

RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

RESEARCH HANDBOOKS IN SOCIOLOGY

Series Editor: Hans-Peter Blossfeld, *Professor of Sociology, University of Bamberg, Germany*

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Research Handbook on Public Sociology

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RESEARCH HANDBOOKS IN SOCIOLOGY

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13. Public sociology in disaster situations: critical engagement and prefiguration against defuturing processes

Laura Centemeri and Davide Olori

INTRODUCTION

Sociological research on disasters is strongly linked to public sociology because it is intertwined with public processes of accountability and demands for victim reparation. Historically, disaster research has emerged as ‘policy sociology’ (Burawoy 2004) and has progressively focused on the priorities dictated by government agencies in relative isolation from the theoretical debates of ‘professional sociology’ (Tierney 2007). With the influence of disciplines such as critical geography and anthropology, however, disaster sociology has also seen the development of critical disaster sociology in parallel with the growing relevance of crisis situations related to the intensification of economic globalization, the simultaneous emergence of a ‘global risk society’ (Beck 2006) and the deepening of ecological problems, especially climate change (Tierney 2007). Within this context, the public intellectual and activist Naomi Klein produced a highly debated and influential analysis of the disaster-prone nature of contemporary societies as related to the neoliberal ‘shock doctrine’ that guides ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein 2007).

Examples abound of sociologists engaged in supporting processes of inquiry and denunciation alongside disaster-affected communities, such as those related to mobilizations for ‘environmental justice’ (Allen et al. 2017; Jobin 2021). The environmental justice framework was first developed by social movement activists and was then used and reflected on as an analytical tool in academia before returning to the social movements domain enriched with new understandings and perspectives (Martinez-Alier et al. 2014). This example confirms that the path that critical sociological knowledge travels to arrive at public relevance, both as a contribution to the transformation of common sense and as an engagement with specific publics, is non-linear. Activists and other actors engaged on the ground are often at the source (rather than being the final recipients) of theoretical innovations (Arribas Lozano 2018). The public relevance of sociological knowledge thus results from diverse, interconnected forms of circulation across the boundaries that separate academia and other social spheres of knowledge production.

Based on her personal experience, the sociologist Diane Vaughan (2006) reflected on the ‘relational complexity’ and porous, overlapping nature of the boundaries between the categories that Burawoy (2005a) identified as ‘professional sociology’, ‘critical sociology’, ‘policy sociology’ and traditional ‘public sociology’. Vaughan also emphasized the difficulties of working in the interstices between professional and public sociology, especially the ‘emotional work’ that this liminal position imposes on researchers, and the risks for junior researchers’ future career prospects. It is nevertheless precisely this interstitial condition that:

(1) ensures the permeability of the boundaries that separate the different types of sociology; and (2) explains how theoretical frameworks can become meaningful resources for social actors engaged in the construction of public issues and transformative social processes.

Building on these premises, we first discuss different ways in which the sociology of disaster can be analysed as a public sociology engaged in the elaboration of: (1) useful expertise for public action; (2) critical approaches that reveal the social determinants of disasters; (3) socioanthropological approaches focused on sense-making processes. We then argue that the worsening of systemic crises as a result of the increasing financialized and globalized nature of contemporary capitalism (Foundational Economy Collective 2018) today requires a critical and ‘reconstructive’ (in the sense of Vandenberghe 2018) sociology of disasters that is actively engaged both in denouncing structural inequalities and in collaborating in ‘prefigurative’ experiments with social movements, affected citizens and ‘reflective practitioners’ (Trainor et al. 2018). In particular, the public engagement of sociologists and other social scientists in disaster situations is crucial to initiate and sustain collaborations among affected actors in order to design alternative, place-based pathways to recovery.

