



Post peak Italy: Naples submerged by waste

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The waste crisis in Naples has been ongoing for more than a week by now. Today (Jan 7), the Italian newspapers are announcing the intervention of the army to retake some control of the



Naples, Italy. Riots and burning waste in the streets. Image from [La Repubblica](#) (more images on the crisis are available there)

The more time goes by, the more Italy looks like the miner's canary of the ongoing crisis. Italy has already cut petroleum consumption of 8% in three years and reduced that of gasoline of 23% in the same period. Last month we had a strike of the lorry drivers protesting against the high prices of fuels. The strike blocked the distribution of goods for a few days and that was enough to make Italy look like a post-holocaust world, with empty supermarket shelves, shut down service stations and people fighting for a seat in buses and trains. That phase was quickly over and everything went back to normal, for the time being at least.

Now, we have another crisis ongoing in Naples and in the areas nearby. This time it is the urban waste disposal system that has collapsed. The crisis started after Christmas and, from then on, TV channels in Italy have been showing streets in Naples filled with waste overflowing out of the ubiquitous Italian "*cassonetti*" (public waste bins). People are reporting that the piles are so high that are reaching the windows of the first floors. Adding disaster to disaster, the height of the crisis came during the last days of the year, when it is traditional in Italy to celebrate by exploding fireworks. Apparently, some people found that it was fun to shoot the fireworks at the waste piles and setting the whole mass on fire. This may have seemed to some a quick way to get rid of waste. Too bad that the combustion of waste in these condition generates poisonous compounds of all sorts, including the famed dioxins. In addition, riots and street blockades have been going on during the last few days, when the authorities have tried to reopen an abandoned landfill in the area. Right now, the situation seems to be still critical, however, as usual for Italy, a certain degree of social resilience seems to be able to avoid major catastrophes, or at least has managed to do that so far.

Is the ongoing disaster in Naples related to peak oil? Not directly, of course. The question of waste in Naples is a long story that would need entire books to be told. Let's say that the situation that we are seeing now compounds all the problems of waste management together in an explosive mixture. First of all, it is the result of a series of strategic mistakes. The authorities have been slow in implementing plans for facing the increasing flow of waste. When they have done something they have done it wrong, sometimes worsening the problem. Naples lacks of plants for waste processing, there are no plans and facilities for recycling, there has been no attempt to reduce the production of waste in terms of overpackaging and non reusable goods, the citizens of Naples have never been given a chance and the proper facilities for differentiating their waste. A final factor in the crisis is the phenomenon of the "Camorra," a local criminal organization similar to the better known Sicilian "Mafia". The exact role of the Camorra in the present mess is difficult to determine, but it is generally reported that it has infiltrated the waste management companies and agencies at all levels.

These specific problems of Naples and have caused the ongoing crisis. However, waste management is a general problem that affects the economic fabric of all Italy and of Europe as well. Waste is a consequence of the abundance cheap oil that creates the general abundance of household and industrial goods which are the turned into solid waste. This waste is collected and transported at long distances by lorries which use fuels derived from cheap oil. The machinery that processes waste needs fuels and electricity derived from fossil fuels and cheap oil in particular. Even incinerators, called by some optimists "waste to energy" systems, are designed around a "fuel" which is supposed to contain a minimum amount of plastic that, in turn, is derived from crude oil. The whole system of waste treatment has been designed in a vision of abundant resources. The oil crisis is weakening the economic system of society and is rapidly making the current model of waste management obsolete.

So, Naples could be a miner's canary of a problem that we might soon see spreading all over Europe. But there are also some elements of optimism. Waste is a "problem" only as long as we think we live in a world of infinite resources, or nearly so. That is quickly changing and we have to start to think of waste as a stock or resources. Paradoxically, peak oil might reduce the gravity of the problem by slowing down the production of waste and encouraging recycling.

That may be easier to do in some places than in others. In Naples, a couple of months ago, you could see on the main avenue signs that said, "copper bought here", something not so easy to see - say - in downtown Brussels. An economy not yet completely globalized, such as in Naples, can quickly turn into exploiting the opportunities that waste recycling can give. Naples, in this case, could teach to Europe a lesson on what to do to adapt to the crisis.



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