On 30 December 2009, the Italian government published Decree Law No. 195, which dealt with the management of two contingencies: toxic waste in the Campania region and recovery from the earthquake of 6 April 2009 in Abruzzo. Article 16 of this legislative instrument was rather different from the other 18 articles, in that it mandated the privatization of civil protection in the form of a holding company entitled Protezione Civile Servizi SpA. The prime minister was named as the only shareholder, and start-up capital of 1 million euros was to be supplied by the public purse. For the preceding six weeks, rumors about this law had been circulating, but the head of the national Department of Civil Protection (DPC) from 1991–2010, Guido Bertolaso, had repeatedly denied that any such action was going to be taken. As Article 14 of this decree law authorized the DPC to appoint an unspecified number of new employees to permanent posts, a large amount of unsupervised hiring took place. At the same time, a third of the employees of the DPC were formally transferred to the private sector. Trade unions, notably CGIL, protested, but the level of public interest in the matter was minimal.

Decree Law No. 195 was approved by the Italian Senate, but in February 2010, while it was being discussed in the Chamber of Deputies, the scandal broke. Over the course of eight years, from 2002 to 2009, more than 600 ordinances had been issued by the DPC. In contrast, during the period from 1994 to 2001, there had been only one or two
per annum (see fig. 7.1). Whereas the intention of a government ordinance is to provide the legal means to spend money and govern situations in times of emergency and crisis, the ordinances had been used for many different purposes that were not connected with either civil protection or emergency management. For example, a huge figure (400 million euros) was expended to make La Maddalena, a small island in the archipelago of the same name located northeast of Sardinia, ready to host the July 2009 G8 summit, for which it was never used. It became clear that a group of engineers had reaped enormous financial benefits when ordinances were used to bypass the usual processes of bidding for public works and scrutinizing the tenders. It is estimated that 10.6 billion euros were disbursed in the 628 ordinances issued between January 2002 and the end of the first quarter of 2010, all without parliamentary oversight. In the midst of the furor, the privatization bill was quietly dropped from the agenda, and the transfer of DPC personnel to the private sector was revoked.

The indiscriminate use of ordinances was closely related to the problem of how public spending is regulated in Italy. Law No. 109/1994 was termed the Merloni law after Franco Merloni, the minister of public works in the then government of Prime Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. In July 2006, it was superseded by Legislative Decree No.

**FIGURE 7.1** Number of ordinances issued per year by the Italian Department of Civil Protection (DPC)

Source: http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/.
163 (the Code of Public Works), a massive text of 200 pages that comprises 257 articles and 22 appendices. Both of these instruments made complex provisions in order to shield the process of spending public money on construction projects against corruption and undue influence. Preparing for competitive bids and tenders has thus become a process that consumes significant time and resources. It appears that privatization was largely a response to the frustration generated by the application of these laws, which have not succeeded in protecting the allocation of public money against organized crime. In this context, ordinances were deployed because they are not subject to the procedures described in the Merloni law or the Code of Public Works and can therefore expedite construction work that must take place more quickly than due process would allow. However, ordinances allowed no mechanism for controlling corruption or ensuring fairness—or even rational expenditure—in the allocation of contracts and could result in a return to the opaque, potentially unfair process of tendering that was so common before 1994.

The impact of a privatization of emergency management has never been assessed. The Italian government’s justification for the move was to provide stable employment for key functionaries in fields such as hazard monitoring and emergency preparedness. However, it is difficult to see how this could be better achieved by a limited company rather than by the Italian state. In any case, the concept of private civil protection calls into question a series of complex ethical and moral issues regarding the welfare of the public and the protection of vulnerable people.

To understand the critical situation that arose in 2010, it is necessary to go back a year to the main event of 2009, the L’Aquila earthquake. The chapter starts by describing this event in the next section and then examines the organizing structure of the DPC. A reconstruction of the associated scandals is followed by an analysis of their social and political implications and their perverse effects on policy-making in the area of emergency preparedness in Italy.

