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Asbestos Deaths: Sustainability Against Social Justice

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Abstract. This paper aims to analyze the contradictions between sustainability and social justice by examining the deaths caused by asbestos processing and the resulting environmental disasters in affected areas. In the first part, the author explores the contradictions between sustainable reforms and “performative environmentalism” as compared to integral ecology, which advocates an integrated and holistic approach to addressing political, social, economic, and environmental issues. Her analysis is grounded in a theoretical framework that argues sustainable development must be evaluated in its full complexity and contrasted with neoliberal simplification practices that prioritize efficiency and the economization of economically assessable resources. From this perspective, the second part of the paper discusses these issues through an Italian asbestos case study, viewed as an instance of social injustice conflicting with sustainability policies. The author outlines three main points demonstrating how sustainability governance can bypass any potential for social justice in situations involving asbestos processing. She explains that managing asbestos cases contributes to the normalization of environmental disasters and exacerbates the conflict between the right to work and the right to health. The incidents involving asbestos exemplify how sustainability is interpreted through a neoliberal lens.

Keywords: sustainability, social justice, environment, asbestos deaths, asbestos factory.

1. INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH ISSUES

This paper aims to analyze the contradictions between sustainability and social justice by examining deaths caused by asbestos processing and the resulting environmental disasters in affected areas. The analysis seeks to demonstrate that sustainability policies fail to challenge the neoliberal logic focused on extracting value from human beings and ecosystems (Galino 2011). Instead, these policies often contribute to the depoliticization of compensation claims and the legitimization of categorizing environmental disasters as non-criminal. This situation creates a disparity between law and substantive justice, leading to a “recomposition” of truth regarding environmental disasters that favors profit-driven logic, despite sustainability being a fundamental criterion in every political and economic intervention. As will be demonstrated below, the management of asbestos cases contributes to the normalization of environmental disasters and heightens the signifi-

cant conflict between the right to work and the right to health. Furthermore, Italian law (68/2015), concerning “provisions on crimes against the environment”, stipulates that for environmental pollution to be recognized, the deterioration must be “significant” and “measurable”. Consequently, in the absence of specific legislative guidelines, these criteria are determined by a judge on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, it is only after the act has been committed that it can be determined whether the impairment or deterioration is serious or insignificant (Telesca 2015). At the core of the following analysis is an awareness of the contradictions between sustainable reforms and “performative environmentalism”¹; in essence, both lack a perspective based on the principles of integral ecology, which refers to an analytical and intervention approach to environmental sustainability that takes into account the essential connections with the broader context of social and economic crises. In other words, the concept of integral ecology highlights the impossibility of addressing environmental conservation without also safeguarding the humanity that inhabits it, thereby emphasizing the need for concrete actions aimed at reducing inequalities and protecting both global and local commons². This approach stands in contrast to the practice of neoliberal simplification, which prioritizes efficiency criteria to determine the savings of economically assessable resources (Spina 2019).

Consequently, it is necessary to exercise control over the social role of science, its production, and its uses, as emphasized by Laval and Vergne (2021) in their discussion of the battle for the common future of knowledge institutions. These authors argue that sustainability cannot be separated from a policy of educational equality, which in turn is inseparable from a policy of equal living conditions. For this reason, discussing sustainability also fundamentally involves safeguarding the welfare state and equipping it with the resources needed to address the challenges posed by labor hypermobility and market anarchy (Castel 2002).

It is important to note that the current models of welfare are unable to cope with significant demographic changes, both in the quantitative and qualitative composition of the workforce, as well as with the fiscal crisis and the difficulties in governing nation-states (Burroni *et al.* 2022). Additionally, these economic, political, and social difficulties have been exacerbated

by the recent health emergency caused by Covid-19 (Mirabelli *et al.* 2022).

The general practices of medicalizing the social body (Maturò and Moretti 2019, Rose 2018, Conrad 2007) certainly do not align with social justice, nor are they consistent with the concept of integral ecology. These practices are tied to individualistic views of the social context, which are promoted by the performative and competitive criteria of neoliberalism.

Moreover, the excessive medicalization of the social body starkly contrasts with the inadequate protection provided to individuals who become ill due to work-related conditions, such as those suffering from diseases caused by asbestos processing. In Italy, the articulation of sustainability in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) appears somewhat disconnected from environmental and health issues. Specifically, the post-pandemic intervention document allocates measures related to the environment and health under Mission 2, titled “Green Revolution and Ecological Transition”, and Mission 6, simply called “Health”. Surprisingly, “Health” is the last of the six missions listed in the NRRP, a curious placement considering the health conditions that prompted the intervention. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has exposed many rhetorical discourses on the indispensable relationship between the environment and health, both individual and collective. It has redefined the neoliberal premises that previously emphasized individual responsibility as a determinant of health, *omnes et singulatim*. The pandemic has also highlighted the shortcomings of recent investment policies related to the environment and health. These policies, which could be described as weakly reparative (consider, for example, the management of post-environmental disaster situations) and entirely driven by efficiency (such as the logic of cutting health and social care spending), have proven inadequate (Ferraro and Petrillo 2022). Thus, many questions arise from such a perspective, especially considering that the NRRP primarily focuses on strengthening the managerial and digital competencies of health-care personnel, rather than increasing the number of human resources. Without any proposals that reconnect environmental planning with health-related planning – both individual and public, physical and mental – the NRRP’s approach to the environment predominantly targets sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and energy efficiency. According to the NRRP’s provisions, the organization of medical interventions is intensified into rigid protocols, dictated by economic principles of efficiency and effectiveness, and structured according to essential performance levels. Similarly, the management of environmental disasters follows the same logic,

