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Irpinia Earthquake and History: A Nexus as a Problem

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Abstract: Forty years from the 23 November 1980, Irpinia-Basilicata earthquake date represents much more than a commemoration. It has been a fracture for the history of Italy. Important for many reasons, this earthquake has been a watershed for the studies and the public role of research. Historians have been solicited to work on the topic by scholars of the geological and seismological sciences: in the face of the repetition of disastrous seismic events in Italy, earthquakes remained 'outside the history'. However, the real difficulty of socio-historical science is not neglecting seismic events and their consequences, but rather the reluctance to think of 'earthquake' as a specific interpretative context. This means to deal with the discipline 'statute' as well as the public commitment of scholars. In this way, the circle earthquake-history-memory requires broad interdisciplinarity, which offers insights to work on historical consciousness and cultural memory: important aspects to understand the past as well as to favour a seismic risk awareness.

Keywords: earthquake history; memory

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1. Introduction

Forty years from the 23 November 1980, much has been said about the Irpinia earthquake, and any socio-historical reading can be submerged by such vast records. Indeed, the event immediately focused the world's gaze on that little-known and remote land of Southern Italy; the concern was also shown by the generous chain of international solidarity. After all, the memory of this broad mobilization is alive and still visible in the place names, as in the case of the "Villaggio Italo-Canadese" of San Mango sul Calore—built with the help of Canadians—or the "Bergamo condominium" of Lioni, funded by Bergamo's citizens (Northern Italy) [1]. Furthermore, the rescues on such a large-scale showed different visions of emergency management, exposing cultural barriers other than solidarity between peoples [2]. Several generations have been affected by the events or wrapped by their consequences over time. Volunteers who flocked as rescuers remained bonded to that memory. In a land branded by emigration, some came back to help; many others left, while the remittances from abroad supported the reconstruction. Some enriched themselves; others simply rolled up their sleeves to go on. The lobbies looked for business. Meanwhile, political struggle enhanced civil protection, seismic risk mapping and safe practices. Ultimately, interests of all kinds and new settlements upset the anthropic impact in the area, polarizing the national choices. In other words, territories and communities visibly changed along with institutions, which were urged to rethink themselves. The events involved scientists of every order and degree. First of all, who rushed to help and then to study: working on the field as well as on theoretical elaboration, they rewrote the history of earthquakes in Italy, generating tools and knowledge, nowadays patrimony of all. The Irpinia-Basilicata earthquake appeared, from the start, a fracture in the history of Italy.

2. About History and the Earthquake: An Interesting Relation

A careful scholar noted that earthquake disasters happened in Italy on average every 4–5 years in the last 150 years, urging more attention from historians, regretting historiography with earthquakes "outside the history" and low memory of the risk [3]. The

reflection is reasonable. Nevertheless, the question invests the role of the humanities and, specifically, of history as a discipline. Science has gained sound knowledge, offering ideas, proposals and hard data on the "Irpinia earthquake". From the first days, the scientific community arose with an unprecedented mobilization, setting up coordination around the Vesuvius Observatory—the oldest in the world, founded in 1841. The observatory was historically an attractor for the scholars and was close to the disaster sites. Hence, it immediately became a reference point, hosting, just in the aftermath of the earthquake, the earlier operative meetings. [4–6] Certainly, historical disciplines' perspective is not quite the same as other sciences: events gain sense within the "historical" narration, and this process needs "time". Moreover, it depends on the contemporary viewpoint. That not for neglecting "objectivity"—destroyed towns are destroyed towns—but for how semiotic contexts shape the representation of the past [7]. It is interesting, for example, how the controversial concept of resilience—adaptive resilience, post-disaster resilience and so forth—can influence the historical interpretation in the light of present-time mechanisms—may be showing the limits of the authoritarian/military emergency management and the marginalization of the communities from post-disaster choices [8]. Moreover even, it is enlightening how historical analysis can decode an interview, showing meanings materialized only with time. However, the "free will" of the scholars is both the pivot and matter for the discipline, judging what to highlight, transmit or leave out. Very roughly, the contemporary perspective shapes the past as history. These issues would lead us off-topic, but here it is just important to remember that these matters exist. Despite the instances of objectivation and measurement influence now strongly the social sciences, historians remain essentially anchored to holistic views.

