

The waste crisis in Campania, South Italy: a historical perspective on an epidemiological controversy

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Between 2001 and 2009, the area of Naples, South Italy, repeatedly hit the headlines of national and international media due to the waste management crisis that on many occasions filled up the streets of the region with huge piles of waste. What soon emerged as the main bone of contention concerned the connections between the population's health and the presence of dumps on the territory. What the risks for health actually were, who was entitled to assess them, and whether pollution from proximity to dumps caused health problems were all topics that came to the fore during a debate that took place within the Italian epidemiological community, alongside the political and governance crisis.

All scientific work is incomplete - whether it be observational or experimental. All scientific work is liable to be upset or modified by advancing knowledge. That does not confer upon us a freedom to ignore the knowledge we already have, or to postpone the action that it appears to demand at a given time.¹

Austin Bradford Hill

Introduction

Acerra, outskirts of Naples, South Italy, 17 August 2004, about 1 pm. Two men cling to the top of a crane inside a building site, in the suffocating heat of a summer afternoon. At the foot of the crane, a group of people has gathered to support them: these are citizens from Acerra, a town of 55,000, which is slated to host Europe's largest waste-to-energy incinerator. The two men on the crane are the mayor of Acerra, Espedito Marletta, and a Senator of the Italian Republic, Tommaso Sodano, both from the radical left party Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Reestablishment). Below the crane, beside the citizens, stands a group of people in uniforms: these are the deputy

police commissioner of Naples, Antonio De Jesu, and his agents. De Jesu orders the two men on the crane to come down, but the two do not comply. Negotiations stall for a while, before De Jesu orders agents to intervene and disperse the protest. Marletta and Sodano are placed under arrest and brought to the police headquarters, where they are charged with invasion of private ground and threats against a public official.

The image of two state officers staging a blatant protest by challenging a body of the very state they represent is among the most emblematic of the waste management crisis that rocked the region of Campania and its capital, Naples, from 1994 to 2009. Especially after this incident in 2004, the crisis filled the pages of newspapers and news broadcasts, bringing to light, both nationally and internationally, an extremely complex network of processes and actors, and causing one of the longest-running media scandals in recent Italian history. Most contemporary Italian media would refer to it as the Campanian "waste emergency," because indeed a state of emergency had formally been declared in 1994. But apart from the legal phrasing, can a fifteen-year long process be called an emergency at all? And what did it entail for the Campanian society?

In the last decade, a number academic and journalistic publications have sought to respond to this and other unresolved questions related to the crisis. Legal, political, managerial, environmental, and sociological aspects have been scrutinized, as have the involvement of the local mafia – the camorra – and that of local and national administrations.² The literature on the crisis brings to the forefront opinions and accounts of technology experts, policymakers, and citizens living in the affected areas.³

² Though in international literature the word "mafia" tends to be indiscriminately attributed to a variety of criminal organizations, one should keep in mind that significant differences exist between, for example, the Sicilian mafia and the Neapolitan camorra, in terms of structure, organization, involvement in illegal activities, etc. For an initiation to the recent history of camorra, see: Francesco Barbagallo, *Il potere della camorra (1973-1998)* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999). On the mass media and the waste crisis, see: Rossella Savarese, *Galli sulla monnezza. Silenzi, grida e bugie sui rifiuti in Campania* (Roma: Franco Angeli, 2009).

³ A summary selection of the most significant monographic sources on the crisis include: Alessandro Iaculli, *Le vie infinite dei rifiuti: il sistema campano* (Altrenotizie.org/Lulu, 2007); Paolo Rabitti, *Ecoballe. Tutte le verità su discariche, inceneritori, smaltimento abusive dei rifiuti. Testimonianza shock su Napoli e Campania* (Reggio Emilia: Aliberti Editore, 2008); Antonello Petrillo (ed.), *Biopolitica di un rifiuto. Le rivolte anti-discarda a Napoli e in Campania* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2009); Liliana Cori, and Vincenza Pellegrino, *Corpi in Trappola - Vite e Storie tra i Rifiuti* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2011); Marco Armiero (ed.), *Teresa e le altre. Storie di donne nella terra dei fuochi* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2014).