¹ Performative environmentalism may also be linked to distortions in participation policies (Moini 2023). For a critical analysis of the concept of participation, refer to Moini (2011, 2012).

² On integral ecology topic, see Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman (2009), particularly regarding the methods and areas of interdisciplinary and intersectional intervention in relation to environmental crises.

structured through intervention flows that primarily begin with the systematic activation of a state of emergency, replacing a political logic, anchored to the circuit of electoral representation, with a technical and politically “unaccountable” one, through the extraordinary Commission (Petrillo 2009). In both the healthcare and environmental sectors, management dominates, firmly anchored to the *gouvernance par les nombres* logic previously criticized by Supiot (2015).

There are also situations where risks do not inherently exist but are constructed through their discursive use to justify the application of pre-coded intervention flows, often driven by economic interests. This is thoroughly explained by Saitta (2022), who investigates the logic behind the recent attempt to clear the shantytown in Messina. He specifically analyzes how risks (including exposure to asbestos and viral contagion) are constructed to justify the political actions of the local administration aimed at clearance. Simultaneously, there are cases where environmental disasters are portrayed as a “brutal fate” to obscure both the lack of risk management and the flaws in intervention protocols driven by economic considerations (Vastano 2022). In the presence of environmental disasters and epidemics (or pandemics), whether viral or resulting from environmental and/or industrial interventions (intentional or negligent), sociology is called upon to recognize and understand the communities that form in response to each specific disaster or health issue. These communities are not merely groups united by suffering; often, they are primarily communities engaged in the co-production of knowledge about their specific conditions (Altopiedi 2022, Olivieri 2022).

2. ASBESTOS FACTORY IN IRPINIA: NEUTRALIZING DAMAGE

The case of Isochimica, an asbestos factory in Southern Italy examined below, is just one of many that aptly illustrates the contradictions between the principles of sustainability and the governance of environmental disasters, as well as the health impacts on workers and local communities. It is important to emphasize that the events at Isochimica coincided with the initial efforts to define the role of sustainability within political and investment frameworks. However, these efforts did not lead to addressing the diseases and deaths caused by asbestos in accordance with the principles of social justice, nor to an adequate acknowledgment of the environmental disasters that had occurred.

As Esposto (2024: 56) outlines in his historical reconstruction, sustainability is not a new concept. Since

the 1960s, international policymakers have progressively incorporated the relationship between development and the environment into their decision-making, driven by a growing awareness of the negative impacts of human activities on the planet. From the establishment of UNEP (the global authority for the environment, with programs focused on climate, nature, pollution, sustainable development, and more) in 1972 to Agenda 2030, there has been a shift from recognizing the centrality of sustainable development to treating sustainability as a neutral exercise, as it is based on consensus decisions made by stakeholders (Ivi: 58-83).

The neutralization process is carried out through a specific use of the concept of sustainability, leading to the equally neutral inclusion of multiple parties with differing interests under the term “stakeholder” (Ivi: 92-93). In this way, for example, the distinction between workers and trade unions, and businesses and industries, is partially blurred by their classification as non-state actors, i.e., stakeholders³. In short, neoliberal institutional environmental governance incorporates social groups with differing interests into the category of stakeholders. Although these groups are excluded from exercising power within sustainability governance, their classification as stakeholders nullifies any form of conflict related to the assertion of specific and legitimate interests, thereby fostering smooth relationships that sustain the discursive order of sustainability. In other words, institutional governance practices for sustainable development have created forms of participation among different groups that are homogenizing in nature, leading to a process of depoliticization of both claims and potential environmental damage⁴.

In this sense, the claims of the former workers of Isochimica can also be seen as at least partially neutralized by a specific application of the concept of sustainability, which was spreading particularly in relation to models of development and prosperity in the inland and often rural areas of Southern Italy. Indeed, this conceptualization of sustainable development led to the

³ The complexity and heterogeneity of the subjects included in the broad group of stakeholders also call into question the financialization of sustainability. For insights into this issue, reference is made to Nupieri (2024, see also her contribution in this special issue), who analyzes the foundational bases of sustainable finance in Italy from value and cognitive perspectives. She examines the actors involved in constructing the specific meanings attributed to the concept and demonstrates that sustainable finance, contrary to the claims made in public and political debates, serves as a tool to discursively reproduce principles underlying the neoliberal paradigm and to support the activation of courses of action aligned with the progressive process of financializing sustainability.