To substantiate this last point, we draw on our experience of conducting research on disasters in the Italian context (Centemeri 2010; Mela et al. 2016). In particular, we briefly revisit the activities of the collective, self-managed research group Emidio di Treviri (EdT) in the aftermath of the 2016 earthquake in the Central Apennines. EdT has been conducting research (and disseminating knowledge) on the various dimensions of the post-earthquake recovery in this region. Since its beginnings, it has been oriented towards creating an interstitial space of encounter between theoretical reflections and direct social action alongside the populations most affected by the disaster and, more broadly, the affected territories and their ecologies (Olori and Menghi 2019). As we will argue, this initiative shows the difficulties of applying public sociology in ‘fragile areas’ (Osti and Carrosio 2017), that is, (mainly rural) contexts in which communities have long experienced processes of fragmentation, which in some cases have led to their almost total disappearance. The long-term engagement of sociologists is essential to support the reconstructive processes, including first and foremost collective ‘capabilities for voice’ (de Leonardis et al. 2012), which can elaborate and advocate an alternative vision of recovery to that promoted by aggressive pro-growth coalitions whose land valorization logics actually increase socioecological vulnerability to old and new catastrophes.

FROM EXTERNAL SHOCKS TO STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES: COMPETING UNDERSTANDINGS OF DISASTERS IN SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIETY

The consolidation of disaster research as a distinctive field in the social sciences is related to a need for expertise in disaster situation management that emerged in the United States in the 1950s. While the very early sociological studies of disasters examined theoretical questions (for example, the dynamics of social change), the focus soon shifted to questions more directly related to disaster prevention and management. Disasters were understood at the time as events whose common denominator was the abrupt disruption of ‘normality’ due to a sudden external shock. In the geopolitical scenario of the Cold War, the question of how to respond to such disruptive events was key for the United States (US) government, mainly for military defence reasons.

In fact, disasters at the time (no matter what their phenomenology) were considered equivalent to war strikes (Gilbert 1998). The research on disasters thus focused on understanding people's reactions and behaviours in the face of sudden disruptive events with the aim of developing tools and procedures to manage populations 'under attack'. However, this meant that sociological knowledge became subordinated to the technical knowledge produced by the so-called 'hard sciences', such as engineering and the natural sciences (Cabane and Revet 2015). Moreover, an excessive proximity with governmental bodies led to a focus on disaster situations in the so-called 'developed countries'.

This understanding of disasters as sporadic, exogenous events has been challenged since the 1970s by a group of young, critical, politically engaged geographers (including Ben Wisner, Phil O'Keefe and Terry Cannon) who have shown how poverty resulting from forms of economic and political domination was the key factor explaining humanitarian crisis situations in the Global South that had supposedly been triggered by 'natural' disasters, such as the Pakistan floods and the Sahel drought (Revet 2020).

These critical approaches, which had their roots in a political economy perspective inspired by Marxism, were also influenced by contemporary developments in systems thinking that provided evidence of the anthropogenic nature of the world ecological crisis. They led to the emergence of the notion of vulnerability as a key concept for understanding disasters as socio-ecological phenomena. The vulnerability approach progressively gained centrality not only in disaster research, but also in the construction of an international space of disaster governance through the activism of the researchers who had first promoted this perspective (Revet 2020, p. 44).

The vulnerability approach highlighted the observable diversity of intra- and intercommunity responses to disaster, and explained this diversity through a combination of structural, socioeconomic, political and ecological factors. Disaster was analysed as 'the result of underlying community logic, of an inward and social process' (Gilbert 1998, p. 3). In other words, the understanding of disaster evolved, from an isolated event caused by an external agent, into the outcome of long-term processes that had generated conditions of vulnerability. Even in so-called 'developed countries', disasters were shown to have different impacts on a population within the same city, region or nation, depending on socioeconomic indicators including class, gender, age and race (Cutter 1996).

Sociologists have contributed to this debate by developing an approach focused on 'social capital' and based on an in-depth exploration of the role that different types of social relationships ('strong ties' and 'weak ties') play in generating or, conversely, reducing vulnerabilities. This focus on social ties involves recognizing the importance of local knowledge and local actors for effective disaster management (Dynes 2005).