**The Political Significance of the L’Aquila Earthquake**

L’Aquila, the administrative center of the Abruzzo region, is a university city of 72,800 inhabitants. Situated in an Apennine basin, it is located 116 kilometers from Rome. At more than 700 meters above sea level and with a sub-Alpine climate, it has the some of the coldest weather of all the regional cities in Italy. L’Aquila has a one-thousand-year history, and its center is home to a fine collection of ancient buildings and monuments. However, it is located in a zone of recurrent earthquakes,
and, during the night of 6 April 2009, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake killed 308 people, 202 of them in L’Aquila city, and caused severe damage to 100,000 buildings, leaving 67,500 people homeless.9

The political implications of the L’Aquila earthquake stem mainly from the strategies employed by the Italian government in order to manage the aftermath. When the main shock occurred, the government’s response involved a doctrine of overwhelming force that put one in mind of the Allied invasion of Baghdad in 2003.10 For two months there were more emergency vehicles on the roads of the province than there were ordinary cars and trucks. A control center, the Direzione di Comando e Controllo, was set up in the national training center of the Guardia di Finanza (a law enforcement agency that deals with financial crime) at Coppito, outside L’Aquila. Roughly, a third of the homeless survivors were accommodated in 171 tent camps, one-third went into hotels on the Abruzzo coast, and the others found their own accommodation.

The medium-term strategy differed from that employed in past disasters in Italy and elsewhere in the world. Survivors were kept in tents and hotels throughout the summer. During this time, the government authorized the urbanization of more than 50 sites in the region, where longer-term housing was rapidly erected. Between 29 September 2009 and 19 February 2010, about 15,000 people were accommodated in 184 buildings at 19 sites as a result of the CASE (Complessi Antisismici Sostenibili ed Ecocompatibili) project. These steel and wooden buildings of two to three stories have seismic base isolation that protects them from earthquake tremors and shocks. The 184 CASE buildings provided 4,600 apartments at an average cost of 280,607 euros per apartment (3,875 euros per square meter of living space), including urbanization and landscaping.11 Money was saved by not providing adequate waste water treatment and, in one case (at Assergi), by building the houses on an unstabilized asbestos dump. The base isolators alone cost an average of 1,427 euros each, and the larger buildings required 40 of them. A further 8,500 people were accommodated in provisional housing units or MAP (moduli abitativi provvisori) in 54 municipalities, including 26 sites in the L’Aquila commune.

There are several reasons why this strategy for managing the medium-term emergency is rather singular. Earthquakes instantaneously generate mass homelessness.12 The usual response is to create a temporal progression from short-term shelter (such as tents and mobile trailers), to transitional housing (prefabs and containers), to permanent reconstruction.13 In the case of L’Aquila, massive emphasis was given to providing high-quality interim housing.14 This was offered to survivors rent-free, fully furnished, and supplied with all domestic appliances. However, the strategy was restricted entirely to
the provision of housing. The result was to provide cramped yet comfortable accommodations, but at the expense of social fragmentation, isolation, and lack of community services.

In political terms, the critical period occurred early in the summer of 2009. Two to three months after the earthquake the population of Abruzzo looked to the government to provide a leadership strategy. As Italy held the presidency of the G8 group of nations at the time, its prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, moved the summit from La Maddalena in Sardinia (where preparations were well under way) to L'Aquila. In reality, the G8 summit did very little for the earthquake victims, despite Berlusconi’s intention to use it to bring the plight of L'Aquila to the world’s attention. The participant nations generally failed to honor the promises of aid that they made at L'Aquila, and, as the summit was held at the heavily fortified Coppito site, very few public works were carried out. Hence, the total cost of the three-day summit, 52.5 million euros, benefited the contractors and participants in the summit, but not the local population.

Nevertheless, in the provincial elections of 6–7 June 2009, the center-right party Popolo della Libertà (People of Liberty) soundly beat the center-left, gaining second place (although the municipality of L'Aquila remained under its mayor, Massimo Cialente, of the center-left Democratic Party). The rehousing scheme had much to do with this, as the CASE project was announced in a blaze of publicity just before the election. In the pre-election period, Berlusconi made 29 visits to the earthquake area. With an adroit display of solidarity and big-heartedness at exactly the right time, his government managed to turn an adverse situation to its own political advantage. The bad feeling over an insensitive approach to earthquake prediction and the revelation that L'Aquila city was highly vulnerable to earthquake damage was temporarily replaced by gratitude for the largesse epitomized by the transitional housing schemes.