⁴ Regarding the concept of depoliticization, see de Nardis (2017); regarding depoliticizing public action by politicizing issues, see d’Albergo and Moini (2017).

Isochimica workers being left alone to fight a desperate battle that seemed to have no impact on the local social fabric. As we gathered from the examination of press sources, until the late 1990s, the workers were often accused of promoting an abstract and unrealistic subversiveness, and of irrationally rejecting the model of development and prosperity that was being painstakingly built for them in Irpinia.

Since the health of the workers was at risk due to manufacturing processes lacking adequate protection systems, the neutralization and depoliticization of their claims were achieved by criminalizing their demands.

Although Isochimica was a small factory, employing no more than 300 workers in the neighborhood known as Borgo Ferrovia in Avellino, its story is inseparably linked to a larger historical context (Petrillo 2016). This asbestos case is particularly interesting and can contribute to the scientific debate on the critical issues of sustainability because it highlights the responsibilities of various national and local institutional actors involved, who were, even then, jointly interested in promoting discursive narratives about the principles of sustainability. For many years, the Isochimica factory played an important role in addressing a serious nationwide problem: the disposal of asbestos that had been an integral part of many railway carriages. Therefore, from 1982 to 1988, workers at Isochimica removed asbestos from carriages and electric locomotives belonging to the public company Ferrovie dello Stato (FF.SS.)⁵.

To fully understand this issue, it is important to consider the context in which it arises. The history of Isochimica is closely intertwined with that of the province of Avellino, also known as Irpinia, a wooded area in Campania renowned for its chestnut trees and intensive agriculture. After the Second World War, this zone became synonymous with poverty and backward farming practices, emblematic of the underdevelopment of the Mezzogiorno, which led to mass migrations to the Americas and Europe. More recently, consumption and lifestyle trends have rebranded Irpinia as a rural retreat for health and relaxation, promoting it as “green Irpinia”. Despite this, real progress in local infrastructure and accommodations remains minimal.

The 1980 earthquake left 280,000 people homeless, thousands injured, and nearly 3,000 dead, transforming Irpinia into a hub for unregulated development under the guise of reconstruction. However, most companies that invested there, attracted by the opportunity to exploit state aid and facilitated by lax local oversight, eventually failed. This led to frequent closures, leaving

behind a landscape littered with unused and polluting “white elephants” (Petrillo 2016: 193). The earthquake fundamentally reshaped the region’s economic, urban, social, and political structures through an ad hoc law (Law 219/1980) that bypassed standard regulations on land use, contracts, public expenditure, and more. This law facilitated a shift in power, enhancing the mayor’s authority at the expense of council bodies and limiting local involvement in reconstruction efforts. A strong military presence ensured compliance. This environment became fertile ground for *laissez-faire* policies, blurring the lines between legality and organized crime (*Ibidem*).

This scenario also shapes the narrative of the young Isochimica workers, some of whom had just turned 18 and were envied by their peers for securing a “good job” amid the scarcity of employment during this post-earthquake period in Irpinia (Ivi: 195). The residents of Borgo Ferrovia, a marginalized area in a working-class part of town, have endured the hazardous aftermath of asbestos exposure. Despite the removal of large quantities of asbestos from a local factory, it continues to contaminate their schools, homes, and public spaces, symbolizing a persistent threat to health and life. These personal tragedies highlight broader failures of governance and oversight, implicating local and national authorities, healthcare systems, and even trade unions in a network of negligence and inadequate responses.

From a methodological standpoint, the small scale of this case allowed for more precise observation, highlighting how Isochimica synthesizes elements that clearly contradict the discursive narrative about sustainability. This case represents the plundering of territories and populations, employment blackmail, the exploitation of workers framed as development and progress, and work that causes death portrayed as an opportunity.

3. ISOCHIMICA: THE ABSENCE OF BASIC SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

In this paper, the Isochimica case is primarily examined as an instance of denied social justice that contradicts the discursive logic of sustainability. The denial of social justice principles can be observed in the following factors: the workers at this factory ensured that Italians would have the future right to travel safely in asbestos-free carriages by removing asbestos from 1,740 carriages and 499 locomotives. However, the dangers associated with asbestos removal were initially concealed from them. By exploiting a very young, non-unionized workforce in a predominantly agricultural and rural area of Southern Italy, these unsuspecting workers were denied

⁵ At the time, FF.SS. was a public company managed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance; it was subsequently privatized.

