

Talking about... l'Aquila nel mondo. Palmerini at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò

Marcello De Marco (October 18, 2010)



Goffredo Palmerini's book *L'Aquila nel mondo* (*L'Aquila around the world*) was presented at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò of NYU.

Over a year has passed since the dramatic earthquake hit Abruzzo in the spring of 2009, and over this time many books have commented and remembered the tragedy – and the response – of the inhabitants of the devastated capital city of Abruzzo.

One of these is *L'Aquila nel Mondo*, presented at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò on the evening of November 14 by Goffredo Palmerini, a journalist and politician born and raised in L'Aquila. This volume is a collection of his articles, but also a number of pieces about L'Aquila written by Italian journalists living outside of Italy.



Palmerini has an interesting political history that sees him focused on the cultural management of L'Aquila. First town councilor, then advisor and eventually vice-Mayor, his production encompasses articles and essays that earned him many awards. He is also a representative of ANFE, the Italian National Association of the Families of Emigrants.

His great interest for Italians abroad brought him after many years to build and nourish a network of journalists living abroad - mainly from Abruzzo - whom he keeps constantly informed.

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The elegant setting of the library of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, in Greenwich Village, radiates culture but also a cozy informality and is perfectly in tune with the spirit of the speakers: Palmerini, Letizia Airos, i-Italy's Editor in Chief, and author of the book's preface, and theatrical writer Mario Fratti, all from Abruzzo.

A discussion arose with the public and touched the aspects of the political management of the earthquake's aftermath as well as the reaction of the inhabitants of L'Aquila, and of what is being done about the physical and moral reconstruction of the city.

It is not the first time that L'Aquila is the stage for such tragedies. The city's colors were chosen after the earthquake of the February 2, 1703. That day was a religious holiday (the "Candelora" day) and the quake hit right during the procession, causing over 6,000 casualties.

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Palmerini, while confirming the effectiveness in the short term of the extraordinary measures taken by the Italian government after the tragedy (allowing the construction over the summer of proper houses for most of those who had lost their homes), underlined some lesser known and, especially, darker situations completely unknown beyond the city limits also because of the silence of the Italian press.

The project "Aquila 2" (the construction of a new city) - luckily aborted, although by chance - is one of the issues that have most preoccupied the writer. The idea was not to rebuild the destroyed houses, but to create a brand new satellite city. The problem in this case would have had two sides: on the one hand, the residents' social relationships, developed over years of living next to one another, would have been wiped out as they would have found themselves living in a whole new city, with new neighbors, new landmarks and new aggregation spots; on the other hand this project would have compromised the urban soul of the first city in the world designed from scratch, by the 99 castles that administered the territory before the creation of the settlement.

Palmerini pointed out how the centralized management of the crisis by the government, while effective under some points of view, is indeed threatening to compromise L'Aquila's historical soul. An alternative to such centralism could have been the option followed by the territory of Gemona (in the north-east of Italy) after the devastating quake of 1976. On that occasion the crisis was handled by the local government and the original urban fabric remained relatively unspoiled.

Today, the small village of Onna is an exception. This settlement of 400 people lost 10% of its population in the catastrophe. Thanks to the help of Germany, who had a debt with Onna since the end of World War II, when the retreating Germans slaughtered most of its inhabitants, the village self-managed the reconstruction and succeeded in preserving its original structure.



Onna is an exception not only to the management style of the crisis, but also to the general situation of the smaller villages around L'Aquila. In these other fractions very little, if anything, has been done not only about the reconstruction, but even simply about putting in safety the stricken buildings.

Another topic was the decision of moving the G8 meeting from the Sardinian island of La Maddalena to L'Aquila. With this move the government managed to focus the world's attention on the city, previously virtually unknown outside of Italy. Various countries made many promises of help however, as of today, according to Palmerini only China, France, Russia and Azerbaijan kept them. United States still hasn't acted.

On the contrary, great participation and tangible solidarity came from all the people of Abruzzo, and many other individuals, living abroad who gathered consistent funds to help their fellows.

L'Aquila's main problem today is that its full reconstruction would cost 30 Billion Euros, however the government allocated only 6 Billion, plus 500 Million from the European Community. The problem of lack of funds is aggravated by the economical crisis created by the earthquake: L'Aquila is a student city and after the tragedy many of them abandoned the University. Today the school has 8,000 vacant seats, with important repercussions on the town's economy.

Nevertheless Palmerini managed to see something positive in this catastrophe: thanks to it L'Aquila acquired the international visibility that a city of such historical and artistic importance deserves.

Furthermore the quake was the source of an abundant artistic production that goes beyond the limits of chronicles and essays (counting more than 50 publications about this topic), and touches theatrical productions (Valentina Fratti, present at the event, was mentioned for her piece about the martyrs buried in L'Aquila awoken by the earthquake) and cinema (a production of the Accademia Cinematografica dell'Aquila - L'Aquila Film Academy - about the earthquake was presented and acclaimed at the Venice Film festival).

Palmerini's hope, certainly shared with all the people living in L'Aquila, is that the town not fall into oblivion, but that this dramatic experience will be an occasion of rebirth and growth, always following the strict historical and artistic guidelines inherent to such a culturally important city, becoming better known outside of Italy's border.

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