

# Witnesses, Memories, and Places of after Catastrophe

## The Vajont Dam Case

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### ABSTRACT

In October 1963, an enormous landslide collapsed into the reservoir of the Vajont Dam, a giant infrastructure recently inaugurated in northern Italy. The resulting waves caused the death of 1910 people and the destruction of the locals' living environment. The event was labelled an 'authentic massacre' caused by human greed in a network of colluded powers that could have prevented it. This human catastrophe constituted a severe break in the historical continuity by profoundly marking the line between a 'before' and an 'after'. We can define this event with the category of 'cultural trauma', which deeply marks subjective and collective biographies. The expression of this difficult memory has been at the centre of my ethnographic and historical work conducted among the survivors and their descendants. In this paper, I want to discuss the emotional relationship people developed with the destroyed places, emphasising their practices of remembrance and witness. Indeed, much has changed in recent years in how Vajont's history is told. New places and new media are the vehicles for counter-hegemonic narratives, which brought previously silent witnesses into the public arena. And yet, the multiple intersections of memories, narratives, and present imaginings of the same place are different and contrasting ways to rethink territories.

**Keywords:** Memory Studies, Disaster Studies, Historical Anthropology, Vajont.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What role do memories play in disaster survivors' relationship to lost places? How can the process of becoming witnesses be structured through this relationship? This paper deals with a catastrophic event, the Vajont dam disaster, and the social history of its memories. We will see how memory is deeply connected with places, remembrance practices, and memorial geographies of what has been lost. It is a work in the methodological and disciplinary field of historical anthropology, "a theoretical position that combines ethnography and history" (Cappelletto 2010, 145). The purpose is to operate a critique of the present in a dialogue with the past. Since 2018, I have been involved in ethnographic fieldwork between the Vajont and Piave Valley to explore practices of intergenerational transmission of memories. The following reflections arose after many dialogues with survivors and their descendants. I collected life-history narratives to better understand the impact that disaster had (and still has). The hoped result is a polyphonic representation of the emotional geography in which my interlocutors move in everyday lives, enacting strategies and practices to reconstruct their sense of self and community.

## 2. HOW TO BUILD A CATASTROPHE

*The 'disaster' is not something given but a construct. On the one hand, there are physical phenomena, continuous rains, mudflows, and rock avalanches. On the other hand, these phenomena provoked and continue to produce a multiplicity of accounts, explanations, interpretations, reactions, fears, and decisions. Therefore, all these things invite us to observe a process that transforms the phenomenon into a social and cultural construct: La Tragedia.*  
(Revet 2007, 315)

On October 9th, 1963, at 10.49 pm, a 260 million cubic-meter landslide collapsed from Mount Toc and fell into the Vajont dam hydroelectric reservoir. An enormous amount of water destroyed everything in less than 4 minutes. The town of Longarone, situated in the Piave Valley (at the feet of the dam), was eroded entirely, along with the lower part of the village of Codissago. The same fate befell the houses on Mount Toc and that on the shore of the lake, belonging to the Municipality of Erto and Casso – a mountain village located upstream of the dam. At least 1910 people died that night, and several inhabited areas were destroyed forever.

What happened was not unforeseen. At the time, the recently inaugurated Vajont dam was the highest in the world and a fundamental element of an articulated system of hydroelectric reservoirs scattered throughout the Alpine area of north-eastern Italy. This system aimed to supply the Venetian industrial district of Porto Marghera with autarchic energy sources. Obviously, this has been made on behalf of 'progress'. The post-war years were marked by the growing investment of private and public capital in the industrialisation of the Italian peripheries. The aim was to bring modernity to the underdeveloped areas of the country. However, the dam was built without adequate geological surveys. Building permits were obtained thanks to collusion with political and financial powers. The inspection commission appointed by the Ministry of Public Works never checked the state of the dam under construction, and only when the mountain showed evident signs of subsidence more experienced geologists were consulted. The response was clear: the only way to keep the mountain from collapsing was to abandon the filling of the reservoir. Nevertheless, the SADE (Società Adriatica Di Energia), the private company responsible for the dam, could not or did not want to afford the loss of its billionaire investment, mainly because the nationalisation of electricity was about to take place. From a wider perspective, we must consider both the period before the dam construction, characterised by struggles and attempts to resist land expropriations, and the period that followed the disaster, when the reconstruction was the scene of speculation in building, commercial, and industrial fields.

