

# The second earthquake: how the Italian state generated hope and uncertainty in post-disaster L'Aquila

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Recent analyses of the state have emphasized its inability to generate hope among citizens, suggesting that neoliberalism and globalization erode its protective power. However, this article suggests that the state still features as a coveted agent of support, in particular during unstable times. After the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, the Italian state became the key actor responsible for emergency aid, restoration, and urban redevelopment. Dedication and the performance of compassion produced expectations of swift improvement. Hope became dependent on state authority. A few years later, uncertainty replaced hope, as promises for recovery remained unrealized. The state morphed from an agent of hope into the source of hopelessness, generating uncertainty and a sense of crisis. Since the state is revealed through its effects, this article highlights the need to trace state power in intimate human emotional experience, such as hope or despair. The production of a specific condition of uncertainty reveals the significance of state power in human life, particularly during times of personal or collective crisis.

On 6 April 2009, at 3.32 a.m., a major earthquake rocked the city of L'Aquila, the administrative capital of the central Italian Abruzzo region.<sup>1</sup> Before the earthquake, L'Aquila had been an important regional centre in a rural and sparsely populated region. One third of the 73,000 inhabitants were L'Aquila University students, most of them from southern Italy. The charming old town – *centro storico* – attracted young people, enticed by the affordable rent for large baroque apartments. One-third of L'Aquila's residents lived in the centre; the others resided across a wide range of post-war quarters. These included multi-storey condominiums as well as semi-detached, modern family homes with small gardens. At the edge of L'Aquila's municipality, historic villages formed a porous border with the rugged, mountainous countryside.

Aquilani – L'Aquila's inhabitants – are aware of their exposure to natural risk. They live in the Apennine mountain range, one of Europe's most seismically active zones. Previous earthquakes razed L'Aquila in 1461 and 1703, depopulating the Aquilano mountain valley. In 1915, a nearby town, Avezzano, was completely flattened by a powerful tremor, burying over 30,000 people alive. In the summer and autumn of 2016, again a series of earthquakes that affected ridges and plains north of L'Aquila claimed hundreds of lives. Tens of thousands of buildings were damaged or destroyed. This is one of the most dangerous regions in Europe, where century-old stone architecture

and insecure post-war constructions provide little protection against seismic events. The 2009 earthquake killed 309 people and injured a further 1,500. Most of the city's distinctive historic architecture in the walled centre and across peripheral medieval villages was ruined, declared unstable and uninhabitable. Italy's then Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, declared a state of emergency for the affected area. He launched a domestically and internationally acclaimed relief operation through Italy's Civil Protection Agency (Dipartimento della Protezione Civile).

The Agency evacuated L'Aquila's ruined neighbourhoods. Aquilani were relocated to 170 emergency tent camps erected on sports grounds and other open spaces throughout urban areas outside the historic centre (roughly one-third chose this option) or instead moved into hotel rooms in touristic resort complexes along the Adriatic coast, at state expense (another third). The remaining survivors found accommodation using their own initiative, usually staying with relatives or friends (Alexander 2010: 326). Implementing state of emergency provisions, the Italian army enforced a ban on access to dangerous areas in the old centre and other damaged neighbourhoods. Fences and barriers were erected throughout the *centro storico*, restricting access to limestone houses and monuments from the eighteenth century. One of Italy's most extensive heritage sites – dotted with historic architecture, listed buildings, churches, and picturesque squares – became an inaccessible so-called Red Zone (*zona rossa*). Closed off, as if frozen in time, its streets and other public spaces remained covered in roof tiles, broken glass, and collapsed stone façades (Fig. 1). Instead of focusing on reconstruction efforts, the state authorities concentrated attention and resources on a large-scale rehousing scheme, called Progetto CASE.<sup>2</sup> The project featured the construction of nineteen satellite resettlement sites with 185 prefabricated housing blocks on anti-seismic pillars. Most CASE sites were located far away from L'Aquila's centre. Simultaneously, however, Berlusconi also promised the restoration of urban heritage and private property in the old town and other urban areas. L'Aquila's future looked bright.



Figure 1. Ruined square in L'Aquila's historic centre. (All photographs by the author.)

In January 2012, almost three years later, I arrived in L'Aquila to investigate how Aquilani had experienced the state's disaster response, its promises and projects, and how they were reflecting on its consequences. Despite initial visions of unprecedented recovery, little had changed in the old centre. Decay and abandonment characterized the uninhabited streets. Resettlement in purpose-built, state-sponsored settlements still constituted everyday life for almost 30,000 Aquilani. 'L'Aquila is dead', someone had written on the cold, mouldy façade of an eighteenth-century *palazzo* near the historic San Bernardino basilica, which was inaccessible and barely held together by steel bracing and wire rope. Survivors described the place they called home as *una città fantasma*, a ghost city, and called L'Aquila a modern Pompeii. Moreover, informants were frustrated by a pervasive and crippling sense of uncertainty. They referred to the difficulty, quasi-impossibility, of imagining their future as a set of predictable, reassuring routines, or a sense of normality. My informants' ideas about ordinary life were characterized by a desire to regain control over their own affairs in a city that was restored and could be lived in, casting off their dependence on government housing and benefits. As we sat on a shabby bench in a derelict park opposite L'Aquila's fortress, parts of which had collapsed into its deep moat, a 50-year-old schoolteacher described her experience of the earthquake's aftermath in the following way:

I've been out of my house for three years and four months. I've lived in many types of accommodation. I've not seen any change in the historic city centre. I'm depressed. I'm in a situation in which I've got no idea where I'll be in ten years' time. The future is completely uncertain for me. And even if things remain as they are, static, this won't comfort me, because the present itself is so uncertain. I feel the sense of time strongly. It weighs me down.

