Making Tracks: Giacomo Parrinello

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In the "Making Tracks" series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

An Initiation Into Environmental History
By **Giacomo Parrinello**

I first heard of something called "environmental history" as a new MA graduate in history. I had completed an MA thesis on the political cultures, experiences, and languages of radical left organizations in Italy from 1968 to 1977, and I was tired of endless documents on upcoming revolutions that never happened. Crazy enough to aspire to a doctorate in Italy in the late 2000s, I was looking for a new topic, possibly with a stronger anchorage on the materiality of human social life. I ended up with earthquakes—so much for the anchorage. Yet it was certainly different from what I had done up to that point, and I was inexplicably happy about the idea of dealing with crumbling houses, reconstructions, and experimental urbanism. I asked for the advice of a friend, at that time a lecturer in history in Bologna, and we went out for a beer to discuss my rather vague ideas. He seemed enthusiastic about the project. He told me the topic could relate to a new branch of historical studies called environmental history. It's new, it's growing and it's interesting, he said; you should have a look at it. I followed his advice, and began with an Italian book suggested by my friend. After reading the book, I was convinced that I wanted to be supervised by the author. I succeeded in convincing the author and managed to get a three-year doctoral scholarship in Siena, and so it all began.

At that time, I did not know to what extent I would become involved in the field. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to study two earthquakes: the 1908 Messina earthquake and the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake—the most destructive Sicilian earthquakes of the twentieth century. Environmental history was (and partly still is) a marginal subfield within the history community in Italy. There are only a few publications in Italian, and not all the principal books and journals in English are easily available. After

having exhausted the resources of the university library in Siena, I decided to move abroad for a while. The University of Siena offered several scholarships for academic exchanges, and I got one for the Université de Montréal. Apart from being a beautiful and lively city, Montreal turned out to be a great opportunity to expand my knowledge of the field. I spent four consecutive months there, followed by another three-month period one year later. In both periods, I focused on intensive reading, accompanied by regular and stimulating discussions with my exchange supervisor. During that time, I had the chance to look at my research topic and questions from different perspectives.

The initial reason for my interest in environmental history was the direct confrontation of the discipline with materiality. The program of environmental history offered in many ways what I was seeking after my MA: a chance to look at history from the concreteness of the physical world. While pursuing my studies, however, I became increasingly intrigued by a number of other questions that lie at the core of environmental history and that speak not only to the discipline of history but to the humanities at large. What is “nature”? What’s the place and role of non-human forces and features in history? How do we then define human agency? How does acknowledging human-environment interplay challenge or modify our conception of timescales and of history? I think—and I’ve seen here that I am not alone in this—that questions such as these are what makes environmental history something very different from just a new and maybe “fancy” subfield of history. They place it at the very edge of the humanities and in a dialogue with the most interesting developments in these disciplines.

These questions confirmed my interest in earthquakes and seismic disasters, which I began to see as great empirical cases for exploring the implications of such questions. Following this intellectual track, I tried to impress a more precise direction on my dissertation project. The project would be, I decided, not only about reconstructions and experimental urbanism, or about considering earthquake disasters as “laboratories” in which to look at disparate features of historical processes. The dissertation would be rather about the role, or, as I prefer to say, the “voice” of earthquakes themselves (and the geological forces that produces them) in history, and more precisely in that marvelous enterprise known as urbanization.

Looking at earthquakes calls into question mainstream narratives on urbanization, which treat it as a mainly human enterprise in which “nature” plays the role of passive material. Urbanization, on the contrary, should be seen as a hybrid process; and cities as always provisional assemblage of human and non-human forces and features that cannot

be entirely tamed or regulated. Considering the interplay between earthquakes and urbanization, in addition, implies the need for a closer look at very different timescales and at the possibility of multi-scaled historical narratives. More generally, exploring such issues calls into question human (individual and collective) agency with respect to non-human forces and features. Giving voice to the non-human and complicating notions of human agency, then, can potentially improve the public sphere. Human plans and projects that do not account for the autonomy, opacity, and unpredictability of what we call "nature" cannot be successful in the long run.

With these ideas in mind and a finished dissertation to transform into a book, coming to Munich has been perhaps the most fortunate event in my initiation into the field. Being exposed to the newest and most exciting developments in the environmental humanities, knowing personally and in the most informal way great scholars with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and having the chance to discuss their works and my own, has widened my perspectives in a fundamental way. It has confirmed my interest in environmental history, extended enormously my knowledge of the field and of its promises, and also allowed me to bring into focus the potential and the place of my own work in the field. The book I am finishing will certainly be a better product thanks to this.

In more than one sense, being at the Carson Center has represented the completion and the conclusion of my initiation into environmental history. Don't get me wrong: I do feel that the seeds planted during my stay at the RCC will produce new ideas and stimuli for a long time to come. Shortly after leaving RCC, I became involved in a new project, funded by a three-year Marie Curie grant. This time, I am dealing with water—the water of the Po River, in the transition from an agrarian to an urban-industrial society. The questions on human agency, more-than-human interplay, and the scales of human and natural history that I developed over the years, then, will still be at the core of my research. At the same time, for the first time since I heard of something called "environmental history," I feel like I really understand what environmental history has been and what it could become, beyond the array of my particular interests. In this precise sense, I think and I feel that my initiation into the field is finished. Now is time to learn more.