

**Introduction to the special issue “The L’Aquila earthquake 10 years on (2009-2019): impacts and state-of-the-art”**

L’Aquila’s earthquake in April 2009 provoked damage and loss to people, communities, the economy and the environment. Since then, several works have adopted a human and social science perspective (e.g. Carnelli *et al.*, 2016) to unpack different aspects of the emergency and recovery of L’Aquila and nearby areas. This earthquake gave rise to a new generation of Italian scholars embracing this kind of perspective on risk and disaster studies (Benadusi, 2015; Carnelli *et al.*, 2016). We, as guest editors of this special issue of *Disaster Prevention and Management: an International Journal*, argue that 10 years after the earthquake, there is still need – and perhaps now more than ever – to talk and reflect about it, for at least three main reasons.

First, the aftermath of the L’Aquila earthquake has revealed the potential for analysing disasters from a political angle (Pelling and Dill, 2010). This allows us to reflect on the event as a political issue, and to move strong critiques of the post-disaster state intervention by openly talking about the failure of the nation-state as representation of liberal democracy (Valent, 2018; Forino, Carnelli, Ventura and Tomassi, 2019; Forino, Carnelli, Ventura and Valent, 2019). Bock (2017) argued that the Italian government (the state), after the event, generated a sense of hope by bringing mass-media in the affected areas and rhetorically claiming “we will never leave you alone”, “we are with you”, “never more these tragedies!”, “housing for all as soon as possible”. A few years later, when it was realized that all these promises had not come to fruition, this hope was replaced by a sense of uncertainty. From an agent of hope, the state became therefore a source of hopelessness and uncertainty, fostering a sense of crisis (Bock, 2017) and undetermined displacement (Alexander, 2013; Carnelli, 2012). Despite the huge amount of funds allocated to emergency management (Ventura, 2010), the state intervention in the L’Aquila aftermath was a “second earthquake” (Bock, 2017)[1] that has consequences even today on the everyday life of thousands of citizens that had to regain and reshape their emotions and habits around endless scaffolding, rubble, off-limits zones and work in progress. Instead of being “simply” a crisis induced by a natural hazard, the crisis is essentially a political matter, where inaction and/or neoliberal strategies (Barrios, 2011, 2017), elephantiasic bureaucracy and the corruption of the state and its institutions are deeply intertwined. On this regard, this issue will move critique to the ways the Italian government managed the disaster and will reveal the rhetoric of institutions and of powerful actors, both within and outside the institutions.

Second, we argue that what occurred in L’Aquila in these years can be found in other disaster aftermaths across Italy. We can say that it is possible to identify structural patterns of post-disaster recovery’s impacts that are reproduced on the affected areas in different forms and at different levels (Bonati *et al.*, 2019). Existing literature (Alexander, 2010, 2013) revealed that L’Aquila recovery presents unique characteristics, particularly in relation to the temporary housing solutions becoming permanent and the economic costs of emergency management (Ventura, 2010). However, we argue that what occurred in L’Aquila can be found in other recovery experiences, particularly post-earthquakes, after 2009 (<http://periferiesurbanas.org/?p=7884&lang=en>). For example, after the earthquakes in the Emilia Romagna region in 2012, Pitzalis demonstrated that a similar top-down governance pattern was applied, totally excluding bottom-up initiatives and local participation in the name of an “emergency paradigm” (Pitzalis, 2015). In a similar vein, the activists/research group Emidio Di Treviri (2018) demonstrated that temporary housing solutions after the



---

earthquakes occurred in Central Italy between 2016 and 2017 did already show a large potential to be permanent, while urban deregulation is increasing socio-spatial fragmentation and driving inequalities, depopulation and the potential loss of entire communities. In this way, this issue will provide useful information to be compared against other case studies in Italy and worldwide.

