

***The garbage crisis, the ecological justice and environmental migrants in Campania  
(Southern Italy)  
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***The ecological disaster in Campania***

In Campania, a region of the Southern Italy, lack of modern technology for waste storage and treatment, an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus and Camorra, a local Mafia, involvement into the business of waste disposal, created the current ecological disaster. There is growing evidence that the accumulation of waste in Campania has heavily contaminated the natural environment and has determined a sudden drop in the health condition of local inhabitants. According to a recent study of the World Health Organization, such contamination reached dangerous levels and has produced a considerable increase in the number of deaths caused by cancer, respiratory illnesses, and also genetic malformations.

***The reaction of people***

In the last few years civil responses have increased and indignation mounted among people from different sectors of the population. Local demonstrations and direct actions have taken place in various areas of Campania. Occupations of landfills, petitions to local courts and marches have tried to break the silence and to call for the attention of national and regional governments. Here we present only some of them. The descriptions that follow are taken from a report of ASUD onlus. «The contemporary garbage struggle reveals that the distribution of power among social groups affects not only their social relations, but also the ecology of the urban/rural environments and, ultimately, of the human bodies inhabiting them.»( Armiero M., Seeing like a protester: Nature, Power and Environmental Struggles, Left History, Spring/Summer 2008, p. 60). «The most concrete emblem of every economic cycle is the dump. Accumulating everything that ever was, dumps are the true aftermath of the consumptions, something more than the mark every product leaves on the surface of the earth» ( Roberto Saviano, Gomorra)

Rather than being relegated to the realm of environmentalism, the struggle for environmental health has become a personal matter as people have discovered the connections between their illnesses and conditions in their living and working environments. According to a recent survey from the Agency for Environmental Protection, 43 percent of all Italian contaminated sites are in Campania. There, the same agency has found around 1000 illegal dumps, most of them in the Naples hinterlands, full of all kinds of toxin waste. “King Midas”: the public prosecutors could not have chosen a better name for their investigation. As in the mythological tale, the bosses of *camorra* have been able to transform even the garbage into gold, offering the disposal of toxic wastes for ten eurocents / kilo against the 20 to – 60 eurocents / kilo on the legal market. According to *Legambiente* , one of the leading Italian environmentalist organisations, in 2007 the value from “eco-crimes” reached about 23 billion euros; it has never been so high before. While the *camorra* was filling Campania's territory with all kind of toxins, institutions were unable either to stop the illegality or promote the regular management of urban waste. Indeed, the Neapolitan crisis is not an “emergency”, but a structural problem which has lasted for more than a decade, giving birth to a special agency: the Committee for the Waste Emergency in Campania (*Commissariato di Governo per l'emergenza rifiuti in Campania*, hereafter Cgcampania), with an officer appointed by the national government and its own budget. Nevertheless, this special agency has produced extremely poor results. After more than

ten years of Cgrcampania's activity, the Campania region has five million bales of garbage which should have produced energy but are instead in storage, and 1,5 billion euros have been squandered by the Cgrcampania. The Cgrcampania, the local government, and the FIBE Corporation, in charge of regional waste disposal, have focused their strategies essentially on the construction of a giant incinerator in Acerra, using the chronic "emergency" to impose their plan and appropriate the economic resources to dedicate to the crisis. Failure to promote a reliable recycling program and focusing on incinerators have reinforced doubts about the quality of waste destined to be burned and the kind of emissions which will be produced. Moreover, this governmental / corporate plan is inscribed within the net of illegality which is now widely known thanks to Roberto Saviano's powerful inquiry *Gomorra*. In other words, the local government and the FIBE Corporation have chosen to build incinerators and dumps in areas already heavily contaminated by illegal toxic disposal.

"Facing a series of diseases, which no physicians were able to explain", Giampiero A., a Neapolitan activist, recalled in his memoirs, "I started to develop a simple hypothesis: if the sheep in my town are contaminated by dioxin, then I can be contaminated too". Submitting himself to lengthy physical tests, Giampiero unfortunately discovered that he was correct. If the sheep – and the entire environment – are sick, humans cannot be healthy. Though causal links are not clear – cut, several studies show that this area has witnessed a significant increase of certain pathologies that could be related to toxin contamination. Furthermore, in this region the mortality rate due to liver cancer is 38.4 percent, compared to 14 percent on a national scale.

Clearly, locating the most dangerous activities in the "worst" places, that is, poorer, racialized, or already polluted areas, should have seemed the easiest solution; as it has always been. However, the struggles over incinerators and dumps in Acerra, Giugliano, and Serre, just as those in Warren County, North Carolina or in Los Angeles demonstrate the folly of assuming that these communities are too poor, too ignorant, or too polluted to react. The forms of mobilization as well as the repertoire of collective actions have varied: non violent resistance to construction of waste disposal facilities, legal challenges, petition to the European Union (EU) Parliament, demonstrations, and even violent urban guerrilla protests. Even though some groups of activists are particularly linked to specific idioms of protests, many times this same group has adopted different forms of resistance, moving from petitions to barricades. Obviously, the language of resistance is not independent of the language of repression/coercion. In fact, they correspond. In addition, the positionality of the protesters in their daily – life experiences, that is, their geographical/emotional distance from the epicentre of the disaster, also shapes their mobilization strategies. Living a few meters from a dump produces a different type of activist. "Local activists", intellectuals and anti-global students of the *Centri Sociali* are the three segments of this new environmentalism. The differences among them are profound, regarding not only the form and language of their resistance but also their understanding of environmental inequalities and possible remedies. Law, violence, and disobedience are other key issues that divide diverse types of activists; while some of them fight to enforce the law, thereby relying on its authority, others blame the law and its agencies, viewing them as a means of control and repression, and calling for disobedience. The level of violence tolerated and / or practiced by these groups varies. For all of them the particular struggle that they lead must be connected to a larger context; indeed none of the activist is a prisoner in his/her own backyard. Nevertheless, the global context is not the same for all of them. Raffaele now recounts how a woman with no political experience concludes their daily assembly with a formula that is becoming their new slogan: "*Nun ci' à faccio cchiù*", the Neapolitan dialect for "I can't take it anymore". This is not orthodox but it is effective".

