



DisComPoSE - Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe

Report of the DisComPoSE seminar “*Istoria funesta*”. *Natural disasters, information and answers in the Hispanic Monarchy*

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via di S. Eufemia 13, Rome

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Welcome greetings from Rafael Valladares and presentation by **Domenico Cecere** (thanks to the participants for having wanted to share in this meeting the results of their investigations).

After an introduction aimed to presenting the Discompose project, and to defining the project's areas of interest, Cecere presents the participant to this seminar: María Eugenia Petit-Breuilh Sepúlveda, Gennaro Schiano, Adrián García Torres and Armando Alberola Romá. If the approach of María Eugenia and Adrián it is more related to scientific interests, the speech of Schiano is more oriented to cultural history. Armando Alberola end the day with his suggestions on the three speeches.

Domenico Cecere explained also the connection of the participants throw the seminars organized in last years in Clermont and Casa de Velázquez. This experience of collaboration shows how necessary it is to integrate different disciplines to understand the interactions between people and institutions, and to comprehend how previous experiences have influenced the way of responding to a catastrophe. Moreover, this multidisciplinary approach allows to understand disasters also as generators of cultural elements.

His final reflections focused on the different media attention with respect to the event, which depends on different reasons. The aim of the project will also be to respond to these questions of interpretation.

María Eugenia Petit-Breuilh Sepúlveda presented two case studies connected respectively to Hapsburgs' Empire and the Bourbon's Monarchy: the eruption of Huaynaputina volcano (the most ancient eruption of great impact recorded in this territory happened the 14th of February 1600,) and the earthquake of Quito (1797). The analysis of these events shows how important, especially in the first case, was the providential vision (eruption as divine punishment), in which the action was influenced by this interpretation of the origin of the event. In the second case, instead, in the management of the event the decisive role will be assumed by the Patronato; the Church and local power share the same explanation of the disaster.





When we study the American territory, we must take into account the fact that the city is the centre, the civilized part. For this reason, when a natural catastrophe occurs, the population is concentrated in the city, in the main square, thus the city becomes the refuge. Who manages the post catastrophe is the secular power together with the Church (Patronato). The shelters are usually built in the Plaza Mayor of the city, close to the affected area, where images and relics related to the local cult are also transferred. They are used during the emergency for processions and other collective religious rites. The concentration of the people in the city as a safe haven also depends on the fact that, as revealed by the documents, during the emergency there is a constant fear of attack by the natives (there are documentary evidences on what happens in prisons and convents on these occasions).

In the viceregal areas the decision-making role is in the hands of the viceroy, while the Cabildo and the Corregidor are in charge of making decisions in the extra-urban and rural areas, and of managing both the Spanish communities and the indigenous population, the slaves, etc. At first and in the great majority of cases, the resources used to deal with the catastrophe and its consequences are internal, and only later, once the crisis is overcome, the competent authorities formally request the central power of a help, most often through the Cabildo.

Gennaro Schiano presented a case study linked to a *carta relación* containing information on the eruption, which occurred in 1646 of the Canarian volcano called Tagalate or Martín. The means of circulation of the news are written texts of different nature: manuscript, printed text, letter, etc. Through the cross-reading of these sources, the origin of the news and the various passages through the different sources can be established, starting from the manuscript to a letter published in Madrid, which constitutes the origin of another printed letter published in Seville. The letter from Madrid is the model of a printed text in letter form, which was published in Milan in Italian.

This comparison also shows how in the passage of the manuscript form to the printed text, some information is omitted which cannot be publicly diffused, while others are kept (such as the supplication).



Adrián García Torres focused his speech in two cases of volcanic eruption (Cotopaxi and Tungurahua) occurred in the Bourbon Era. In the interandean area (callejón interandino) of the Ecuador several modern Spanish villages developed in the modern age,

which are located in territories bordering the areas occupied by the natives (in the Bourbon period there were 8 active volcanoes, today they are 50).



Generally, these villages were deliberately located at the foot of the volcanoes, which is explained taking into account both the fertility of the lands, and the symbolic importance that the volcanoes have for the indigenous people, in addition to the fact that the presence of the Andean cordillera constituted a further protection factor for villages and their populations. However, these are territories characterized by frequent earthquakes and eruptions.

Regarding the Cotopaxi, a volcano in the south of Quito, its eruptive cycles were different, but the most violent occurred on 15th of July and on 9th of December 1742 (pyroclastic flows), and again in 1743, and 1744; but the most important event was undoubtedly the eruption of 1766-1768, which caused the destruction of the town of

Latacunga. Among the measures taken the day after the eruption there was the putting in safety of the population (which was concentrated in the Plaza Mayor), the realization of rogative letters, processions to the Madonna de la Merced, local protector of the population.

In the south of Quito is located also the Tungurahua volcano. The worse eruptive cycles have been in 1773-1781, in particular we can remember the eruption of the 23rd of April 1773; this event led to the production of a report (very brief and informative) for the Consejo de Indias; it was accompanied by a couple of very precise and detailed drawings, which make it clear that the damages were quite different from those described in the official report.

Armando Alberola Romá then presents his personal suggestions on the interventions presented. The results of this research demonstrate the need to continue on this kind of research approach, by





adopting a comparative methodology. Also, he focuses on the importance of the role of military engineers in the recording of disastrous events: these figures constitute the "armas savias" of the Crown, because they study what is not studied in universities, and are therefore the great architects of reformism.



Rafael Valladares ended the seminar talking about the taxation as an element of transversal reading for these events (the manipulation of victimhood is another strategy to obtain an economic and fiscal return). Other reflections occurred focused on the replies of the Consejo de Indias: they choose to not respond to requests for help, which according to Valladares is symptomatic of a central government's behaviour (even silence means something: the importance of silence as denial, but without compromising the image of a pitiful monarch); in any case, the fact that even in the Bourbon age the need to write to Madrid is still evident shows how the polycentric model of monarchy is not refutable. About the intervention of Schiano, Valladares recalls the importance of the centrality of the Canary Islands for sea traffic.

