



Healthy Italy, but Naples poisoned by garbage

Judith Harris (January 07, 2008)



In a polite letter to the New York Times Italian Interior Minister Giuliano Amato pointed out that the Italian national health care system is ranked by the World Health Organization as second in the world. Amato has a good point. If Italy is potentially the second healthiest nation in Europe, however, Neapolitans have been left out...

ROME - Last month's New York Times article accusing Italy of being adrift continues to trouble the



establishment here. In a New Year's message, center-left coalition Premier Romano Prodi announced that December's Eurostat statistics, which purport to show that the Spanish economy has trumped Italy's, were dead wrong. According to Prodi, the real story is told by the International Monetary Fund, whose statistics (also from December) show that Italy's annual per capita income stands at \$31,792, well above Spain's \$27,767. The Italian GNP, he added, is of \$1,852 billion, well over Spain's \$1,230 billion.

Another strong defense of Italy came in a polite letter to the New York Times sent by Italian Interior Minister Giuliano Amato. In it Amato pointed out that the Italian national health care system is ranked by the World Health Organization as second in the world, even as reports of what is called here *la malasanità* continue to pour in. Sutures in the abdomen, rats in hospital kitchens, the dying left outside shut doors, meningitis in the wards, camorristi in privileged treatment, immensely costly machines rusting in a cellar—you name it, we read about it.

Nevertheless, Amato has a good point, which he would do well to make at home. My personal experience is that many of the same Italians who utilize the free health service here, and some of those who run it, fail to appreciate that it exists at all, and that the public health clinics scattered throughout Italy are still open to one and all. A healthy diet and the (not always jolly) sociality of family life are only partly responsible for the remarkable Italian longevity, superior to that of the U.S.; surely the public health system with its obligatory immunizations for all children—as of January 1 being challenged by one region, the Veneto, on a test basis—also deserves credit.

The proof is in the pudding: in 1939 the infant mortality rate stood at 100 deaths within the first year of life for every 1,000 births, down today to five deaths. In addition, in 1939 the average life span was, for men, 53 years and for women, 56; today is 77 for men and 82 for women. Something right is being done, and it is a precious heritage. And this is true despite the obvious risk of politicization (translated: appointing friends and relatives to health service, or ASL, posts).

If, as is implicit in Minister Amato's statement, Italy is potentially the second healthiest nation in Europe, Neapolitans have been left out, however. Newspapers this week are running double pages filled with pictures of burning rubbish and seething Neapolitans. Awash in a sea of untended garbage, breathing in dioxin from burning rubbish piles on street corners, infuriated locals do battle with police. No one can blame the Neapolitans for being exasperated: the garbage war has been going on for well over a year now, with no end in sight. Put in the simplest way, the garbage treatment resources are inadequate to the population, but of course nothing is ever that simple. Some blame the camorra but others say the camorra is used as an excuse. Others blame City Hall. Whoever is to blame, last summer the United States embassy in Rome warned its citizens that the garbage crisis may risk travelers' health in the Campania region surrounding Naples: "U.S. citizens traveling to or through the area may encounter mounds of garbage, open fires with potentially toxic fumes, and/or sporadic public demonstrations by local residents attempting to block access to dumps," said an advisory note. Altogether the eighteen rubbish consortiums of the region employ 2,400 paid employees and countless "consultants."

In RAI TV interviews aired on November 19, 2006, Bernardo Iovene pointed out that 71 Campania region city councils have been dissolved on grounds of mob infiltration and their elected officials replaced by administrators. The result, as seen in interviews with workers of a rubbish-gathering consortium hired by local administrators, shows men standing idly about and chatting. Herewith an edited portion of interview transcripts:



Iovene: How many men are here now?

Man No. 1: Two hundred sixty, two fifty six...

Iovene: Two hundred sixty people? And just now what are you doing?

Man No. 2: Nothing

Iovene: That is, you do nothing?

Man No. 3: Nothing, because the trucks can't go out....we are supposed to work shifts but the trucks are all broken down....

Man No. 4: We work three shifts, morning, afternoon, night...we are supposed to bring in the differentiated rubbish but as you can see, we aren't doing anything at all...

Man No. 6: We come here, we sign in, and we wait for time to go home.

Iovene: Are you telling me the truth?

Man No. 6: Certainly!...The tires are smooth, the motors burned out...

Union rep.: These workers ask only to be able to work...

Man No. 8: We don't have the means to work. The trucks are all broken down...We have thirty of them. Only eight work.

Iovene: Are there mechanics in here?

Man No. 3: We are all mechanics....

Iovene (voice-over): The City prefers to use a private company...this is a private consortium.

Consortium President (named in text and on camera): Ah no, you must turn off that camera.

According to Agence France Presse on, Jan. 3, "Criminal investigators say the Camorra mafia pay truckers to haul industrial waste from factories in northern Italy for fees that undercut those of the legal trade. They bring it to illegal dumps in the Naples region made by blasting holes in mountainsides."

Il Messaggero on the same day pointed out a solution: that Neapolitan rubbish be shipped to Germany, where it will be turned into electricity, which can be resold to Italy, which already buys 15% of its electricity from Germany.

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A post-script to my December piece on Italy's [winter of discontent](#) [2]: I had dated the general indifference to the study of mathematics (and hence the loss of basic training in logic) on the part of the masters of the Italian school curricula to an ideological quirk of the Seventies. Turns out that this snubbing of math dates from the year following Mussolini's take-over, 1923, when Minister Giovanni Gentile's school reform project boosted the importance of the liceo classico (Latin high school) at the expense of the scientific high school. According to Dario Ragazzini, historian of education at Florence University, "For the elementary school Gentile justified his choice saying that mathematics serves to resolve problems, and that the children could do without this, therefore, because they have no problems." (Cited in Focus Storia, No. 3, "Come si viveva ai tempi di fascismo," Milan, 2005) It is



garbage

Links

[1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/amicidimargherita1199689754jpg>

[2] <http://www.i-italy.org/1008/winter-discontent>