These developments also paved the way for linking disaster research with the movement for environmental justice and against environmental racism.¹ More generally, they saw non-governmental organizations (NGOs) playing an increasingly important role in disaster situations, according to two main logics of intervention. Some NGOs would concentrate on risk education initiatives and would often be criticized for their lack of sensitivity to the diversity of cultural contexts; while others would promote the building of a 'risk culture' based on local knowledge and practices. Although the NGOs usually took cultural diversity into account, they tended to have a quite romanticized vision of the local community that foreclosed internal diversity, tensions and struggles (Revet and Langumier 2015).

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: FROM RESILIENCE TO THE OPENING OF ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

A growing awareness of the social determinants of disasters and evidence of the ‘slow’ (see Nixon 2011), pervasive, long-lasting nature of the processes generating risks both for societal or community life, and for individuals’ environments and their bodies, have made it increasingly difficult to clearly define where and when a disaster begins and ends, and to distinguish between natural and man-made disasters.

In addition, the emergence in the 1980s of the notion of the ‘risk society’ in parallel with an increase in crisis situations, such as those related to the HIV epidemic and mad cow disease (Gilbert and Henry 2006), highlighted the questions of risk communication, risk perception and risk acceptability, and shifted sociologists’ attention to the production of meaning and knowledge in contexts of radical uncertainty.

Disasters were approached at the time as events resulting from the loss of ‘key standpoints in common sense, and the difficulty of understanding reality through ordinary mental frameworks’ (Gilbert 1998, p. 9). This difficulty was considered to be generated by the growing complexity that characterized the relationship at the societal level between human, ecological and technological systems.

Acknowledging radical uncertainty meant paying attention to how a disaster and its consequences were made the object of a variety of sense-making struggles; that is, struggles around the meaning of what had happened and how it had affected the given order of things and the possible future (Centemeri 2010, 2015). These developments also led to a questioning of the normativity implicit in categories such as disaster (Calandra 2020), risk, damage and recovery (Centemeri et al. 2022), showing the contentious nature of apparently consensual frameworks such as ‘Building Back Better’.²

Social scientists have thus proved the existence of forms of exclusion regarding the types of knowledge considered relevant to public action, such as in the contrast between scientific and ‘lay’ knowledge. This is not simply a cognitive issue, however, but more generally concerns the taking into account of different systems of meaning, saliency and value; that is, a plurality of ways of knowing and being, or ‘ontologies’ (Leach et al. 2005).

The relevance of this form of exclusion is today at the heart of the critical anthropology of disasters, because crisis situations are increasingly managed in a globalized context through ‘frictions’ (Tsing 2004) between local contexts of action and instruments of action designed at global level. This question is equally relevant to the sociology of participatory practices insofar as it underlines the normativity implicit in the idea of stakeholders (Cheyns 2011).

More recently, new types of disasters have emerged from the interplay between the dynamics of global capitalism, the rise of the information society, the proliferation of transboundary crises and the emergence of ecological threats at the planetary level. These include climate change, financial collapses, terrorism and pandemics. According to Quarantelli et al. (2018, p. 61), ‘we are at another important historical juncture with the emergence of a new distinctive class of disasters and crises not often seen before’. Cabane and Revet (2015) noted that this juncture is marked by a return to centrality of technical solutions and approaches to disasters that are dominated by the natural sciences, especially climate science, and a sidelining of the social sciences, which are confined to the study of local adaptation and resilience capacities.

In this context, the notions of resilience and resilient communities have gained momentum both in the professional sociology of disasters and in public policy discourses and grassroots

mobilizations (for example, the Transition Towns Movement), thus generating potential interstitial areas of public sociology. At the same time, the ‘social resilience’ framework (Hall and Lamont 2013) promotes a specific normativity that is underpinned by neoliberal policies and narratives and relies on individual and collective capacities to cope with and creatively adapt to unavoidable catastrophes, which are seen as opportunities for change.