It is a history of continuous prevarications on a peasant world destined to be swept away by the water. In the years that followed, a trial marked the Vajont as a culpable disaster, with the aggravating circumstance of the prediction of the fact. Still, it did not produce fundamental criminal convictions for those responsible. Almost everyone died in Longarone, and the inhabitants of Erto and Casso were evacuated from their houses, forever divided.

Thus, more than in other circumstances, the Vajont history shows us that disasters are usually something 'made', not 'natural' events caused by a tragic fate. As Mara Benadusi (2015a) points out in her literature review about disaster studies, since the 1970s the anthropological gaze on disaster progressively moved its focus from the category of 'crises' to that of 'vulnerability'. That was because it became clear that "a disaster is made inevitable by the historically produced pattern of vulnerability, evidenced in the location, infrastructure, socio-political structure, production pattern, and ideology, that characterises a society. The pattern of vulnerability will condition the behaviour of individuals and organisations throughout the life history of a disaster far more profoundly than will the physical force of destructive agent" (Oliver-Smith 2020, 37). From this point of view, the Vajont case is paradigmatic. In the following, we will discuss how the survivors dealt with these long-term vulnerabilities exacerbated by the disaster. The focus will be mainly on memories and the practices

related to them. Indeed, memories are fundamental in (re)constructing communities and (re)defining the relationship with places.

### 3. MEMORIES, PLACES AND COMMUNITIES

Scholars who study memory, such as Halbwachs (1992) and Nora (1984-1992), always emphasise the spatial dimension of memory. In her ethnography about the flooding that affected Santa Fe in 2003, Susan Ullberg (2013) pointed out that memories spatially embedded in landscapes are central to remembering disasters. The disaster memoryscape combines lost geographies, violent images of the days following the catastrophe, and current empty or rebuilt spaces. There are also monumental places dedicated to collective ritual practices of commemoration.

For Vajont's people, the disaster night was not only a severe break in their historical and biographical lives, but also in their living spaces. What happened assumed the shape of what Thomas defined as 'ecocide': the destruction of an entire living environment as the result of a "thanatocratic logic based on the pursuit of profit as an engine of development; on the accumulation of capital as a system of growth; on the myth of happiness (or opulence) as a need for production/consumption" (Thomas 1976, 106). Some of my interlocutors often say: "we saw and experienced the end of the world". Surely, it was the end of the domestic, economic and community life that they used to know. The survivors experienced a "cultural trauma" that deeply shaped their subjective and collective biographies. The sociologist Jeffrey Alexander explains that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004, 1). All the personal, familiar, and public memories inside Vajont communities are located 'before' and 'after' the disaster, which has become the cardinal point on which the narratives are oriented. That discourse is also linked to the trauma of the place loss, as it shows the case of Valeria<sup>1</sup>, who in 1963 was 16 years old. In one of our conversations, she described to me what she suffered after the catastrophe as follows:

When I arrived on the morning of October 10 on Pirago hill [above Longarone], I hoped to see just a flood... I hoped that my house was still there, that people were still there, and everything. When I saw this... This destruction... I said to myself: "No. I don't believe it. I don't want to believe it". [...] They ruined our lives. Because it's not like war... This is different. What you experienced, what you saw... That immense massacre of corpses... That land that is no longer yours, but another planet... It moves something in you... Something was triggered... And you will never forget it.

Then, you go on with your own life; you have your depressions and your fears that occasionally resurface... You do not feel safe anymore, and security is the foundation of yourself. Why do I say that? Because it has become an abstract world, there is nothing that materially reminds you of your home, your nest, your parents, or the family. Nothing is left. You also have a different view of the place because the area was turned into a flood of stones and mud. So, your traditions, your history, which were your reference points... They were gone. You were thrown into nothingness. [...] I loved my little girl [meaning her young self]; I loved my place. I loved it. I loved my Longarone. My streets, my squares, the Piave River... All this was ripped away, even from within.