Third, as a consequence of the first two reasons, L'Aquila is a relevant case study for worldwide disaster studies. We claim that understanding what happened in the L'Aquila aftermath represents a robust background for (but not limited to) disaster scholars aiming to interpreting the medium-long term impacts of post-disaster recovery on society and built environment. Indeed, Italy is not the only country where post-disaster recovery tends to be affected by bottlenecks, delays and corruption. However, it cannot be denied that Italy also represents a country where the long-term tangible and intangible impacts of recovery and reconstruction shape society, economy and built environment of affected areas along decades after the event (e.g. Guidoboni and Valensise, 2011). In this regard, paradigmatic is the case of Messina (in the Southern Italy region of Sicily), for which a very recent book by Farinella and Saitta (2019)[2] has revealed the 100 years old mechanisms linking the current socio-economic inequalities of the city with the consequences of reconstruction following the earthquake (and tsunami) in 1908. In this way, we argue that changes occurred into society and built environment of L'Aquila in these 10 years can support an understanding of the city as it is now and as it will be in the near and far future. In this way, this issue shows the potential for disaster recovery in L'Aquila to become a landmark for the city next years (or decades) ahead.

As a consequence of the aforementioned reasons and based on the most recent disaster risk reduction (DRR) literature (Oliver-Smith *et al.*, 2016; Gaillard, 2019; Kelman, 2019), it is clear how “disasters are caused by society and societal processes, forming and perpetuating vulnerabilities through activities, attitudes, behaviour, decisions, paradigms, and value” (Kelman, 2019, p. 1). To the extent to which we need to address DRR issues at global level we have to, as researchers, understand local ontologies and epistemologies (Gaillard, 2019), acquiring a long-term view on local contexts. Contrary to the representation given by media, policy discourse and even research (Oliver-Smith *et al.*, 2016), disasters are not unexpected events, rather, long-term processes to be understood through in-depth studies to untangle the “competing and contradictory” forms of knowledge (Simpson, 2013) that forge social-ecological complexities, especially during and after the process. Ideally, research should be undertaken before the (visible) triggering event(s), but this usually happens by accident (e.g. Simpson, 2013).

Further to its significance in theory and practice, it is important to underline that the SI is interdisciplinary by nature, and draws on a range of anthropologists, urban planners, sociologists, psychologists, disaster scholars, geographers and philosophers that along these years have worked on unpacking multiple issues in L'Aquila and nearby areas. All the papers have developed an original perspective to approach, interpret and present the current situation in L'Aquila, making an attempt to link this situation to what occurred in the past 10 years and also making efforts to understand which the future can be.

David E. Alexander proposes a critical examination of the aftermath in L'Aquila, by identifying and explaining the most important characteristics of the recovery and reconstruction process with an integrated perspective. He analysed the vulnerabilities and exposure factors – including root causes and past and present unsafe conditions – that turned a relatively moderate seismic event into a long-term disaster. In terms of lessons learned, he clearly shows how the political context can have bad, long term, irrational social, economic, urban consequences – unique examples are the CASE projects, temporary settlements became permanent so permanently slowing a planned reconstruction, and the nature of legal proceedings following the earthquake. His considerations are then intertwined to common patterns of risk and disaster management in Italy.

---

Angelo Jonas Imperiale and Frank Vanclay provide an original reflection on the L'Aquila trial of scientists from a DRR perspective. Through a document analysis of trial materials and related commentaries, they argue that disaster governance in L'Aquila was not aligned to international DRR guidelines, such as the Hyogo Framework for Action and the replacing Sendai Framework for DRR. In addition, local communities and knowledges were excluded from the recovery process, so amplifying local vulnerabilities and risks.

Gianmaria Valent reflects on the concept of violence as resulting from the territorial fragmentation of post-disaster L'Aquila. Accordingly, he argues that the recovery in L'Aquila was a violent phenomenon driven by the authoritarian governance regime and supporting legislation during the emergency. In particular, he focusses on the territorial organisation deriving from the authoritarian governance under the Mixed Operative Centres (Centri Operativi Misti) of the Italian Civil Protection and on the CASE Project. In this way, the way the emergency was managed led to long-term socio-urban changes.

Grazia Di Giovanni and Lorenzo Chelleri apply and explore the concept of build back better (BBB) in L'Aquila in a context of depopulation and shrinking economy. In particular, they test whether BBB principles can contribute to driving the recovery pattern towards a sustainable redevelopment. They found that the recovery process revealed several shortcomings in the application of BBB principles, mainly due to a lack of addressing pre-disaster socio-economic stresses related to a shrinking economy.

