The Remaking of Toxic Territories: grassroots strategies for the re-appropriation of knowledge and space in the socio-environmental conflicts of Campania, Italy

Salvatore Paolo De Rosa

PhD student at Human Geography department of Lund University, Sweden
Fellow of ENTITLE Network of Political Ecology
Salvatore.Paolo_De.Rosa@keg.lu.se

Abstract

Moving from the empirical case of the socio-environmental conflict unfolding in an area of the Southern Italian region of Campania, Italy, this article investigates meanings and practices developed by grassroots movements that open up the possibilities for a transformative politics of socio-ecological relationships. The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I sketch the theoretical background for the study of socio-ecological conflicts from the perspective of Urban Political Ecology and Environmental Justice, delving into the production of concepts and the remaking of places as political practices of bottom-up re-appropriation of knowledge and space. In the second part, I give a background of the “waste conflicts” of Campania and I describe the local formation of environmental grassroots movements. In the third part, I describe and analyse the recent strategies of the movements in the region that are changing the space of political action. The concept of Biocide, produced in the course of struggles by Campania’s grassroots movements, is highlighted as a fruitful device for politicizing the interdependence of biophysical degradation and structural mechanisms of exploitation in universalizing terms. Finally, art interventions, practices of place remapping and re-appropriation of portions of territory performed by Campania’s movements, are presented as spatial performances that work on the remaking of socio-ecological relationships in cultural and physical terms, thus enlarging the scope of political action.
1. Introduction

This article carries the rumble of an ongoing struggle. Amidst “waste wars”, contaminating agents, states of exception, armed entrepreneurs and popular engagement with the making of nature, I seek to discern from the noise the lessons of bottom-up democratizing attempts performing the politicization of socio-ecological relations. By analysing the empirical case of socio-environmental conflict unfolding in an area of the Southern Italian region of Campania, Italy, this article investigates the meanings and practices developed by social movements that enlarge the scope of political action. Two dynamics of the Campania social movements are described and analysed: first, the production of a grassroots concept capable of framing the issues at stake in universalizing terms; and second, the deployment of spatial performances that through art and collective labour open up the possibilities for a transformative politics. The confrontation of Campania's local communities with an environment turned toxic during decades of waste colonization is another terrain of the glocal clash between capitalist accumulation strategies and the resistance of people bearing the negative outcomes of the treadmill of growth. Indeed, in the current global context of rampant ecological crisis, the unequal distribution of risks posited to humans and ecosystems by contaminating agents released in the biosphere from production, consumption and disposal activities is an issue of heated debate and conflict. By investigating the formation, the strategies and the repertoires of action of popular movements resisting toxic exploitation, I unwrap the possibilities for a transformative politics emerging from the dialectical interactions of socio-ecological degradation, cultural creativity and political commitment.

The fieldwork of research is still ongoing, therefore the results are to be considered provisional. I am conducting an ethnographic study of the social mobilizations in Campania as part of my PhD research project. The methods used for collecting data are individual semi-structured interviews, oral histories, participant observation and documents reviews. My background as activist involved in the Campania conflicts allowed me to rely on an extensive network of personal relations and to have familiarity with the history and the geography of the field.

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2. The Re-making of Socionatures

- Urban Political Ecology

Conflicts in which the environment play a key role have been scrutinized within the multi-disciplinary field of study broadly defined as Political Ecology (hereafter PE). In particular, PE scholars provided insights both in the dynamics that elicit such conflicts and in the role of human groups coping with the degradation and dispossession of their livelihoods. The common premise shared by political ecologists is that environmental change and ecological conditions are the product of a political process.¹ The practice of research aims to explore and explain linkages in the conditions and changes of socio-environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power. A fruitful analytical effort of PE research has been the investigation of the ways in which individuals cope with change, households organize for survival, and groups unite for collective action (Robbins 2004). In this sense, much PE involves the documenting of knowledges and understandings of ecological process. As Peet and Watts (1996) insist “this concern is not simply a salvage operation but rather a better understanding both of the regulatory systems and the conditions under which knowledges and practices become part of an alternative development strategies”. Recent developments in the field of Urban Political Ecology (hereafter UPE) are the point of departure for my framing of the Campania environmental conflicts. UPE studies are “primarily concerned with the political-economic processes involved in the reworking of human–nonhuman assemblages and the production of socio-environmental inequalities” (Swyngedouw and Cook 2012). Critical scholars working within UPE have been particularly keen in demonstrating the artificiality of the ontological divide between nature and society, still common both in mainstream academic and in popular understandings of nature/society. UPE scholars argue that nature and society do not exist independently of each other, but are intricately tangled in mutually constituted