Uncertainty and fear of the future were ubiquitous in an almost entirely ruined city that consisted of derelict buildings, hypermodern resettlement blocks, construction sites, makeshift container theatres, unlit streets, temporary schools, and re-established restaurants in wooden huts across the periphery, reachable only by car. In 2012, in the wake of forced resettlement and subsequent perceived abandonment by the authorities, Aquilani identified state institutions as responsible for the most painful transformations since 2009. Survivors called the state relief effort 'the second earthquake' (*il secondo terremoto*). They attributed distressing changes in their private lives more to the government intervention than to the natural disaster. I thus came to examine local ideas about the state's responsibility for establishing the parameters of the everyday in post-earthquake L'Aquila. In this article, I analyse Aquilani reflections on the intersection of state agency with personal aspirations for the remaking of everyday existence in the wake of catastrophe. The official emergency operation instigated survivors' beliefs in a bright and near future. These beliefs unravelled, however, when government support began to appear increasingly superficial and ineffective. In 2009, the state had pompously inaugurated many promising projects; only one year later, the possibility that these would become real started to crumble. The city's destruction had induced a moment of collective despair, but the long-term effects of a deceptive state intervention transformed this into an enduring sense of crisis, which crippled both community life and the hope for a purposeful future in restored urban neighbourhoods.

### **The state, uncertainty, and hope**

The difficulty of extricating the transformative influence of the state from the web of constraints that regulate human existence has been the subject of extensive

anthropological debate (Abrams 1988). Since its inception, the anthropology of the state has critiqued the canonical approaches of Western political science, with its normative definitions of what the state is and how it should be studied (Sharma & Gupta 2006). Beyond obvious practices – such as military discipline, taxation, or imprisonment – anthropologists have revealed state effects in inconspicuous places: interference in local identity politics via heritage classification (Herzfeld 1991), autonomy constraints in welfare regimes (Miller 1988), or negotiations with bureaucrats (Gupta 1995; Herzfeld 1992; Navaro-Yashin 2002). By policing citizenship categories, states produce subjects as proper citizens, non-citizens, or semi-citizens; such divisions then condition experiences of exclusion, inclusion, and political belonging (Geschiere 2009; Ong 1996; Partridge 2012). Thus, if we want to expose its capacity to shape human existence, we must study the state by tracing its subtle effects and surprising repercussions (Trouillot 2001), even in unexpected places. Reviewing the impact of recent austerity politics, however, anthropologists have suggested that the state's scope in shaping people's lives positively has been significantly reduced, even in European countries with traditionally expansive state intervention programmes, such as Italy or Greece (Muehlebach 2012; Spyridakis 2013). Analysts have argued that the neoliberal paradigm has led states to surrender certain transformative powers (Abélès 2010; Scott 1998). In addition to the neoliberal retreat, emergent global actors are purported to diminish nation-state agency, rendering 'the state irrelevant not only as an economic actor but also as a social and cultural container' (Trouillot 2001: 125). The decline of the state as an influential agent in human lives has become something of a truism in the age of globalization.<sup>3</sup> What I suggest is that we should look more creatively for the effects of state power, which, in the case of L'Aquila, concern the most intimate experiences in the lives of earthquake survivors: hope and uncertainty.

Growing uncertainty, Ulrich Beck (1992) has argued, results from global connectivity. For Beck and others, uncertainty is a shared global condition in the age of global warming, migration flows, industrial accidents, economic crises, terrorism, complex expert knowledge, and round-the-clock news coverage (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1990; Nowotny 2015; Urry 2003). Marc Abélès (2010) has dubbed the resulting diminished political aspiration 'the politics of survival': shrunken in scope and ambition, state governments no longer concern themselves with the production of *convivance* – harmoniously living together. Their concern is merely with population survival. The good life, hope, betterment, social harmony, grand societal visions, or promising perspectives on the future, Abélès argues, have disappeared from the spectrum of state action. His bleak conclusion is that there 'are no longer single protective powers, long embodied by the monarch or more recently by the welfare state, that make life safe' (2010: 16). Indeed, Abélès concurs with Beck, 'uncertainty has become our fate' (2010: 18). In this article, however, I suggest that uncertainty is not an inevitable condition of the present – our fate – created by globalization and neoliberalism. Instead, state authority can manufacture uncertainty. My suggestion is that the state still has significant power to shape human existence, albeit in perhaps unexpected ways: earthquake survivors identified the Italian state as the source of uncertainty and fear of the future. State intervention transformed a natural catastrophe into an enduring crisis, which entailed the breakdown of community life and the disappearance of the belief in improvement. I contend that this is the case because the Italian state had initially achieved what many no longer assume it to be capable of: to manufacture hope through displays of compassion and recovery schemes.<sup>4</sup> This

analysis traces the state's deep reach into intimate dimensions of human emotional experience.

I show how the Italian state – specifically, Berlusconi's state – expanded the scope for intervention throughout the emergency period, monopolizing control over local lives. This monopoly included emotional worlds as the Italian state extended its reach into the affective experience of survivors. As a result of the state operation, Aquilani were transformed as subjects, when their emotions became entangled with state power, since 'subjectivity implies the *emotional* experience of a *political* subject, the subject caught up in a world of violence, state authority and pain' (Luhmann 2006: 346, emphasis in the original). I go further than this, by suggesting that not only was hope, as an emotional orientation, caught up with state authority, but that it became dependent on state power.

Berlusconi's emergency operation was not an inevitable or ordinary consequence of catastrophe.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the city of New Orleans in 2005 and claimed thousands of lives, it was the absence of the state that invited criticism from commentators and survivors for the apparent lack of compassion on the part of the US administration (Ethridge 2006). Displays of compassion and politics intersect in intricate ways, and the absence of empathy is often characterized as a sign of political failure (Nussbaum 2013; Ticktin 2006). Ultimately, the US administration under George W. Bush responded with privatized militarization and intimidation, not with benevolent aid (Adams 2013; Johnson 2011). In L'Aquila, by contrast, the performance of compassion turned the state into an agent of hope for recovery. Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) argues that hope is a method of self-knowledge, reorientating human action towards the future, based on our innate capacity for resistance to adversity. In the devastated Italian city, however, it was the state that produced a particularly strong affective expectation regarding the future. The willingness to conceive of the Italian state as a paternalistic carer certainly intersects with cultural understandings regarding the interpersonal, kin-based nature of political agency prevalent in southern Italy (Vannucci 1997). However, analyses of Mediterranean paternalism and clientelistic politics also show that citizens' political demands are accompanied by hesitant scepticism or cynicism (Schneider & Schneider 2003). By contrast, as I show below, many of L'Aquila's survivors experienced genuine hope with little, or no, scepticism. If the state takes a central role in producing and diffusing new affective orientations that sustain life after catastrophe, anthropologists should identify emergent ideas about recovery and the future as manifestations of state power – and thus in the process also expand our understanding of state authority in times of crisis.