In this scenario, where the systemic catastrophe is diluted in the ordinariness of increasingly precarious and vulnerable social worlds, resilience traps the sociology of disasters in an ‘ancillary’ role. When disaster sociology instead adopts a lens of critical analysis, what emerges is the inexorability of the reproduction of domination structures where the only way to avoid a planetary socioecological collapse is to influence ongoing processes through a radical whole-scale systemic change. Indeed, despite a growing number of international initiatives aimed at disaster risk reduction, including the International Decade for Disaster Reduction (1990–99) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015), the number of disasters has increased dramatically over the past two decades, in parallel with the global increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty, a proven cause of vulnerability and an accelerator of risk and disaster (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2019).

The controversial term ‘Anthropocene’ hypostatizes the vision of the incumbent catastrophe. On the one hand, the Anthropocene framework often reinforces (promises of) technocratic solutions to managing complexity, and reduces the sociologist’s role to promoting the social acceptability of technical fixes. On the other hand, critical sociologists risk being trapped in the impasses of becoming prophets of doom.

Faced with systemic complexity, the sociological analysis of disasters can adopt an approach that is focused on monitoring long-term ‘critical processes’ (Chateauraynaud and Debaz 2017); that is, it can follow the evolution of scientific debates, public problems and post-disaster reconstruction processes while engaging in place-based ‘experimental inquiries’ (Pappas 2014). In fact, it is only by examining both the long-term dynamics and the specific contexts that it is possible to identify the factors that can turn certain events into ruptures, emergencies, upsurges, bifurcations or turning points.

Today, renewed forms of engaged public sociology are emerging from the encounter between systemic analysis and situated knowledge in situations of post-disaster recovery, encouraging the creation of ‘publics’ (in Dewey’s sense) that denounce ‘defuturing’ processes; that is, processes of destroying the future by design (Fry 1999, 2020). This implies that an engaged public sociology of disasters should take the form of a research practice that is necessarily collective, collaborative, transdisciplinary, multi-scalar, place-based and inscribed in a long-term dynamic.

This perspective also implies encouraging the involvement of local researchers to study their ‘own’ disasters (see, e.g., Tomassi and Fiorino 2019; Ciccozzi 2013). This point was emphasized by Gaillard (2019) in his reflection on how to ‘decolonize the approach to researching disasters’. A critical sociology of disasters must first come to terms with the fact that, ‘intentionally or not, disaster studies has fuelled an imperialist disaster risk reduction agenda that, in no way, is different to other “sectors” of the broader development agenda’ (Gaillard 2019, p. 13). Gaillard suggested the following possible directions for renewing the critical scope of disaster research: ‘encourage local researchers who know best local contexts to study local disasters’; ‘invite non-Western researchers to collaborate in studying disasters in the West’; ‘move away from Western sources, concepts, and methodologies’ and draw on ‘different epistemologies to reflect different local realities’ (Gaillard 2019, p. 14–15). Gaillard

stressed that ‘transferring power to local scholars to take the lead in studying disasters should be the first political and symbolic move’ (Gaillard 2019, p. 15).

Transferring power to local researchers is not in itself a guarantee of critically engaged public sociology, however. The main point is to promote disaster research that does not simply ‘capitalize’ on catastrophe (Schuller and Maldonado 2016, p. 67), but takes a long-term, place-based approach to the affected organizations, territories and populations. The involvement of local researchers only achieves this goal, however, if it is complemented by a research perspective that takes into account the interconnection of systemic dynamics, sense-making processes, political cultures and local organizational logics.

More specifically, a critical and committed public sociology of disasters today should engage first and foremost in denouncing a management of emergencies that is almost exclusively based on the stakeholder perspective, which implicitly benefits those with clearly identifiable economic interests while excluding alternative ways of framing the situation in terms of public and common goods. However, there are many obstacles facing such a public sociology, and these vary according to the intervention context. In the next section, we examine some of these obstacles in depth within the context of the post-earthquake recovery processes in Italy.

