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CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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Fault Lines: Thinking (and Writing) about Earthquakes and Historical Change

72. Minisymposium des Zentrums für Umweltgeschichte

Präsentation:

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Can earthquakes speak? The idea that "nature" actively participates in historical change is probably the most fundamental tenet of environmental history. Earthquakes seem a clear example of that agency, and especially so in the history of urbanism and the built environment. Yet, several problems confront us when trying to define the way this agency operates. We can hardly blame exclusively the geophysical trigger for the destruction of built environments, ignoring human responsibilities. The transformation that may or may not follow the seismic event, moreover, cannot be easily connected to the earthquake itself, as it may depend on different agendas and processes.

Therefore, to understand if and how earthquakes play a role in urban historical change, one needs to devise specific analytical and narrative strategies. It is indeed necessary to follow the multiple threads that converge into the seismic disaster only to diverge right after it, and to articulate the historical analysis across multiple temporal scales. In particular, it is crucial to fully incorporate into the analysis not only the disaster and the reconstruction, but also the transformations that were going on before, to distinguish long-term continuities from ruptures that can therefore more convincingly be attributed to the effects of the geophysical trigger.

In my book Fault Lines (Berghahn 2015) I have applied these questions and methods to the empirical investigation of two of the most tragic and destructive seismic disasters in the history of modern Italy: the 1908 Messina and the 1968 Belice Valley (Sicily) earthquakes. In both cases, two brand new environments rose from the ruins of the earthquakes. By looking at the history of these two places on the longer term, we can recognize how much of their transformation was prepared before the earthquakes, and was part of larger urbanization processes in modern Italy. From this perspective, however, we can also see how much of it was the result of the multiple and sometimes counterintuitive interaction of geophysical forces with material structures and human expectations and actions, thus giving voice to the earthquake in more-than-human histories of urban change.

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