### Earthquake legacies in L'Aquila

According to local folklore, ninety-nine monasteries, castles, and other hamlets from the Apennine Mountains requested permission from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II to create a central marketplace in the thirteenth century. This new settlement was called Aquila, 'Eagle', referencing its imperial origin.<sup>6</sup> It was established on a heart-shaped, elevated plateau in the centre of a large valley. Every founding hamlet or monastery contributed a church and a square, which resulted in a variegated architectural environment of labyrinthine cobbled streets and numerous chapels, as well as charming little squares with picturesque fountains. Aquilani identify with their neighbourhoods, insisting that they were even distinguishable by different dialects before the earthquake.

After the Second World War, when the population expanded, new quarters were built outside the ancient walls. At the same time, however, L'Aquila began to experience economic trouble. Abruzzo, of which L'Aquila remains the capital, is a divided region. Its largest city, Pescara, is a tourist hub on the Adriatic Coast. Its airport and seaport connect the region's shoreline with European holidaymakers. Dotted along the coast are a string of hotel resorts from the post-war period. Pescara's commercial, trade, and fishing industries provide many jobs. Towns and cities along the coast became more prosperous than the mountainous parts of Abruzzo after 1945. Economic strength shifted from L'Aquila to the Adriatic Sea (Lopez 1988). In 2009, most employment opportunities in L'Aquila were in the third sector: medium-skilled administrative jobs for the regional and provincial governments, the university, and call centres. There was little industry. After the disaster, many small businesses shut down. The number of people relying on state benefits across the affected area increased by 800 per cent (Cerasoli 2013). Aquilani used to rent property to non-local students, but most apartments, particularly those in the sought-after historic neighbourhoods, became inaccessible in 2009.

By 2012, some residents had already been able to move back into repaired post-war condominiums outside the historic old town. Construction sites were a ubiquitous feature in these modern quarters, frustrating survivors with endless noise, road diversions, and pollution. The absence of a redevelopment plan for these areas prolonged the inconvenience and hassle. The walled city centre, however, was a different story. Historic buildings remained completely uninhabited. In 2010, most historic houses and monuments had been extensively buttressed and encased. Wire rope and scaffolding stabilized damaged buildings to prevent collapse. At the time of my fieldwork, the main streets in the centre had been cleared of debris, allowing former residents to meander in between the damp, cold, decaying, and empty buildings they used to inhabit. Out of 900 businesses located in the historic centre before April 2009, only two dozen had reopened by early 2013, mainly cafés or bars (Bolzoni 2014). Their owners had obtained temporary permits to open ground-floor venues. Although some businesses had relocated to containers, wooden huts, or other makeshift structures across post-war quarters, the majority had disappeared. Former shop or restaurant owners relied on state benefits.

Ruin heaps, gaping holes, and other places where people had died transformed into memorials. The victims' relatives attached photographs, poems, and commemorative objects to railings and fences surrounding these sites. This new topography of suffering and loss served as a constant reminder of L'Aquila's deadly past. It was impossible for survivors to share an *aperitivo* and not find themselves in the vicinity of a crater, where a house had collapsed, or near a makeshift memorial. High fences, adorned with withered lilies and images of deceased Aquilani, surrounded bare building foundations. 'The sky is full of white clouds. They are the cradles of our earthquake victims', read the caption of one photograph of a young dark-haired boy with a blue coat (Fig. 2). Candles stood below the image. Forced to negotiate my expectations as a young and enthusiastic student with the constraints of an urban environment defined by despair, destruction, and bereavement, I struggled alongside my friends with the exceptional conditions of city life. The Italian army maintained control posts throughout the abandoned centre, which frustrated Aquilani. Officially, armed soldiers were stationed in the city to protect property from looters, and to prevent survivors from entering unstable buildings, but critics denounced the army presence as an *occupazione* (occupation), casting the state as an outsider that wielded illegitimate power over local existence and property.





Figure 2. Memorial site for a young earthquake victim.

Years after the disaster, Aquilani were living in a depressing and inconvenient ‘ghost city’, marked by the absence of restoration initiatives. State institutions had reduced their presence to military personnel. The use of psychiatric medication had increased rapidly among a population dispersed across partly restored modern quarters, peripheral resettlement sites, and self-made wooden huts in allotment gardens. This semi-urban landscape, deprived of its centre, suffered from increased individual car traffic and long delays. Large-scale shopping malls on the outskirts of L’Aquila had become a pragmatic substitute for old town sociality. Driving across the disjointed territory was frustrating and nerve-wracking, and many older Aquilani, who had never owned a car, were confined to their resettlement apartments. At night, the historic centre was completely abandoned. Most areas were unlit. Aquilani reported feeling unsafe in neighbourhoods they used to consider their home. There were rumours that construction workers from Naples and abroad had stolen precious furniture, jewellery, and electronics from damaged buildings. L’Aquila’s old town remained a jarring landscape of semi-ruined historic neighbourhoods; inaccessible corners cordoned off by metal railings; partly reopened bars with coffee tables under wire rope; stray dogs; army checkpoints; ubiquitous rodenticide boxes; rusty scaffolding; the scent of mould; and dusty shop windows still advertising the 2009 spring sale.

Exemplifying the state of limbo, schools had been moved to large metal containers, with low ceilings, shabby plastic doors, hospital-style tubular lamps, and uncomfortable industrial chairs and tables. Constructed as temporary solutions after the earthquake, without a clear replacement in sight, they seemed increasingly permanent. This augmented parents’ concern about the urban environment in which they were raising their children. ‘From postponement to postponement, from promise to promise, those who were children during the earthquake are now teenagers, and *those with hopes witnessed them quickly transform into frustration*’ (Amabile 2014, my emphasis). But

why was this transformation of initially generated hope so surprising? Why had people hoped in the first place, given the circumstances? Rather than dismissing the experience of frustrated hopes as an inevitable consequence of catastrophe or survivors' naïveté, I will now explore the processes that generated fear of the future.