In synthesis, the short-term crisis in L'Aquila was managed by directing the whole country’s emergency resources to it, without any rationing on the basis of needs assessment. The medium term involved the lavish provision of temporary housing and little else. Economic stagnation, poor infrastructure, and induced dependence on aid are the legacy of the earthquake. It is not clear how long the CASE and MAP projects are intended to last, or what the ultimate use of the buildings is intended to be, if and when the current inhabitants move back to their reconstructed homes. But like the buttressing of historic buildings, the prefabs have a greater air of permanence than similar initiatives from any other earthquake in recent Italian history. As vestiges of the temporary housing of the 1908 Messina and 1915 Avezzano
earthquakes are still visible, one can imagine what the future holds in store. At the same time, the rubble of the historical centers of towns in Abruzzo continues to deteriorate from neglect.

Meanwhile, the L'Aquila earthquake and the privatization and ordinances scandals dragged Italy’s civil protection system into the middle of the political free-for-all and effectively left it there. Given that civil protection is a complex and ramified system, this is hardly fair, as responsibility for the controversies described above is not evenly distributed among the participating organizations. To understand the implications for the system as a whole, it is useful to consider the purpose and structure of civil protection in general and specifically in Italy.

The Structure and Political Connotations of Civil Protection in Italy

Citizens must be protected against disasters, crises, and contingencies. When the cause is armed aggression, the task is allotted to the military or civil defense forces. In contrast, the principal sources of protection against natural disasters and other civil contingencies are the emergency services and the civil protection authorities. Nowadays, civil defense is heavily focused on counter-terrorism activities and remains under the direction of the central state. In Italy, there is a national organization that functions in the provinces through the prefects and detachments of the national police and fire services.15

In contrast to the “top-down” approach that characterizes civil defense, civil protection is necessarily a decentralized, “bottom-up” activity based at the local level.16 This is because, whatever the size of the event that needs to be managed, the theatre of operations is always a local area of restricted dimensions (although obviously in large disasters it is an agglomeration of many such areas). Moreover, civil protection needs the support of the local population in order to survive and function. It is clear that the two systems exist amid a number of tensions, for example, between policies and expectations at the grassroots and the center. These tensions are shown diagrammatically in figure 7.2, which lists some of the opposing tendencies that contribute to centrism and devolution in the context of civil protection and civil defense. The intermediate level of government (which in Italy consists of the provinces and regions) usually finds itself as a protagonist of both tendencies, as it must seek more resources from the central government while rationing them among the municipalities in its jurisdiction. The net result is a barter market in relief resources, with interplay between control and autonomy.
The Italian system has two great strengths. First, as mandated by Law No. 225/1992, the chief authorities of civil protection are the mayors of the country’s 8,104 municipalities. In theory, with the use of directions and ordinances (defined as temporary bylaws), a municipal mayor has more power to direct emergency operations than does the prime minister. In practice, many mayors would not know how best to exercise that power, nor would the central state allow them to do so. That was the case in L’Aquila, where Cialente rapidly ceded authority to order the evacuation and to protect the population of the city to the DPC.

The second strength lies in the volunteer emergency response system, which is the backbone of Italian civil protection. In the national register, there are 3,600 voluntary organizations, 36 of which are federated at the national level. Many of them are based in medical response. Indeed, across large parts of the country, local ambulance services are in the hands of volunteer organizations that receive grants for equipment and activities (although no salaries) and in return have clearly specified obligations to respond to emergencies, large or small. When volunteers are called upon to give copious amounts of their time in response to major emergencies, legislation offers them employment protection. Social services, psychological assistance, and certain forms
of technical intervention (from amateur radio to engineering) are also offered by volunteer associations.\textsuperscript{17}

As mayors are elected by their constituency members, and since volunteer organizations draw their personnel from a wide spectrum of the general public, there is a direct democratic connection between the population and local emergency response agencies. This is much less so at the national level, despite Bertolaso’s efforts to give the DPC a popular profile by improving its image with the public and the mass media.

The problem with emergencies and disasters is that they sometimes need to be tackled with special powers, and this requires exceptional mechanisms of government and law. Because time is short in a crisis situation, such mechanisms need to bypass the normal system of checks and balances inherent in a democracy. To a certain extent this is inevitable, but taken to extremes it is dangerous. At the least, lack of oversight encourages corruption; at the worst, powers could be assumed that would subvert democracy and even foster a coup d’état. Given the long history of corruption, collusion with the Mafia, and political instability under the First Republic, the Italian left wing was particularly wary of measures to enhance the capacity to deal with emergencies, and responsible members of the center-right were equally concerned. One result is that it took 10 years (1982–1992) to pass Law No. 225/1992, which established the national emergency response system as a coherent entity.\textsuperscript{18} In 1991, President Francesco Cossiga refused to sign the bill that Parliament had passed and sent it back to the house for amendments. He reasoned that the Constitution made no provision for emergency management, and thus he could not guarantee that the law would not infringe the rights and freedoms of the Italian people. Moreover, Cossiga feared that excessive power had been given to a person (the head of the DPC) who was neither the prime minister nor the president of the Republic. A compromise was arranged, and the bill passed into law the following year.