Abbreviations: AIE, Italian Epidemiology Association; CM, congenital malformations; CNR, National Research Council (Italy); E&P, Epidemiologia & Prevenzione; FFW, fuel-from-waste; GNI, Gross National Income; ISS, National Institute of Health (Italy); Sebiorec, Studio Epidemiologico Biomonitoraggio Regione Campania; WHO, World Health Organization

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¹ Austin Bradford Hill, "The Environment and Disease: Association or Causation?"

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Works by journalist Alessandro Iacueli and engineer Paolo Rabitti, for example, have scrupulously reconstructed the chronology, main legislative and political issues of the Campanian case, and detailed the roles and actions of actors involved.⁴

More reflexive works started to emerge towards the formal end of the crisis (December 2009), and aspects of the Campanian crisis have been analyzed by geographers, political scientists, and environmental scientists. Geographers have shown how the camorra progressively took control of the regional waste management sector by replacing the formal regulatory system with an informal one; surprisingly, however, much less academic interest has been shown towards illegal waste disposal activities by Northern and Central Italy's entrepreneurs.⁵ Political scientists have argued that delays in the transition to industrial treatment and recycling can be explained by institutional proliferation (i.e., ad hoc creation of a large number of public agencies to which to entrust urban waste management), clientelism, and unstable political executives who favored political expedience over technical expertise.⁶ While stressing major discrepancies between the data on produced and disposed waste in official statistics, economists have formulated a new system of environmental accounting to provide a more accurate assessment of the figures of waste generation and disposal in Campania, in contrast to analytical tools employed in official statistics.⁷

Other studies have provided more sociologically and anthropologically oriented perspectives: the environmental history and sociology.⁸ Some scholars have sought to understand the relations between territory, populations, and waste, for example by analyzing the numerous mobilizations against incinerators and landfills in Campania. In particular, environmental historian Marco Armiero has included the Campanian issue within the framework of the environmental justice movement, which merges social and environmental issues:⁹ by framing the crisis within Italy's historical post-"unification" context,¹⁰ he has shown the

role of racialization in the Campanian issue, the contamination of the region's land being often summarily ascribed to a historical anthropological diversity – read, inferiority – of Southern Italians with respect to peoples of the rest of the peninsula.¹¹ The racialization framing of the crisis allowed Armiero to liken struggles of Campanian citizens against the opening of landfills and incinerators to those of populations of the global South against industrial mega-projects, or those led by marginalized Afro-American communities in the US.¹²

Still other studies, countering a simplistic narrative ascribing Campanian mobilizations to technophobia or to a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) effect, have investigated citizens' protests in terms of a crisis of democracy, showing how resistance was prompted by institutional actors' neglect of any consultation and communication strategy with the affected populations, and their adoption of a technocratic, top-down decision-making agenda, ruled by institutional experts.¹³ In short, these works interpret mobilizations as community struggles or popular resistance movements, capable of going beyond localism and extending their claims to a democratization of sociotechnical decision-making and a more general criticism of the contemporary development model.

Notwithstanding the extensive academic research on the Campanian crisis, very few authors have hinted at the issues of the production of expert knowledge in the process, or recognized the crisis as a paradigmatic example of a sociotechnical controversy, namely one combining a high rate of scientific technicality with social and environmental preoccupations. Those who have taken an interest in the science involved in the waste crisis, have highlighted the difference in attitude of the many stakeholders involved in the Campanian issue vis-à-vis the word of experts, or have focused on the disclosure of epidemiological data, on their appropriation by citizens and on the institutional consequences of such appropriation, or still, have stressed the activists' exploitation of the plurality of voices among

⁴ Iacueli, *Vie infinite*; Rabitti, *Ecoballe*.

⁵ Fabrizio Maccuglia, "La Campanie, plaque tournante du trafic de déchets". *Historiens & Géographes* 403 (2008): 125–33. A second work by a geographer is: Vittorio Amato, "Conflitti ambientali e territorio. Alcune evidenze dalla crisi dei rifiuti in Campania". In Tullio D'Aponte (ed.), *Il cavallo di Troia. Disagio sociale, politiche carenti, marginalità diffusa nello sviluppo territoriale della Campania*, 87–106 (2009, Roma: Aracne). However, this work appears based on rather simplistic argumentative lines when it embarks on a sociological analysis of the crisis.

