

FROM EMERGENCY TO MEMORY: THE PHASES OF THE FRIULI EARTHQUAKE

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Abstract

The sequence of events of the Friuli earthquake can be read by splitting up its psycho-social consequences into three phases: emergency, reconstruction and memory. During the emergency phase social behaviours can be easily generalized, especially in those social contexts where a «disaster subculture» can be detected, while the reconstruction phase seems to be more connected with environmental, cultural and political variables. Research conducted some years after the event has allowed me to outline a typology of the different modalities of responding to the environmental trauma.

Dall'emergenza alla memoria: le fasi sociali del terremoto del Friuli

Possiamo leggere la sequenza degli eventi del terremoto del Friuli suddividendone le conseguenze psicosociali in tre fasi: l'emergenza, la ricostruzione e il ricordo. Mentre i comportamenti sociali nella fase dell'emergenza appaiono abbastanza generalizzabili, specialmente nei contesti in cui può essere ravvisata una «subcultura da disastro», la ricostruzione appare maggiormente collegata a variabili di natura ambientale, culturale e politica. Le indagini sviluppate alcuni anni dopo l'evento hanno permesso una tipologia della diverse modalità di risposta al trauma ambientale.

Emergency

The emergency can be defined as the period following a disastrous event, during which a human community tries to regain its normality within a system that has been struck violently in its constituent parts: individuals, economic structures, urban structures and social institutions.

The emergency arises as soon as the event impacts on a specified territory and comprises two distinct steps:

- 1) individual and collective reaction;
- 2) recovery.

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The first step

After the initial inhibition to action, an overactivity phase follows during which, after rescuing themselves and the family, individuals look for news about, and bring help to, the loved ones. During this phase, individuals are sometimes trapped into decision conflicts, stemming from their multiple group memberships (kinship, neighbourhood, peer group, work group, etc.). News is looked for, and relief is provided according to the intensity level of the emotional ties.

Thus, small collectives are formed in order to bring help to affected people and to face the first survival problems, starting up the behaviour known as “informal mass struggle”. The sharing of traumatic experiences and widespread suffering results in a temporary breaking of the rigid existing social stratifications, thus limiting the conflict behaviours and motivating many people to dedicate their forces to reciprocal help. So, we can observe a strong increase in social solidarity and the establishment, for a variable period of time, of a «therapeutic» community.

On the disaster scene, a number of groups, institutions and organizations intervene in a more or less prompt manner. The institutional or primary task, for some of them, is to assist the disaster victims; for others, instead, this is a temporary role; moreover, side by side with permanent organizations, new groupings are formed, with single or multiple goals connected with the emerging needs.

Usually, there is no exact definition of needs and quantification. The large geographical range of some disasters, the lack of certainty, the impossibility to monitor rumours, as well as the uncertain and urgent atmosphere typical of disasters, are all factors that likely hinder efforts to detect needs accurately.

The second step

The recovery is a very delicate phase because, once the heroic and overactive initial phase ends, the phenomena of discouragement and depression can occur among the disaster victims, sometimes culminating into self-aggression. The personal recovery speed is associated with factors such as a previous experience with similar events, including levels of emotional involvement and psychological stability.

In the period following the disaster, usually a greater family integration arises, together with the overcoming of any possible previous tensions. Moreover, disasters usually tend to bring out latent family ties. On the other side, some typical family functions (such as food preparation, elderly care or child socialization) are committed to more formal organizations inside the community.

The disaster, through its direct and indirect consequences, is most likely to affect the groups of people who in the pre-disaster period already experienced

a high hardship level and those who in the impact phase suffered a hard negative experience.

The precarious temporary dwellings, the forced cohabitation, the absence of privacy for individuals and families, the missing spaces for children and the state of uncertainty make up further hardship sources for the individuals, especially considering that the situation – felt and lived as temporary – could last for many years.

Reconstruction

The reconstruction phase can be both substitutive and ameliorative.

By «substitutive reconstruction» (Dynes, Demarchi, Pelanda) we mean the period through which social and economic activities go back to the pre-disaster levels. The end of the phase is marked by the total achievement of functional equivalents for satisfying the housing and employment needs and the community activities of the victims.

An «ameliorative reconstruction» (Dynes, Demarchi, Pelanda) phase may entail a bettering transformation of the affected communities.

With reference to the lasting psychological effects over this phase (long term effects) at the individual level, the (scant) research on the subject hints at the hypothesis that natural disasters give rise to more severe and long-lasting consequences on the psychological than on the economical level.

The changes inside a community that can be noticed after a disaster feature an acceleration of processes already going on, rather than new directions in the social change process, even though usually the changes induced by the disaster drive the individuals to perceive the chance for sweeping transformations in the economic, social and physical environments. For instance, we can mention some fanciful proposals made after the Friuli earthquake, such as to build new phalansteries or to have a new whimsical economic-urban arrangement: the 'Great Udine', or the urban settlement along a single road axis.

