

The Assemblies of the City of Naples: A long battle to defend the landscape and environment

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When I lived in Naples there were only the Assemblies of Palazzo Marigliano standing against the establishment.

-Roberto Saviano (author of *Gomorrah*, interview in *La Repubblica* 15 April, 2013)

From Downtown to the Outskirts

The Assemblies were created in March of 1991 by Gerardo Marotta, president of the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies, Antonio Iannello, President General Secretary of Italia Nostra until the prior year, and by several other Neapolitan intellectuals. The goal was to defeat yet another attempt at real estate speculation: the demolition of part of the historic center of Naples and the construction of eight million cubic meters of concrete in areas east and west of the city. In fact, the Assemblies bore witness to a civil and cultural struggle that lasted for more than two decades, and which aimed to defend the historical center of Naples from speculation. In 1995—thanks in part to the Assemblies' actions—UNESCO declared the historic center of Naples a World Heritage Site. From 2006, following the battles for the defense of the historic center and against property speculation, the Assemblies fought against the privatization of essential goods and services, more specifically against water privatization at the start. This battle culminated in the referendum of June 2011 and marked a victory in defense of the public water supply and against nuclear power.

Over the past eight years, the Assemblies have developed an increasingly clearer organizational structure. Firstly, a Secretary was appointed to serve in the role of coordinator, a position which I have occupied personally since 2005, and thereafter as President, a position held in recent years by Professor Alberto Lucarelli (Professor of Public Law) and then by Professor Giuseppe Comella (Head of Oncology). The decision was also made to set up a scientific committee, which brought together university professors, judges, doctors, former parliamentarians, along with the many intellectuals and experts who had participated in the organization in the 1990s. Alongside the Scientific Committee, the Assemblies mobilized a new generation of young scholars who went on to form the Administrative Committee. The latter bore the laborious task of processing the immense amount of documentation that was produced by the activities of Assemblies in publishing the *Bulletin of the Assemblies of City of Naples and Southern Italy*¹. In doing so, the Assemblies promoted an alliance out of representatives of different generations and different disciplines in order to overcome the narrow limits of specialized knowledge and experience, to overcome the distrust between the world of high culture and the needs of all citizens. This mistrust can be traced to the enslavement, in part, of the academic world to the logic of the ruling powers and also to the widespread notion that sees the sciences and research as something neutral, divorced from social relations.

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¹ The *Bulletin* together with many other Assemblies publications (all in Italian) can be consulted for free at the website www.napoliassise.it or they can be purchased on the website for La Scuola di Pitagora Editors www.scuoladipitagora.it.

Committees of concerned citizens, which had sprung up spontaneously to protect their territory and defend the fundamental rights and principles established in the Constitution, became the major interlocutors in weekly meetings every Sunday morning for approximately five years. These meetings presented an opportunity for updates and coordination to address, from a critical angle, the emerging issues that undermined an already fragile democratic foothold in Naples and the Campania region. The issues were and are especially pressing given that the area has been a veritable laboratory in the practices of emergency government, even to the point of waiving constitutional principles.

This unprecedented alliance between citizens committees and independent researchers has been continually revived through public assemblies and temporary municipal councils throughout the region, in the places most affected by the waste management crisis and where the conditions were in place to give life to a vast civil rights movement. Lasting several years, this attempt has been nullified by special laws which as of 2008 (D.L. 90/2008, L. 123/2008) have safeguarded the power of the Special Commissioner for Waste Emergency. Election committees have added to this obstacle by entering the political stage and seizing the political capital gained in the difficult struggles of previous years, dispersing these gains into new forms of populism and ideology.

The waste emergency was the battlefield on which this outcome was most evident and where the framework that was forming was put to the test. From 2004, the Assemblies began to systematically deal with waste in Campania by relocating – in a manner of speaking – from downtown toward the outskirts.

Unearthing the Truth

The merits of the Assemblies lay in revealing the true nature of the so-called ‘waste emergency’. Nearly all local and national news, bearing a strong ideology dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century, argued that the inefficiencies in the management of waste in Naples and environs were mainly due to the anthropological and sociological backwardness of Neapolitans and, in general, of the South, deemed incapable of tending to their own waste and of any form of self-government. Uncivilized and effectively pre-modern, forced to adopt the capitalist system of production and consumption, the Southerner would therefore not be able to integrate into the processes of mechanization for mass production or the division of labor. This, then, a form of archaism that would argue the Southern to be a consumer of goods yet totally estranged from the waste products created. The hostility of the local population to the construction of industrial waste treatment plants was explained thus. According to the official scientific record, these plants had solved the problem – in the civilized world, that is.