Earthquakes come with Italian history; just to think of great twentieth-century disasters like those of Messina (1908), Marsica (1915), Belice (1968), Friuli (1976), Irpinia (1980); or the more recent of L'Aquila (2009) and the others happened all along the Appennini Mountain chain in the twentieth-first. The infinite seconds of any seism have marked the "land of the thousand bell towers". In addition to the pars destruens, all along the centuries, the earthquake has molded the forma urbis, as the recent case of L'Aquila has brought back to general attention [9]. Moreover, seismic events shaped the morphology of vast territories, scattered settlements, updated governing praxis, as has been shown by recent natural hazard studies [10]. Then the crucial issue remains how and if "earthquake" dwells in the memory of the country. No understanding, no safety plan, zoning, prevention, recovery or omission make sense without reference to "memory" [11]. Many events were "unexpected" due to a lacking narrative and also by psychological and emotional removal of disaster memory. Hence, the nexus earthquake-history-memory emerges as both a slippery and focal point.

The issue about the historians" attention does not concern the omission of disasters and their consequences. It rather concerns—looking at Italian historiography—a reluctance to think of "earthquake" as a special interpretative habitat in the critical context of general history. About the Irpinia earthquake, the historians had reflected on the social problems arisen due to "the worst Italian disaster from the Second World War"—as it was immediately recognized by international public opinion. The State institutions have been shaken, while the inadequacy and anachronism of the Italian ruling classes have been brought to light [12,13]. From the beginning, aid and reconstruction also meant conflict, criminality, material and moral ravage, and bloated investment for this endless "emergency". In this scenario, the historians adopted traditional approaches to studying the events. Ultimately, the related geological and environmental studies—and in general of hard sciences—were not really taken into account when elaborating historical analysis. Nowadays, after investigations and with the new generations, the scholars began to sense the interpretative limits of the "Irpiniagate"—to use a journalistic term—putting the earthquake of 1980 in the view of a slightly more comprehensive version of the general Italian history [14]. Moreover, recently, the earthquake–history connection as "disaster narrative" seems to revive the historiography, while new studies widen the discipline on the socio-anthropological side

and towards a sociology of disaster [15]. It sounds like an “earthquake” can shake even academic “resilience”.

3. Shaking Land, Shake the State

The date of 23 November 1980 has been fixed in the collective memory by a jarred audiotape aired months later on radio, in which earthquake disturbingly rumbles over a folk music track. In 1970, a reference law had set an overall groundwork about “Rules on relief and assistance to disaster victims—Civil Protection” [16]: it concerned the emergency, the definition of “disasters”, and the commitment of the state. A subsequent regulation should have ensured the law’s application, but it was not made. However, that evening of November 1980 showed the absolute unpreparedness of the state, although only four years had passed since another terrible earthquake, namely that of Friuli (1976). The command chain was unclear. No information, no electricity, no telephone line, no coordination. After the one of Rome, the Turin fire department sent right away its firemen: many men came from the affected areas of South, and that helped the rescues. They camped in Avellino, the main city of the area, in harsh conditions and without food: all its 119 district municipalities were hit. Firemen most readily dealt with the difficulties of mountain localities, often unreachable, while the Italian army—at the time, a military force of conscription—took longer to arrive. Similar initiatives started everywhere, among the confusion and the incompetence of territorial authority. In the villages, local “carabinieri” and volunteers dig right away. Rescue vehicles, equipment and expertise, coffins were all missing. Food was scarce, and squads gave up their rations to the victims. Once again, the political agenda and social behavior had ignored the past experiences and environmental risk: the consequences were clear. On average, the earliest significant help arrived after more or less five days. On 23 November, the President of the Republic, Sandro Pertini, had just returned to Rome after an unofficial state visit to the Hellenic Republic. On the 24th, after having welcomed the UK PM Margaret Thatcher, he left for the disaster region. On 25th, Pertini reached the earthquake sites by helicopter, despite the contrariety of the PM Arnoldo Forlani, ministers and advisers. The next day, in a discourse to the nation, the President reported the desperate situation and denounced the political responsibilities; the coordination centers, planned in 1970, had never been realized [17]. That day, the historical newspaper of South Italy—“Il Mattino”—suggested 10.000 deaths: the front page had an international echo and soon became a symbol [1,18]. Everything happened under the sight of the world.