During the reconstruction phase, the community can display features indicating the development of a «disaster subculture» (Quarantelli), which seems likely to develop in a number of communities that experienced a reiterate impact from specific disaster agents. Such a culture includes the array of – actual and potential, social, psychological and physical – adjustments used by a population of a specific area to cope with disasters that hit, or could hit according to local traditions: its elements are norms, values, beliefs, knowledge, technology, legends and institutionalized models for an intra- and inter-organizational response.

Surveys during the Reconstruction Phase in Friuli

During the reconstruction phase, several researches had been developed, aiming at identifying the long-term psycho-social effects.

Within a first survey, developed by the Institute of International Sociology of Gorizia five years after the earthquake, respondents were requested to give a general assessment of the disaster effect. Just under half among them stated that hardships were temporary; one quarter maintained that hardships had not been overcome yet and a fifth was able to mention also positive outcomes.

General psychological, as well as physical, situations were perceived as worsened rather than improved (45% against 6% of the respondents), mostly among women, the most educated and the elderly respondents. However, the family atmosphere was perceived as «rather serene» (Cattarinussi, Pelanda, Moretti). Intra-family conflicts in families dwelling in temporary houses were declared four times more than in families living in brick houses.

Kinship solidarity

As for kinship relations, the sociological literature on the subject maintains that after a disaster kinship solidarity tends to broaden and strengthen. In the Friuli case, this event does not seem to have continued in the long term and the return to 'normal' pre-disaster relationships appears to be more likely. However, in a number of cases, forms of co-operation, with work and technological exchanges, had been started.

The increase in community solidarity and a corresponding reduction in community conflict are among the most undisputed responses to catastrophic events: a «therapeutic community» set in (Quarantelli), lasting over different time spans. In the Friuli case, findings about the perception of a possible community solidarity after the disaster seem to disconfirm the hypothesis coming from the «sociology of disasters» (Cattarinussi, Pelanda, Moretti). As a matter of fact, just one fifth of respondents agreed with the statement that, after a disaster, a general utopian climate arises, where general interests overcome the individual ones and conflict and selfishness decrease; around 17% of the respondents stated that solidarity among the people was definitely not present, while 33% recognized it among just some community members. Moreover, among those who perceived a limited community solidarity, some attributed it just to the two weeks immediately following the May earthquake, others (one third) declared it as covering all the summer until the September earthquake, while just one fourth had noticed it extending over the years. Other findings about the long term effects, stemming from the survey, point out a higher difficulty in psychological recovery among those people who already revealed

uneasiness symptoms before the disaster and a slower recovery in demographically disadvantaged mountain communities experiencing undue internal conflicts that died down reconstruction planning.

Job markets

Another set of researches was interested in the job market. The earthquake had severely damaged the different economic sectors, with the loss of about 18.000 work places. The entity of the damages to the building assets caused a thorough transformation of the work market: the strong increase in the labour required in the construction sector was not matched by the available offer, from one side, while on the other side stole workforce from the other sectors exactly in the moment when a larger amount of workforce was needed, since the productive plants had been rebuilt quickly and even enlarged. Moreover, the rebuilding and repair of dwellings involved the families, both with direct work and with money investments in addition to the financial support received through the special regional laws.

At the beginning of the 1980s a set of researches had been developed on the families living in the affected areas, on the families engaged in rebuilding activities and on the families having at least one member working in the construction sector or in the craft and industrial business fields. Findings have been especially interesting, both because a picture of the turbulent reconstruction reality was taken and because of some resulting «surprises» (Cattarinussi, Strassoldo) where heavy spatial and temporal concentration of the high demand in the construction sector had caused a heavy-rise in the prices of raw materials, in labour costs and in profit margins of firms. As for the size of houses, the smaller buildings had been enlarged and the larger ones had been reduced; a definite preference was present for single-family detached dwellings. But the most significant finding was that about half of the families had contributed 'physically' to repair or rebuild the houses and that the financial support granted by the regional laws had covered less than half of the costs.

Environment quality

The negative evaluation about the environment quality – despite the increase and improvement of infrastructures, the estate rearrangement and the antiseismic security – likely depends on a rather formal and anonymous reconstruction, in any case 'different' from the past, with which people, especially the elderly, identify with difficulty.

It is relatively easy to understand the uneasiness among those living in a place that is different from the past, since they lost the locus of a familiar neighbourhood, which enlivened interpersonal relationships; more difficult is the understanding of the negative evaluation from those (12%) who still live in the

same location. One reason can depend on the fact that, during the reconstruction period, several attempts to gain favours, concessions and financial contributions caused disagreements, envy and disputes which disrupted the traditional relationships and brought up grudges that were dormant. But the new settlements also favoured the disintegration of the social structure: the old traditional courtyards, favouring encounters and social interaction, have been cancelled and weakened by social relationships that are more anonymous.