According to this mainstream narrative, however, the Southern barbarian, faced with the efficiency of industry, instinctively reacts to the issue of waste in a primitive manner by burning it or leaving it on the streets or fields. In short, the problem of waste in Campania, and especially in the city and province of Naples, should be treated as a purely anthropological, sociological, and psychological matter. At most, if one factors in the role of organized crime in the mismanagement of waste, it is a problem of public order.

Following these assumptions, from February 1994 to December 2009, the processing of refuse in Campania was managed by a special commission that allowed for the suspension of applicable, common laws and for the violation of many basic rights, first and foremost the right to health, bringing about a true state of exception that has suspended democracy and further degraded the country’s political life (Agamben 2003; Armiero and D’Alisa 2012; Buonaccorsi 2009). Corruption, devastation of the landscape, environmental destruction, risks to public health: this is what has emerged as a result of investigations by the public prosecutor of Naples and Santa Maria

Capua Vetere in the case of the Campania region². The misleading portrayal of the problem has enabled this to happen with the indifference of the majority and under the consent of the professional class that, when not in collusion with the offending parties, was profoundly ignorant and uninformed. Since 2005, it is against this false representation of reality that the Assemblies have struggled.

A working group of the Society of Political Studies has been occupied with these matters since 2004. The task of looking deeper into the political and social phenomenon of the so-called 'waste emergency' was entrusted to the working group by the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies, directed by Gerardo Marotta. One might wonder why this only occurred as late as 2004. It is a year that saw published in two major scientific journals, *The Lancet Oncology* and *Epidemiology & Prevention*, research explaining the results of some studies on the incidence of tumors in the Neapolitan area known as the 'triangle of death.' This research then reverberated out to wider, non-specialist international magazines such as *Newsweek* (Nadeau 2004; Senior and Mazza 2004). What was also impressive is that the area in question is widely-known to be an agricultural area. How was it possible, then, that in an area intended for food production there were tumor rates higher than what was found, on average, in the industrial areas of the country? How did these data connect to the fact that the same area was also affected cyclically by a waste emergency? What relationship existed between the anthropological backwardness of Southerners, black plastic bags dropped on the street, and the 'epidemic' of cancerous tumors?

For nearly two years, the Assemblies volunteers reviewed major headlines in newspapers, archiving and linking news stories seemingly disconnected from each other. In doing so, they have called into question the official story of events. At the end of 2005, the study group offered its interpretation (Capone, Cuccurullo, and Micillo 2006): the waste emergency served to conceal the unlawful trafficking of industrial waste through the mismanagement of municipal evidence. By making exceptions to any law on the subject and in some cases even the Constitution, the emergency regime took millions of tons of municipal waste, shamefully left to rot on the streets, and filled in dozens of quarries where for years criminal organizations had dumped millions of cubic meters of toxic waste. In many cases, municipal refuse was mixed with waste of an unknown nature, almost always dangerous and toxic industrial waste, which then went to continue filling the existing landfills. As has been shown by the investigations of the judiciary, waste that came out of the seven plants, which in theory should have been producing aggregates and inert waste, were more than those inflows: a multiplication of matter that had nothing miraculous about it. To be called in to handle this ecocide was that same 'social block'³ of the past, an accumulation of parasitic entrepreneurs, devious administrators and politicians, and organized crime, which in the years of speculation had used the mountains of Caserta and the plain of Naples, as real mines from which to extract the new gold. This new gold was the cement that when 'reinforced' killed and looted an area in which nothing remains but the sad sidewalk and rows of poplar trees withered, asphyxiated from benzene (Marotta 2008; Polichetti 2011; Zoppi 2002).

The waste emergency was a weapon of mass distraction, a tool to deprive local governments of their powers. It was a machine of forced consensus that over the years has produced strong divisions even among the inhabitants of the other provinces of Campania, which were played one

² The actions of the judiciary that contributed to the discovery of the illicit trafficking of waste in Campania are: Operazione Adelphi 1991, Operazione Eco 1994-1996, Operazione Cassiopea 1999-2002, Operazione Re Mida 2003, Operazione Terra Mia 2004, Operazione Madre Terra e Madre Terra 2 del 2005-2006, Operazione Dry Cleaner 2006, Operazione Chernobyl 2007, Operazione Fenice 2008.