¹ A key definition of PE from Paul Robbins (2004): “[PE] accept the idea that costs and benefit associated with environmental change are for the most part distributed among actors unequally, which inevitably reinforces or reduces existing social and economical inequalities and which hold political implications in terms of the altered power of actors in relation to other actors.”
socionatural assemblages. Socionatural metabolism is the material manifestation of the processes mediating the exchanges within these assemblages, and it is driven by the dialectical social relations organized around the appropriation and transformation of nature. In capitalist societies, socionatural metabolism takes the form of commodities: materials and energy are transformed into useable, ownable and tradable commodities that constitute urban environments (Coe et al. 2007). The capitalist imperative of growth leads to the expansion of capitalist relations toward every potential site for the extraction of surplus value; this implies that environmental management increasingly revolves around neo-liberal strategies that seek to open up new avenues for capital accumulation (Castree 2008). Waste metabolism, in particular, is increasingly dealt with by governments and corporations through a reliance on market logic, which is turning waste management into a new emergent global market. Waste of all kinds increasingly become money-making commodities (Hanson 2001), and recent research warns that nowadays "liberalisation and privatisation have driven a corporate view of waste disposal as a profitable industry in itself" (Khoo and Rau 2009). Conflicts around transformations of nature thus erupt for the fundamental clash between cycles of continuous production, extraction and waste accumulation, and the cultural and material conditions of the life-worlds of human groups impacted by the unequal outcomes of this treadmill (Martinez-Alier 2002).

To maintain the unity of society and nature and to theorize the production of urban environments as a socionatural metabolic process, hold great consequences for the study and the practice of grassroots environmental movements. First, since unequal power relations are inherently bound up in the metabolism of nature, the urban environment is created by and embodies unequal power relations. This means that an effective activist strategy has to work on the ways urban environments are constituted and it has to address the metabolic processes in which inequality and injustice are bound up. Second, since environmental inequality cannot be understood in isolation from the processes in motion within contemporary urbanisation, it is of prominent importance to address the scalar dimension both of power-laden metabolic processes and of the material and discursive strategies of grassroots mobilization. The awareness of the multi-scalar constraints and possibilities of social environmental movements prevents the fetishizing of the local, uncovering the interconnectedness of struggles at several scales.
• **Environmental Justice and Grassroots Concepts**

A fertile tradition of research within PE comes from activists and scholars working together in the movement (or rather in the group of movements) for Environmental Justice (hereafter EJ). The roots of EJ are in the US, where since the 1970s hundreds of activists’ reports and academic research have shown “the differential exposure to environmental ‘bads’ and access to environmental ‘goods’ experienced by different social groups” (Bickerstaff et al., 2009). In this tradition of research, waste has been used as a lens for studying the uneven inter- and intra-national distribution of waste disposal facilities and social movements and the discourses of distributional and procedural justice that accompany them (Bullard 2000; Pellow 2007). From its early concern with the *patterns* and the *procedures* of environmental injustices, and their unfolding along lines of ethnic, racial, gender and class discrimination, the EJ literature has evolved by covering conflicts both in the global North and South, and by examining a multitude of socially mediated environmental injustices, deepening its theoretical and multi-disciplinary engagement. A main contribution of the EJ movements inside and outside the academia has been to develop concepts emerged from struggles on the ground, in order to bring bottom-up conceptualizations of environmental problems and solutions to scholarly attention and into the realm of policy-makers. This practice has been described as an “activist-led and co-produced social sustainability science” (Martinez Alier et al. 2014), and it provided concepts and frames that, by connecting thematically environmental conflicts at different geographical sites and scales, are influencing policy agendas, networks formation and organisational forms of environmental movements. In the case of Campania, we see the emergence of a mobilizer concept that not only describes dialectically the interactions between political economic and biophysical processes bringing about highly unequal socio-natures, but also politicizes life processes and posits social agency at the centre of environmental change. The scope of the universalizing and mobilizing capacity of the *Biocide* concept deserve serious attention and it will be discussed below.

