

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Dickie. *Una catastrofe patriottica, 1908: Il terremoto di Messina*. Translated by Fabio Galimberti. Rome: Laterza, 2008. vi + 240 pp. EUR 18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-88-420-8690-1.

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The book market often obeys laws that do not have much in common with scientific research. So it may happen that a book such as *Una catastrofe patriottica* (A patriotic catastrophe) by John Dickie remains in the drawer of a publisher for some time, waiting for the best moment for it to be published. In this case, the good moment was the one hundredth anniversary of the earthquake that destroyed Messina, Reggio Calabria, and many other cities and villages of Sicily and Calabria, on December 28, 1908. It was a tragic event, and one of the most significant disasters in Italian history. Nevertheless, the contents and ambition of this book cannot be confined to the historical account of that earthquake. To be sure, *Una catastrofe patriottica* is a book on the 1908 disaster. But it is also something else. Most of the books published to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the earthquake have tried to provide accurate and documented narratives of the event, its aftermath, and its impact, some more successfully than others. Dickie has undertaken quite a different operation. The British historian has not focused on the event to produce new or better accounts of it. Rather, he has shed light on the narratives produced as a response to the earthquake, analyzing their characteristics, structure, and uses.

As revealed by the title, the thread of these narratives is the nation: through a consideration of the massive textual production in the aftermath of the disaster, we may understand better the role and use of the nation and national identity within Italian society of the day. More than a study of a disaster, therefore, *Una catastrofe patriottica* is a study of the nation and nationalism, and one whose theoretical ambitions are never concealed. “Nation,” writes Dickie following the steps of W. B. Gallie, is an “essentially contested concept” (p. 20).

“Nation” is a concept that aims at defining a coherent and all-encompassing unity. Nonetheless, the unity to be defined, and the way of doing it, are constantly disputed. The success of nationalism lies in this contradiction, which made it a powerful producer of meanings and, at the same time, the stake in a political and cultural struggle. Facing a deep “symbolic crisis,” such as that generated by the 1908 disaster (the work by Ernesto De Martino on “cultural apocalypses” is an explicit reference here), the frameworks of “nation” and “patriotism” were massively mobilized. By studying the language and meaning produced in this peculiar situation, Dickie thus tries to investigate the concrete functioning of nationalism within Italian society.

This original choice is the first remarkable quality of this work, and provides a peculiar direction to the entire book. This could be defined first of all as a textual analysis, a hermeneutic operation conducted on the Italian national press: the national press was indeed the media through which the language, feelings, and meanings of patriotism were produced and experienced. Coherently with his theoretical premises, the author extensively researched the huge number of articles published during the days following the great catastrophe, and analyzed the production of meaning that resulted from them. As a consequence of this particular approach, the book has a thematic structure: each chapter is devoted to one specific topic among those which structured the patriotic narrative of the 1908 catastrophe. In the first chapter, for example, Dickie presents the recurrent rhetoric that made the state’s response to the quake a consideration of the national preparedness for an upcoming war (“un test del livello di preparazione nazionale” [p. 34]). This kind of turn to the nation is argued throughout the rest of the

book, by analyzing the functioning of the binary couple heroes/enemies of the nation (chapter 2), the presence and use of the southern Italian framework (chapter 4), or the role of the Catholic Church and the place of women within the national community (chapter 5). A detailed chronology of the events integrates the books, offering information on the earthquake that may be necessary for the general reader.

Some parts of *Una catastrofe patriottica* have already been published, entirely or partially, as journal articles or chapters in edited collections, but none have been published in Italian. The collocation within the unitary framework of this book—together with the excellent translation from English to Italian by Fabio Galimberti—permits us to read them in a different light. Although each chapter is relatively autonomous and can still be read separately, the focus that links all of them is strong. The dimension and characteristics of that disaster caused an irruption within the public sphere of deep political but also anthropological concerns (as shown in the suggestive chapter 3 dedicated to the “smell of disaster”), which involved life and death, mourning, time, and personal and collective identity. Patriotism responded to these concerns by offering a cognitive frame, plastic enough to be adapted to different symbolic contexts. At the same time, by constantly returning to patriotic languages and symbols, all the social and political actors contributed to the actual construction of the “nation” under consideration, while engaging in a sometimes hard competition for its meaning and use.

In his exploration, Dickie engages in a direct confrontation with one of the most influential theoreticians of modern nationalism, Benedict Anderson. While declaring his debt to Anderson, Dickie indicates clearly what he believes to be the failures of Anderson’s theory: to consider the nation as a coherent and homogeneous

construction and to overlook the conflict and disagreement behind national identity. As the author reminds us in the conclusion, we should think of patriotism as a plurality of concurrent social fictions (“come una pluralità di finzioni sociali concorrenti” [p. 207]), and the nation as the stake at the heart of a political and cultural struggle between diverse actors. The work by Anderson, however, is not the only reference and influence behind this book, and it should be remembered that this work, so explicitly centered on narratives, cultures, and hermeneutics, originated in the University College London Department of Italian, where other influential scholars of Italian history and culture, such as John Foot, Robert Lumley, and David Forgacs, worked or still work. This book, therefore, is another product of a fecund school of research that has tried to innovate an understanding of Italy by applying methods and concepts of contemporary cultural studies. By using these methods and concepts, *Una catastrofe patriottica* demonstrates well that Italy, and especially “Giolittian” Italy, was a patriotic country, and that the 1908 disaster was a major moment in the competition for the meaning and use of nationalism. This contribution enriches a field of research that, apart from the remarkable contributions of Alberto Mario Banti and other scholars of the Risorgimento and a few interesting attempts in the field of environmental history (like, for example, *A Rugged Nation* by Marco Armiero [2011]), could be perhaps frequented more but has still much to say. Finally, like the predecessor *Disastro! Disasters in Italy since 1860: Culture, Politics, Society* (2002) edited by Dickie in conjunction with Foot and Frank M. Snowden, this book shows once again that through an apparently local and timely perspective offered by such a disaster, it is possible to present analytical views embracing both the redefinition of basic historical concepts and an understanding of major historical phenomena. It demonstrates, in other words, what it means to consider disasters as a historical laboratory.

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