



DisComPoSE - Disasters, Communication and Politics in Southwestern Europe

Report of the DisComPoSE Seminar “Firefighting and the Narratives of Great Fires in Early Modern Europe”

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Introduced by Domenico CECERE and Diego CARNEVALE

Organized in collaboration with the Eu project DECIvE

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Department of Humanities, Via Porta di Massa 1, Naples

In the framework of the ERC-funded project *DisComPoSe* and the STAR project *DECIvE*, the seminar *Firefighting and the Narratives of Great Fires in Early Modern Europe* took place on the 22nd of January 2019 hosting **Vanessa Harding** (Birkbeck, University of London) and **David Garrioch** (Monash University, Melbourne) and chaired by **Domenico Cecere** (Università di Napoli Federico II) and **Diego Carnevale** (Università di Napoli Federico II). The talks focused on the theme of great fires, which encounters the research areas of both the projects *DisComPoSE* and *DECIvE*.

Vanessa HARDING: Disaster Management: the City of London and the Great Fire of 1666

Vanessa Harding delivered a speech titled *Disaster Management: the City of London and the Great Fire of 1666* thanks to the knowledge and the expertise built up in her research field. Her communication started by outlining the context of 1660s London. It was, in fact, traversing a complex period, being an important capital city in reprisal after the return of the monarchy but at the same time still weakened by the political and religious dissent. In 1665, furthermore, London experienced the largest plague episode of the English Early Modern Period. One year later it was beginning to recover owing to an emergency plan. Nevertheless, after an extremely long and hot summer on the 2nd of September 1666, all of a sudden the Great Fire flared up across the city, fuelled by a strong easterly wind. As Harding pointed out, the unpredictability of the event determined the inability of the city to respond, in contrast with the former plague, where people and the institutions had a good



sense of how to manage it. After four days of fire and damages, the city failed to take effective action, owing to the recent political troubles. In fact, the political groups did not have experience of working together, lacking moreover of the sense of public visibility and knowledge of London. The disaster management was undertaken by both private action and political organisation. In particular, they arranged tents in open spaces and there was an implementation of the regulation for the rebuilding, especially through the foundation surveys. In this climate of feeble response to the catastrophe, there were several signed depositions about the cause and spread of the fire, with many accusations made against French and Catholic communities. Contemporary writers and historians expressed a judgmental opinion about this weak reaction of the management, but after all, as Harding underlined, under the circumstances there was exceptional cooperation and participation of the city.

David Garrioch's communication *Towards a fire history of European cities 1550-1850*, presented his research project, which in contrast to Vanessa Harding's presentation, does not focus on the consequences and outcomes of fires, but on their causes. In particular, he illustrated that environmental history inspired his research path: fire is simultaneously a natural phenomenon and a human activity. Since humans are able to control fire, it is interesting to detect the human responses and reactions to it. The focuses of the research are the spreading of fires in multiple buildings in Paris, London, Stockholm and Venice, and to explain why particular kind of fires occurred in particular times and in particular places. The study is based on several historical sources, which are often very different from each other in terms of precisising the cause of the fire since chronicles are commonly vague about this. The cities chosen as case studies had dissimilar sizes and rates of growth in the Early Modern Period. Consequently, they offer the possibility to observe the source of ignition and of fuel, the factors permitting the fire to spread. Regarding the source of ignition, Garrioch pointed out that fire was used in each city for a variety of purposes: not only heating, cooking



and lightning, but also ritual and industrial uses. In particular, there was a social dimension according to how these technologies were used, for example, late night events lead to the extended use of fire for lightning, smoking and sometimes fireworks. In regards to the sources of fuel, in Early Modern Europe, the buildings themselves were very susceptible to catching alight as they had wooden structures and were



filled with cotton decor. Among the factors permitting it to spread, there were winds, different climatic zones and climate change. In particular, Garrioch focuses the attention on the ambivalence of human action, between causing fires and preventing them, thanks to firefighters, equipment and water supplies. Owing to these studies, it is now possible to state that the history of fires is not linear, though some general trends emerge, like the preventive measures, since in Early Modern Europe responding to fire meant to respond to a new problem, not an old one, to be faced in a much less fatalistic way, and taking action to prevent them.