Much has been written on the political struggle, the interests, the dreams and the betrayal, the outputs due to the Irpinia 1980 [14]. To have an idea, the dossier of Deputy House of 2009 reported, for the quake of 23–24 November 1980, around 200 municipalities affected in Campania and Basilicata regions, about 60 of that severely damaged, 2.914 deaths, 8800 injured, 280,000 displaced/homeless, 150,000 buildings to rebuild, 47.5 billion euro (currency evaluation at 2008) for the reconstruction of disaster areas, excluding other costs like mortgages and tax benefits, and 17.5 billion for Naples—the last funds were related to the earthquake, but linked to specific law 219/1981, urged by the social tension of the city [19]. Still, the so-called “Milleproroghe Act” (2017, art. 9) included the renewal of the commissioner for ongoing issues related to the Irpinia earthquake (considering the period 1980–1981), pointing to long-run implications. After all, several municipalities still report sites for prefab housing that survived here and there—as in Avellino province—sometimes used, mostly abandoned. In some localities, “temporary” housings still exist [1,20].

Different parameters about damages may touch up some estimates, but the key figures are clear. The Irpinia-Basilicata earthquake was the strongest seismic event (Mw 6,9) in Italy in the last 100 years. Felt throughout the peninsula, particularly affected the regions of Campania and Basilicata—the last also named Lucania—harming more than 800 locations. Fifteen municipalities in the Avellino, Salerno and Potenza districts were almost destroyed. Even damages to the natural environment and the hydrogeological instability were huge,

although the emergency needs of the populations focused for a long time on the urban settlements [21].

On the historical horizon, the dynamics between disaster and institutions—or emergency and institutions—can conceal recurrent patterns. The symbolic universe of the dominion over nature/territory concerns the bases itself of the institutional power: not by chance, in Ancien Régime, royal gardens ruled the reluctant nature showing, metaphorically, the sovereign order over chaos. In a long-run historical perspective, symbolic and social schemes can be repeated. One of these concerns the need to reaffirm the government authority—shaken by the crisis and the impotence in the face of nature—and to offer a narrative of the events. In addition, the naming of governing commissioners to deal with an emergency, as an adaptive response, is a recurrency in history; in the past, as a step of the state-building, in 1980 as a lack of consideration of the seismic risk in an ordinary state commitment.

Overall, the new perception of the risk improved institutions and approaches. One of the most visible examples was the enhancement of the civil protection department. However, above all, there was impressive enforcement of the public role of science. A grassroots mobilization involved scholars of all kinds, from students to academics. Practically, a generation of young graduates—among the first rescuers or subsequently involved in assistance, studies and reconstruction—participated in the events and remained tied to this experience also as experts and professionals. This social adherence gathered around a scientific network in full reorganization. Just before the first Irpinia-Basilicata shock, earthquake studies were a task of various institutions, including the Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica (ING, now known as INGV). At the time, the National Research Council (CNR) had a section for the study on the territory, involving seismic and volcanic risk [22] and, from 1976 (year of Friuli earthquake), it was carrying out the "Progetto Finalizzato Geodinamica" (PFG). Many scholars—often students and young researchers—had known the Irpinia area through this project as well as the Progetto Finalizzato Energetica, both promoted by CNR. Immediately after the earthquake, the Vesuvian Observatory took on the coordination of the "geodynamics" network and the scientific mobilization: the historical volcanology observatory became a leading reference [6,23]. In the following years, the scientific network was renewed; expertise and practices were improved, thanks to an extraordinary collaboration among such research institutions, universities and other organizations. It is noteworthy the strengthen of seismic mapping and historical seismology, as shown by the catalog of strong earthquakes in Italy [24]; inquiring geological settings linked to ground deformation and infrastructure matters [25]; zoning and building laws; the long-run studies on seismic fragility for Italian RC buildings [26]; the evolution of paradigms and incubators involving academy and public administration [27]; the update of financial strategies. In short, the Irpinia earthquake prompted processes that have influenced and daily influence the lives of millions of people beyond their awareness of these processes.

