

## **"A Far Greater Calamity than the Natural Cataclysm..."**

Ignazio Silone (April 19, 2009)



Half a century ago, famous Italian novelist Ignazio Silone wrote about the 1915 earthquake in Abruzzo. He commented that what happened afterwards -- the reconstruction -- because of the way it was done, appeared as "a far greater calamity than the natural cataclysm." We are re-publishing that passage here as a contribution to a better understanding of the discussions that are developing in Italy today.

In 1915 a violent earthquake destroyed a good part of our province and in thirty seconds killed thirty thousand people. What surprised me most was to see with what matter-of-factness the people accepted this tremendous catastrophe. In an area like ours, in which so many injustices went unpunished, the frequency of earthquakes seemed so plausible a fact that it required no explanation. On the contrary, the surprising thing was that earthquakes did not occur more frequently. In an earthquake, everyone dies: rich and poor, learned and illiterate, authorities and



people. An earthquake accomplishes what words and laws promise and never achieve: the equality of all. An ephemeral equality, for when fear had died down, collective misfortune became the opportunity for even greater injustices.

What happened afterward was therefore no surprise, and that was the reconstruction by the State. Because of the way it was done, because of the intrigue, fraud, embezzlement, favoritism, scheming and thievery of every sort to which it gave rise, it appeared a far greater calamity than the natural cataclysm. From that event dates the origin of the popular belief that if humanity is bound to get thoroughly skinned some time or other, it will be not in time of earthquake or war, but in a postwar or post-earthquake period.

A friend of mine, who had been fired from one of the government offices in charge of the reconstruction, one day gave me some precise data which proved that crimes had been committed by engineers who had been his colleagues. Quite disturbed, I hurried to consult with some persons in authority whom I knew to be upright and honest men, to ask them to denounce these crimes. Not only did the gentlemen I consulted not contest the authenticity of the proofs; they were in a position to confirm it. But they advised me against 'getting involved in the affair', and they added affectionately: "You have to finish your education, you have to make a career for yourself. You shouldn't compromise yourself with things that don't concern you."

"With pleasure," I answered. "Certainly it would be better if the report didn't come from a boy of seventeen, but from adults in respectable positions."

"We are not madmen," they replied in indignation. "We mean to mind our own business and nothing else."

I then talked with some "reverend" clergymen, as well as some of my more courageous relatives, and all of them, revealing their greater or lesser familiarity with these crimes, implored me not to get mixed up in such a hornet's nest, to think of my education, my career and my future.

"With pleasure," I would answer, "but are any of you willing to report the thieves?"

"We are not crazy," they responded, scandalized. "These matters don't concern us."

I then began to wonder seriously whether it might not be appropriate to make a new "revolution" with some other boy, which would end with a fire in the government offices. But the friend who had given me the documentation on the crooked dealings dissuaded me, in order not to destroy the very proof of the crimes. He was older and more experienced than I, and he suggested that I get the denunciation printed in some newspaper. But which one? "There is one," my friend explained, "which might be interested in giving space to such a report, and that's the Socialist paper." And that was how I came to write three articles (the first ones in my life) to describe and explain in detail the corruption of the government engineers in my part of the world. I sent them to Avanti! The first two articles were printed at once and caused an uproar among the readers, but no reaction from the authorities. The third article did not appear, as I was to learn later, because a prominent Socialist lawyer intervened with the editorial board. In this way I learned that the system of deception and fraud oppressing us was vaster than I had imagined and had invisible ramifications that extended even to the Socialists. The partial denunciation, coming as a surprise, contained enough material for several trials, or at least for a parliamentary board of inquiry. But nothing happened. The engineers whom I had denounced as thieves and accused of specific charges made no attempt to justify themselves or even to issue a denial. After a brief interval, everyone went back to minding his own business.

The student who had dared to make this challenge was considered by the more charitably-disposed to be impulsive and strange. It must be borne in mind that the economic poverty of Italy's southern provinces offered few possibilities for advancement to the young men who came out of school by the thousand every year. Our greatest industry then was government employment. It did not require exceptional intellectual qualities, but it did demand a docile character and political conformity. The young men from the south, who had grown up in an impoverished atmosphere, if they had the least pride or human sensitivity, tended naturally to anarchy and revolt. Taking a government job



therefore meant a renunciation, a surrender and a mortification of the soul for those who were still on the threshold of their youth. For this reason it used to be said, "Anarchists at twenty, conservatives at thirty" - and this was the true foundation of society in southern Italy.

The passage is excerpted from: Ignazio Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza*, 1949 (Engl. translation: *Emergency Exit*, New York, Harper & Row, 1968.) Photos are from [Ignazio Silone Web](#) [2]

(Edited by Vincenzo Ruocco)

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