Valeria's words are full of pain. She lost everyone in her family, remaining alone. But the mourning was not only for the people. She lost her nest, her place, to which she was deeply tied. However, she has not completely lost the connection to her birthplace, which remains in the way she portrays it and the values she associates with it. Likewise for Rosa, a resident of the village of Casso, who lost her land and house on Mount Toc:

We lived much more on Mount Toc than in Casso. Five winter months in Casso, and the rest of the year on the Toc, on the opposite side of the Valley. On the Toc, we got firewood

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<sup>1</sup> For privacy reasons I will use in the text pseudonyms to quote my interlocutors.

and hay. There were cows, goats, and sheep. We had houses with fireplaces, and there was a dairy to make cheese. There were several hamlets: *Canever, Pian de la Pausa, Col de Buc, Col de Pierin...* All the families had a home in Casso and another on the Toc. The Toc was a paradise. As a child, I used to play in the trees; there were cherries, fruits... It was better than Casso. Everything was better there. Everyone was close friends. Now it's all gone. You can only see the wounded mountain.

The French scholar Katiana Le Mentec recently developed a new category to describe the relationship between human subjects, places, and imaginaries. She uses the neologism 'anthropotopia' from the Greek *ánthropos* and *tópos*. An anthropotopia is a physical space that is part of the world of the people who interact with the latter also beyond its materiality: "Examination of the differences (in practices, representations, etc.) through which the same space is lived and managed makes it possible to identify the overlapping of anthropotopias (shared or not) that are present on it. The occurrence of an event that transforms or disrupts this space, as well as its forthcoming announcement, can make these anthropotopias salient as much as they can alter them (in practices as in representations)" (Le Mentec 2021). Anthropotopia is a valuable tool to analyse places from the perspective of how subjects or groups live and represent them. What Valeria found that morning was no longer her home but another planet: Longarone, as her familiar anthropotopia, did not exist anymore. The distance she felt was a deep emotional rupture. Her place was taken away from her physically, but also emotionally. She will always overlap an expanse of stones and mud with the memory of her Longarone, and the two images will coexist within her; as for Rosa and most of my interlocutors. There is also an idealization of destroyed places: Mount Toc in collective and personal memories will always be a lost paradise. The many visions and policies that over time change the relationship with places (even causing upheaval) give the space a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1978) that affect the practices of living, remembering, and witnessing.

When we refer to multiple and diverse relationships with places, we can realize that there are many continuities, even beyond the rupture caused by catastrophes. It is crucial not to forget that actors, even the vulnerable ones, have an agency that allows them to adopt strategies to handle dramatic scenarios. As in similar situations, the Vajont disaster is "far from representing a *tabula rasa* in which people's ability to make meaning is threatened or destroyed" (Benadusi 2015b, 88). We can observe that new communities emerge, despite the displacement of the original ones. These communities are not out of nowhere. They are deeply linked to the past of involved villages, and also to the present of these territories. To describe the post-disaster bond between survivors, Ullberg chooses to use Liisa Malkki's category of 'accidental community of memory': a community kept together by a "biographical, microhistorical, unevenly emerging sense of accidental sharing of memory and transitory experience" (Malkki 1997, 91). She argues that even if disasters are social processes which unfolded in time and space, they are experienced by people as temporally circumscribed events, which became the reason for their being together as a community. Longarone, Erto and Casso were very different villages. They did not even speak the same dialect. Tradition and economic activities were far one from another. Of course, they were neighbours, and their people were linked in multiple ways, but only after 1963 they came together as the same un-banded (and unshaped) 'Vajont community'. It is a group that, occasionally, practices its memory collectively. In other words, they are also a 'mnemonic community', as Francesca Cappelletto labels this specific social segment "made up of those who, communicating with each other, remember together experiences of which they were victims" (Cappelletto 2005, 3). Vajont survivors' communities are no longer entirely located in spaces affected by the disaster, and they are not even all united. They are not a single voice; there are many souls, different associations, and contrasts regarding how memory should be told and managed. Still, the memories hold together many displaced subjectivities that share the same experience.

