



Conflict in Campania: Waste emergency or crisis of democracy

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the Italian Government issued a decree according to which obstructions or protests in the vicinity of landfills or incinerators became a penal felony. This was the outcome of a long process that began fifteen years before when regional waste treatment facilities became unable to cope with the waste accumulated in the region of Campania. This article studies the history of this conflict in order to identify a range of values and concerns about nature, health and democracy. It asserts that the decision-making process adopted by subsequent Italian governments, alongside repressive laws, oversimplified a complex crisis and obscured different emergent perspectives and values. Ultimately, denying the will of a large part of the population caused increased social unrest.

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1. Introduction

On May 2008, under decree no. 90 issued by the Italian Government, protests taking place in the vicinity of landfills, incinerators or any plant related to waste management became a penal felony. After fifteen years of unsuccessful attempts to solve the waste management crisis in the region of Campania, and after eleven appointed National Commissaries, hundreds of local demonstrations and even guerrilla insurgencies, this decree was the solution devised by the Italian government to handle increasing social unrest and to repair the damage done to Italy's international image.

The Italian Prime Minister declared that “the emergency is now over” as the streets of Naples were now clean (EDIE, 2008)³. This statement mirrored a perspective shared by the majority of Italian policy-makers and conveyed by international media (The Economist, January 10, 2008), that the problem was one of inefficient waste management and had to do with the inability of Campania's inhabitants to implement household waste separation.

However, the Campania case has inspired a diversity of studies – by NGOs, activists, government institutions, historians, and social and

medical scientists – from which a much more complex picture emerges. These documents have focused on distinct angles of the conflict: the importance of the toxic waste trade between the camorra (the regional mafia) and corporations across Italy and Europe (Fontana et al., 2008; Iaculli, 2007), legal analyses (Lucarelli, 2007a,b,c; Raimondi, 2007), health risks and epidemiological assessments (Fazzo et al., 2008; Martuzzi et al., 2008; Senior and Mazza, 2004; Comella, 2007), the impacts of landfill sites (de Medici, 2007; Ortolani, 2008), the institutional responsibilities of waste mismanagement (Rabitti, 2008), the emergence of the inter-linkages between society and nature in environmental conflicts (Armiero, 2008), the role of activism (Musella, 2008), and the political implications of the crisis (Barbieri and Piglioni, 2007).

Building on these studies, this paper aims to give an overview of the diversity of perspectives, and range of values and beliefs at stake throughout the conflict. This allows us to reveal how the complexity of the conflict was inadequately addressed by official decision-making procedures. Rather, politicians, public authorities and media have promoted a simplistic view which has served as a foundation for policies that do not address the roots of the problem, have negative environmental and social impacts, are barely legal (if not illegal) and erode democracy.

Grounded in a post-normal science (PNS) approach, the present article highlights that the official resolution of the ongoing environmental conflict is unacceptable from political, social and ecological points of view. The authors stress the need to shift away from the current top-down approach of the National and Regional Governments and their reductionist and technically-led methods, to others

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³ Also listen to the declaration of the Italian Prime Minister: <http://www.governoberlusconi.it/page.php?idf=450&ids=451>.

more sensitive to the complexity of the Campania case. The approach adopted so far has obscured dangers posed to environmental and public health, and ignored repeated calls for community involvement in decision-making processes. In contrast, the current study elucidates the presence of a multiplicity of legitimate perspectives (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994a; Giampietro, 2003; Munda, 2004) held by different actors and above all the irreducible uncertainty characteristic of the emergent problems.

In this vein, the paper constructs a narrative that reflects the complexity of Campania's waste crisis. We propose a new conceptualization of the conflict, one embedded in a complex social system framework (Gallopín et al., 2001), that includes the values and concerns of lay people in environmental governance processes (Delgado and Strand, 2010). The purpose of this research is therefore not only to document what is happening in Campania, but to provide an improved understanding of and sensitivity to the issues of uncertainty, quality and complexity.

The paper is organized into five sections. Section 2 presents the PNS framework, the background of our case study analysis, and describes the methods chosen to approach and characterise the conflict. Section 3 develops a contextual analysis, first describing the geographical, economic and institutional features of Campania and then deconstructing the main processes underlying the conflict. Section 4 discusses the history of the conflict and the core issues at stake, making explicit the multidimensionality of the crisis and its irreducibility to a single problem. Finally, Section 5 concludes by denouncing the repressive resolution of the problem as unacceptable from both political and ecological points of view, and proposing a more inclusive procedure whereby the different actors at different scales assume responsibilities through a deliberative approach.