all safety measures, in blatant violation of regulations designed to protect them, in order to maximize profits by avoiding the costs of implementing safety protocols. This situation is tragically encapsulated in a statement made by FF.SS. leadership at the time: «There, they either die of hunger or of asbestos» (Ferraro 2015: 128). Later, after the factory closed in 1990, the workers faced the downplaying or denial of the pathological damage caused by asbestos exposure, which was aimed at evading the demands for social security protection made by former workers now suffering from asbestos-related illnesses. It is important to note that Article 117 of Law 190/2014 grants early retirement only to former workers diagnosed with asbestos-related illnesses. However, the correlation between asbestos inhalation and disease is determined at the discretion of experts from INAIL (National Institute for Insurance against Workplace Accidents). One example, among many, of the arbitrary manner in which requests for early retirement and recognition of occupational diseases are handled is that of a former Isochimica worker who died of mesothelioma in 2022 at the age of 72, whose occupational disease was only recognized by INAIL a few weeks before his death⁶. Additionally, the failure to fully recognize the damage, or only partially acknowledge it, serves to conceal the political, economic, and social responsibilities that led to the “Isochimica tragedy”. For example, it has now been proven that many workers were employed off the books for extended periods, making it impossible for them to prove their employment. This was made possible by the complete silence of local authorities responsible for protecting both the environment and the population, including the labor inspectorate. Moreover, in disregard of any principle of sustainability, the court in Campania ordered the seizure of the factory site only in 2013, following protests by local residents and, of course, former workers. In that area, 469 blocks of asbestos-cement, totaling almost 3,000 tons of waste, remain, and their dust has claimed the lives of residents over the years⁷. Furthermore, still in disregard of any principle of social justice, both former workers and residents continue to grapple with ongoing legal proceedings to uncover the truth, as will be discussed below.

It is clear that the Isochimica case, with its elements of social injustice, seriously challenges any possible appli-

cation of the sustainability criterion. Introduced at the first United Nations (UN) conference on the environment in 1972, this criterion was later defined and formalized in 1987 with the publication of the Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). According to the report, development can be considered sustainable when it meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It is evident that the Isochimica case, by denying workers’ rights to health and damaging the environment, has strongly contradicted this criterion. In addition, it is important to note that many other cases of asbestos contamination occurred during and after that period⁸.

The history of Isochimica began in this context: in the late 1960s, growing awareness of the dangers of asbestos led the State Railway to discontinue its use in new carriages by 1975, due to regulatory pressures. This marked the beginning of a phase of asbestos removal from train carriages, an activity that was carried out at the Officine Grandi Riparazioni (OGR)⁹. Over time, as awareness of the dangers of asbestos grew – partly due to the efforts of newly formed environmental defense organizations – workers at OGR protested the hazardous removal of asbestos insulation from carriages. In response, national trade unions developed a platform in 1972 to combat toxic substances in the workplace, advocating for safety measures and medical support. In 1979, an epidemiological survey conducted by Medicina Democratica revealed an increase in cancer cases among OGR workers handling asbestos in Bologna and Foligno, raising alarm and attracting the attention of medical and legal professionals.

In reply, a government inquiry committee was formed, which partially met the workers’ demands for improved safety measures, reduced working hours, and health inspections. The implementation of costly measures delayed progress, and in 1982, following protests by OGR workers and amid the process of transport privatization, FF.SS. outsourced the asbestos removal to Isochimica. The decision to outsource a hazardous activity makes Isochimica a particularly interesting case, as it foreshadows the logic of a globalized economy where polluting tasks are delegated to marginal territories and populations. It also represents one of the earliest examples of outsourcing by a public company in Italy. In 1984, two years into their work at Isochimica, a worker

⁶ For more information on this case and others, see the Information and Legal Assistance Portal for Asbestos Victims, Mesothelioma, Occupational Tumors, and Medical Malpractice at <https://www.risarcimentomalattieprofessionali.it/isochimica-mesotelioma-pleurico-scoibentatori-ferrovie/>.

⁷ To access updated data on illnesses and deaths related to the Isochimica case, see ONA (Osservatorio Nazionale Amianto; National Asbestos Observatory) at <https://www.osservatorioamianto.com/>.

⁸ For an analysis of cases of deaths and pollution from the processing and use of asbestos, see Ferraro (2018).

⁹ OGR is a large facility of FF.SS. designed for the maintenance, renewal, and repair of train engines and carriages across Italy. For a historical-sociological analysis of OGR, refer to D’Ascenzio and Ferraro (2022).

secretly shared an article about the dangers of asbestos and the related illnesses and protests among workers in Northern Italy. The article was passed around clandestinely, like contraband, in the factory toilets, spurring attempts to engage trade unions for protection. However, in the protest organizing group, participation never exceeded 30 workers, as others succumbed to employer pressure or union advice to avoid risking their jobs. Efforts to address the issue were consistently met with silence until a significant breakthrough occurred: a technical survey conducted by the Catholic University of Sacro Cuore in Rome, initiated at the union's suggestion to ease tensions. On June 10, 1985, experts delivered a shocking report. They found asbestos everywhere, visible to the naked eye, crudely removed with basic tools, mishandled by workers, and carelessly disposed of in the environment. The widespread contamination extended from poorly ventilated work sheds to offices, changing rooms, and beyond, affecting the entire town. Until 1988, the complicit media, bribed to ignore these issues, remained silent. Misunderstood by the community and their families, the workers' legitimate concerns were dismissed as mere laziness. Like many communities facing pollution, the residents were initially reluctant to acknowledge the health risks due to economic constraints and disbelief in the dangers surrounding them.