In addition to the survivors' groups, a broader 'enunciatory community' arose around Vajont and its history. As conceptualised by Kim Fortun in her masterpiece *Advocacy after Bhopal*, a "collectivity [that] is not a matter of shared values, interests, or even culture, but a response to a temporally specific paradox" (Fortun 2001, 11) is involved in post-disaster advocacy practices. Over time, some journalists, writers, scientists, artists, lawyers, and even an anthropologist (me) have joined this

community. The long history of the Vajont disaster shows us that this enunciatory community is in constant reconfiguration, but not so 'temporary' as in Fortun's words. After 60 years, advocacy is still necessary both to transmit the memory of what happened (reiterating the demands for justice) and to condemn the speculation that still plagues the territory and its memory. However, the voice of this community rarely is heard beyond a local level. Outside the disaster area, very few know the Vajont disaster history. That is the result of local and national memory politics, which only accept Vajont as a 'natural' and 'senseless' tragedy and not as a fault-based disaster.

#### 4. FROM SILENCE TO WITNESS

In the Vajont memoryscape, some places express an institutional narrative. They are official 'places of memory', sites where the images of a meaningful past are concentrated (Nora 1984-1992). To better understand the genesis of these places, it is necessary to know how the reconstruction of living environments took place after the disaster. The communities involved have had very different experiences.

Longarone and Codissago were rebuilt in the same place, over mud and ruins. The survivors made this decision, insisting with numerous protests that the settlement should not be moved elsewhere. Multiple government grants financed the new Longarone. The town also had a new extended industrial area, subject to public funding, and tax-free for many years. From all over Italy, many people emigrated to Longarone in search for work, growing the small surviving community.

Erto and Casso had a more complex destiny. For years the area upstream of the dam was declared off-limits, even after the lake was drained. The householders were asked to decide where to rebuild the village. Among the few options provided, they chose the area of Maniago, a flat countryside 40 km away from their home. This settlement is known since 1971 as the Municipality of Vajont: a small new town characterised by artificial and regular shapes, in which "all the streets' names recall places and facts of the motherland" (Casagrande 2014, 57). Most of Erto and Casso's survivors moved to Vajont or elsewhere, tempted by the promise of a more comfortable and modern life. Only in the 1970s, after many protests, a new settlement began to be built uphill from the old village. This is locally called *Stortàn*, and nowadays about 300 people live there. In the area of Erto and Casso, no one reconstructed the destroyed houses, so ruins can still be found in the woods.

The State called acclaimed architects to design the new villages. They chose to fabricate most buildings with exposed reinforced concrete, following the 1960s architectural trend. So, the new settlements are not in the style of Alpine villages and appear unrelated to the surrounding landscape. These architects also decided to scatter the shape of the dam. The new church in Longarone, the municipal building in Vajont, the Memorial Fountain and the Vajont Victims' Monumental Cemetery entrance, everything is made of concrete and has a shape that reminds the giant hydroelectric infrastructure. The dam, a complex memory object that provokes contrasting feelings, seems to be everywhere. Nevertheless, for many years the survivors, as they tell me, "walked past the dam without seeing it anymore". The new towns covered the past, and the collective instinct was to forget.

The relationship of Vajont survivors with witnessing is complicated. After the first few months, no one in Italy spoke publicly about Vajont. Even the survivors report the silence, both in public and private lives. As Antonio tells me: "We never talked about it, either with friends, family or at work. We never talked about it. The word 'Vajont' did not exist in our vocabulary." The reasons for this are manifold. They range from the desire to suppress suffering up to a feeling of helplessness and shame in connection with the long process of life reconstruction. However, the silence and oblivion ended in 1997 with a play featuring Marco Paolini staged in front of the dam entitled *Vajont. Un'orazione civile*. The play was broadcast live on national television. Paolini was inspired by the narrative of journalist Tina Merlin (1983), who first reported in 1959 the risk of a landslide in the Vajont Valley. For the survivors, it was like a collective awakening. As Bepi tells me, "Paolini taught us how to tell our history."