THE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY OF DISASTERS IN ITALY AND THE CENTRAL APENNINE EARTHQUAKE

In Italy, a critically engaged approach to the study of disasters first emerged in the 1960s alongside the first examples of public sociology and mass popular mobilizations in response to the great flood of Florence and the earthquake in the Belice Valley in Sicily.

In 1966, (mainly young) volunteers from all over Italy gathered in Florence to help in the rescue operations after the disastrous flooding of the Arno river, in particular by clearing the mud that had covered the streets and monuments, earning themselves the nickname the ‘mud angels’. This grassroots mobilization was one of the first examples of spontaneous youth mobilizations in Italy.

In 1968, a major earthquake in the Belice Valley in Sicily killed 370 people and displaced more than 70 000. The poor management of this emergency revealed deep social inequalities between Southern Italy and the rest of the country. This was the first time that dramatic disaster scenes had been broadcast on TV in Italy, and the lack of humanitarian aid, the mobilization of volunteers and the scandals of reconstruction were there for all to see. The deep emotional impact of the event turned the ‘post-emergency’ recovery phase into a key public issue, and resulted in a shift away from the still prominent fatalistic interpretation of disastrous events. The sociologist and non-violence activist Danilo Dolci played a crucial role in triggering this dynamic through his research, action and denunciation.³

These grassroots experiences contributed not only to creating the national *Protezione Civile* (Civil Protection) system, but also to permeating the scientific debate. With the prominence at that time of Marxist-inspired critical approaches in the social sciences, the underlying socio-economic causes of such events came to the fore in the political, theoretical and scientific debates on disasters and emergencies. A reading of disasters through the lenses of class relations and class conflicts led to a sociological analysis of industrial (Conti 1977) and ‘natural’ disasters (Cavazzani 1972) as “capitalist crimes”.

While these contributions did not result in a critical sociology of disasters research community, their influence facilitated the local reception of the international sociology of disasters, whose development in Italy was supported by the Disaster Research Center at Delaware University and the Institute of International Sociology of Gorizia as part of an internationalization strategy aimed at broadening the disaster research field.

In the 1990s, Italian social scientists became increasingly involved in the study of technological risks. At the same time, the study of environmental disasters contributed to the emergence of environmental sociology approaches in Italian sociology (Avallone 2010, p. 225).

After the earthquake that destroyed the city of L'Aquila (regional capital of the Abruzzo region) in 2009, there was a resurgence of forms of critical and engaged public sociology of disaster. The emergency management was characterized by a rigid top-down approach, which along with the numerous corruption scandals (Puliafito 2010) sparked widespread protests. Social scientists played a fundamental role in highlighting critical issues in all post-event aspects, including the emergency phase (Ciccozzi 2010), the management of the camps and humanitarian interventions (Bonaccorsi 2009), the reconstruction phase (Alexander 2013), urban planning (Frisch 2009), land use transformation (Olori 2020) and demography (Calandra 2012).

This research activity, however, came mainly from junior, non-tenured researchers and small academic groups (Calandra 2012), so the initiatives struggled to consolidate an analysis that was sufficiently systematic to have an impact on public intervention measures. The creation, on the initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), of the Urban Studies and Regional Science department at the Gran Sasso Science Institute was a late and limited attempt to institutionalize and systematize social sciences' contribution to the analysis of the disaster. This was a missed opportunity to create a research centre that would promote social sciences interventions to support participatory and transformative processes.

This trend was reinforced after the earthquake that hit central Italy on 24 August 2016, causing 299 casualties. Its seismic crater was located at the intersection of the Marche, Umbria, Abruzzo and Lazio regions. Several more seismic events followed, notably those of 26 October and 30 October (6.5 magnitude).