⁶ Eleonora Pasotti, "Sorting through the Trash: The Waste Management Crisis in Southern Italy", *South European Society and Politics* 15 (2: 2010), 289–307.

⁷ Giacomo D'Alisa, Maria Federica Di Nola, and Mario Giampietro, "A multi-scale analysis of urban waste metabolism: density of waste disposed in Campania", *Journal of Cleaner Production* 35 (2012): 59–70; Giacomo D'Alisa and Marco Armiero, "La ciudad de los residuos. Justicia ambiental e incertidumbre en la crisis de los residuos en Campania (Italia)", *Ecología política* 41 (2011): 97–105; Id., "What Happened to the Trash? Political Miracles and Real Statistics in an Emergency Regime", *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24 (4: 2013): 29–45.

⁸ William R. Catton, Jr. and Riley E. Dunlap, "Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm", *The American Sociologist* 13 (February 1978): 41–49; Riley E. Dunlap and William R. Catton, Jr., "Environmental Sociology", *Annual Review of Sociology* 5 (1979): 243–273.

⁹ See the articles included in: *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 24 (4: 2013). For a theorization of the Environmental Justice Movement, see: Joan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002).

¹⁰ Italy's political 'unification' – in fact, the conquest by the Piedmontese armed forces of the states of the Italian peninsula – was ultimately by 1871. The fall of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies – and of its capital city, Naples – occurred in 1861. The King of Sardinia-Piedmont, Victor Emmanuel of Savoy, was proclaimed King of Italy on 17 March 1861.

¹¹ Marco Armiero, "Is there an indigenous knowledge in the urban North? Re/inventing local knowledge and communities in the struggles over garbage and incinerators in Campania, Italy", *Estudios de Sociología* 1 (20: 2014) [no page number] (<http://www.revista.ufpe.br/revsocio/index.php/revista/article/view/339/298>, accessed 19 October 2015). On the issue of anti-Southern racism in Italy, see references in: Antonello Petrillo, "Le urla e il silenzio. Depoliticizzazione dei conflitti e parresia nella Campania tardo-liberale". In Antonello Petrillo (ed.), *Biopolitica di un rifiuto*, 20–3.

¹² Armiero, "Is there an indigenous knowledge". On environmental racism and marginality, see: Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: race, class, and environmental quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); Sarah A. Moore, "The Politics of Garbage in Oaxaca, Mexico", *Society and Natural Resources* 21 (2008): 597–610; Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2014).

¹³ Articles included in Petrillo (ed.), *Biopolitica di un rifiuto*; Marco Armiero, "La natura sotto casa: le lotte per la giustizia ambientale con un caso di studio sulla Campania", *Ricerche Storiche*, XLI (3: Sep–Dec 2011): 551–63; Marco Armiero and Giacomo D'Alisa, "Rights of Resistance: The Garbage Struggles for Environmental Justice in Campania, Italy", *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 23 (4: 2012): 52–68; Id., "Voices, Clues, Numbers: Roaming Among Waste in Campania", *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24 (4: 2013): 1–10; Gianpaolo Di Costanzo and Stefania Ferraro, "The Landfill in the Countryside: Waste Management and Government of the Population in Campania", *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 24 (4: 2013): 17–28; Marco Armiero, "Garbage Under the Volcano: The Waste Crisis in Campania and the Struggles for Environmental Justice", in Marco Armiero and Lise Sedrez (eds.), *A History of Environmentalism. Local Struggles, Global Histories*, 167–84 (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). Against interpretations in terms of NIMBY, see: Danny, "De la réfutation de l'effet NIMBY considérée comme une pratique militante. Notes pour une approche pragmatique de l'activité revendicative", *Revue française de science politique*, 49 (1: 1999): 31–50; Jacques Lolive, "La montée en généralité pour sortir du NIMBY. La mobilisation associative contre le TGV Méditerranée", *Politix* 10 (39: 1997): 109–30.

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