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Disasters, Development  
and Humanitarian Aid  
New Challenges for Anthropology

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Ethnographies conducted in recent “development laboratories”, as well as the study of humanitarian operations in cases of natural disasters and other calamities (war, famine, drought, etc.), reveal the urgent need to closely monitor decision-making processes and practices of social change involving heterogeneous actors capable of moving in the transnational arena of *here* and *there*: a network of “mobile sovereignty” (Pandolfi 2005) made up of international and local NGOs, civil protection departments that rush to intervention sites, organizations of bilateral, multilateral and decentralized cooperation, migrant associations, and even military ensembles, with their mandates of peacekeeping and/or peace-making. This tenth issue of the CE.R.CO.’s *Quaderni*, sponsored by the PhD Programme in Anthropology and Epistemology of Complexity at the University of Bergamo, attempts to shed light on these scenarios without detaching the space of emergency from that of the traditionally more studied development.

As Sandrine Revet recalls in the opening of her chapter in this volume, in the last fifteen years, the customary “division of labour” that had separated development-related measures from those used in emergency response has diminished. No longer considered distinct and, in a certain sense, antithetical fields (owing to different purposes and temporalities of action), emergency and development have thus become hybridized and in many cases juxtaposed, if not always at a programmatic level, then certainly on the ground, in the contexts where the intervention takes place. Witness the fact that operations of early warning and preparedness with which governments and humanitarian aid organizations try to manage crisis situations, both locally and globally (Lakoff 2008, 2006), as well risk-prevention campaigns for disaster situations, have gradually been added to the international agenda as an area of “development” policy (Revet 2011).

This volume stems from an international conference held in Bergamo, Italy in June of 2009, and is intended to accompany, from an anthropological perspective hinging on the experience of fieldwork, the process of translating into practice styles of intervention and action strategies that are rapidly making headway in the field of international aid. The scholars who took part in the two-day conference made an in-depth analysis of several issues: the dynamics underlying the “regime of exception” that characterizes current humanitarian emergencies; the political, cultural, and emotional processes that trigger disastrous circumstances when human communities are caught in vulnerable positions; the evolution of cooperation policies as an attempt to respond to criticism of Development advanced by both academics and practitioners – such as South-South cooperation, decentralized cooperation, or the use of home town associations, migrant remittances and microcredit programmes as engines of local development.

The chapters contained in this volume are organized into three sections, which are closely interrelated through the many internal references and theoretical and methodological affinities shared by the authors. The first, *Defining Catastrophe, Practicing Ethnography in Disasters*, reflects on the category of “catastrophe” and how anthropology can help to understand the social practices, narratives, imagery and performances of groups interacting at disaster sites. Amalia Signorelli begins the section resuming and updating some of the issues that stimulated the field of anthropology of disasters in Europe in its early stage during the ‘90s (Signorelli 1992): the multidimensional and procedural nature of disaster, the inextricable juncture between the political, cultural, environmental and technical aspects of so-called “natural” catastrophes, the global-scale social activism that accompanies “post-disaster economies” (Klein 2007); issues that are then taken up in the following chapter by Anthony Oliver-Smith, without doubt amongst the most relevant scholars of this branch of studies internationally (Hoffman, Oliver-Smith 1999, 2002). The author dedicates his contribution to the analysis of the many forms of rationality and technicality in confrontation at the disaster scene: local and global voices expressing more or less professionalized knowledge, internal and external to the affected contexts, including those that anthropology produces and could place in service of a more responsible management of rescue, prevention and reconstruction interventions. Sandrine Revet then contextualizes the issue by analyzing the controversial process of reconstruction that followed the 1999 flood in Venezuela; while Gianluca Ligi closes the section with a reflection on spaces cloaked

by emotion, understood as both a cognitive and experiential device, in the anthropology of disaster.