This earthquake was unprecedented for its temporal and geographical extent. It predominantly affected mountain areas that had been classified in Italian legislation as *aree interne* (inner areas) based on indicators of high levels of social vulnerability (see De Rossi 2020). Social vulnerability goes hand in hand with ecological fragility, and both are related to long-term processes of depopulation, demographic ageing and pauperization. These socioeconomic trends have affected the whole Italian mountain region (the Apennines and the Alps) over the last 50 years.

The earthquake areas have seen an exponential acceleration in depopulation and fragmentation due to a management of the emergency phase that was based almost exclusively on displacement, and accompanied by delays in the recovery phase (Emidio di Treviri 2018) and a lack of economic support.

In a context where cultural infrastructure is lacking and with no external support (such as that provided by the OECD in the case of L'Aquila), the development of coordinated post-earthquake research efforts has been difficult. At the same time, the assemblies of volunteers engaged locally in supporting the affected populations have expressed the need from the outset to develop practices of inquiry in order to elaborate the knowledge generated by their

mutualistic practices through a dialogue with scientific research. These mutualistic practices have been a bottom-up response to this emergency through the establishment of a network of self-organized aid (independent of the Protezione Civile system), including self-managed camps and psychological and legal support. These initiatives were intended to support forms of collective action and autonomous territorial planning during the recovery phase.

In December 2016, a call launched across the grassroots mobilization networks led to the creation of the post-earthquake Research Collective EdT.⁴ Dozens of PhD students, academics and professionals have been involved in this self-managed research initiative, which has explored various aspects of the post-earthquake recovery, with a strong commitment in terms of making research results available to the affected populations. Since its beginnings, the group has adopted an openly critical but also place-based perspective, collecting data through immersive fieldwork and other methodologies, and designing research questions in strong collaboration with local actors in the post-disaster processes.

The research conducted at EdT has revealed a number of limitations and difficulties with respect to applying a public, critical and reconstructive sociology in a context such as that of the 2016 earthquake; that is, in the *aree interne* of central Italy. While the voluntary engagement of researchers together with the self-organization of the research work has allowed a high level of autonomy in defining research topics and methods, this logic of employing junior researchers without remuneration has been criticized, and even outright rejected, within the context of a wider debate on the rise of unpaid forms of labour in academia (Coin et al. 2017).

The goal of ‘co-research’ (*conricerca*),⁵ a practice based on the co-definition of the analytical framework and research methodology alongside the collective actors engaged in supporting social transformation, turned out to be (at best) an aspiration rather than a realistic objective. A number of obstacles to achieving this co-research goal have emerged, including the impossibility of prolonged fieldwork owing to the researchers’ precarious working conditions, the displacement of the local populations due to the emergency management, and last but not least, the lockdown periods during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A further difficulty relates to the positivist approach to the role of ‘science’ widely adopted in the public debate. On the one hand, there is a prevailing understanding of science as neutral and detached from social conflicts, which implies that an engaged science is considered not to be objective. As a result, fundamental epistemological issues (how science constructs the knowledge that we then use, for what purpose and, ultimately, for whom) are never properly addressed. On the other hand, science is often confused in the public debate with expertise; that is, with the production of technical solutions. Consequently, efforts to problematize established technical certainties are not taken as contributions to the production of a better understanding of the situation. Both these positions have been difficult to deconstruct (Pugliese 2008).

The initiatives intended to facilitate the co-production of knowledge through the joint involvement of scientists, experts, activists and lay people have been partially successful in some of the ecological struggles that have emerged in the region, in response to recovery projects with a significant environmental impact. Finding effective ways of opening a dialogue with institutional actors – especially those in charge of the recovery process – to publicly discuss EdT’s research results, and of denouncing power inequalities among the supposedly equal stakeholders, have proved difficult, however.

Notwithstanding these limitations, EdT has nevertheless been able to interact in a transformative way with the social worlds in which the research interventions have taken place in

some situations. On the one hand, a variety of local and non-local actors have commended the quality and relevance of the collective's scientific output. Some of its results – such as evidence on delays in emergency management, data on demographic decline, statistics on the medicalization of displaced persons and on land consumption – have been used as an 'informational basis' (Borghi 2018) by earthquake victims, grassroots movements and journalists to make public authorities accountable for their decisions, and to construct public claims. The results have thus been helpful in turning discontent and indignation into forms of collective action.