³ The term social block (blocco sociale) is Pasquale Saraceno's expression, referring to the array of forces of different social backgrounds that developed like a cancer, feeding off of public spending.

against the other through acts of misinformation. In fact, most felt that the problem could be traced back to the inability by some to recycle. In turn, the view was that those responsible were the residents of different provinces within the Campania region. For this reason, from the second half of the 1990s the vast majority of the committees for the defense of the region remained enclosed in local areas, manipulated by local political representatives as residual pockets in forming an electoral consensus and continually disoriented by the opinions of some pseudo-technical professor or advisor siding with the government. Until the end of the Special Commission, the Assemblies were committed in their relentless efforts at uncovering the political tactics utilized and educating and informing the communities that rose up against the civil and environmental decay.

The Harvest

Many organizations responded to the call. Following thousands of copies of appeals and posters published and distributed by the Assemblies and town hall meetings promoted in many towns in all five provinces of Campania, the first coordination committees were formed. In 2006 the Toxic Waste Alert Committee (allarmerifutitossici.org) was established, taking the name of one of the publications of the Assemblies, *Toxic Waste Alert: Chronicle of a Disaster Foretold*. In 2008, the Regional Waste Coordination (rifiutacampania.org) formed which, bringing together more than 80 committees engaged in different parts of the region, became the interpreter for the appeal launched in 2007 by the Assemblies, entitled *Environment and Health Alert: A Warning to the People of Campania*. The appeal was discussed for over a year and was distributed in all of the provinces of Campania. In addition to outlining the state of play to the committees, it asked to join together to form a united struggle which would incorporate the theme of toxic waste into that of urban waste.

In 2007 the magazine *The Bulletin of the Assemblies* was founded to give to the community of people affected by the emergency a tool to support their reasons before public authorities. Both foreign and national press were contacted, organizing a 'Waste Tour' as it was called by the press ([youtube.com/watch?v=CPbDwrWh49g;=8XfVzraAoZs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPbDwrWh49g;=8XfVzraAoZs)), in order to bring to light what was hidden. To meet the increasingly urgent need for information and scientific investigation, and in conjunction with the International Society of Political Studies, the Assemblies began in 2008 a book series called *Assemblies: Training Notebooks to Exercise Citizenship* which sought to collect and reprocess the studies and documents submitted during the meetings. The relationship with the public prosecutor intensified, presenting petitions for the environmental disaster (Raimondi 2006), as did the links to the parliamentary committees that dealt with the matter, which heard representatives of the Assemblies during a special session at the Prefecture of Naples. Prosecutors Vincenzo Galgano and Franco Roberti and Deputy Prosecutors Aldo De Chiara and Donato Ceglie often gave reports as the public meetings of the Assemblies, responding to questions from citizens gathered for the event. Even Tommaso Sodano, President of the 13th Standing Committee on the Environment and Natural Resources, and Paul Russo, a member of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Activities related to Waste Management, were often guests of the Assemblies, updating citizens on the state of parliamentary work on the issue and collecting items for the business agendas of the Commissions.

After months of study and discussion with local communities, in consultation with the Refuse Regional Coordination in Campania (Co.Re.Ri.), a model for waste management has been developed that has attracted the praise of the European Commission for the Environment, who visited Naples on various occasions for the infraction proceedings number 2007/2195. The proposal is slowly becoming an example of how to unite the individual struggles of thousands of people involved in the defense of their community.

What has been proposed, as an alternative to the integrated (or virtuous) cycle of waste, is a materials chain by which differentiated waste can be recovered in sorting and recycling facilities that already exist in our country and put them back into the market of so-called secondary raw materials. So far, these companies work materials from Eastern Europe. Why would this be the case? Together with the criminal logic of those who intend to use the huge amount of unsorted waste to continue to conceal the illegal traffic of toxic waste, the blind interests of the incineration lobby have conditioned to a great extent the waste management policies of Italy. The latter have been aligned exclusively to the logic of integrated waste cycling, whose linchpin is landfills and incinerators.

