

**EASA2022: Transformation, Hope and the Commons**  
**17th European Association of Social Anthropologists Biennial Conference**

**P021: Haunting pasts, future utopias: an anthropology of ruins**

(<https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2022/p/11400>)

**Convenors:** Valentina Gamberi (Research Center for Material Culture) and Chiara Calzana (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca)

**Discussant:** Francisco Martínez (Estonian Academy of Arts)

**Panel short abstract:**

This panel welcomes papers dealing with heritage practices in post-disaster areas. It reflects on how the material traces of ruins and natural and historical tragedies continue to play a role in the present and metamorphose in future hopes, engagements, and utopias.

**Long Abstract:**

What if anthropologists let ruins speak? With the critical analysis of "Southern" epistemologies by de Sousa Santos (2014) and a historical-material approach to the so-called "difficult heritage" (Macdonald 2008), there is a growing interest in the anthropological potential of ruins and post-disaster contexts. Ruins and traces of natural and historical tragedies are lost pasts shipwrecked in the present with their material trace that will continue to transform in future hopes, engagements and utopias. They embody a past haunting current practice, posing ethical dilemmas on their present and future usages by the social actors and collectivities that enter into contact with them. Ruins open a dialogical space between institutional politics of memory as well as grassroots claims on the past that can work in synergy or, conversely, in conflict with each other. At the same time, ruined material crafts imaginaries and affective orientations (Ahmed 2004) towards traumatic memories for then transforming the latter's scars into building materials for a future, collective res-publica. Not only are ruins material remaining, but they are also resistant, counter-hegemonic thoughts to venture the future otherwise.

This panel sets out to reflect on the sustainability of post-traumatic memories and what is lost with the vanishing materiality of difficult pasts. It reflects on possible ways to think ruins and difficult traces of the past beyond the Western-centric categories of the abject and the residual in favor of a resilient and counter-hegemonic perspective in which ruined worlds can be generative of something new (DeSilvey 2017; Martínez 2018).

## **The Vajont Valley Memoryscape between post-disaster ruins and remembering practices**

Chiara Calzana (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca)  
(<https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2022/paper/66296>)

### **Paper short abstract:**

The Vajont disaster, which occurred in 1963 in northern Italy, left lots of ruins that are places of remembering, mourning, but also a start-point for alternative narratives about what happened in the valley 60 years ago. Actors of these memories are families, who never forgot their beloved dead.

### **Paper long abstract:**

In October 1963, an enormous landslide collapsed into the Vajont dam water basin causing two waves that destroyed villages and lives, resulting in 1917 human dead. Along the river Piave, Longarone was cancelled entirely, becoming a "martyred city" that has been rebuilt on its ruins. Instead, the little villages scattered along the Vajont valley remain in ruins, giving the space a "structure of feeling" - a spiritual, emotional, and historical dimension that contributes to the orientation of the living activities. It's here that families commemorate their beloved dead, who forever disappeared that night, bringing flowers and candles, and praying for the souls, instead of going into the official Monumental Cemetery. And it's still here that - against the official narratives about the disaster - some of the survivors would like to start a form of "pilgrimage" that could bring tourists and students to discover what happened in the valley, getting closer to the family dimension of mourning practices instead of admiring the most spectacular aspects of the disaster. Observing how families manage material and immaterial traces of the past is the best way to investigate the politics of memory, keeping together the experiential, emotional, and daily dimensions of kinship with the political meaning of kinship itself, which constitute real challenges to the power. The ruins create imaginaries and affective orientations toward the memories of the dead and the landscape and then transform the scars of the latter into materials to build an imaginary future.