4. Memory: A Complicated Matter

Conza della Campania suffered seismic disasters in 1466, 1517, 1694 and 1732, yet the old country was still there when, in 1980, 90% of the houses collapsed; only then people decided to abandon the ancient settlement. It was 9 km away from the epicenter, made by buildings with often no foundations and leaning against each other on two unstable hills. San Mango del Calore suffered a destructive earthquake in 1732, but it was there that night of 23 November to be destroyed, with its inadequate housing and its landslides. The nearby Calitri was struck by the shock and by following incidents including a slump-earth flow that moved 23 million cubic meters of land, but similar things had already happened with the earthquakes of 1694 (X MCS), 1805, 1910 (IX MCS) and 1930 [28]. "Histoire événementielle" is not enough to explain such resilience or to avoid such recurrent exposition to the natural hazard.

Nonetheless, the nexus history-memory came out of the Irpinia earthquake with force, and it is crucial to understand events and behaviors. Beyond the scientific and technical

assumption for the reconstruction, the communities had to look back to their own historical identity. That followed many ways: the "narration" went from a reconstruction as a continuum with the origin up to breaking the link with the past in the name of brave choices. In this range, terms such as *Genius loci*, memory/oblivion, tradition/shock acquired real meaning. Among the most known cases, San Mango sul Calore and Calitri were rebuilt on-site, Conza della Campania was relocated. San Mango, reusing emergency wooden buildings as touristic resources, embraced the grief shaping within a more truthful and accepting narrative that goes beyond the practical outcomes. Conza—where the temporary village has been quite abandoned—focalized its origin on the archaeological site discovered on the ancient settlement—*Compsa*, ancient Roman city—nowadays elevated to a symbol of city and tourist resource. While the old village stays similar to the immediate after quake time, the new town shows contradictory urban and architectural signs. Moreover, the cemetery stays as a barycenter between the old hit hamlet and new town, like a memorial with the graves of the victims. The new industrial facility is near, displaying the territorial policies that occurred with the reconstruction. This view shows the fragmentation of historical memory and how the meaning of the places can change [29].

Visual cesura labeled some localities [1]. Bisaccia, in the province of Avellino, has a background of earthquakes and landslides: destroyed by the 1694 seism, devastated by those of 1732, 1930, 1980. After the last one, the municipality rebuilt the town on a safer site—so-called "piano"—identified in a master plan related to the 1930 event. Nowadays, two Bisaccia exist, the medieval hamlet that clings to the castle and the new city. The last is mostly rebuilt according to the urban plan of a renowned architect, Aldo Loris Rossi. Many people criticize the new urban spaces far from local uses, the otherness of its architectonic-urban codecs, the harsh contrast with a landscape dotted by wind turbines [30]. Nonetheless, some appreciate the radical changes based on anti-seismic criteria and unordinary ideas. On everything, it hovers a sense of suspended lives, perceivable at the sight of uncompleted and run-down public housings. The last scene is common in several post-quake localities. Moreover, beyond the cases, it coincides with a trend of the Apennine mountains range: between 1946 and 2000, in a context of depopulation of mountains, 3.5 new buildings were erected for every lost inhabitant, with an impressive rate of unoccupied dwellings [14,31]. Contrasting hydrogeological instability and seismic risk with non-essential buildings is quite a contradiction. Moreover, if the "semantization" of the sites depends on the community, which community we are talking about is a real question referring to holiday presences, migration and many more "absent" actors. The "quality" of the community influenced the decision-making process as well as the leading values of the reconstruction. These are matters that historians generally leave out, especially in the light of globalization: when, after all, there are the turbines to characterize the new skyline of Bisaccia.