• **Place, Identity and Territory**

Recent studies in EJ are focusing the attention on the role that place attachment and defence has for activists engaged in environmental conflicts. Anguelovsky (2013) conducting research
in distressed neighbourhoods in which people are struggling to ensure the liveability of their dwelling place, underlines the intermingling of identity formation processes and material interventions on urban environments as an effective strategy for a bottom-up re-appropriation of the rights to stay and to a good life. Social mobilizations for long-term environmental quality and liveability shape, and are shaped by, the attachment to place and the sense of community. Some of the activists' strategies highlighted from these premises are the creation of “safe havens” and the re-making of place through emotional connections and recreation of rootedness (Anguelovski 2013). Local resistance can thus be seen at once reactive and creative: activists use their contestation as a segue to address broader questions related to place, its identity, and their identity (Escobar 2008). What comes to the forefront in this perspective are the material and immaterial links that human groups establish with their places during and beyond conflicts. According to Leff (2012) the social re-appropriation of nature is rooted in the reinvention of cultural identities: the rescuing and reconstruction of traditional knowledge that occurs in the encounter of confronting and conflictive rationalities, intercultural hybridization and dialogue of knowledges. Environmental movements resist to the rationalities of nature that threaten their life-worlds through the reconstruction of a tradition in dialogue with other knowledges. This entails a different approach to the forms of desired socionatural metabolism, which is reworked in continuity with cultural and ecological dimension of production and reproduction. The spaces at stake during conflicts are also reshaped through practices and discourses that constitute meaningful links between the community, the memory and the biophysical dimensions of the inhabited place. The notion of territory catches this relation with space that emerges among activists during environmental conflicts. Territory is “a multidimensional space, fundamental for the creation and recreation of communities’ ecological, economic and cultural practices [...] The demarcation of collective territories has led activists to develop a conception of territory that emphasizes articulations between settlement patterns, space use and use-meaning practices of resources” (Escobar, 1998). The stratified experiences of struggle and the re-appropriation of the territory by the activists are performed through symbolic and spatial practices in which contested terrains are remapped, redefined and remade.
3. Campania or “The Wasted Land”

- Accumulating Trash, Contaminating Bodies

The field of my research is located in the northern part of Campania region in Southern Italy, one of the poorest and most densely populated sites in the country. This area is a wide plain that comprises the provinces of Naples and Caserta, the two main cities of the region, and stretches on 3.800 sq. km inhabited by approximately 4 million people. It is a large and complex urban/rural system, where intensive agriculture currently trudges next to industrial plants, rampant overbuilding and, as we shall see, waste management and disposal activities. During the last two decades, two intertwined, multi-scale processes have had a remarkable influence on the changes of the socio-environmental relationships of this area. The first process is the implementation of the regional urban waste cycle, supervised and managed by a special governmental agency and carried out by private firms, operating under the legal framework of the “urban waste emergency”. The second process, linked to the former, is the illegal dumping of hazardous industrial waste in unsuitable landfills and in agricultural fields accomplished by a complex network of entrepreneurs, state officials, industry managers, owners of waste facilities and organized crime groups referred to as camorra. These two processes have complex interrelations that blur the demarcation between legal and illegal practices of waste management. The common factor that best exemplifies the logic of their functioning is the shrinking of the democratic space of negotiation on environmental management issues.

The “waste emergency” has been the legal framework through which a special governmental agency, the Commissioner for the Waste Emergency in Campania (hereafter CWE), enjoyed the power to act in derogation of ordinary laws for organizing the management of urban waste. It was created by the central government through a law that disciplines “situations of extreme danger”, requiring “extraordinary means and power to guarantee an effective coordination and avoid institutional overlaps” (Law 225/1992), and it became an almost permanent governance body for the management of urban waste, lasting in office for fifteen years (1994-2009). In a non-transparent and controversial way\(^2\), the CWE assigned to a partnership of private companies the task of dealing with all the urban waste daily produced in Campania. The private

firms opted for an industrial plan based on two waste-to-energy facilities and seven waste processing plants. The factual realization of the plan entailed the dispossession of municipal land for the uses of the private company, the deployment of “technological fixes” for dealing with waste and the financialization of waste as the guarantee of revenues for the banks loaning the money to the companies.

As Paolo Rabitti, a consultant of the prosecutors in the trial against the CWE and the companies, demonstrates in his research (2008), the interest of the private investors, and of the banks that lent the money to finance the project, focused on the public subsidies that the operators of incinerators enjoy in Italy. These incentives, masqueraded as promotion for “renewable energies”, establish a 7% increase of the prices of electricity produced from the burning of trash, which is financed by final consumers directly through the bills. Therefore, more trash to burn meant for the private firms more public money to collect through the selling of electricity. Their interest in accumulating as much trash as possible resulted several times in the clogging of the waste cycle. When the urban trash was flooding Naples and other municipalities of Campania, the CWE used its powers to impose the opening of landfills and storage areas on territories already jeopardized by previous pollution, causing increasing unrest among the communities that were the recipients of the garbage.