### The state relief effort

Silvio Berlusconi turned the state response to the L'Aquila earthquake into a global media event. Beginning the morning after the disaster, he visited the city on numerous occasions, repeatedly promising unconditional and unprecedented state support, funding, and commitment. Assisted by Guido Bertolaso, head of the powerful Civil Protection Agency, Berlusconi administered an exceptionally active and well-coordinated, as well as apparently effective, state relief effort. This included the immediate provision of 170 government-run tent camps within the municipality of L'Aquila, accommodating over 30,000 evacuated Aquilani. The authorities also rented thousands of rooms in touristic hotel resorts along the Adriatic shoreline for an additional 30,000 people. Within days, survivors had been moved into tents or hotel rooms; food, clothing, medical aid, and even entertainment were taken care of. Before the earthquake, Silvio Berlusconi's leadership had rarely received international approval. After his first government took office in 1994, and failed to deliver before its premature downfall, the European press had considered him a political lightweight (Ginsborg 2004). He has been portrayed as obsessed with pomp, women, and show, protecting his large private television empire by hand-tailoring immunity legislation to prevent prosecution – pundits did not consider him as fit for serious politics.

After the earthquake, however, commentators heaped praise on the Prime Minister for his many visits to the disaster site, commitment to the bereaved, and exceptionally well-organized resettlement. Four days after the earthquake, *The Independent* dubbed the state response Berlusconi's rise from 'zero to hero' (Popham 2009). The Prime Minister personalized state provision and presented himself as a paternal superhero who cared for the city's distraught population. He pledged to concern himself personally with important decisions for L'Aquila's future and encouraged Aquilani to enjoy their stay in government-sponsored tent camps and hotels as a cost-free holiday, rather than interfere in state business (Hooper 2009a). Even the foreign press commented positively on Berlusconi's leadership:

Wearing an Ultraman-style safety helmet, he talked to survivors, one of whom, a white-haired old lady, cried: 'Silvio, help us, I've got nothing left, not even my dentures! Don't forget about us!' Shrugging off the shyness towards ordinary people that has in the past made him an awkward witness to tragedy, he stroked her hair and hugged her head to his breast. 'We'll do all we can,' he said, in a voice choked with emotion. 'You'll see, no one will be left behind, we are here' (Popham 2009).

Berlusconi also attended the state funerals:

At a news conference after the funeral, Prime Minister Berlusconi said that 'people have been asking me, "Please don't leave us alone." I made a promise to them in front of their coffins,' he said. 'The government has assumed this responsibility' (Donadio 2009).

Despite having spent over 200 million euros on purpose-built, state-of-the-art conference facilities on the Sardinian island of La Maddalena, Berlusconi relocated Italy's G8 summit of world leaders, scheduled for 8-10 July that year, to L'Aquila. The Civil Protection Agency – under Berlusconi also responsible for the organization of so-called major events (*grandi eventi*) – hand-picked companies to build new



roads, temporary facilities, and a small airport within months. Emergency legislation permitted bypassing bidding procedures. In July 2009, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and other global leaders and celebrities visited the devastated historic centre, which was still inaccessible to ordinary Aquilani. Dinners and press conferences produced globally circulating images, showcasing the Italian state's efficient disaster response and commitment to distraught survivors. L'Aquila became the focus of a media spectacle, which seemed to suggest that state attention was effective. In 2012, one Aquilano urged me to understand this: 'Before the earthquake, nobody had known where L'Aquila was. And then everybody came to see us: the Pope, Berlusconi, Obama, Clooney, and even Gaddafi, with his tents and camels'. Although situated in a remote Apennine valley, L'Aquila achieved global fame. The world talked about the city and knew its predicament. Survivors were surprised that the metropolitan and foreign press praised the country's leader. Berlusconi's promise to bring attention to local suffering and accelerate recovery appeared convincing. BBC reporters approved:

To my surprise earthquake survivors living in local tent camps thought the [G8] summit an excellent idea. What better way to draw attention to the fact their lives had been reduced to rubble than to pull in the likes of George Clooney and other celebrity hangers-on who tend to pitch up at major summits ... In some ways this new 'bare bones' G8 style suits the mood of the moment (Kendall 2009).

Six months later, in November 2009, the British newspaper the *Guardian* continued to praise the Prime Minister: 'Silvio Berlusconi keeps his promise to the earthquake victims of L'Aquila', the paper headlined, explaining that '[w]hen Silvio Berlusconi returns to L'Aquila tomorrow for the removal of the tents put up to house the victims of the earthquake that struck the city on 6 April, he can expect a hero's welcome' (Hooper 2009*b*). Aquilani noticed the supportive and positive commentary regarding state initiatives. One of my informants, who worked as a journalist for a local newspaper, recalled her impression of the state relief effort: 'When you are in such a difficult situation, and someone offers to help you, then you believe them, because you *want* to believe in what they are saying'.

One of the central projects showcasing the Prime Minister's ambition was the aforementioned Progetto CASE, an unprecedented state-sponsored rehousing project for over 15,000 people (Fig. 3). The resettlement scheme was announced within days of L'Aquila's devastation, and the new building blocks were completed within months. Commentators pointed out that previous disaster relief schemes in the earthquake-prone country had rarely produced tangible results: kickbacks, corruption, and bribery often beset state disaster-recovery operations in Italy. Particularly in the poorer south, politicians have routinely embezzled relief funds, while the evacuated population would spend years, even decades, in ramshackle temporary accommodation (Dickie, Foot & Snowden 2002). By contrast, Berlusconi's sturdy and rent-free resettlement houses were a novelty: apparent physical proof of forthcoming serious initiatives for the local population. The Prime Minister inaugurated the first resettlement sites on 29 September 2009 – his birthday. Italian media broadcast live as survivors entered their new rent-free apartments. They found a bottle of prosecco in the fridge, with a personal note: 'With most affectionate wishes for good health and serenity in your new house. Silvio Berlusconi'.