This is the status of the legal Isochimica case at the time of writing this article: on December 13, 1988, the factory warehouses were sealed by order of the Florence prosecutor for violating regulations on hazardous work. This action followed reports of asbestos dust found in the train carriages that had been processed at Isochimica. These reports were filed by workers at the FF.SS. workshops in Florence, where the carriages processed in Irpinia were sent. Subsequently, the case was dismissed due to an amnesty granted to the defendants. When the factory closed in 1988, the workers were placed on a temporary layoff scheme until early 1990, when the company went bankrupt. After the bankruptcy, fourteen former Isochimica employees were transferred to the new company ElSid Srl, which was responsible for de-insulating the last 33 carriages under the agreement with FF.SS. until 1992. After the final closure of the asbestos factory in Irpinia, cases of asbestosis among former workers began to rise, and, unfortunately, deaths also started to occur. In the neighborhood where the factory was located, there was a significant increase in respiratory diseases and allergies. This led to the start of a prolonged protest by residents, who eventually joined the demands of the former workers. It was only in 2013 that the Avellino Court ordered the seizure of the area where the factory had been located, due to the deteriorated condition

of 469 blocks of friable asbestos-cement. On October 23, 2014, the criminal trial related to the Isochimica case began. The prosecutor's office in the provincial capital of Irpinia requested that 29 individuals be brought to trial, facing charges including multiple counts of manslaughter, willful disaster, environmental disaster, bodily harm, forgery of public records, and omission of official duties. On January 28, 2022, the Court of Avellino delivered the first-degree judgment in the trial. This verdict came thirty-six years after the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) first lodged a complaint in 1986 with the Avellino Prosecutor's Office regarding the illegal disposal of toxic waste at Isochimica. The trial, which began in 2014 and involved 270 civil parties, lasted five years and seven months and included 127 court hearings. The sentence imposed ten years' imprisonment on two individuals responsible for safety at Isochimica and two FF.SS. officials, while acquitting all the other defendants. A provisional compensation of 50,000 euros was granted to each of the families of the 33 workers who died from illnesses related to prolonged asbestos exposure. However, no compensation was provided to former workers suffering from these diseases. While this verdict falls short of expectations, there is a significant risk that the crimes may be subject to statutes of limitations in the next stages of the proceedings (D'Ascenzio and Ferraro 2022), as has already happened in Italy, for example, with the Eternit case (Natali and de Nardin Budó 2018, Altopiedi 2014).

On May 23, 2024, the appeal trial began before the judges of the First Criminal Division of the Naples Court of Appeal. The outcome of the first hearing was the exclusion of numerous victims who had suffered asbestos-related injuries; they were effectively excluded from the appeal as civil parties contesting the statute of limitations applied to some of the defendants in the first-degree judgment. The request was denied, partly due to new Italian legislation aimed at reforming criminal justice procedures with a focus on efficiency¹⁰.

On a theoretical level, the reconstruction of this asbestos case can be analyzed, following Foucault (2010), from a biopolitical perspective, as it clearly illustrates the exercise of new power over life and death, in the sense of "letting die". This power is evident in the social and political role of scientific knowledge, particularly in interpreting the cause-and-effect relationship between unsafe asbestos processing and the resulting illnesses. It is also reflected in the weakening of welfare services and social policies, particularly those aimed at protecting workers and the environment. This includes the

¹⁰ The reference is to the so-called Cartabia reform, Legislative Decree No. 150 of October 10, 2022, which was implemented with the aim of reducing the duration of criminal trials.

inadequacy of medical protocols based on essential levels of care, as well as the management of environmental disasters, especially in terms of the methods used for the remediation of contaminated sites.

4. HOW SUSTAINABILITY MAY CONFLICT WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Concerning sustainable development, the Isochimica case study is just one of many examples that highlight certain contradictions in the management of workplace safety and environmental pollution. These contradictions emerge even as the concept of sustainability permeates all aspects of public policy and economic investments, ultimately betraying the concept of social justice, which should be a fundamental pillar of sustainable logic. Social justice is a complex concept that integrates the economy, health, and environment in terms of equity.

At least three points illustrate how the governance of sustainability can circumvent any possible form of social justice in matters related to asbestos processing.

