Catastrophe and Photography as a “Double Reversal”: The 1908 Messina and Reggio Earthquake and the Album of the Italian Photographic Society

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December 28, 1908: this was the incipit of numerous articles that appeared in the press in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck the cities of Messina and Reggio and the small towns along the Sicilian and Calabrian coastlines. The earthquake, XI degrees on theMercalli scale, started at 5:21 a.m., when most people were still at home. It was followed by a series of tsunami waves. The catastrophe was immense: according to contemporary sources a good 200,000 people died, though today it is estimated that the number was closer to 70,000 to 90,000. Messina was the city most affected. Its urban landscape was reduced to a mass of 900,000 cubic meters of rubble; 2,224 of its 7,800 houses collapsed.

The earthquake had an incredible echo in the national press. Immediately after the first reports in the first few months of 1909, which described the cities as completely destroyed, the front pages of magazines were taken up by news of the catastrophe, usually accompanied by images and photographs, which hadn’t been used in such a generalized way before. It was the first time that the recently unified Italy had faced a calamity of this kind, and it was the first time that the role of the State had been put to such a hard test in relation to the idea of nation. The cherished dream in the Giolitti era of an industrialized and efficient State, and above all, modern, like its society, now seemed to crumble like the Sicilian and Calabrian cities depicted in the photographs of the disaster.

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1 As it is impossible to mention the extensive bibliography, I refer only to a recent collective and comprehensive book: La furia di Poseidon vol. 1: Messina 1908 e dintorni, ed. Giuseppe Campione (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Ed., 2009).

2 Aldo A. Mola, Giovanni Giolitti, fare gli italiani (Turin: Capricorno, 2005). Giolitti was Prime Minister five times between 1892 and 1921.
Following the first reports of the earthquake, from the early days of January, a widespread solidarity movement arose throughout Italy: material aid was collected and groups of volunteers gathered in numerous cities under the banner of Pro Calabria e Sicilia [For Calabria and Sicily] (fig. 7.1). In an Italy that had only been united into a single political structure for a few decades the catastrophe brought crisis upon the role and meaning of the State, to the extent that Giovanni Giolitti’s government was forced to resign on February 8, 1909, and human solidarity could only be expressed in the form of a renewed sense of nationalism.

In an interesting recent study, the historian John Dickie defined this spontaneous movement in terms of a genuine “patriotic catastrophe”: a wave, but this time social and historical, that gave rise to some of the most profound contradictions and unrest in Italian society. It brought to the surface the failures of the State and the numerous structural shortcomings in organizing aid on the one hand, and on the other the unexpected capacity of the population to participate together in the public sphere. Solidarity following December 28, 1908 was new in Italy because, for the first time, it was not generated by family ties or the feeling of belonging to individual places. This was largely fueled by the power of the illustrated press, which emerged after the introduction of half-tone image printing.

The culturalist approach of the studies carried out in the 1980s by Benedict Anderson on “imagined communities,” which centered on the connection between the ability to feel oneself part of a nation and the function of images in relation to the diffusion of the press in the age of capitalism (which he defined as “print capitalism”), opened up new opportunities for research on the role of the industrial production of photographs and their mechanical transcriptions. Dickie—who addressed this topic—did not, however, further examine the specific role played by photography in the process of constructing a national imagination. We believe this historical source to be particularly important for its persuasiveness and diffusion. Patriotic participation was therefore a key driver in the sharing of a complex sentiment. The various components that contributed to its formation, also thanks to photography, included immediate

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