Why is it that enterprises and research centers involved for years in developing new waste management and treatment systems have not been successful in Italy? The reason for this is that in Italy, since 1992, the Inter-ministerial Price Committee issued the Directive 6/96 (CIP 6). This activated a mechanism of public funding obtained through an increase of 7% of electricity bills and designed to promote the production of renewable energy – funds allocated to encourage the purchase of energy from the sun, wind, and earth by ENEL (the mixed public-private energy company giant). But Italy, contravening the European directives⁴, added among the renewable sources of energy those sources also known as 'assimilated,' i.e. the energy produced by the combustion of fossil fuels, hydrocarbons, waste and other sources. The text of law CIP6, in fact, inserts “the transformation of organic and inorganic waste or plant products” among renewable sources of energy. In this way,

the CIP/6 ends up amortizing most of the contributions made. In 2006, a table of the Energy Services Management reports that about 90 percent of the funds for renewable energy ends up in the pocket of the oil companies and operators of incineration plants. In that year, out of a €6.169 billion budget, about 4 billion went to finance the production of assimilated energy (petroleum waste byproducts). Another €1.135 billion was earmarked for the incineration of municipal waste and organic material. Solar, wind and photovoltaics, however, are a total of €622 million. The lowest figure is for solar power: only € 40,370. (Fava 2011)

For these reasons, the European Commission has intervened with infraction proceedings number 2003/2246, which states:

In accordance with the definition in Article 2 of Directive 2001/77/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 September 2001 [...] the non-biodegradable portion of waste cannot be considered a source of renewable energy. (...) It is clear that the specific provisions of Community rules for aid to renewable energy sources shall be applicable only to renewable sources that meet the definition of Article 2 of Directive 2001/77/EC. The above provisions for aid do not allow for the production of energy from non-biodegradable waste.

⁴ From article 2 of directive 2001/77 of the European Community it is clear that the aid distributed for renewable sources of energy are applicable only to those sources that correspond to the following definition:

Renewable energy sources refer to a) wind, solar, geothermal, wave, tidal, hydroelectric, biomass, landfill recovered gas, residual gas from purification processes and biogas. b) 'Biomass': the biodegradable part of products, refuse, and residual materials that derive from agriculture, forestry and connected industries, in addition to the biodegradable part of industrial and urban waste.

The Italian energy market was thus drugged by a measure that unfairly favors some and hurts others. And that is not all. Incinerator lobbies are being organized at the Community level in order to pass a similar law for the European Union. One of the largest corporations in Italy that has benefited from this 'contribution' is Impregilo, a multinational company that has had as its president for over thirty years Cesare Romiti, also at the top of Fiat. Among its main shareholders there are the Central Bank of Norway, the investment company Black Rock and UBS AG, and the holding company Igli Spa. Igli Spa is divided into a third owned by the family Gavio (through its intermediary Argo Financial Spa), a third by owned by the Benetton family (through Autostrade Spa Italy), and the remaining third owned by the Ligresti family (through Immobiliare Lombarda SpA, a subsidiary of the insurance group Fondiaria Sai). The Ligresti family is closely associated with Silvio Berlusconi. This, as with all businesses in the sector, exploits a contradiction that is within the European Union regulations and directives and to which the applicable Italian laws also refer. It is a contradiction according to which the recovery of materials parallels energy recovery from the treatment and disposal of waste. This is a monstrosity since one only saves and recovers energy by avoiding wasting materials.

The Campania Region has faced this situation for years. That is, it has been the hostage of Impregilo since it launched the bids for the construction of the incinerator at Acerra and the seven Cdr refuse-derived fuel plants (then transformed into waste shredding and sorting facilities). By contractual arrangement, Impregilo got to decide where to build landfills and incinerators. In turn, the company stacked millions of tons of fake engineered fuel pellets, de facto stripping the authority of the government in its scheduling and planning duties, and treating the citizenry as an obstacle to its business plans. Thanks in part to complaints and petitions submitted to the public prosecutor of Naples by the Assemblies, today this large multinational company is on trial for fraud against the State, fraud in public trading, forgery and abuse of office . And even though cameras and national media have not been allowed in and local authorities have not given any news of the trial, hope remains alive that the people of Campania, those minorities that have not stood helpless before the environmental disaster before them, will resist forgetfulness, that oblivion that predators and dispossessors would wish on them. Power is not fiction and as long as it will be exercised as domination of the powerful over the weak there will always be a need for those who know how to recognize it, even if behind the most innocent of manifestations, to fight and transform it into an instrument of power to become other than what one is.

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