspective adopted here, therefore, not only empirically validates non-deterministic analytical models for post-disaster migration but adds to them by demonstrating the importance of timescale as a pivotal element in the analysis.

In conclusion, by considering these phenomena from a comparative perspective and by extending the temporal scale of historical analysis, it becomes clear that there is no simple relationship between disasters and population movements. Entwined with social, economical and political processes, influenced both by autonomous decisions and external pressures, the complex series of movements that follow a nature-induced disaster must be analyzed in the light of specific contexts and processes and their multiple temporal stratifications. Taking into account the complexity of historical processes, even in environmental migration studies, is perhaps one of the most effective counterbalances to any deterministic approach to present problems.