Giorgios Koukoufikiis critically investigates the mismatch between reality and expectations of the "knowledge city" concept, that the local research centre Gran Sasso Science Institute, supported by OECD, adopted as a spatial imaginary for L'Aquila to frame its reconstruction and promote its socio-economic redevelopment. The Author finds that the "knowledge city" concept promoted a vision of the city that was unfeasible due to the lack of specific urban qualities and positive economic trends to attract and maintain highly skilled labour and investments.

Teresa Galanti and Michela Cortini analyse the use of work by female workers in L'Aquila as a recovery factor to the earthquake. By drawing on a series of focus groups with a range of female workers, the authors explore how work offered a possibility to rebuild and reshape women's personal and professional identity.

Rita Ciccaglione uses a street ethnography technique to investigate the conflictual relationships between neoliberal institutional management and practices and discourses of inhabitants, administrators, experts and commercial operators. In this way, the author is able to highlight the existing differences between institutional resilience strategies and resisting local tactics by people and their dwelling practices.

Finally, Isabella Tomassi and Giuseppe Forino explored the reasons why the community of a self-built ecovillage (EcoVillaggio Autocostruito) spontaneously born after the L'Aquila earthquake in 2009 dissolved in 2014 after deep changes within the community. By using a self-ethnography method, the authors found that community-building goals (such as self-construction, sustainability, mutuality and reciprocity relationships) were replaced by an increasingly centralised decision-making process, and in individual and community conflicts and contrasts.

We warmly thank all the authors who contributed to this special issue for their constructive and mutual knowledge exchange. We extend our thanks to all the anonymous reviewers who gave their availability to provide timely and constructive comments and to ensure an effective peer-review process for increasing the quality of all the papers. In addition, the issue would have never been possible without the guidance of JC Gaillard and Emmanuel Luna, Editors of *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, and we thank them for their support throughout these two years. We also thank the Emerald Publishing staff, who have been key in providing their kind assistance along with all the editorial steps.

We hope that the issue as a whole, and every single paper of it, can represent a milestone towards a better understanding of the L'Aquila earthquake and the post-disaster recovery praxis in Italy. We also hope further research, not limited to Italy, will build upon the contents presented here.

**Giuseppe Forino**

*University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia, and*

**Fabio Carnelli**

*University of Milan-Bicocca, Milano, Italy*

## Notes

1. See also Bristol (2010), who defined a “second tsunami” the land grabbing after the tsunami (2004) in the Indian Ocean.
2. See also previous works (e.g. Saitta, 2013).

