La Terra dei Fuochi: Cultural Labeling, Ecological Crimes, and Social (re)Action in Mediocratic Italy

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2013, two major televisual outlets released a groundbreaking campaign of information about a massive mafia-lead traffic of toxic and radioactive waste involving the peripheries of Napoli and Caserta, southern Italy, which was historically covered up by the national secret services. The widespread mass-mediation of such a dramatic news significantly impacted the local cultural sphere. At the same time, it elicited eclectic (re)actions among the dwellers of these two areas, which the media dubbed as the “Land of Fires.” This article ethnographically analyzes the “Land of Fires” case study as a discursive milieu that mirrors the relationships between power, cultural production, and political change in neoliberal Italy. In so doing, it aims to redefine the contemporary Italian mediascape, which most academic literature describes as a “cynical” machine of political consent merely engendering “televised” subjectivities amid its publics, as an highly controversial (but still sophisticated and vibrant) space of socio-cultural production.

KEYWORDS

Anthropology of Media, Camorra, Cultural Labeling, Ecological Crimes, Informal Politics, Italy, Mediocratic Politics, Napoli, Organized Crime, Social Activism

I believe in low lights and trick mirrors. -Andy Warhol

INTRODUCTION

In late 2013, the southern Italian provinces of Napoli and Caserta were no longer called as such by a large portion of their own population. I conducted fieldwork research in those areas from January 2013 to January 2014, since I wanted to study how contemporary southern Italian politics articulated vis-à-vis the local industry of cultural production. In that occasion, most of my ethnographic informants, as well as the overall Italian media mainstream, commonly referred to the two contiguous provinces as the “Land of Fires” (Italian: “la Terra dei Fuochi”). Such an evocative nickname had nothing to do with the breathtaking volcanic landscape offered by Mount Vesuvius. It instead echoed a major journalistic “scoop” by two Italian national TV operators: the newscast “TGSky24” and the news-satire-show “Le Iene.”}

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Starting in the summer of 2013 till the end of that year, the two media outlets regularly released groundbreaking information about a more than ten-year-old (and still ongoing) illegal traffic of toxic and radioactive waste involving the Campanian municipalities of Qualiano, Giuliano in Campania, Orta di Atella, Caivano, Acerra, Nola, Marcianise, Succiso, Frattamaggiore, Mondragone, Castelvolturno, and Melito di Napoli (Chiariello, 2013a; Cerqueti & Chiriello, 2013; Toffa, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). This traffic was promoted and supervised by the notorious Casalesi clan—one of the most violent gangs composing the Camorra, that is a Neapolitan organized crime cartel—, in structural collusion with corrupted apparatuses of the Italian state and several northern Italian and European big corporations (Chiariello, 2013; Toffa, 2013a; 2013b; Moccia, 2014; Saviano, 2006).

In order to free space for the illegal displacement of new toxic waste and avoid controls by the public authorities, the camorristi used to burn up the piles of trash they had previously accumulated over the concerned areas, which were now punctuated by stakes as a true “Land of Fires” (Legambiente, 2003; Saviano, 2006). The criminal cartel thus spread deadly smoke and toxic chemical substances (including dioxin) in the surrounding crops, water sources, and atmosphere. In so doing, it severely compromised local agriculture (a key economic sectors in those areas) and consistently multiplied the amount of tumor cases affecting the local population2 (Legambiente, 2003; Moccia, 2014; Esposito & Turolo, 2014, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2014).

The widespread diffusion of such dramatic news by the Italian media in 2013 elicited anxiety and political outrage among the national audience, and especially among locals. On the one hand, large sections of the local population reacted to the “Land of Fires” mediatic scandal by means of political action. As such, they participated en masse in a plethora of initiatives such as the November 2013 demonstration “Fiume in Piena” (English: Full River), in which more than 100,000 local protesters called for the direct intervention of the Italian government on the matter (Corriere della Sera, 2013). On the other hand, the national media’s lasting use of the term “Land of Fires” as a metonym for the whole hinterlands of Napoli and Caserta quickly percolated from Italian TV screens to daily conversations happening on the most local of grounds.

How can a geographical space get a new name and connot new meanings through the social circulation of mediatic texts? How can these new names and meanings endorse original forms of civic identity and informal political (re)action to state power in contemporary Italy? This paper aims to answer these questions, while redefining the “Land of Fires” case study as a socio-cultural milieu mirroring the coalescence between mediatic1 politics and cultural production in contemporary Italy. Following the method suggested by Abu Lughod (2004) for the ethnographic analysis of mediascapes, my research considers media operators and their audience as the two agentic poles of complementary dynamics illustrating “what kinds of cultural interactions people have through the mass-media” (Abu-Lughod, 2004: 21, 43), rather than merely describing the impact of the media over culture. In light of that, this paper aims to re-define the contemporary Italian mediascape—which most academic literature defines as a “cynical” neoliberal machine merely producing “televised” subjectivities (Molè, 2013; Bodrunova, 2010; Panarari, 2010)— as an highly controversial, but still vibrant and socially participated, space of cultural production.

I first realized the cultural relevance of the “Land of Fires” label when I compared the interviews I conducted in 2013 with several ethnographic informants from the areas of Napoli and Caserta (who come from various social backgrounds5) with those I elicited from them over the previous year in occasion of the preliminary pilot research, which I had also conducted in those two provinces. When asked about their origins in 2012, most of my informants claimed their personal belonging to a vast grouping of Campanian urban areas or neighbouring villages. In 2013, the very same people claimed to come from the “Land of Fires,” of which most of them self-declared as “proud citizens.” Interestingly, none of the subjects participating in both my ethnography and pilot research was a resident of the 14 locations directly involved in the “Land of Fires” exposé. Apparently, the diffusion of a geographical label by the national media contributed to the grass-root construction of an informal
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