



DisComPoSE - Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe

Report of the conference “**Disastri naturali, comunicazione e politica nella Monarchia ispanica - Società di antico regime di fronte all’emergenza**”
(Natural disasters, communication and politics in the Hispanic Monarchy.
Society of an ancient regime facing the emergency)

Naples, 10th December 2018

On Monday, December 10th, the hall of the Pontaniana Academy hosted the launch conference of the ERC-funded project DisComPoSE, titled *Natural Disasters, Communication and Politics in the Hispanic Monarchy. Society of an ancient regime facing the emergency*, a convention that has replaced a precious opportunity to highlight the research lines of the project.

The works were opened by the greetings of Edoardo Massimilla, director of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II, who underlined the importance of the continuity of the projects over time, and by Anna Maria Rao, head of the Historical Sciences Section, which reflected on the heuristic prospective fecundated by projects such as DisComPoSe, useful for weaving solid discourses between different disciplines.

The first session of interventions, chaired by Anna Maria Rao herself, began with the intervention of the P.I. of the project, Domenico Cecere, who started from the discussion and the problematization of the question that inspired the project: why natural disasters? Starting from the question that has given rise to the research, Cecere’s intervention dealt with other issues that are related to Historical disasters studies and the lines of research that the project intends to pursue in order to find some effective answers: from the survey of the wide range of textual typologies designed to explore the different forms of storytelling of disasters - in the territories of the Spanish Empire, during the early modern age -, to the first networks of news circulation, from the focus on social practices, to the importance of the communicative sphere and to the clear and complex necessity from which the project starts: if disasters interrupt social relations, a particular and shared need for memory emerges.

The intervention of François Walter, University of Geneva, started from a further question: is there a European disaster culture during the modern age? A sure and



unquestionable answer: "oui et non". For Walter, reconstructing the culture of disaster means, first of all starting from the topical problems of the catastrophe, highlighting the specificities of the *ancien régime*, probing the means through which the catastrophe is thought. Walter compares the precarious equilibrium of the postmodern society of risk, a society in which everything can collapse, in which the risk of the disastrous must be quantified so much that we believe it to come to an imaginary creation, with the awareness of the risk of *ancien régime* societies, a carefully localized attention, addressed to previously experienced risks. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the traditional vocabulary changes, and the word "catastrophe" is increasingly used; we start to apply a percentage calculation to the risk; the tools for forecasting and preventing risk change.

The second session, chaired by Giovanni Muto, opened with the intervention of the historian on the social and social values of the concepts of risk and catastrophe - how did the risk and the catastrophe is perceived by the peasants of the old regime? - and continued with two precious interventions for the discussion of the project's research object, which provided very useful tools, methods and perspectives for the group's work. Tamara Herzog, Harvard University, started with a number of questions related to the fundamental tool of archiving documents and information: Why collect information about the Spanish Empire? The Empire made of paper, with so many archives. How to process information? We could have huge database, but how was this material used by contemporaries? Enormous value and used by the scholars but it isn't clear what it was for in the past. How were the documents stored? Were they deposited or did they circulate? Summaries in order to find them better. Philip II confesses his ignorance about some of them. Gathering and organizing data was a difficult task. Another question: why collecting information? In order to receive recompense for such effort, constructing and maintaining effort. And why creating archives? Into the fortress they were locked, it was not built to be visited, they are like cash deposits. They were the best weapons. They were meant to let the documents safe and inaccessible. Even the existence of document had to be secret. Who's looking? For most contemporaries the wider world was confusing, unclear, our vision is completely different to the one they used to have historians analyses.

Alberto Alberola Romá, on the other hand, presented the enormous amount of work carried out by the Alicante research team on climate history: not a history of the climate, but





rather the reconstruction of the social and economic history of the world in relation to the climate. The Spanish scholar has highlighted the objectives of the research group: the study of modern fluctuations in Spain (documents and tools); the analysis of extraordinary atmospheric and natural phenomena; the enhancement of risk and natural hazard; the study of agrarian crisis; the incidence of epidemics; the science, the technique and the organization of the territory; the study of popular religiosity and its mechanisms (petitions, sermons, exorcisms); political action: administration behavior in extreme situations.

The last session of the work, chaired by Giancarlo Alfano, University of Naples Federico II, was dedicated to the relationship between Italian national identity and the concept of catastrophe. Amedeo Quondam, La Sapienza University of Rome, has shown how the historical narratives have brought the catastrophe as a structural factor and

underlined the need to take into account the material differences of catastrophic discursiveness.



The day ended with the presentation of the volume *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples. Politics, Communication and Culture* (Viella, Rome, 2018), edited by Domenico Cecere, Chiara De Caprio, Lorenza Gianfrancesco, Pasquale Palmieri, translated from Italian into English by Enrica Ferrara; the book was discussed by Sergio Bozzola (University of Padua), Flavia Gherardi (University of Naples Federico II) and Elisa Novi Chavarria (University of Molise).