



## **DisComPoSE - Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe**

**Report of the DisComPoSE Seminar *Il paradosso dei disastri. L'elaborazione sociale del rischio tra consapevolezza e diniego* (The paradox of disasters. The social processing of risk between awareness and denial)**

**Giovanni GUGG** (LAPCOS - Université de Nice Sophia)

Introduced by Pasquale PALMIERI

In collaboration with the STAR project *Tales of Four Cities*

26th March 2019, at 16:00

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On March 26th, 2019, in the context of the ERC project *Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe. The Making of Emergency Response Policies in the Early Modern Age*, and the STAR project *Tales of Four Cities*, Giovanni GUGG (LAPCOS - Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis - Università di Napoli Federico II) gave a paper on *Il paradosso dei disastri. L'elaborazione sociale del rischio tra consapevolezza e diniego*.

The communication focused on the interest in the risk under an anthropological point of view, and specifically on how this discipline can help to better explain and understand the way it is lived by communities.

After a brief introduction by prof. Pasquale PALMIERI (Università di Napoli Federico II), Gugg started outlining that this field of study has been interested in the risk connected to natural disasters since the fifties thanks to the studies of Turner, Quarantelli and, Smith. Nevertheless, a severe shift of perspective took place after the L'Aquila earthquake in 2009, when for the first time an anthropologist, Antonello Ciccozzi, played the main role as a consultant during the trials. He then underlined that nowadays environmental disasters are not seen as merely 'natural' events, but also as social processes; hence, different social responses are possible. Therefore, the question that these sciences try to answer is



how and why in most cases communities hit by catastrophes firmly aspire to come back and live in the same places they used to, even knowing that they are dangerous.

As a case study to exemplify this paradox, Gugg referred to the Vesuvius Neapolitan area. Here, the centuries-old *topos* of the representation of the city through the volcano contributes to the collective elaboration of the risk, which is oriented in a potential future but still influences the present, leading to a redraw of the boundaries of the risk through the definition of a - still problematic - emergency plan. In particular, he mentioned a study he conducted in San Sebastiano al Vesuvio, a town in the foothills of Vesuvius totally rebuilt after the 1944 eruption. This environment, in fact, seemed particularly interesting to be investigated since, thanks to the imprinting given by the former mayor, what was once a ghost town became the so-called “little Switzerland”: a desirable residential area to live, even though in the shadow of a new potentially catastrophic eruption. His anthropological researches - carried out both on bibliographic sources and in fieldwork through walking interviews - suggest that in the perception of San Sebastiano inhabitants there was no repression or denial, but rather scotomization of the risk. Actually, Gugg adopts this category borrowed by Social Psychology from the Ophthalmology, to describe an imperfect awareness of the risk. According to his study, among San Sebastiano’s community different kinds of scotomization act, linked for example to the mass media (which dangerously fluctuate between alarmism and reassurance), or even to other risks considered at the present time more urgent than the Vesuvius’ one. All of these aspects co-operate into the elaboration of Vesuvius risk, which according to Mary Douglas can be approached by people as “cornucopians, catastrophists or fatalists”.

Thus, bearing in mind the results of this research, Gugg underlined the importance of abandoning the emergency logic. In fact, since it is all about a risk that is not known when it is going to materialise itself, the right path to be followed - especially by administrative bodies - should not be over-focusing on what to do at that very moment, but rather improving the communication regarding the event.