Indeed, identity memorials are never just tangible but often related to a system of territorial relationships. In the case of Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi, the self-perception of its role in the region—having, before the events, a Hospital, a Court and other public services for the zone—worked as an ideal starting point, likewise to the wrecked medieval core. Hence, people considered its lost role as a reference and recalled this feature by setting up hosting camps, reconstruction commissions and offices. Social studies took on board these aspects, checking local archives and recovering interesting accounts [32]. Moreover, here and there appeared a "resilience" to change the balance between towns, an aspect that is both related to practical interests and the need to hold onto their identity.

People affected by the Irpinia earthquake had shaped the agrarian and mountain landscape as well as the urban scenery. Their way of life improved biodiversity, gave semantic sense to the environment and played a part in the dynamics of the natural hazard. This puts delicate questions upon subjects, languages and contexts of the "memory". Melito Irpino had suffered earthquakes and landslides during the twentieth century and before, and it had been already relocated in 1980: the earthquake just accelerated the demolition of the ancient site. An elderly inhabitant—a "privileged eye-witness" of the urban changes

and keeper of important pictures and cinematographic patrimony—said: "In my heart, there is that beautiful country that you do not see, but I feel" [33]. This speech reflected the fracture among generations that did not share the same experience/imagination of the place: the bricks crumbled, but their meaning too; material marks go together with the gazes that give sense to them.

Very roughly, the bonds commonly collected under the concept of "memory" show how the earthquake–history nexus could be problematic, not because simply unclear, but because it is fundamentally open, dynamic and debatable. Yet, the semantization of the events, the explanation of settlements and landscapes, the self-understanding of a community, all these depend on it.

We can sum up the issues on two levels. The first concerns the commitment of historians on the study on the earthquakes, and this case of the Irpinia earthquake. As mentioned, we begin to include earthquakes in a more general Italian history [14]. However, the difficulty of considering earthquakes as interpretative spaces with characteristics, and developing approaches and languages for them, remains; not simply to add suggestions and records. In this regard, it is interesting how a great part of the literature about the Irpinia earthquake is fundamentally linked to memorials, experienced journalism, literary production. In a way, it could not be otherwise for the impact of this seismic event: this narrative expresses a collective need. On the other side, this production has not been accompanied by an equivalent historical reflection. The wide use of the term "crater" to indicate the area of the 1980 earthquake, as well as the reception of simple interviews as *tout court* expression of oral history, are just two examples of semantic slip from a calibrated lexicon; these simplifications introduce confusing elements, but also testify the disengage of the historians from a disciplinary narrative. The second—but not secondary—level concerns the contribution of the historical studies to the disaster memory and then to the cultural memory [34]. Without dwelling on the classification details, that "memory" is an expression of the communities/groups/individuals and how they process traumatic events. It can keep knowledge about natural hazards and inspire adaptive behaviors regarding risk. As long-term and future-oriented memory, it needs to be fed or/and reinvented, using every kind of tool, such as museums, acting and narration, festivals and commemorations. In this perspective, they also become basic communication, exercises, education and games—especially involving young people—to raise awareness of the risk and consciousness of history/fragility of the communities [35]. That implies working for an intergenerational memory too and, indirectly, for the social cohesion around shared values. Ultimately, the cultural memory appears at the same time prelusive, inclusive and consequent of any educational process to promote a seismic risk awareness.

