

Pandemic (Italy): Covid in Calabria: an Italian parable

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Calabria, a region of southern Italy, was at the end of October declared a “red zone” by the Italian government. But, whereas in the other red zones of the North (Piedmont and Lombardy) this measure was taken in relation to the figures of contaminations and deaths, in Calabria, it was taken in relation to a situation of extreme public health crisis. In other words: the Calabrians must stay locked in their homes because in their region there are no hospitals. Why?

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It's an old story, as old and dramatic as the abandonment of the South, its unemployment rate (before Covid, it was over 16%), its economy based on undeclared and poorly paid work, the control of its territories and its administrations by mafia organizations. And, in this story, it is in fact the Italian state that has always played the main role in consciously fuelling this state of affairs.

An indescribable chaos

The public health of two of the Calabrian provinces (the most important, Reggio and Catanzaro) was already under the tutelage of a “regional health commissioner”, appointed by the government, because of mafia infiltrations in the administration. But this state supervision did not settle the matter, but made it worse: brand new and very expensive hospitals never opened, active ones closed, millions of Euros were spent and lost for ever. This situation had already provoked the phenomenon called “health emigration” - to cure themselves of any disease more serious than a cold, Calabrian people were obliged to use the health structures of other regions, including the North. As everything continues to go from bad to worse, with the arrival of the second wave of the pandemic, the already inadequate health situation in Calabria has turned into indescribable chaos. No one has been able to give reliable information about contamination or the number of available beds and intensive care units; the tests are weeks late.

This is why the government of prime minister Conte decided, in early November, to appoint a special commissioner for the management of public health in Calabria. But the government has already appointed four and all of them resigned or were dismissed from their posts within days. It is one thing to be the government commissioner in normal times but it is quite another, and it is very different, to start your reforming mission with everybody watching. No thanks. If only because the ndrangheta (the Calabrian equivalent of the Mafia) have their triggers ready, especially if anyone meddles in their business.

Some popular anger

The growing health challenges, coupled with dire economic conditions and incredible, laughable government incompetence, eventually sparked a popular backlash that can hardly be called “marginal”. In all the capitals and small towns of the region, for two weeks in November, mobilizations succeeded one another: demonstrations, occupations, blockades of streets. For a society which is generally “passive” and resigned, as some characterise Calabria, this is no small feat, especially in times of lockdown.

It is above all an expression of the anger of the sectors most affected by the latest measures (the shadow economy, petty trading), with diverse origins and political references. Here too, as was the case in October in the rest of the country, it was the right and the far right - apparently - who made the most political profit from these semi-spontaneous mobilizations. But slogans in defence of public health have been at the heart of the latest demonstrations, which, along with the non-marginal role of feminist organizations like Fem.in de Cosenza and other collectives that have been fighting for a long time on these questions, is indicative of a desire not to leave the streets in the hands of neofascists and to build an alternative discourse and proposals. Moreover, the right and the far right - which, historically, are as one with the mafia which has done golden business at the expense of public and private health - should not derive great prestige from a situation like that of health in Calabria. But, in this case too, the ideological and political disaster which has reigned for a long time in Italy does not guarantee answers of a rational type. Hunger and despair on their own do not necessarily lead to revolution.

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P.S.

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