Many of EdT's research activities in the different local contexts have led to the development of relational networks involving a huge variety of actors. These place-based collaborations have been crucial in terms of defining new research objectives and forms of research practice that are more openly oriented towards supporting 'prefigurative', practice-based processes of 'sustainable materialism' (Schlosberg 2019). This has involved a shift away from an approach to the disaster as a catastrophic event, to an exploration of the long-term and structural determinants accounting for the socioecological fragility of the *aree interne*. In particular, there has been an increasing focus on exploring the relatively recent marginalization of the Apennine territories in the Italian history of economic development (Ciuffetti 2019), and the contribution of the agrosilvopastoral culture in the production and reproduction of common goods (Ostrom 1990). To this end, EdT has supported grassroots social reactivation initiatives, the organization of training schools, and the creation of an archive of independent scientific output on the recovery process and local struggles.

Having uncovered a composite world of practices, identities and interests in the earthquake areas that are sometimes discordant, if not openly conflicting, EdT has identified various directions for action, each with its own specific objectives and strategic paths, thus participating in the creation of a series of local publics that have supported the constitution of partially overlapping collective actors. In this sense, the dynamics triggered by EdT have counteracted the individualization of the experience of the disaster engendered by the displacement measures.

Recovery measures in the region have been tailored to meet the needs specifically of stakeholders who are private property owners, which has contributed to further exacerbating the processes of fragmentation and individualization. In fact, recovery has been framed as the 'revitalization' of the *aree interne* exclusively in terms of economic growth (see Macchiavelli and Olori 2019). The political and academic endorsements of this vision have prevented any serious discussion of an alternative, bottom-up reconstruction guided by objectives aimed at regenerating the mountain socioecosystems in the 'reinhabiting' sense (Centemeri 2019).

The EdT initiative shows the importance of a 'critical public sociology' of disasters, in the sense of a public sociology that goes in search of 'potential and actual counter-hegemonic publics', and tightens 'relations with social movements but not forgetting other publics that are less active, less organized, less articulate' (Burawoy 2005b, p. 390). This is only possible if sociologists accept the challenges of transdisciplinarity while integrating the ecological perspective as a source for theoretical renewal and experimentation with new modes of practical engagement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The EdT initiative represents neither best practice nor a model to be imported to other contexts. This was not the motive for this brief discussion of its activities. Our aim was to contribute to the general discussion on the current challenges faced by the public sociology of disasters in the Anthropocene era by providing experiential insights from a group of researchers who are trying to produce critical and reconstructive sociological knowledge in a disaster situation with its own specific resources and constraints.

This initiative confirms that the public sociology of disasters is necessarily an interstitial practice. In our case, interstitial means first and foremost an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research practice as a prerequisite for investigating territorial contexts characterized by complex socioecological interactions at different levels. It is interstitial, then, in the sense of an openness to collaborating with the actors most directly affected by the disaster. This collaboration is essential if we are to design research interventions that can help to sustain critical and reconstructive processes that have some reasonable hope of resonating with local sensibilities.

A successful interstitial positioning requires autonomy in the definition of research objectives and methods, and above all the potential for continuous redefinition based on lessons learned in the field. This latter condition is difficult to meet in an academic context that increasingly rewards the pursuit of preformatted research objectives.

The autonomy of the EdT Research Collective relies on the voluntary-based engagement of usually junior, non-tenured researchers. The self-organized nature of EdT partly explains the problems it has faced in not being taken seriously as a qualified partner in the elaboration of public policies. Furthermore, the difficulty of ensuring the project's continuity has complicated its active contribution to prefigurative practices. However, prefigurative engagement is today a key component of a critical public sociology of disaster in terms of both reviving the affected populations' capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004), and challenging the 'extractivist' disaster capitalism practices (Klein 2007) that rely on the many abstractions of neoliberalism (Tsing 2004). Prefigurative efforts are nevertheless heavily stymied by the structural fragility of interstitial sociological interventions. They also have to contend with the absence of local publics with whom to concretely prefigure reconstructive processes so as to counteract the dynamics that (re)produce socioecological vulnerability.