Although Law No. 225/1992 led to a flow of minor legislation on civil protection, the system has failed to keep pace adequately with changes in Italian society. The first major change affecting civil protection was the Bassanini Decree Law No. 112/1998, of which Articles 107 and 108 attempted to define the respective roles of the various levels of government in managing emergencies. In particular, it gave to the regions and provinces the coordination tasks previously carried out by the provincial prefectures. However, the wording of the articles in question was brief and vague enough to leave many areas of uncertainty, and hence the response to Bassanini has been uneven. In some instances, notably Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna,
regional governments have taken the lead and induced the provincial
governments to seize the initiative. In other cases, the provincial
prefects have not relinquished their roles. Moreover, the latter part of
the 2000s saw a gradual swing back to central control. The weakness
of the civil protection structures in the Abruzzo region was exempli-
fied by the overwhelming dominance of the DPC and other national
institutions in managing the L’Aquila earthquake aftermath. This did
absolutely nothing to encourage local autonomy and self-determina-
tion in Abruzzo.

The net result is a civil protection system that, as a recent OECD
inquiry highlights, is extremely uneven in its development across
the country, with pockets of excellence alongside areas in which there
is hardly any structure at all, for example, central Sardinia. As in the
past, more recent attempts to re-establish national dominance have
been undermined by the periodic occurrence of scandals. This chapter
started with a description of the latest batch of such transgressions that
now require a more thorough explanation of their place in the scheme
of things. Although one is encouraged to think in terms of evolution
and progress, it should not be forgotten that protection against disas-
ters and contingencies can suffer instead from retrogression, espe-
cially if funding dries up and political support withers, ensuring that
the programs are no longer self-sustaining.

The Cycle of Scandal in Civil Protection

Civil protection tends to be a highly politicized public service and is
therefore subject to the winds of political fortune. In Italy, major
change in this field has been achieved by scandal, with a recur-
rence of roughly once in a decade, rather than consensus. The first
to succumb was Elveno Pastorelli, a leading official of the Italian Fire
Service, who in 1984 was given operational command of the DPC by
its then minister, Giuseppe Zamberletti. In 1987 Pastorelli became
commissioner for earthquake relief and industrial development in the
areas of Campania and Basilicata affected by the 1980 earthquake. In
1993, he became entangled in scandals over the distribution of funds,
following which he remained out of the political limelight until his
death four years later.

Meanwhile, the DPC underwent a sporadic process of evolution that
reached a point in 1999 in which it was transformed into a national
agency. The intention was to give it autonomy and insulate it from
political interference. Thus, Article 14 of Decree Law No. 300/1999
formally assigned civil protection to the Ministry of the Interior (from
which, in reality, it had never been separated). Article 20 of the same legislative instrument added the national technical services to the same ministry, as a supporting service to civil protection. Article 78 created the national Civil Protection Agency (CPA). Here, for the first time, the National Fire Brigade Corps was to be subordinate to the agency, rather than the other way around, as had been the case with Law No. 996/1970, the prototype national civil protection law that established the Fire Services as the “lead agency” around which other emergency response activities should be organized.

The CPA lasted for three months (January–March 2000) before it came under direct government control. This transpired due to a scandal that was engineered over the use of funds and resources dedicated to the care of Kosovar refugees in Albania, for which Italy had mounted a lavish operation. It was alleged that money had been diverted from the public purse to private accounts and that relief goods had been pilfered in large quantities. In reality, nothing was ever proved, nor were there many signs that the allegations had substance, but the head of the CPA, the volcanologist Franco Barbari, was ousted in the early months of 2000. The probable incentive for this move was to precipitate instability in the center-left government (under Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema) in the hope that the center-right would win any election that resulted. It did not immediately do so, but the tenure of the center-left was weakened, and by mid-2001 Berlusconi had become prime minister.