Many decided to share their stories publicly as well as privately. In an era when one is called to respond to what Annette Wieviorka defines as 'the social imperative of memory', those who choose to become witnesses act in a fundamental political arena. The witness is a political subject, an active

builder of memory: "at the heart of this newly recognised identity of the survivor was a new function: to be the bearer of history [...] an embodiment of memory [un homme-mémoire], attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past" (Wieviorka 2006, 88). The survivors perform their witnesses in schools, at the Victims' Cemetery, and especially at the dam – the attraction with the most significant number of tourists. However, those who manage the sites of this 'memory' – or 'dark' (Lennon and Foley, 2000) – tourism ask survivors and volunteers to follow a 'technical' narrative: numbers, data, death toll, and outcome of trials. Personal histories are considered too subjective, and survivors are advised to keep their memories and narratives in check. The sites of this institutional memoryscape are The Dam, the Victims' Monumental Cemetery, the new church in Longarone and two museums. These places are instruments for a politics of memory linked to large infrastructures. Although many survivors still experience their history as they wish, there is the danger that personal memories will gradually disappear and go unappreciated. The narrative about Vajont disaster is at risk of being relegated to a dimension of large numbers and huge monuments, losing forever the life histories of people and families who lived, died or survived there.

In recent years two community projects managed by local associations have shown the willingness of survivors – and also of their children and grandchildren – to tell the Vajont histories from a different point of view, moving the gaze away from the dam. Thanks to new technologies, it is possible to communicate their perspective to a broad and intergenerational audience. The first project was born in Erto. *I will see you again with the eyes of memory* is a workshop run by a small group of survivors and descendants to create a website and an app. These portals show the visitors where the ruins of the destroyed houses are located. The purpose is to tell the history of the ruined places and transform them from private anthropotopias (now known only by victims' relatives) to public spaces. They want to avoid that people forget where these ruins are. As Flavia (a survivor involved in the project) tells me: "The ruins you see in the woods are the greatest memory. Because it is true, you have the dam, you have the landslide... But with that little tile that remains on the ground, you go into the everyday lives, into the people's gestures". They collected testimonies from those who personally knew the people died that night, producing a polyphonic narrative voice that guide visitors through the destroyed places and the biographies of the victims. Meanwhile, *The Streets of Memory* project concerns the Municipality of Vajont. The aim is to familiarise the inhabitants of Vajont, many of whom are not from Erto and Casso, with the street names of the new town, which recall the place names of the Vajont Valley. Some local youths collected elders' testimonies about the daily life in their birthplaces before the dam was built. An online geolocated map has been created that shows the valley as it existed in 1956. It is a map that depicts the Vajont Valley before the presence of a huge hydroelectric company became the only possible narrative. Grandparents and parents were asked to tell something about their bond with the places. On the website, personal stories and photographs can be found for each place name, along with general geographical and historical information. All the interview records were stored in a community oral history archive. However, despite these attempts, the most significant public funding always involves major memorial architecture projects, with which institutions like to associate themselves. Nevertheless, memorial work conducted in communities deserves to be appreciated in order to preserve the legacy of witnesses.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In the Vajont area, whatever disappeared has been overshadowed by a politics of monumentalization, which emphasizes the drama of the catastrophe. This narrative tempts the visitor to feel pity rather than to understand. Sixty years later, rediscovering the everyday life of vanished places, and transmitting these memories to new generations provides an opportunity to structure a counter-hegemonic narrative against attempts to depoliticise witnessing practices. This is possible through the collective caring of alternative memory sites. As suggested by De Certeau (1984), we have to read the space as a narrative. In this narrative, we can better understand power relationships and environment designs produced by discourses that act with different authorities. As we have seen, the relationship with places involves multiple overlapping anthropotopias. This depends both on the kind of bond someone has with that territory and the role that the subjects have. Mainly, capitalism agents

(industrial, technical, political...) act concretely on people's living environments. As an 'ecological regime' (Moore 2016), capitalism should not be viewed only as an abstract concept. The future anthropotopias imagined by the agents of capitalism often become a reality that the inhabitants are forced to face. As in many other cases, to better understand the memorial policy in the Vajont history we must analyse local and global power dynamics, along with both the processes by which subjectivities are shaped and the agency of those involved. That is the only way to contribute to an alternative narrative that focuses on witnesses, memories, and places.

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