The EU Solidarity Fund covered most of the costs for the resettlement scheme. Nonetheless, emblematic of the ways in which Berlusconi personalized the state relief effort, Aquilani and the press nicknamed the buildings *case di Berlusconi* – Berlusconi's



Figure 3. Progetto CASE resettlement site in L'Aquila's periphery.

houses. Having witnessed the unprecedented emergency operation, Aquilani were led to believe that the restoration of monuments and houses in the historic centre would proceed with similar efficiency and competence. At a G8 press conference in July 2009, Berlusconi vowed that L'Aquila's historic centre would be restored within four years (Reuters 2009). This statement was reported in the media and also remembered by many survivors during my stay. One month later, Gianni Chiodi, the President of the Abruzzo Region, assured survivors that the state would give them so much money for the reconstruction that they would not even be able to spend it all (Sebastiani 2009). The remaking of the historic city centre was never in doubt. During the G8 summit, for example, participating governments pledged to restore particularly important damaged monuments.

What appeared to be a selfless and effective state recovery effort, however, was a practice of exclusion and concentration. Non-state actors were not allowed on the disaster relief stage, orchestrated by the national authorities. Berlusconi employed the rhetoric of national pride to justify declining offers of support from foreign governments and experts in disaster management. Media representatives were allowed to participate in the spectacle if they followed the state script. Survivors became passive bystanders, or stage props, and provided the tragic backdrop to Berlusconi's ruin show: destitute mountainfolk in need of a heroic statesman. Aquilani contributed suffering and their heart-wrenching stories. As soon as they veered from the prescribed role, however, they were called to order by the state authorities. Protests and demonstrations were not allowed in the city. The head of the Civil Protection Agency, Guido Bertolaso, made it clear that survivors should not concern themselves with civil society involvement or grassroots activism, but leave the task of disaster response to the state authorities alone. Berlusconi and Bertolaso used the exceptional and tragic circumstances to concentrate power. As a result, only one actor was left with the capacity to generate recovery prospects: the Italian state.

Periods of emergency give rise to new political orders – usually temporary, but often with after-effects – promoted by ‘a government that is at once military and humanitarian, resting on a logic of security and a logic of protection’ (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010: 16). The conscious display of this logic of protection had a powerful effect on the displaced population: the Italian state appeared as a benevolent carer, generating trust in its promises and intentions. Berlusconi – previously accused of being superficial, carnivalesque, and vulgar (Molé 2013; Pellizzetti 2009) – was transformed. He began to appear statesmanlike and capable. Before his career in private television and his turn to politics, the Prime Minister had been a wealthy man in the construction business. His promise to repair the damaged city and its infrastructure was therefore convincing, coming as it did from a building sector expert. The state did not just promise, it apparently delivered – or at least so it seemed during the initial emergency period.

With political power concentrated by the state authorities, civil society initiatives concerned themselves with cultural projects (Bock 2016) or psychological assistance, such as trauma therapy. One important activist was Rocco Pollice, a well-known psychiatrist, whom I met towards the end of my fieldwork in 2013. Soon after the earthquake, which damaged his apartment in the *centro storico*, Rocco set up a youth trauma service, the SMILE centre. He continued his work after the catastrophe, in a temporary wooden building adjacent to L’Aquila’s hospital. Rocco helped hundreds of young people, and Aquilani praised his resolve and commitment. When I visited his SMILE centre, he pulled out a couple of articles he had written on post-disaster psychiatry, to help me understand the hospital’s enormous effort during the earthquake’s aftermath. Still a young man, Rocco looked older than he was. I asked him how he had experienced the summer of 2009, the emergency period shaped by state intervention. ‘In September and October 2009, I was reading house design magazines, choosing how to furnish my apartment after its restoration’, he told me. He insisted: ‘This wasn’t because I was feeling desperate and needed something to hold on to. I was genuinely, completely convinced that the city centre’s redevelopment was imminent and that our lives would soon be normal again.’

With months of frantic activity, attention, and pledges, the state relief effort had had an effect on Rocco. When survivors moved from tent camps into resettlement accommodation, in the autumn of 2009, Rocco was not expecting recovery to be complicated. The state relief operation shaped his family life. Given his optimism, Rocco told me later, he and his wife decided to have a baby. Hope in the future resulted from having witnessed expeditious state operations, coupled with promises that resettlement would be followed by the rehabilitation of historic neighbourhoods.

### Disappearing hopes

In February 2010, almost a year after the quake, the end of L’Aquila’s state of emergency was declared. The Civil Protection Agency returned powers to the local authorities. Up to this point, the city council and the mayor had been insignificant representatives of a territory tightly administered by the state. As one informant phrased it: ‘Our mayors were only good for wedding ceremonies’. The state authorities had established order in the tent camps, overseen the construction of the Progetto CASE resettlement sites, and maintained displaced survivors. When the emergency was lifted, Civil Protection personnel, medical professionals, engineers, and other state employees left the city. All *terremotati* (literally, ‘the earthquaked’) had been rehoused in peripheral emergency

settlements, still lived in hotel rooms, or had moved elsewhere. It seemed to the Italian public that Berlusconi had kept his ambitious promise to restore normal life with miraculous speed and effectiveness. The media lost interest. The catastrophe seemed over. The euro crisis replaced disaster recovery coverage. Expectations for large-scale heritage restoration, however, had not materialized. On the contrary, the historic centre had been left untouched. High barriers prohibited entry, under the watchful eyes of Italy's mountain combat regiment, the Alpini.

Two weeks after the official end of the emergency period, in February 2010, survivors launched a powerful demonstration that revealed the disjuncture between government timelines of emergency and normality and their own experience of the earthquake's aftermath. On 14 February, hundreds of Aquilani toppled the barriers that prevented them from accessing the *centro storico*. When protestors reached the ancient Piazza Palazzo – the seat of the city hall and once a lively student quarter – many broke down in tears. One friend recalled his experience of seeing the much-loved square for the first time in ten months: 'I was shocked. There was an enormous pile of debris in the middle of the square, six metres high. It had become a dump. Nothing had happened in a year'. Thousands of survivors returned every week. Using wheelbarrows to cart away debris, they became known as the *popolo delle carriole*, or the 'wheelbarrow people'. They exposed the reality that almost one year after the earthquake, and despite vows to restore the historic centre, no redevelopment scheme had been devised. Debris had not even been removed. Visions for the future began to unravel.