The second part of the volume, *Coping with Emergency and Humanitarian Aid*, focuses on the consequences of human, financial and media mobilization generated by humanitarian emergencies in the local contexts where aid is received. The essays cover an ample range of intervention situations, consistent with the gradual expansion of the category of “emergency” characterizing the current logic of interventionism (Fassin, Pandolfi 2010). It ranges from relief and rehabilitation operations following major natural disasters, like the tsunami that hit Southeast Asia in December 2004 (in the chapter by Mara Benadusi that opens the section), to theatres of humanitarian action that attend on highly publicized food crises, such as in Niger in 2005 (discussed by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan). Special attention is paid to coping strategies that are activated at the local level when the beneficiaries of aid confront the humanitarian devices and apparatuses, as is also evident in Erika Lazzarino and Mauro Van Aken’s chapters. The two authors delve into, respectively, the encounter between Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and humanitarian aid, and the political and cultural dimensions of the water supply emergency in the Jordan Valley. The second section generates a fairly rich portrait of what can happen when the expatriate staff of humanitarian projects, local government officials, beneficiary communities and other actors on the emergency scene interact, contaminating their respective practices, ideas and technologies of social change (Lewis, Mosse 2006). If we want to make progress in understanding humanitarian interventions, it is not useful to explain cases like the ones we present here by invoking the problem of reciprocal misunderstanding or misrecognition between “us” and “them”, donors and receivers, locals and expatriates. Depending on the circumstances and the strategies at play, various forms of coalition or antagonism can develop between and among these actors. Whether they are operating *here* or *there*, whether they are made up of technicians or non-experts, we are dealing with highly stratified networks with considerable power differentials. It is thus inevitable that these networks give rise to imaginative and performative efforts that are highly incoherent and contested, with outcomes that continue to defy expectations (Benadusi 2010a).

Finally, the third section, *Switching Anthropology in Development*, questions the delicate relationship between anthropological knowledge and development practices (Malighetti 2005), covering several areas of international cooperation: decentralized cooperation, co-development

and microcredit. The section starts with a reflection by Ivo Pazzagli on anthropology and development, which addresses methodological issues highly debated in this field of study: which ethnographic posture, in the long run, reveals itself to be best suited to the role of the anthropologist working in development? How can we understand and unravel, in the web of global and local, the new power dynamics underlying the actions of those involved? With such premises, how do we continue to exercise, as anthropologists working in the field, an indispensable critical function concerning the consequences of planned social action? Federica Tarabusi attempts to respond to these questions based on her direct involvement *within* development. The chapter explores how the rhetoric implicit in programs of decentralized cooperation is translated into action, describing the transnational system of power relations formed around a program of cooperation between a few Italian regions and 41 schools in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The theme of decentralized cooperation surfaces again in Flavia Virgilio's contribution. The anthropologist probes the ambiguous processes of building citizenship among North and South, referring to the negotiation "roundtables" that involved the regional administration in Italy in an international partnership activity focused on the resource "Water as a Common Good". The next chapter, by Selenia Marabello and Bruno Riccio, focuses on the relationship between migration and development, or the so called "migration-development nexus" (Nyberg Sorensen 2007), discussing the ambivalence and asymmetry of power that can arise from those co-development programmes which decentralize aid practices to institutions below the level of the state and involve migrant collectives as "actors of development" (Grillo, Riccio 2004). Finally, the essay by Francesca Crivellaro and Giovanna Guerzoni proposes an upset of socio-anthropological studies of the "galaxy" of microfinance experiences today.

Of course, an ethnographic analysis of the complex network of actors involved in development projects and humanitarian interventions cannot leave aside a comparison with the world of those who design, propose and implement action in this area. Our volume, as well as the conference from which it arose, took up the challenge of bringing together in debate those who study humanitarian intervention and development and those who participate in them firsthand. We hope that the distance that separates the academic world from that of the so-called practitioners, which formed a counterpoint to the two-day conference, can be renegotiated in the course of future opportunities for meeting, exchange and discussion. We would like to thank, for their participation

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