There are thus considerable parallels between the situation in 1999–2000 and the demise of Bertolaso in 2010. During his tenure as head of the DPC, Bertolaso proved adept at servicing the needs of governments from both the center-left and the center-right. However, it proved beyond his capabilities to survive the political upheavals that occurred in the wake of the L’Aquila earthquake. He was also heavily implicated in the ordinances scandals and the associated distribution of public funds. For example, of 300 million euros allotted to five construction companies for the Maddalena construction works, Anemone Costruzioni of Grottaferrata (in Rome) managed to earn 117 million euros, despite the fact that it had only 26 workers, including its CEO, Luciano Anemone. Confidentiality (il segreto di stato) obscures the decision as to why Anemone Costruzioni was the preferred bidder, despite mounting evidence that it was merely a front company. The mass media managed to link Bertolaso directly to the Maddalena scandals through Francesco Piermarini, the brother of Gloria Piermarini, Bertolaso’s wife, who was hired as a consultant on land reclamation at the site. The heads of Anemone and other construction companies were closely associated with Piermarini. The
mass media frequently wrote about a “clique” of company bosses feeding off Bertolaso through the ordinances. Although Bertolaso was not immediately removed as a result of the scandal, he retired in November at the age of 60.

Conclusions

The events of 2009–2010 call into question what civil protection should actually do for the population of a country like Italy. In the simplest analysis, it should be a system that protects citizens against disasters, crises, and sudden contingencies, and in this context it is difficult to determine what the limits of the service should be. For example, civil protection operatives sometimes have to deal with the capture of abandoned exotic animals, such as snakes and crocodiles. But should this be part of their remit?

Greater questions hang over the role of civil protection during the longer-term aftermath of events and the creation of resilience in the general population through a system of identifying, evaluating, and thus reducing the risks of disaster, an approach that is termed disaster risk reduction (DRR). For example, the national DPC retained a presence in the L’Aquila earthquake zone long after the initial emergency phase was over. As its work became linked to the preparations for reconstruction, one can argue that it is significantly involved in DRR. One wonders whether the DPC system is overextended, whether there should be alternative structures for DRR, and what role, if any, civil protection should have in reconstruction planning. The answer is undoubtedly that civil protection should help create resilience against future disasters. But should it also manage reconstruction in its own right?

An OECD team evaluated the Italian civil protection system between 2008 and 2010, and it concluded that there were significant strengths, particularly in the use of multiple risk analysis and the monitoring and management of hazards. However, the team also found that across the country the level of capacity in civil protection varied widely, as did the ability to plan for the management of adverse events. Despite having top-down leadership, there had been little attempt to create uniformity in the response capacity across all levels of the system. This was very evident in L’Aquila, where national leadership effectively swept aside the local response and thus did very little to build up local capacity. Moreover, one could go further than the OECD team, which based its analysis on self-assessments made by members of Italian civil protection institutions. An independent
inquiry would probably find a serious lack of leadership in the production of standards or guidelines for training, emergency planning, and local preparedness activities.

A good civil protection system requires a national (or international) structure that harmonizes lower-level initiatives and makes them compatible, but there must also be the full capacity to act at such levels, as all disasters and contingencies are fundamentally local affairs. The Italian DPC has had an unfortunate tendency to pick and choose the events in which it intervenes. Thus, it has managed both national disasters, such as the L'Aquila earthquake, and more local events, such as landslides in Calabrian villages. At the same time, it has chosen not to intervene in some large meteorological events (floods, severe storms, heavy snowfalls, etc.), which it has described as “provincial affairs.” It is difficult to see any logical criterion in the choices made, except that they are perhaps related to the quantity and quality of publicity that the DPC might receive in the Italian mass media. As the Italian system for managing disasters is collaborative, rather than being based on well-defined hierarchies, there is little redress for the local and provincial forces when the national people arrive to take charge, and this tends to weaken local capacity to respond to major emergencies. On the other hand, regional variations in response capability also drive the national policy of intervention. Although the Lombardy region, with its sophisticated civil protection apparatus, would be frustrated at being sidelined by the DPC, it appears that one rationale for the heavy national involvement in Abruzzo was to mask the dreadful paucity of regional, provincial, and local resources.