The first point is that, despite the significant role of environmentalism and sustainable development since the 1970s, the geographic placement of asbestos processing factories has predominantly targeted the poorest populations. These communities are also less equipped to defend themselves against health, environmental, and economic injustices (Petrillo 2016, Ruggiero and Gounev 2012, Saitta 2009, 2010, 2015, Sanyal 2007). According to Foucault's views on biopolitical governmentality, the population and the environment are seen as being in a perpetual, living interrelationship that falls under the State's domain to manage (Foucault 2009). At the same time, there has been a shift in the concept of the "right to death", or at least a tendency to align it with the demands of a life-administering power and to redefine it accordingly. This notion of death, once rooted in the sovereign's right, is now regarded merely as the counterpart to the social body's right to ensure, maintain, or develop its life (Foucault 1978). Undoubtedly, biopower is an indispensable element in the development of capitalism, requiring both the availability and docility of bodies. Consequently, despite the influence of sustainability principles, neoliberalism continues to exploit marginal territories and populations. We must remember that Isochimica is located in Campania, a region facing a widespread environmental crisis. This includes a "waste emergency", with urban waste flooding the region's cities (D'Alisa *et al.* 2012) and toxic waste being dumped in landfills (Pasotti 2010, Petrillo 2009). Campania is also infamous for the "Land of Fires" (Terra dei Fuochi) and

the "Triangle of Death" (Triangolo della Morte) – notorious disasters that are clearly linked to economic speculation. By the way:

Over the course of many years, the Campania region of Italy has been exposed to all sorts of environmental devastation by both national and international powers. This total disregard for any type of biopolitical objective regarding the health and safety of the resident population, which constitutes the basis of neoliberal 'governmentality' [...] has been achieved by developing a specific order of discourse aimed at the inferiorization of the local population by constant reference to their state of underdevelopment, and by means of very structured narrative patterns [...] As well as general indexes regarding the quality of life (the lowest in Europe), health data reveals some really worrying statistics: the National Cancer Institute Fondazione G. Pascale in Naples reports a disturbing increase (over the last two decades) in the cancer mortality rate (Petrillo 2016: 191).

Regarding the waste emergency and the further construction of waste dumps, mainstream public discourse often portrays the opposition of the Campanian population as an egotistical refusal, epitomized by the Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome. This portrayal, based on the conventional and dominant representation of Southern populations as underdeveloped, uncivilized, and barbaric, strips social protests of their political dimension and redefines them in more naturalistic terms (Schneider 1998). In reality, these protests represent the "struggle of a community" capable of transcending the "local issue". This aspect is related to the enforcement of a political agenda that encompasses a politics of life itself and, therefore, also of death (Rose 2007). The protests are a political issue because they create public spaces for debate that transcend prevailing institutions and employ alternatives established from the bottom up, which cannot be included in the aforementioned category of stakeholders.

The second point is that, while public discourse and policies on sustainability are intensifying, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that asbestos will cause approximately 500,000 deaths in Europe over the next 20 years¹¹. This continues despite the fact that, as early as the 1960s, the scientific community had already confirmed a correlation between asbestos exposure and mesothelioma, coinciding with the rise of the theme of sustainable development.

All this occurs because asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that can be extracted at a low cost. It has been extensively used in construction, shipbuilding,

¹¹ ILO, *Safety in the use of asbestos*, at the link www.ilo.org/safework/cis/WCMS_337080/langen/index.htm.

military, and transport industries, particularly for thermal and acoustic insulation, due to its high plasticity and resistance to water and fire. Asbestos has been an extraordinary multiplier of invested capital, enabling substantial profits at relatively low costs (Bonanni 2009). However, its harmful effects on humans and the environment were already well-known when discussions about sustainable development began.

During the 1950s, Sleggs, a medical practitioner overseeing the tuberculosis service in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa, observed that a group of patients with pleural effusions was not responding to the new anti-tuberculosis drugs. He noted that this phenomenon was more common among patients from the West, where the mountains contained workable deposits of crocidolite asbestos. Sleggs collaborated with a thoracic surgeon and a pathologist, and they concluded that the increase in pleural effusion cases was linked to a rare type of pleural cancer, specifically mesothelioma. The physicians eventually documented a series of 33 cases of this rare cancer over just four years. Following the publication of the paper by Wagner, Sleggs, and Marchand in the 1960s, scientists recognized that mesothelioma was caused by exposure to asbestos. Battista *et al.* (1999) documented the etiological relationship between work processes and the effects of inhaling asbestos fibers. Additionally, the American scientist Selikoff had already identified all types of cancer associated with asbestos exposure as early as the 1960s. The first Italian study on the carcinogenicity of asbestos in the naval engineering sector was carried out by the Institute of Occupational Medicine at the University of Genoa and was published by Zanardi and Fontana in 1971. Calls for the abolition of asbestos use coincided with the rise of environmental movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which also marked the beginning of the first public and political debates on sustainable development:

To understand how stakeholders have shaped their attitude to asbestos during the years-long process leading to bans on asbestos, we should remember that the abandonment of asbestos was preceded by many notable events. The first was the beginning of the environmentalist movement emerging after the publication of Rachel Carson's famous "silent spring" in 1962. The second was the International Agency for Research on Cancer's finding, in 1977, that all forms of asbestos are carcinogenic to man. The third factor was a growing awareness, in the industry, trade unions and governments of the 1980s, on safer substitutes for asbestos (Terracini 2019: 331).