In their analysis of the waste conflicts in Campania, Armiero and D’Alisa (2012) argue that the state of emergency for the waste management in Campania has granted legal justification for the proliferation of environmental injustices. The device of emergency allowed the removal of the democratic dialectic and legitimized an increase in repression against any kind of dissent. By deleting the space of discussion on the ways in which waste ought to be managed, the emergency device left to market, technology and expertise all the solutions to the crisis, depoliticizing the issue of the unequal distribution of environmental burdens. Accordingly, the increasing unrest among local populations was dealt with by the CWE and the central government through the intensification of repressive measures, culminated with the decree no. 3.

Prosecutors also demonstrated that the cycle was blocked on purpose several times by the companies, so to exercise pressure on the CWE and being granted more law derogations and more freedom to shape the waste management according to their interest (Saraceno 2007, 326). For more on this judicial inquiry, see Sodano and Trochcia (2010); and, especially, Rabitti (2008).
90 of May 2008 (then law 123/2008), with which waste facilities became areas of strategic military interest and the protests in proximity of landfills and incinerator became a penal felony.

The dynamics of the illegal trafficking and dumping of hazardous waste toward Campania have an older history that intersects with the “waste emergency”. The main sources to gain an insight come from investigations and trials that dealt with different segments and actors of this profitable business, and from the grassroots records that have been mapping the territories object of illegal dumping. Since the early nineties, million tons of hazardous waste travelled to Campania through networks provided by stakeholders, often belonging to organized crime, whose main role was to connect industry managers willing to cut the costs of expensive practices of correct waste disposal with the routes and the places where their waste could be accommodated at lower or zero costs in illegal ways (Iacuelli 2008). Corruption of public officials, political protection and patronage, and the lack of credible deterrents by the state, have made this business one of the main revenues for criminal groups and allowed legal as well as illegal businesses to socialize the costs of production while privatizing the profits. According to the Parliamentary Commission on Illegal Activities Related to the Waste Cycle (Pecorella et al. 2013), the regime of emergency has offered to the illegal traffickers a veil for hiding hazardous waste under the category of urban one and created a situation in which the same actors provided their services both to the state and to the criminal organizations. Extensive activist archives, police investigations and NGOs reports have exposed the places where the waste was illegally disposed of: inadequate legal landfills, mixed with cement for constructing homes, disguised as compost and spread over cultivated fields, or abandoned in the countryside and set on fire to destroy potential clues (Legambiente 2006).

The environmental outcomes of these intertwined processes have slowly shown their magnitude. According to surveys of the Campania Regional Agency for Environmental Protection, there are today 2551 contaminated sites in all of Campania, with the majority of them clustered in the area between Naples and Caserta. The pollutants highlighted in the contaminated sites are mostly coming from urban and industrial waste incorrectly disposed (ARPAC, 2008). A recent re-classification of contaminated sites in Italy for which land
remediation works are planned, identifies four *Aree Vaste* (Wide Areas) in Campania: these are sites of national interest to be reclaimed for the high levels of pollution. More than fifty municipalities are included in the *Aree Vaste* of Campania: here, a few hundred meters from each other, there are landfills, temporary storage sites of waste blocks and illegal dumping sites. The outcomes of the environmental degradation caused by the accumulation of urban and hazardous waste are the risks in terms of health for the residents. Several scientific studies connect the high rates of cancer diseases among the population of this area to the presence of pollutants from waste (Senior and Mazza, 2004; Comba et al., 2006; Fazzo et al., 2008; Martuzzi et al., 2009), while popular epidemiology records also signal increasing health impairments that by now turned into a general existential fear.

D’Alisa and De Maria (2013) recently proposed to frame the colonization of waste in Campania as a process of “accumulation by contamination”. Such a strategy is the process by which the capital system socializes costs through successful costs-shifting strategies (Martinez-Alier 2002), and degrades the means of existence and bodies of human beings in order to find new possibilities for capital valorization (D’Alisa and De Maria 2013). This process of capitalist development turns the body into an “accumulation strategy” (Harvey 2000) by extracting surplus value from waste management through the appropriation of the socio-ecological space of politically weak human groups. The accumulation by contamination thesis allows us to make visible the inherent socionatural articulations that enable the realization of profits. Moreover, the arrangements required to carry out the valorization of waste imply an unequal distribution of power, reflected by the hegemony of particular framings of nature and of the social conflicts that may erupt in response.

- **Resisting Toxics**

Alongside the continuous “waste emergency” and the illegal dumping of noxious waste, a complex and large array of grassroots movements emerged on the toxic fields of Campania. Belonging to the municipalities targeted by the government waste management policies and/or living in areas affected by the illegal waste-related business, local committees of citizens organized campaigns against the localization of landfills and incinerators on their territories.