Instead of dedicating time and energy to restoration projects in the city centre, Silvio Berlusconi's government struggled with scandals. Shortly after the wheelbarrow protest, Italian prosecutors launched investigations into construction projects for the G8 summit and other major events. Guido Bertolaso stood accused of corruption and abuse of office. Whereas he had previously been seen as an esteemed crisis manager, now survivors began to associate him with organized crime and cronyism. He soon resigned. In early 2012, newspapers published the transcript of a tapped phone conversation, which revealed that Berlusconi had demanded to be seated among the victims' relatives during the state funerals to boost his public image. It was also revealed that Bertolaso had informed Berlusconi that damage repair would last until 2040; at the same time, they nonetheless promised to complete the recovery before 2014.

The much-celebrated resettlement sites also lost their appeal. In 2012, L'Aquila's state prosecution investigated their expensive anti-seismic pillars. Tests showed that at least 200 of them out of a total of 4,900 would not be able to withstand seismic shocks (Catenaro 2012). Furthermore, the European Court of Auditors (2013), overseeing the use of EU funds, found that the sites had been overpriced. It ruled that handpicking companies to construct and furnish the rehousing sites had inflated costs artificially. The beneficiaries were private companies. On the ground, Aquilani interpreted inflated construction cost as evidence of the involvement of organized crime. In 2013, the isolated and peripheral resettlement sites still lacked bars, shops, cafés, restaurants, schools, or other social spaces. Presented as an unprecedented and generous initiative, the scheme had become associated with solitude, corruption, and the destruction of the rural periphery. Survivors now expressed a fear that the sites were actually delaying restoration projects in the centre. 'Why would the government spend money on heritage restoration? We aren't living in barracks and tents anymore', a local city councillor asked me rhetorically. He continued: 'The resettlement sites were merely the cheaper alternative to reconstruction. Our heritage continues to decay'. A former symbol of

hope for recovery became the focus of uncertainty about heritage restoration, which was central to expectations regarding the return of normality.

Outside L'Aquila, relief effort coverage had created a widespread impression that the city and its population had recovered completely. In March 2011, almost two years after the earthquake, the Berlusconi-owned television channel Canale Cinque broadcast a popular talk show, *Forum*. Marina Villa, a 50-year-old Aquilana, praised the recovery. 'L'Aquila has been reconstructed', she said, 'and life has begun again. Those who still complain just want to keep eating and sleeping for free'. She left no doubt about whom she considered responsible for the quick recovery: 'We must thank our Prime Minister'. When I arrived in the city a year later, informants showed me clips from the broadcast. They described it as indicative of misinformation that had led Italians to lose interest in L'Aquila's fate. Survivors felt abandoned by their fellow citizens. Moreover, even though, two weeks after the show, Villa was forced to admit that she was not actually from L'Aquila, and that Canale Cinque had paid her 300 euros to praise Berlusconi, this had little effect since her confession did not receive much attention outside the city. Images and propaganda of effective disaster management had created nationwide impressions belying local realities, and Aquilani noticed the absence of interest or support for their cause in the country as a whole.

Just before the fourth anniversary of the earthquake, nearing the end of my fieldwork, I asked my friend Tomaso<sup>7</sup> – a humanities Ph.D. student who was following the news and developments in his home city diligently – to explain why the city centre restoration had not begun. We were on our way to participate in a Non-Reconstruction Party, organized by local activists to mock empty pledges. The sarcastic protest coincided with the visit of a newly appointed government minister, Federico Barca, who also promised a quick recovery, and accused Aquilani of being too negative about the future. Four years after the earthquake, few survivors expressed faith in his pledge. Barca was derided for his suggestion that L'Aquila needed simply a bit more optimism. Tomaso shrugged his shoulders when I asked him what he thought of Barca's comment:

The mayor says there is no money anymore, but the government says there is enough. The mayor says we could reconstruct the centre in five years. Minister Barca says it'll take ten. And in a private phone conversation that was leaked to the press, Bertolaso told Berlusconi it would take thirty years. But why would the state at all care about rebuilding? There were 70,000 people in L'Aquila. 20,000 of them have already left. You cannot spend billions of euros on the remaining ones. No one cares. We have a crisis in Italy. But nobody wants to say this. When there was an earthquake in Emilia-Romagna [a prosperous northern Italian region, in May/June 2012], the state immediately helped local businesses, and reconstructed houses, because that's where the Italian GDP is generated. But in L'Aquila, there is nothing – just sheep, some cheese, and pensioners, who cannot leave. With the current economic situation, nobody wants to spend money on L'Aquila.

Tomaso – an informed, well-read, and young Aquilano – did not know what to believe, or in whom to trust. He was frustrated with uncertainty and the lack of perspectives for L'Aquila's future. As he remarked, Aquilani no longer knew whether it would take ten, twenty, or thirty years to restore the historic centre. Contradictory statements had left all citizens confused about life decisions. Hopes had been shattered and turned into uncertainty, with ramifications for community solidarity.

### **A war among the poor**

Immediately after the earthquake, the state had allocated billions of euros for emergency measures. These included the construction of the Progetto CASE and other resettlement



sites, hotel bills, subsidies for displaced Aquilani renting privately elsewhere, support for repair work in post-war neighbourhoods, and the G8 summit. In 2012, initially assigned funds were running out. Many Aquilani had received financial support for repair schemes in modern neighbourhoods, but property owners in the old town were increasingly anxious that funding would not suffice. Between 2009 and 2014, Italy saw four different governments, each of which changed the bureaucratic structures for the distribution of resources for repair and reconstruction projects. Every government set up a new state ministry or special office for the reconstruction, with new procedures. This frustrated survivors, who had to acquaint themselves with administrative vocabulary to fill in complicated claims forms. In this context of heightened uncertainty, relocated earthquake survivors frequently expressed envy and resentment when commenting on the situation of other Aquilani. In the winter of 2012/13, I visited a friend, Marco, in his home village on the outskirts of L'Aquila. Its old centre was still completely inaccessible. The survivors had moved to a resettlement site that consisted of wooden huts. Unlike the sturdy Progetto CASE building blocks, the small semi-detached houses failed to withstand the harsh L'Aquila winters. Damp mould patches were ubiquitous. Before the earthquake, Marco had lived in a historic house in the village's centre. The earthquake had killed both of his children. When I asked him how the relief effort had changed village life, his response was bleak:

When you arrived, did you notice the house with the orange façade at the corner? For twenty years, that house had been white. Then it was repainted. All the houses that had some damage repair, even if only minor stuff inside, were repainted in bright colours. Initially, the state was dishing out money. Many exploited the earthquake to upgrade their lives: new bathrooms, new basements, renovated attics, lively colours.

