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The Vajont Dam disaster: revealing science, power and narrative justice beneath the waters



On 9 October 1963, two thousand people were swallowed up by a colossal wave of water and mud unleashed by a gigantic landslide that sank the dam in the Vajont basin, Italy. A tragedy that the UNESCO would classify as one of the five most serious anthropogenic environmental disasters in history. On the inauguration of the 2023/24 academic year, the Institute for the History of Science (iHC) of the UAB organized a conference on 5 October given by UAB professor Marco Armiero, ICREA researcher at the iHC, entitled: "**Science, power, and narrative justice: The Vajont Dam Disaster (Italy, 1963)**".

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Marco Armiero

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contributed to bringing together environmental humanities and political ecology. In addition, he is currently the editor-in-chief of "Resistance: A Journal of Radical Environmental Humanities" (Nebraska UP, formerly Resilience).[5]

In the fateful records of history, a monumental catastrophe unfolded on 9 October 1963 when the Vajont basin, in Italy, bore witness to the merciless wrath of nature: a wave of water and mud, triggered by a landslide over the Vajont dam, took more than two thousand lives from the valley. This calamity, considered by the UNESCO as one of the most serious anthropogenic environmental disasters ever to have occurred, has etched a chilling tale in the collective memory of humanity.^[1]

On the threshold of the 2023/24 academic year, the Institute for the History of Science (iHC) of the UAB invited us to delve into the annals of this tragedy. On 5 October, an inaugural conference of the Master's in History of Science was given by UAB professor Marco Armiero, who is also an ICREA researcher at the iHC. The lecture, entitled "**Science, power, and narrative justice: The Vajont Dam Disaster (Italy, 1963)**", unravelled the intricate tapestry of science, authority, and the search for justice in the wake of the Vajont Dam disaster.

The talk recounted how in the quiet valleys of northern Italy, the Vajont dam was a testament to the skill and ambition of human engineering. Completed in 1959, the dam was a symbol of scientific progress and modernity, promising hydroelectric power, and economic growth for the region. However, little did anyone know that beneath the surface of that seemingly perfect structure brewed a storm of socio-environmental injustice that would culminate in the loss of so many lives.

From his recently published book, "*La Tragèdia del Vajont. Ecologia política di un disastro (Einaudi 2023)*", Marco Armiero used this case study to decipher the intersection of science, politics, and memories in the creation of socio-ecological relations.^[2]

Ambition and progress

Armiero began his conference by contextualizing the construction of the dam, where the Italian electricity company, Società Adriatica di Elettricità (SADE) was determined to harness the hydroelectric potential of the Vajont River, which was located in the Dolomite Mountains in northeastern Italy. Scientific knowledge and technological expertise were at the forefront of this ambitious project, "but so were power and the desire to control nature, supported by the narrative of progress", highlighted Armiero.

As construction progressed, concerns began to appear on the face of the apparent solidity of the of scientific excellence. Geologists and engineers raised alarm about the stability of the dam, since, although well-constructed, the adjacent towering Mount Toc had a history of landslides.^[3] "However," Armiero declared in his speech, "the pursuit of economic gain and political influence overshadowed the need for prudence". Residents also expressed fears about the dam's impact on their homes and livelihoods, but despite their protests against the dam, their concerns were summarily dismissed by the authorities.^[4]

Professor Armiero remarked and exemplified the importance of the work of journalists like Clementina Merlin, who tried to give voice to the inhabitants and denounce in advance the dangers of the construction of the dam. Ignored by the institutions, Merlin was accused in 1959 of "spreading false and tendentious news aimed at disturbing public order through her articles".^[1] Tragically, three years later, the valley would experience a terrifying catastrophe.

The wave of consequences

On the night of 9 October 1963, a massive landslide occurred on Mount Toc, causing 300 million cubic meters of rock to fall into the Vajont reservoir. A colossal wave of 50 million cubic metres flew over the crest of the dam, crashing into the valley below with devastating force and destroying everything in its path. In a matter of minutes, more than 2,000 lives were lost.^[3]

In the aftermath of the disaster, the narrative began to change. The more it was debated, the more questions were raised about who was responsible for the tragedy. According to Marco Armiero, the government and mainstream media described the Vajont disaster as an "unforeseen chain of unfortunate events, a terrible accident caused by nature impossible to predict". Geologists and engineers argued that the dam structure was well built, but in the wrong place. Their discourse serves as a reminder that science sometimes has political limitations.^[2]

The incident ended "with no blame and no responsibility for anyone, but the risk of the dam was well known," Armiero declared in an indignant tone. However, several scientific experts, journalists and civilians who had warned of the dam's instability demanded justice for their ignored warnings. The Italian Communist Party and its newspaper denounced the corporation and the authorities, accusing them of neglecting the safety of the dam. The Italian government faced a backlash for prioritising economic interests over human lives. The narrative of power had been transformed into one of accountability and justice.^[4]

In essence, the Vajont dam disaster remains a grim chapter in Italian history, underlining the intricate interplay between science, power, and narrative justice. Marco Armiero's talk served as a reminder of the dangers of arrogance in the face of nature, where the pursuit of progress can blind decision-makers to society's warnings. It also highlights the importance of considering the views and concerns of local communities and the need for greater citizen participation in political and scientific decision-making processes.

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