The Italian public is equivocal in how it views civil protection. In some areas it is perceived as solely the purview of the volunteer organizations, and undoubtedly these are deeply rooted and locally prominent groups. In other places, people regard civil protection as the function of the national DPC. The weakness of these views is that in reality civil protection is a universal concept: it includes all citizens and all levels of public administration. Until ordinary people in Italy are sufficiently encouraged to assume some of the risk themselves and to share the responsibilities with their political representatives, civil protection is unlikely to have much impact on risk levels in Italy, the European country that is most at risk of natural hazards. Government policy at all levels still tends to maintain a strict separation between the civil protection executive and operatives, on the one hand, and the beneficiaries in the form of the general public, on the other. In contrast, the public need to become more involved in civil protection as protagonists, not merely passive recipients. This will require a cultural change in which people begin to realize that through the political
process they can have more control over their own lives—but at the price of facing up to personal responsibilities, for example, by making private homes more resistant to earthquake forces.

In 1980, an earthquake impacted 23,000 square kilometers and 637 municipalities of the Campania and Basilicata regions, killing 3,000 people and injuring nearly 9,000. The response was slow, initially disorganized, and heavily dependent on extemporized resources. Some 160,000 young conscript soldiers were sent to the area. Now that conscription has been abolished and the Italian armed forces are numerically smaller, that resource no longer exists. In theory, it has been compensated for by the greater institutional role, equipment, training, and integration of the volunteer organizations. However, as no disaster of the magnitude of the 1980 earthquake has occurred in the ensuing three decades, the new system has not yet been put fully to the test.

The only thing that is certain in Italian civil protection is the inevitability of disasters. Geologically young and recently uplifted terrains, active seismicity in 70 percent of the national territory, active volcanism on land and in the sea, and periodic violent storms all conspire to threaten the Italian population with catastrophe. These events tend to demonstrate the fragility of Italy’s post-war growth and development. For example, only one-sixth of building stock is seismically resistant (one-third in the areas of highest earthquake risk), a problem that is particularly acute for large public buildings such as hospitals and schools. In fact, of 60,000 schools, 18,000 are seismically vulnerable (with 6,000 at high seismic risk), and there are funds to retrofit only one-third of them. On that basis, public debate could easily become very acrimonious, and hence government has done little to stimulate it. The L’Aquila earthquake was moderate in seismological terms but huge in terms of the damage it caused. Except when there are great events, DRR has little political salience, and planning for adverse events is not a vote winner. The situation is akin to the “no votes in sewage” syndrome, as negative events tend to be avoided in political campaigns. This predicament is reinforced by the relentless escapism of Italian television.

Politicians caught out by natural disaster tend to protest that such events cannot be foreseen and hence it would have been inappropriate to prepare for them. But whereas earthquakes, for example, cannot adequately be predicted in the short term (e.g., 48 hours in advance of the main shock), areas of recurrent seismic activity are very precisely delineated, and hence the risk is quite accurately known. The same is true of many other natural phenomena and a good many technological risks as well. A plea of ignorance is thus negligent and unjustifiable.
The only alternative is a more mature and rational public debate—one that is informed by both the physical and social sciences—yet at the time of writing, there is little sign that it will emerge.

Italian culture is still heavily dominated by *campanilismo*, a strong feeling of identity with the local community that encourages rivalry between places and regions. This has both positive and negative implications for civil protection. On the positive side, there can be considerable local pride in volunteer organizations and some desire to protect local assets. On the negative side, since it promotes rivalry, mutual suspicion, and self-absorption, *campanilismo* tends to impede cooperation between regions, provinces, and municipalities, especially in planning for emergency management and DRR. Nevertheless, major disasters give rise to vast outpourings of public sympathy and solidarity of the kind that tends to break down regional barriers. What they have yet to do is lead to a concerted process in which lessons are learned from one region to another. The conditions for such a process ought to be created by the coordinating activities of the national civil protection agencies. Unfortunately, this has seldom happened.

Volunteer organizations such as the Venerable Archconfraternity of the Misericordia of Florence (founded in AD 1244) form the backbone of practical civil protection in Italy. Whether or not they are federated regionally or nationally, their bases are always local. Many public services, including civil protection, are utterly dependent on such volunteer organizations. At the time of writing, there is a palpable sense of betrayal in the organizations, which contrast their own severe financial constraints with the waste and corruption that has been revealed by the ordinances scandal. Nonetheless, the public, the government, and the volunteer organizations all need each other, and thus there is no prospect of a “divorce,” whether amicable or acrimonious.