Despite this, the first European directive (382), which prohibited the extraction, production, and marketing of asbestos, dates back only to 1991, while the

Italian law banning asbestos (257/92) came into effect in 1992. It should also be noted that the dangers of asbestos were recognized long before these bans. In fact, the Italian Royal Decree 442 of June 14, 1909, and Italian law 455/1943 had already acknowledged these hazards. These laws extended insurance coverage to include illnesses related to asbestos and silicosis for all workers (Ferraro 2016, 2018). Consequently, employers were obligated to report cases of occupational diseases and related worker exposures to INAIL. Not coincidentally, between 1940 and 1980, the commitment of the Italian National Institute of Health was significant, leading to the formation of a multidisciplinary research group that initiated epidemiological studies on asbestos. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, many harmful incidents still occurred, including those at Isochimica.

The third point is that legal interpretation techniques have also relied on the enduring relationship between scientific knowledge, power, and truth (Romano 2014). For instance, while some rulings concerning asbestos-related damage acknowledge the causal link between asbestos and mesothelioma, they have noted that this connection is not inevitable and can only be demonstrated in a certain percentage of cases. The risk of the statute of limitations expiring for offenses related to asbestos processing represents one of the most significant contradictions, especially when viewed through the lens of sustainability. It undoubtedly constitutes one of the clearest deviations from the principles of social justice.

The management of asbestos-related issues reveals an asymmetry in industrial legal systems, where rights and duties lack reciprocity (Romano 2014). Legal interpretations in these cases shape the boundaries of crimes, sometimes even denying their existence. Recent laws, such as Italian Law 68/2015, exhibit typical flaws of emergency legislation, including unclear environmental protection measures and ambiguous criteria for assessing damage (Telesca 2015). These laws contribute to the classification of offenses as involuntary, leading to the problematic outcome of statutes of limitations for asbestos-related crimes and disconnecting justice from factual accountability, an issue Foucault (2019) addressed in his analysis of power and justice. Despite the prolonged effects of asbestos, the cessation of business operations ends legal liability (Gatta 2015). Judicial interpretations often explore the interplay between scientific knowledge, power, and truth (Foucault 1980), sometimes challenging the inevitability of asbestos-related diseases. Italian law limits compensation to workers who have been exposed to asbestos for more than ten years and are regularly employed. Overall, the management and remediation of asbestos-contaminated sites have, to date, evolved into a

substantial business where speculation often takes precedence over the protection of health and the environment (Petrillo 2016). In practice, the costs of removing and treating asbestos range from 8 to 16 euros per square meter. However, the total expenditure is influenced by several factors: the amount of material to be disposed of, the structure of the building, any technical difficulties or unforeseen events, and, crucially, the distance from authorized landfills. This last factor is particularly problematic in the current Italian context, where asbestos landfills are few, unevenly distributed across the country, and inadequately monitored by authorities. According to current Italian regulations, each region should have a plan for the census, remediation, and disposal of materials containing asbestos; however, a complete national mapping is still not available. It is estimated that in Italy, there are over 30 million tons of contaminated material and more than 1 billion square meters of compact asbestos¹². There is also the issue of illegal asbestos dumps, used throughout the years of processing for the exclusive benefit of entrepreneurs, thereby saving costs (D'Ascenzio and Ferraro 2022). Furthermore, the Italian Association of Asbestos Victims (AIEA) reports that asbestos-related diseases result in 4,000 deaths per year in Italy, with deaths solely attributable to Eternit expected to reach 30,000 over the next 15 years. All this occurs while sustainability is touted as the solution to all problems. However, there has been no change in the legal recognition of environmental disasters caused by asbestos, nor in the recognition of the health damages and deaths it continues to cause. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of investment in the remediation of contaminated sites.

5. CONCLUSIONS: THE FACT DOES NOT EXIST

As previously mentioned, Isochimica is just one of many asbestos factories that operated in Italy without any protection for workers or the environment. The stories of these deadly factories are very similar and almost always begin with a lie, encapsulated by the statement: «Asbestos is less harmful than Coca-Cola». This was the response given by the owner of Isochimica to counter accusations of a lack of safety in his factory (Petrillo 2016: 203).

This is followed by another version of the same lie:

They told us that we could even eat off those jute sacks containing asbestos and cement. They assured us it was

¹² For more information on these data, see: www.tuttogreen.it/amianto-smaltimento-bonifica-rischi-salute/.

safe, and we had nothing to fear. In 1979, I read an article that clearly stated the material caused cancer. That's when I began to connect it to the cancer deaths of some of my colleagues during that period. We demanded masks and protective suits that had never been provided to us, even though the law had mandated them since 1955. We requested medical examinations and checks. Following an inspection of Sacelit employees, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine at the University of Bari compiled a list of workers "not suitable for specific and general work"¹³ [translation by the author].