Such accusations were common, delivered with an undertone of envy, since the availability of resources was uneven. L'Aquila's periphery was dotted with houses in bright red, yellow, and orange. Survivors categorized each other as earthquake winners or losers. Uncertainty about the future also surfaced during citizens' assemblies. At one such public meeting in the winter of 2013, held in a large marquee erected in the market square, twenty-five Aquilani debated recovery possibilities, sat on plastic chairs under patio heaters. It was freezing outside, but, once again, middle-aged survivors pondered non-existent reconstruction plans. I had initially thought that such assemblies would be fascinating arenas to witness exchanges about recovery, but after having attended dozens of them, I found something else: the debates attracted the same people, debating the same topics, with the same arguments. I felt sorry for the resilient participants, since there was nothing new to talk about or comment on, and yet they continued.

This time, a wealthy Aquilana confessed that she owned a number of damaged houses in the centre, which she used to rent. She was concerned about whether or not the government would finance repairs for all of them. Earlier in the week, a newspaper article had reported a new government plan: state disaster funds would only cover the restoration of property inhabited by the owner. As the lady disclosed her concern that she might have to sell the other houses, other Aquilani interrupted her. They accused her of greed. 'I think only one's proper home should be repaired with state money', another pensioner exclaimed at her. Others expressed their fear that resources might not suffice to restore all damaged houses. They urged her not to apply for additional funding until they had received support. She shook her head in a determined fashion. 'I am entitled to the same state funding as everyone else', she countered, 'and if the government will

pay for the restoration of historic buildings, I will make claims for every single house I have'. By now, the other participants had leaped to their feet. A loud argument ensued, with accusations flying back and forth, symptomatic of many similar incidents I had witnessed. Aquilani called such squabbles and envy a *guerra tra i poveri*, a war among the poor. The term encapsulated the impression that all survivors were struggling with the aftermath of the disaster. Instead of uniting to demand restoration and recovery, they were fragmented. They were all struggling, even those with renovated attics, repainted façades, and multiple properties, but envy was replacing understanding and sympathy in a situation defined by unanswered questions about the future.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, Rocco Pollice – the psychiatrist who had set up the SMILE youth trauma centre – told me about the powerful effect the state disaster management had had on him. In the late summer of 2009, as noted above, he had chosen furniture to design his apartment in the historic city centre. He had expected to be able to return quickly. The future was near. Years later, however, he was still in his Progetto CASE resettlement apartment; his former home was still in the same state in which the earthquake had left it. Repairs had not been planned. His child was growing up in an isolated housing block, where everything – furniture, cutlery, bed linen, flower vases, chairs and tables – belonged to the Italian state. When I spoke with Rocco, he seemed tired and frustrated, but he was also busy at work. He managed to cope with the crisis settling in his everyday life. He invited me to have a pizza with the SMILE centre team before my departure. We did not, however, manage to meet up again.

One year later, Rocco returned to his still inaccessible apartment in L'Aquila's historic centre, climbing over military fences. It was winter and he left footsteps in the snow. Back in his old home, Rocco wrote on the wall: *sono un uomo buono*, 'I am a good man'. He shot himself with a handgun, leaving behind his wife and their 2-year-old son. L'Aquila was in shock, as was I. I could not understand why a man who had seemed so resilient one year previously had given in to doubts and fears. What about his child? Why did he give up? Thousands attended Rocco's funeral, and had similar questions. A long obituary appeared:

No one will ever know what led Rocco to this extreme act. The tragic end of a man who knew how to distinguish between depression and the suffering of life forces us to think more about repairing people's minds, social lives, souls – our inner worlds. For five years now, institutions have only paid lip service to this crucial task. Rocco's death renders us more fragile, exposed in a moment in which we realise the scope of the earthquake tragedy, worsened by exhaustion, disappointment, the lack of prospects for the future, and the many uncertainties, which have plagued people for at least four years, and which plague them still. The institute run by Rocco had to confront the most devastating effects of post-disaster life. But these effects, although they permeate the city's suffocating air, have been silenced or hidden. As if the institutions were trying to avoid talking straight, avoid admitting and confronting, avoid dealing with those serious problems. L'Aquila, with a few isolated exceptions, is a fragmented city now, and does not have a very bright future, to say the least (Santili 2014).

The obituary highlights that Rocco's suicide was not just an act of personal desperation, but conditioned by shattered hopes, debilitating uncertainty, and the lack of prospects for L'Aquila's future – circumstances shared by other earthquake survivors. Its author identifies a culprit for debilitating uncertainty and feeble souls: state institutions. Rocco's profession would have permitted him to distinguish between short-lived depression and pervasive suffering. That he eventually took his own life, the obituary reads, illustrates that he no longer believed in a purposeful future, in remaking normality, in escaping from anguish. The state is accused of ignoring survivors' agony – the absence of social life

and psychological distress – and of neglecting the need for genuine recovery initiatives. Scientific research, conducted by Rocco Pollice and his colleagues, found that up to 12 per cent of the survivors suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, compared with 1 per cent among the general population. Depression was common, affecting two in three Aquilani (Salvadorini 2013). Psychological suffering had become a shared condition, a pervasive legacy, years after the earthquake. I do not wish to speculate on the reasons for Rocco's decision, but the survivors saw the matter clearly: the act was conditioned by the earthquake's aftermath, marked by false promises, institutional failure, and the absence of future prospects. These issues, as the obituary highlights, are well known locally, but 'silenced or hidden' by state institutions, which thus prolong L'Aquila's crippling crisis.

Michael Jackson suggests that

the worst fate that can befall any human being is to be stripped of the power to play any part in deciding the course of his or her life, to be rendered passive before impersonal forces he or she cannot comprehend and with which he or she cannot negotiate. Under such circumstances, some people fight desperately to regain some sense of being in control, while others submit fatalistically to the situation that has overwhelmed them – having recourse to flight, camouflage, or avoidance (2007: 116).