Finally, recent events in Italian civil protection prompt one to re-examine the duality of liberalism and so-called assistentialism. Liberalism, or neo-liberalism, encourages the citizen to bear responsibility for his or her own risks and seeks to limit the liability of the state. Such a philosophy formed the basis of the response to the 1908 Messina earthquake and was quite explicitly articulated by the then prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti. “Assistentialism,” as Italian commentators term it, is a state of dependence on emergency aid. It grew, perhaps disproportionately, with the post-war development of the Italian welfare state. In a time of recession and fiscal stringency, one expected the assistentialism of the 1970s and 1980s to give way to a neo-liberalism in which the government was much less open-handed in its treatment of disaster victims. This has not been entirely the case. In L’Aquila, the first 15 months of the emergency were characterized
by largesse with public funds at a level never seen before. Quite probably, this will be followed by years of abstinence in which reconstruction projects stagnate. The cost of reconstructing a major city such as L'Aquila is so high and the local economy so meager, that this is almost inevitable. Hence, neo-liberalism is bound to triumph in the end. But in the short term, it is clear that post-disaster generosity is a very good means of winning elections, as disaster victims are also voters.

In disaster, as in other aspects of life, the Italian mass media tend to adopt a short-term approach that typically fails to follow a story through to its conclusion. Substantial proportions of the reporting concern “human interest” coverage, with an emphasis on vox populi and the plight of the individual. Statistics are used copiously when they are available. Much of the rest consists of the detailed political background to emergency responses. By publicizing the CASE rehousing scheme and the work in the field carried out by operatives of the DPC, the government was able to create a good impression in the media and stave off criticism. It relied somewhat on the fact that L'Aquila is a relatively isolated place and a political backwater; hence, the nation’s attention would soon be turned elsewhere. Few people outside Abruzzo follow the debates in the local newspaper, Il Centro. Occasionally, they are picked up by the national media, but attention is sporadic.

One exception is the documentary film Draquila (a conflation of the words “Aquila” and “Dracula”), by a well-known Italian actress and director, Sabina Guzzanti. Released to cinemas throughout Italy on 7 May 2010, the film proved wildly popular and won a commendation at the Cannes Film Festival, as a result of which Berlusconi’s minister of culture, Sandro Bondi, refused to attend. Draquila uncomromisingly links the recovery policy for the L'Aquila earthquake to Berlusconi’s political situation, arguing that he used the earthquake to divert public attention from his sex scandals and marital problems. If nothing else, the film is clever at highlighting the illogicality of government strategy for managing the emergency and the poor state of preparedness for dealing with earthquakes in central Italy. However, it is difficult to see any positive outcome of the film in terms of better disaster preparedness or more rational recovery planning.

These observations bring one to the model of disaster propounded by Mitchell, Devine, and Jagger, who show that the political and journalistic salience of disaster is heavily conditioned by contemporary events. In the case of the L'Aquila earthquake, it is clear that the national strategy had much to do with the political survival of Berlusconi and his government and, incidentally, enabled his party to maintain its power base in the Abruzzo region. Indeed, billions of
euros of public money went into ensuring that survival. In conclusion, these considerations make it difficult to think of civil protection in Italy over the past 40 years—that is, since Law No. 996/1970 established the rudiments of the current system—as a forward-moving evolutionary process.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support of the MICRODIS-Aquila Project, funded by the European Commission’s Sixth Framework Programme, and the fine contribution of the MICRODIS-Aquila team: Christian Iasio, Roberto Miniati, Diego Guidotti, Francesco Barbano, Fausto Marincioni, Caterina Antinori, Michele Magni, Rita Fraboni, Vincenza Cofini, and Anna Carbonelli.

Notes

4. Ibid., 2232.
18. Law No. 225/1992 placed the DPC under the direct control of the Italian Cabinet (the presidency of the Council of Ministers). Prior to this, Zamberletti, the former commissar of earthquake relief in Friuli (1976) and Irpinia (1980), was nominated as minister without portfolio for civil protection by Decree Law No. 57/1982, which was converted into Law No. 187 later the same year. His jurisdiction was the DPC, which was instituted by a prime ministerial decree of 22 June 1982.
22. As of 11 November 2010, Bertolaso retired from his post of undersecretary of state and head of the national DPC, to be replaced by Franco Gabrielli, the former prefect of L’Aquila.
27. OECD, Italy 2010.