“Not suitable” refers to those who were sickened by asbestos, and became ill due to exposure. If work is the main foundation of social cohesion – as the division of labor into different roles makes individuals heavily dependent on each other (Durkheim [1893]1999) – then illness and death resulting from work represent, undeniably, the greatest betrayal of the principle of collective conscience.

Consequently, considering the role played by sustainability criteria, it seems necessary to note that work-related illnesses are on the rise: the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that 160 million people worldwide fall ill each year due to occupational diseases. Thus, death, as a “random variable” of work, fits within the contemporary concept of risk (Beck 1998), because the production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks (Sennett 1998). Under such conditions, there is a clear dissociation between the role of sustainability and the protections that should be guaranteed to humanity and the environment in terms of social justice. Consider, for example, Taranto and its Tamburi neighborhood, located just steps away from Ilva, the largest steel plant in Europe. Here, the necessity to work at all costs collides with the refusal to die from the pollution produced by the steel plant, highlighting one of the greatest paradoxes of neoliberalism: the certainty of employment is contrasted with environmental safety (Colucci and Alemanno 2011, Colombo and Comito 2013, Ferraro 2014, Vignola 2017). Yet, even here, the neoliberal governance of sustainability reframes pollution and death in terms of individual blame and criminalizes the population.

The mortality data for cancers in the Sentieri Study refer to the period 2003-09. The incidence and mortality from

¹³ Statements by Domenico Nania, former Sacelit worker and president of the former exposed committee (AIEA), in G. Maimone, *La Sacelit: la fabbrica della morte!*, in «www.ilcarrettinodelleidee.com», 28 Gennaio 2010. Salicet is another factory that produced building materials from concrete and asbestos in San Filippo del Mela, a town within the high environmental risk area of Messina because other highly polluting industrial sites operate in the district.

cancers reflect exposures that date back to the distant past. Lung cancers have a latency of 30-40 years and thus essentially reflect exposures from the 1960s and 70s, or earlier. Ilva was not present at that time. In this regard, it is well known that in Taranto, a port city, the availability of cigarettes was historically higher compared to other areas of the South. [...] It is the fault of the cigarette smugglers¹⁴ [translation by the author].

As Romano (2014) explains, truth and justice serve as mechanisms for the will to power; this principle also applies to the statute of limitations on asbestos-related crimes, which fails to meet the needs of social justice. The pursuit of justice for asbestos-related deaths is encapsulated by the Anglo-Saxon adage, *Hard cases make bad law*. Naturally, victims seek justice, but when a judge is faced with the difficult choice between law and justice, he has no alternative. Bound by law, he must choose the law, as asserted by Altopiedi (2014). Generally, the statute of limitations for an environmental disaster is tied to the date of the company's bankruptcy filing and/or closure, regardless of whether the responsible parties have undertaken any remediation or damage reduction efforts.

This statute of limitations disconnects the environmental disaster from its deadly effects, which is neither just nor consistent with sustainability criteria, especially since the mesothelioma epidemic will persist for many years because asbestos-related damage remains undetectable for at least 20 years. Furthermore, the failure to acknowledge the damage can also stem from denying the cause-effect relationship between asbestos and mesothelioma, as demonstrated by the deaths of twenty-eight workers from mesothelioma after working at Pirelli's Bicocca factories in Milan during the 1970s and 1980s. In these cases, the reasoning behind the judges' verdicts identified three impossibilities: determining the exact onset of mesothelioma, proving omissions by the factory's leadership, and establishing a contributory role in the causation or acceleration of the deaths.

Is all this sustainable?

With which principle of social justice does this align, especially considering that science has long established that inhaling asbestos causes mesothelioma?

Is it reasonable to believe that all those who have fallen ill or died from asbestos exposure are merely victims of their own negligence at work, particularly in light of well-documented cases of factory leadership denying the hazards of asbestos?

For these reasons, it seems to us that the asbestos incidents illustrate how sustainability is often interpreted through a neoliberal lens. As Esposto (2024) explains, sustainability has become a vacuous concept, representing not only a lack of meaning but also an absence of alternatives to the existing development model. In this void, the most aggressive mechanisms that undermine social justice take root, including the suppression of conflict and the exploitation of humans and nature, all of which align with the well-established canons of depoliticization. This does not happen by accident or due to institutional incompetence; rather, it occurs because it is conducive to profit. Furthermore, the criteria for sustainability are inherently meaningless, as they must be continually adapted to accommodate the specific exploitation being undertaken (Brown 2016).

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¹⁴ Statements from the then-commissioner of Ilva, Enrico Bondi, in F. Casula, *Taranto, Enrico Bondi: "I tumori? Macché Ilva, la colpa è di tabacco e alcool*, in «Il Fatto Quotidiano», 14 luglio 2013.

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