Faced with the reality of destruction, displacement, and death, many survivors adopted a strategy of fighting to maintain agency. Rocco set up an institute to support L'Aquila's depressed youth; the wheelbarrow people reclaimed urban spaces collectively. After years of fighting, however, Aquilani started giving up: depression and post-traumatic stress disorder had exhausted dispersed, isolated survivors. Thousands of people had already moved to other parts of the country. Rocco's suicide expressed concern that civil society engagement would not accelerate recovery either. L'Aquila's future had become dependent on the state, which ignored pleas for sustained compassion and help. The city's purportedly bright future had disappeared into a void.

### Conclusion

In the wake of the L'Aquila earthquake, the Italian state concentrated control over post-disaster existence in the hands of the national authorities. Visions for the future were generated through the state's initially promising engagement, leading to widespread hopes for an unprecedented recovery. Besides material projects, the state staged performances of compassion, which, in turn, conditioned expectations for the remaking of historic city spaces and normality. The emotional experience of hope as a central dimension of emergent post-disaster subjectivity became dependent on the ongoing and benign exertion of state power. Consequently, belief in the possibility of recovery was shattered when survivors grasped that the relief effort had been more show than substance; displays of compassion, which had given rise to hope, were exposed as a self-serving and unsubstantiated spectacle, without any repercussions in policy. The Italian state's specific strategy for administering the disaster's aftermath had conditioned personal aspirations for the future, which, in turn, generated a particularly crippling sense of uncertainty when the agent of hope disintegrated in scandals, lies, and apparent disinterest. Years later, survivors thus identified state governance as the arbiter that had turned a situation of momentary despair into enduring hopelessness, with community life being ripped apart by envy, isolation, and fear of the future.

Hope and uncertainty were the effects of state disaster management. Ghassan Hage (2003) has argued that the resurgence of contemporary nationalisms results from the inability of polities to produce other, positive kinds of emotional attachment to

statehood. State politics, commentators have likewise suggested, is no longer concerned with better futures, bright expectations, or the improvement of collective human life (Abélès 2010). The Italian state, however, produced precisely a belief in the possibility of betterment in the near future. Thus, the state can still feature as a coveted agent of care and support; it is able to generate visions for collective life in redeveloped urban neighbourhoods and to change intimate, emotional experience. Disenchantment and cynicism are not universal attitudes towards state politics in the age of neoliberalism, globalization, or austerity. At the time of my fieldwork, Aquilani experienced their future as absent, with the tools to reconstitute it beyond their control. This sense of crisis was the result of an unreliable state that had shattered local expectations: it thus removed the emotional experience of hope and erased the future it had initially fostered. When hope becomes an effect of state politics, the implosion of state-dependent expectations entails the disappearance of the future from the realm of possible imaginations, and life is difficult to master. The production of this specific condition of uncertainty and instability demands further attention to the ongoing presence of effects of state power in human affairs, particularly during times of personal or collective crisis.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> On the moment magnitude scale, the main shock measured 6.3.

<sup>2</sup> CASE stands for *Complessi Antisismici Sostenibili ed Ecocompatibili*, or 'Anti-Seismic, Sustainable and Eco-Compatible Housing Complexes'. *Case* is also Italian for 'houses'.

<sup>3</sup> Even though national security and border policing have emerged as spheres of state agency in neoliberal contexts (Chalfin 2008; Harvey 2005; Lutz 2006; Masco 2014), Wendy Brown (2010) has shown that they are only feeble attempts to maintain old-fashioned forms of a now increasingly irrelevant power in the era of digital communication and globalization.

<sup>4</sup> Hope often emerges in the wake of catastrophe, particularly as a short-lived orientation in its immediate aftermath (Allison 2013; Solnit 2010); but the profound and enduring character of hope in L'Aquila exposes a particular effect of state power.

<sup>5</sup> In June 2012, powerful earthquakes hit the northern Italian Emilia-Romagna region: tens of thousands of people had to leave their houses. Industrial activity was interrupted in one of Italy's most prosperous areas, now dotted with emergency tent camps. The government response, however, differed from Berlusconi's media spectacle in L'Aquila. The new Prime Minister, Mario Monti, an economics professor who once served as an EU commissioner, pursued a low-key approach to recovery, without resettlement schemes and away from television cameras. In 2016, an earthquake cluster in central Italy left tens of thousands homeless, and the Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, pursued a small-scale and less mediatized response. Renzi cited L'Aquila and the focus on resettlement as a negative example that the authorities ought not to follow. Subsequent government operations thus revealed the extraordinariness and exceptionalism of Berlusconi's 2009 intervention.

<sup>6</sup> Following Italy's reunification in 1861, the city was renamed Aquila Degli Abruzzi. In 1939, under Italian Fascism, the name was changed once more to its current form, L'Aquila, which was intended to sound more impressive.

<sup>7</sup> I use pseudonyms for my friends in this article.

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## Le deuxième séisme: comment les pouvoirs publics italiens ont suscité espoir et incertitude à L'Aquila après la catastrophe

### Résumé

Les analyses récentes de l'État soulignent son incapacité à susciter l'espoir parmi les citoyens et suggèrent que le néolibéralisme et la mondialisation érodent son pouvoir protecteur. Le présent article suggère toutefois que les pouvoirs publics restent un agent de soutien très sollicité, en particulier pendant les périodes d'instabilité. Après le séisme de 2009 à L'Aquila, l'État italien est devenu un acteur essentiel des secours, de la restauration et de la reconstruction urbaine. Son dévouement et sa démonstration de compassion ont

suscité des espoirs d'amélioration rapide. L'espoir en est venu à dépendre de la force publique. Quelques années plus tard, les promesses de redressement sont restées lettre morte et l'incertitude a remplacé l'espoir. De porteur d'espoir, l'État s'est transformé en source de désespoir, générateur d'incertitude et d'une atmosphère de crise. L'État étant révélé à travers ses effets, l'article souligne la nécessité de suivre à la trace son pouvoir dans les expériences émotionnelles intimes telles que l'espoir ou le désespoir. La création d'une situation spécifique d'incertitude met en lumière la place de l'État dans la vie humaine, notamment pendant les périodes de crise personnelle ou collective.

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