2. Background and methods

2.1. Post-normal science

The “Post-normal” epistemological framework (PNS) analyses the limitations of “normal” science approaches when facts are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high and decisions are urgent (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994a,b, 1997, 2002; Ravetz and Funtowicz, 1999; Gallopín et al., 2001). Normal Science (NS), according to Kuhn, is a puzzle-solving attempt to force nature to fit within a certain paradigm “predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like” (Kuhn, 1978, p. 23), quality assured by evaluation by peers. In contrast PNS emphasizes irreducible uncertainty, multiple perspectives and quality assurance by an “extended peer community”. The latter refers to the expansion of the peer group beyond certified experts to include all those with a stake in the issue such as “judges, journalists, scientists from other fields or just citizens” (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994a p. 204). Such an extension improves the democracy of science for governance and enhances the quality of the process and the outcomes.

As far as decision-making is concerned advocates of PNS argue that to face socio-environmental issues a change in approach is needed, from seeking an optimal solution, where single perspectives and criteria lead the process, to seeking the wisest solution, where multiple perspectives allow for a better understanding of the problem (Giampietro, 2003).

In this context, we see a shift of emphasis from a “community of experts” (i.e. scientific peer community) in NS to an “expert community” (i.e. extended peer community) in PNS; the former is led by certified experts, while the latter emerges from a quality assessment of the political process able to articulate “extended facts”, i.e. the diversity of knowledge (e.g. scientific, local), values (e.g. economic, ethical) and beliefs (e.g. material, spiritual) at stake (Ravetz and Funtowicz, 1999).

The complexity of the waste crisis in Campania requires a PNS approach to elucidate the multidimensional aspects of the whole story and to avoid the application of reductionist policies in the future. Inspired by a PNS framework we try to express the plurality of epistemological (non-equivalent observers) and ontological (non-equivalent observations) views in the Campania waste conflict (Giampietro, 2003; Giampietro et al., 2006). This approach allows us to move some steps towards a more complex definition of the crisis, as perceived by the various social actors according to actual knowledge, being prudent in relation to the unavoidable existence of uncertainty and ignorance (Giampietro, 2003).

2.2. Methods

In order to reconstruct the Campania case and to identify the different actors and their values and beliefs, we have developed a narrative based on diverse primary and secondary sources. Research was carried out in three stages. First, an initial collection and analysis of documents including official waste figures and trends in Europe, Italy and Campania, government acts, newspaper articles, video documentaries, journal articles, internet web pages, and NGO dossiers was done. This allowed us to characterize Campania's institutions, geography and economy, giving particular attention to waste production and treatment trends, and land use and landscape impacts.

Second, primary direct information was collected via “participant observing” (Cattaneo, 2006; D'Alisa, 2010). This method stresses the participative role of the observer and the fact that the resulting observations emerge from the reflective ability of the participant. In this vein, the motivation of the participant is activism and the academic outcome is a by-product of this activism. D'Alisa has actively taken part in the Campania conflict since 2003 and has had access to a vast amount of documentation accumulated by activists and local organizations. During the second half of 2008, following a strategy designed by the all the authors (objectives and questionnaire structure), he conducted extensive discussions with local activists to identify with them the main events in the conflict and the main values at stake. What is relevant methodologically is not simply the access to these activist sources of information, but the fact that this conflict is part of D'Alisa's biography. Paraphrasing Armiero (2008), we were able to see the waste conflict like a protester. Hence, we approached the socio-natural processes through the lens of the conflict, which allowed us to expose the role of nature and society and the power relations informing them (Armiero, 2008).

Third, we compared conflicting interpretations of events, descriptions of the values at stake over time and their relevance to the current state of affairs. An extended chronological description of the conflict was built identifying the key events, actors and issues at stake (Miles and Huberman, 1994), followed by an in-depth discussion aimed at delimiting, defining and characterizing the key stages of Campania's waste crisis. This analytical process allowed us to present our own narrative and understanding taking into account the different values and their weak commensurability (Martinez-Alier et al., 1998).

3. The Campania waste crisis

3.1. Context analysis

Campania is a region in the southern part of Italy and the city of Naples is its capital. According to Svimez, the metropolitan area of Naples (Fig. 1a, b), which covers less than 20% of Campania's surface (Smarrazzo, 1999), accounts for 80% of the total regional population (about 4.5 out of 5.8 million people). Metropolitan area of Naples is the most densely populated area in Italy and one of the most in Europe, with an average density of about 2000 habitants per km²,

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