## References

- Alexander, D. (2013), “An evaluation of medium-term recovery processes after the 6 April 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila, Central Italy”, *Environmental Hazards*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 60-73.
- Alexander, D.E. (2010), “The L'Aquila earthquake of 6 April 2009 and Italian Government policy on disaster response”, *Journal of Natural Resources Policy Research*, Vol. 2 No. 4, pp. 325-342.
- Barrios, R.E. (2011), “‘If you did not grow up here, you cannot appreciate living here’: neoliberalism, space-time, and AFFECT in Post-Katrina recovery planning”, *Human Organization*, Vol. 70 No. 2, pp. 118-127.
- Barrios, R.E. (2017), *Governing Affect: Neoliberalism and Disaster Reconstruction*, University of Nebraska Press.
- Benadusi, M. (2015), “Antropologia dei disastri. Ricerca, attivismo, applicazione. Un'introduzione”, *Antropologia Pubblica*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 33-60.
- Bock, J.J. (2017), “The second earthquake: how the Italian state generated hope and uncertainty in post-disaster L'Aquila”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 61-80.
- Bonati, S., Forino, G. and Valent, G. (2019), “Patterns of structural violence recovering after four major earthquakes in Italy (2009-2019)”, presentation at i-Rec2019, Gainesville, FL, available at: [www.researchgate.net/publication/334164548\\_Patterns\\_of\\_structural\\_violence\\_recovering\\_after\\_four\\_major\\_earthquakes\\_in\\_Italy\\_2009-2019](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/334164548_Patterns_of_structural_violence_recovering_after_four_major_earthquakes_in_Italy_2009-2019)
- Bristol, G. (2010), “Surviving the second tsunami: land rights in the face of buffer zones, land grabs and development”, in Lizarralde, G., Johnson, C. and Davidson, C. (Eds), *Rebuilding After Disasters: From Emergency to Sustainability*, Routledge, London, pp. 133-148.
- Carnelli, F. (2012), “Istantanee etnografiche post-sismiche da Paganica”, in Calandra, L.M. (Ed.), *Territorio e democrazia. Un laboratorio di geografia sociale nel doposisma aquilano*, L'Una Editrice, L'Aquila, pp. 139-164.
- Carnelli, F., Forino, G. and Zizzari, S. (2016), “L'Aquila 2009-2016: the earthquake in the Italian social sciences”, *Sociologia Urbana E Rurale*, Vol. 111 No. 2016, pp. 111-114.
- Emidio Di Treviri (2018), *Sul fronte del sisma: un'inchiesta militante sul post-terremoto dell'Appennino centrale, 2016-2017*, DeriveApprodi, Roma.
- Farinella, D. and Saitta, P. (2019), *The Endless Reconstruction and Modern Disasters: The Management of Urban Space through an Earthquake – Messina, 1908-2018*, Palgrave.
- Forino, G., Carnelli, F., Ventura, S. and Tomassi, I. (2019), “Il decennale del terremoto dell'Aquila: la politica dell'autocostruzione. Sei domande a Isabella Tomassi, filosofa aquilana”, Lavoro Culturale, available at: [www.lavoroculturale.org/il-decennale-del-terremoto-dellaquila-la-politica-dellautocostruzione/](http://www.lavoroculturale.org/il-decennale-del-terremoto-dellaquila-la-politica-dellautocostruzione/) (accessed 3 May 2019).

- 
- Forino, G., Carnelli, F., Ventura, S. and Valent, G.M. (2019), "Il decennale del terremoto dell'Aquila: una violenta riconfigurazione territoriale", Lavoro Culturale, available at: [www.lavoroculturale.org/il-decennale-del-terremoto-dellaquila-una-violenta-riconfigurazione-territoriale/](http://www.lavoroculturale.org/il-decennale-del-terremoto-dellaquila-una-violenta-riconfigurazione-territoriale/) (accessed 10 May 2019).
- Gaillard, J.C. (2019), "Power, prestige & forgotten values: a disaster studies manifesto", Ipetitions, available at: [www.ipetitions.com/petition/power-prestige-forgotten-values-a-disaster](http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/power-prestige-forgotten-values-a-disaster) (accessed 8 July 2019).
- Guidoboni, E. and Valentini, G. (2011), *Il peso economico e sociale dei disastri sismici in Italia negli ultimi 150 anni*, Bononia University Press.
- Kelman, I. (2019), "Axioms and actions for preventing disasters", *Progress in Disaster Science*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-3.
- Oliver-Smith, A., Alcántara-Ayala, I., Burton, I. and Lavell, A.M. (2016), "Forensic Investigations of Disasters (FORIN): a conceptual framework and guide to research", IRDR FORIN Publication No. 2, Integrated Research on Disaster Risk, Beijing.
- Pelling, M. and Dill, K. (2010), "Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 21-37.
- Pitzalis, S. (2015), "Positioning as a method: the earthquake in Emilia Romagna and the forms of 'exilience'", *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 29-40.
- Saitta, P. (2013), *Quota zero. Messina dopo il terremoto: la ricostruzione infinita*, Donzelli, Roma.
- Simpson, E. (2013), *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India*, Hurst.
- Valent, G.M. (2018), "Disaster governance and democracy: meta-legal Praxis in L'Aquila (Italy)", in Forino, G., Bonati, S. and Calandra, L.M. (Eds), *Governance of Risk, Hazards and Disasters*, Routledge, pp. 107-124.
- Ventura, S. (2010), "Trent'anni di terremoti italiani. Un'analisi comparata sulla gestione delle emergenze", in Osservatorio sul Dopusisma (Ed.), *Le Macerie Invisibili: Rapporto 2010*, pp. 19-86.