What emerges from the contemporary Italian post-earthquake recovery process experience are the specific difficulties of applying a public sociology of disasters in 'fragile areas'. In the *aree interne* of the Apennines, the dynamics of pauperization, ageing and depopulation have contributed to the fragmentation of the social context. An emergency management that was almost exclusively based on displacement has reinforced this process, generating further isolation, conflict and territorial dispersion. And yet the dominant logics that guide the recovery plans seem to ignore both the problem of defining who the beneficiaries of the reconstruction should be, and the voice of future generations (not to mention ecosystems and non-human beings). Political actors uncritically apply the framework of the economic stakeholders as the only legitimate representative of the collective interest. As such, they have no need to work actively on creating local publics who can contribute to defining a shared vision of the problems and solutions. Problematizing the question of the 'subjects' with whom one rebuilds after a disaster is today one of the main tasks of the public sociology of disasters.

From this point of view, the EdT initiative demonstrates the value of a strategy that is promoted more generally by movements and social networks working to support the need

for reasoning in terms of common goods as a way out of a paralyzing state versus market opposition. In our case, this alternative translates as the inclusion of forms of self-organization in the management of common-pool resources within the decision-making mechanisms of recovery. In the Apennine area, there are still forms of collective ownership of agricultural land, forests and pastures (or “communal tenure” according to Ostrom 1990). These so-called “rural commons” are managed by local bodies that are defined as *comunanze agrarie*. The *comunanza* is a legally recognized entity, with the task of managing the common resources of a given territory through an administration composed of a president and councilors who are chosen from among the residents, by the residents themselves. The *comunanza* is an inclusive organizational model that historically has been able to combine collective self-organization and institutional recognition based on the pursuit of social equity and environmental sustainability objectives. These experiences of autonomy in the local governing of populations and resources, when guided by objectives of solidarity and co-responsibility (as in the ‘sustainable district’ notion discussed by Donolo 2003), can be drawn upon to imagine alternative pathways of community (re)construction, to recognize socioecological vulnerabilities, to support decision-making processes that aim at the collectivization of risk, and to increase collective preparedness for future crises.

In this sense, the public sociology of disasters has an important role to play both in supporting the capacities of communities to repair and reconfigure broken socioecosystems, and in countering the defuturing systemic processes that continue to feed fast and slow disasters.

NOTES

1. In particular, the response to Hurricane Katrina dramatically exposed the enduring racial divide in disaster relief in the US (see Wright 2011).
2. This catchphrase was coined by former US president Bill Clinton in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and was developed into a list of ten propositions conceived as operational guidelines for the humanitarian post-disaster intervention.
3. Danilo Dolci (1924–97) was an Italian intellectual and activist, and one of the leading figures in the nonviolent movement. Dolci had been engaged in the Belice Valley context since the early 1950s, promoting forms of denunciation and direct action against the extreme poverty that plagued the region. After the earthquake, he engaged in denouncing the public institutions’ inefficiency and collusion with the Mafia during the reconstruction phase.
4. For a more in-depth discussion of this initiative, see Olori and Menghi (2019) and Emidio di Treviri (2018). The name ‘Emidio di Treviri’ represents a form of subversion of local religious devotion practices, because Saint Emidio from Ascoli is a local saint who, according to local tradition, protects against earthquakes. The story is that he was born in Trier (as, incidentally, was Karl Marx).
5. The term *conricerca* in the Italian public sociology tradition (see Armano 2020) refers to a methodology in which researchers and social actors share a similar vision of the wider goals of social transformation, and a shared theoretically informed frame of understanding of a given problematic.

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