Comparing the findings of the 1986 research with those of 1996, the latter describe their house as more beautiful, the environment less depressing and the neighbourhood less unfriendly: over time, the recollections of the pre-earthquake have faded slowly and the organization of life has conformed to the new conditions.

Thirty years after the disaster, a further survey had been performed among a sample of the inhabitants of the Osoppo municipality. According to the answers, the reconstruction – that had been rather fast – seemed to be accepted by the large majority of the respondents: the settlement has become substantially more functional and simple, while a traditional touch has been preserved through the arcades along the main street. The few negative evaluations came from the elderly that understandably prefer to remember the old shape of their village.

Thirty years after the event, the majority of the residents – 80% – declared that, should a new earthquake hit the area – they would stay on place, loyal to the land, while 10% would move temporarily and 7% would move finally to a different place.

Technology and new antiseismic construction criteria have at least partially turned away the fear for the tremors and creaks in case of high intensity earthquakes: one third of the respondents declared to feel rather secure, and more than half to feel definitely secure inside their homes, due to the antiseismic building techniques.

Memory

After forty years, it is quite difficult to read social events in connection with the past event.

The earthquake happened in a moment when the Friulian communities were moving from an agricultural to an industrial society, passing through the sharecropping phase. The patriarchal family, typical for centuries in the central Friulian countryside, was giving way to the nuclear family; craft activities were undergoing a fordist standardization process; the Catholic Church was losing a measure of formal visibility; after centuries of lean times, consumption was

increasing, reaching also the poorer categories in the population; workers' sons were receiving university degrees and emigration was gradually substituted by immigration. At the end of the second millennium, families were becoming smaller with an average of 2.1 members against the previous 4.2; a little less than half of the Friulian families are now of the nuclear type, while there is an increase in monoparental and reconstituted families or in singles without families. Newlyweds celebrate their marriages much later, after their 30s, and usually wait a few years before having their only child.

With the creation of a university in Friuli, the number of workers in the advanced tertiary sector is expanding, while the agricultural sector is suffering a process of gradual senescence. However, upward mobility seems to have slowed down and consumption appears to be less widespread, at least in some portions of society. The less valued jobs are performed by members of different ethnic groups, while in schools the presence of second generation migrant students is becoming relevant in percentages.

The territorial bond is still rather diffused. In a survey run in 2000, four out of five people declared a strong or moderately strong feeling of attachment. The bond seems to increase with older age groups and has certainly been a crucial factor for the fast recovery of the settlements in damaged areas.

Today the use of the Friulian language has greatly and rapidly decreased considering that little more than half of the population speaks the language consistently, while in the 1990s it was routinely used by about 80% of the people.

With regards to religious behaviour a recent survey found that one third of the Friulian population attend religious rites and practices at least once per week, another third only occasionally, one sixth once per month and one fifth do not practice at all: religious behaviour is more frequent among women and tends to increase with age.

With reference to moral issues, comparing the findings of two surveys done respectively at the beginning and at the end of the 1990s, over the decade we notice an increase in tolerance toward homosexuality, euthanasia, light drugs and divorce; on the contrary, moral judgement becomes intransigent toward persons lying for personal gain, seeking undue public advantages, evading taxes and accepting bribes. Some tendencies seem to be present, leading toward a widespread of civic morality, accompanied by the justification of some features which characterize the 'familistic syndrome'.

As for ethical norms the Friulian people put in first place post-materialistic values such as friendship and love, while the last positions are held by those connected with the Yuppie life style and with socio-religious commitment; the desire for leisure and fun, especially among the younger generations, has replaced the commitment toward work.

Conclusions

For the adult and elderly Friulian generations, the earthquake is very likely a crucial and meaningful stage marking personal histories, while for teenagers and youth it is a past event, a subject for discussions once a year among parents and institutions. As happens with diseases, which heal but leave some traces in the body, the memory of the event and of the following recovery period is also latent inside those individuals who, directly or vicariously, lived, through the quake, even though the possibility of a similar event in the future does not overly concern the inhabitants of the damaged areas thanks to the renovation and the strengthening of housing and community structures.

The memory is also spurred every time that around the world a catastrophic, natural or man-made, disaster happens and psycho-social and organizational dynamics are observed, similar to the ones experienced in the past and obviously compared to those that took place 40 years ago in Friuli. In these moments, even the wish to offer advice is awakened, in order to avoid strategic mistakes within the social and territorial recovery processes: the expertise acquired through direct experience allows experts to give advice both at the interpersonal and the institutional level.

Thinking over the findings from several socio-psychological researches about the long term consequences, we could affirm that:

- a) the risk of turning the 'temporary' into 'permanent' has been avoided;
- b) no uprooting of the population occurred;
- c) the Friulian identity became stronger;
- d) the recollection of the earthquake experience no longer arouses the first year of anguish;
- e) the "Friulian diaspora" or Friulian migrants living abroad, did not return to the homeland;
- f) the resolution to entrust local communities and individuals with the responsibilities of reconstruction has been a winning choice.

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