5. Sweeping the Past, Reshaping the Past

Forty years means a generation shift. Moreover, in the areas affected by the earthquake of 1980, that change went along with an astonishing modification of the landscapes too. In visual culture terms, it is not just an esthetic matter but rather a semiotic issue. The Irpinia earthquake hit mostly mountains and rural areas with little towns, low urbanization and people of reserved customs. Their "well-known landscape" was not a frame around the communities but an expression of the human presence. Its springs have been poles of life for centuries; its country lanes age-old routes; its square were crossroads of active awaiting and encounters; its biodiversity came from centuries of hard-working lives. Briefly, the landscape expressed ways of life. After the earthquake, the changes were deep and fast. The urban and the rural landscape mirrored the historical fracture caused by the quake, widespread anomie and the revolution of the social and economic structures. In this context, the self-understanding of the communities concerning the environment, and the meaning of the places themselves, were fragmented. The migration, which already was part of a longer-term trend [14], favored the alienation from the settlements.

Pressed by harsh social issues, the major cities used their political weight to get as much as possible by the emergency funds; mainly Naples and its hinterland, where the

earthquake had struck, but, above all, inflamed housing problems [36]. A trivialization of the core-periphery paradigms as a spot-refrain accompanied the investments. Hence, demographic and political poles worked as spending outposts, fostering top-down economic models on those interior and "periphery" areas which had been the main victims of the disaster. The "emergency" catalyzed political-economic interests and changed the spending centers. The involvement of crime upset the life of the whole country. It became necessary a parliamentary anti-mafia committee face and stopped corruption and territorial mafia organizations from an extraordinary social penetration, the main one being "Camorra" [14,37]. Among the consequences, they influenced regional planning. The law 219/1981 was about rebuilding, but it favored demolition and urban reconstruction rather than the recovery of boroughs of historical and architectural value. A sort of general amnesia facilitated the loss of cultural heritage, compounded by expropriations pursued by foreigners economically stronger than residents or/and in agreement with local ruling classes. The same law made room for infrastructures and industrial facilities—many short-lasting while some became important for the territory—that branched out in a rural world. Industrialization involved areas like San Mango sul Calore, Guardia dei Lombardi, Nusco, Morra de Sanctis as well as the highway Ofantina-bis.

After forty years, some settlements are dependent on migrant remittances, exposing the inadequacy of development models. In particular, "High Irpinia" seems a marginal system for the general socioeconomic process; some localities come across as out of general time. Nonplace, the disappearance of historical landmarks without a coherent rewriting of the rural and urban landscape, poor territorial planning and urban sprawl, all that are now debated among scholars [29]. Useless to list the cases with pros and cons. Our focus is that the earthquake of 23 November 1980 unleashed a powerful change, but that was accompanied by the disorientation of the memory, a disorder of the community references. Top-down decisions, experiments, speculations and successful choices concerned a land shocked in both seismic and metaphorical sense. Induced from the outside, some models of economic growth seem currently outdated. Therefore, there is a need for a new participatory regional planning that would take into account comparative studies [29].

There is undergoing a recomposition of the cultural memory driven by wider civil participation, reinventing traditions and reshaping the past. High-quality agro-food production linked to ancient anthropic presence—for example, Irpinia has got fine grapes varieties—rural tourism, festivals, biodiversity promotion, reflect the effort to recompose its history, processing the trauma. These trends related to the territories hit by the Irpinia earthquake can be transposed in an international context of studies on heritage and identity [38].

Just like the current pandemic shakes the use/meaning of the spaces, the connection earthquake-history-memory stimulates a reflection on those used, forgotten or provisory places that marked the post-quake Irpinia territory. Between the disorder and bureaucratic reconstruction, they are interstices of the disaster memory. As previously mentioned, in San Mango, the provisional recoveries have been converted in a touristic hypothesis. Use and reuse of these cabins, beyond the practical implications, recall the wish of the community to metabolize the past and, eventually, to produce storytelling. The case of San Mango is not isolated [1]. Romagnano al Monte—gold medal for civil merits: an honor earned for its reconstruction effort—has been rebuilt far from its former millennial settlement. Metaphorically, the wooden provisory houses signed the passage to the new village from the old one; the last, it is now a closed ghost town. Except for some houses used by the local families, they are now available for tourists or migrants returning to the country for a while. Beyond the logistic solution and the economic aspects, the safekeeping of this temporary landscape is a meaningful symbol of a shared past. There is extensive iconological documentation on the days of the earthquake and those of the reconstruction [1]. We would like to dwell on some aspects of a temporary nature that deal with the disaster memory. For example, in San Potito Ultra, the local administration set thermo-igloos provided by the Sicily Region—i.e., dome houses in expanded polystyrene. This solidarity pattern is recurrent in

Italian history, a sign of national unity. The igloos were inhabited for over twenty years and dismantled in 2015 [39]. There was a consistent flow of families that occupied them one after the other. This was a common phenomenon in the first decades after the Irpinia earthquake and reached challenging moments in the not far city of Naples. The footprint of past lives dots the "residual" spaces of the rural and urban landscape, as well as the material ruins of abandoned workplaces. Just recently, scholars have tried to read the landscape of the earthquake areas as a semiotic and anthropological scenery, with an eye to the symbolization of the space evoked by Marc Augé and to the so-called *délaissé* places by Gilles Clément [40]. These sites mirrored the new hierarchies of poverty, the contrasts and the solidarities between inhabitants, the succession of the generations. They were part of the social recomposition. In this sense, reused or not, restored or degraded, these sites are symptoms of a complicated memory and pieces of the post-earthquake dynamic landscape. Tangible and intangible signs have been swept away or reinterpreted by the consequence of the disaster. Moreover, within all these things, we can see the processing of the trauma and a reshaping of the cultural memory. The Irpinia-Basilicata earthquake was not just a fracture in a linear story—of course, it was too—but the beginning of a more overall rethink of the local and national history. In this sense, it involves the historians' role and their interpretative approaches.

6. Conclusions

When the Irpinia-Basilicata earthquake struck, the trauma of the disaster was immediately associated with the vivid memory of Belice (1968) and Friuli earthquakes (1976). The two events had deeply affected the country. Furthermore, the last one had coincided with the renewal and reorganization of the studies on earthquakes and their impact [6,23,41]. Nevertheless, because of the energy released, the highest number of victims, the responsibilities and the consequences, the Irpinia earthquake immediately appeared in the international press as the worst Italian disaster from the Second World War [12,13], grabbing more attention due to the deaths, the slowness of rescue, the villages erased by maps [42]. There is a before and an after the earthquake of 23 November 1980. Italy changed, painfully, and the disaster acted as the detonator, starting processes whose consequences are still visible. The commemoration of the 40 years since this event may be an opportunity to reflect, not only on the history of the earthquake itself but—it is the focus of this paper—on the problematic connection between the Irpinia earthquake and historical discipline. The challenge for historians is to overcome disciplinary fences, considering the "earthquake" as an interpretive space, both specific and complex. In this view, the reference earthquake-history-memory became, essentially, a hermeneutical circle. This attitude can shed light on the Irpinia earthquake as well as on aspects closely connected to historical understanding. Memory, landscape, identity, participation, processing trauma, disaster narrative are some of many interpretative focuses. It is not just about approaching earthquakes as part of the general history. It is about grabbing the insights that come from the study of the earthquake to refine the disciplinary tools. This also questions the role of history and historians in this regard.

In this view, social-historical studies can also support the demand for knowledge and mitigation of the risk that comes from citizens and communities living in seismic areas. This means paying attention to social memory, the consciousness of the seismic risk and natural hazard, without forcing the historical discipline towards distant topics or teleological instances. We have touched just some points to reflect.

"Don't worry. She's the Earth cradling you" is a common saying to calm the children in some South American countries, a tender metaphor that makes "comprehensible" the events. Pacha Mama Andine culture is far away from postmodern society yet, the need to accept the earthquake as a possibility of life, perhaps through an inclusive narration, is an instance sharable everywhere, in any culture.

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