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4 [http://www.sogesid.it/campania_2.html](http://www.sogesid.it/campania_2.html)
and took a clear stand against the illegal dumping. They rarely called themselves environmentalists: personal reasons linking health concerns with the loss of control over the environment acted as mobilizers, more than any supposed will to “protect the nature” (Armiero 2008). The sensuous perceptions of radical environmental changes caused by the colonization of waste unsettled the experience of everyday life and foregrounded the work of continuous collective self-formation by active citizens that begun investigating the causes and the effects of waste flows disrupting rural and urban environments. This led to the politicization of the processes linking biophysical change, spatial restructuring, technological and scientific discourses, governance methods and waste flows, which in various ways grassroots movements have addressed during fifteen years of struggle. The social mobilization in Campania has been striking for its heterogeneity: radical activists from Centri Sociali (social centres) cooperated with ordinary citizens and farmers; local politicians from left and right wing marched with football fan groups and religious associations. Even though participation has had a "variable geometry" (in the words of an activist) and there was no lack of indifference and sabotage by sectors of civil society toward the mobilizations, these have cut through the social fabric involving economically deprived people, middle class and intellectuals in the same struggle. Strong divides also crossed the movements; endless discussions and ruptures aroused over whether or not to engage in dialogue with government institutions or whether or not to trust the judicial system. However, the lack of a centralized directorate of the mobilizations did not mean that the committees acted in isolation from each other: indeed, pacts of mutual assistance and support flourished since the early demonstrations.

4. From Toxic to Commons

- *The First Wave*

Throughout the recent history, we can identify two main periods of popular environmentalism in Campania, which follow the changing patterns of repression and delegitimization enacted by economic and political elites. The first runs from 2001 to 2011: ten years of “waste wars” during which the State’s plans for dealing with urban trash encountered the steady opposition of local communities. Through the organizational form of “grassroots committees”, citizens built up coordination units for resisting against what they perceived as an authoritarian governance of
waste not concerned with environmental and human safety. Starting from Acerra, a town 15 km north of Naples unilaterally chosen for placing a 600000 t/y waste-to-energy plant, the mobilization quickly spread to several other towns where the CWE decided to accommodate the urban trash by opening storage areas and landfills, often in socio-economically deprived and already polluted areas. From “the battle of Acerra”, at least other 37 localities directly confronted the government plans (Festa 2012). Major events occurred in Chiaiano, Pianura (2008), and Terzigno (2010); here the conflict became harsh, including guerrilla actions and roadblocks that continued for days. The committees aroused in this period grew around the local perceptions of degradation and dispossession, and had a prominent defensive stance. With the increase of repression and the proliferation of front lines of the conflict, activists implemented trans-local coordination efforts between local committees, leading to more structured social movements with a national and international scope. The main results in terms of environmental knowledge and politics of this long season of grassroots mobilization can be synthetized as follows:

- The government’s waste policies were contested on the basis of alternative waste cycles projects formulated by the movements through knowledge exchanges and affiliations with international networks (like Zero Waste Alliance). The priorities posited by movements were reduction and recycling of garbage, following the EU most recent regulations.
- New narratives concerning the local history of pollution and health impairments were produced through investigation of past and present contaminating activities and the collection of personal histories of sickness.
- Through the involvement of experts in disagreement with the government’s technicians, movements understood the uncertainties and the biases of scientific knowledge, thus valorising the historical perceptions of environmental change experienced by lay people.
- Some of the committees born in the wake of a single protest became permanent political subjects, building alliances with other social movements at regional, national and international scales.

The physical repression deployed by the State crushed the resistance most of the times. Besides violence, the delegitimization of the movements was built and reinforced through discursive
formations drawn from a repository of enduring stereotypes (Petrillo 2010, Festa 2012), based on the characterization of Southern Italian people as ‘primitive’, ‘mafia associates’ and ‘uncivil’. National media reports and political statements dismissed any alternative proposal of environmental management and blamed Campania people's lifestyle as the main cause of their cancer diseases. The paradox of this way of dealing with social unrest has been that organized crime and corrupted officials continued, in the heat of the events, with their practice of illegal dumping of toxic waste.

- **The Second Wave**

The second wave of mobilizations runs from 2012 until today. With the official end of the “emergency regime”, the national and regional institutions settled the management of urban waste within a fragile cycle that incorporated the environmental injustices imposed by force in previous years. Moreover, the legacy of the emergency are between 6 and 7 million tons of trash packed into waste blocks and amassed in “temporary” storage sites located amidst the cultivated fields of several municipalities in the provinces of Naples and Caserta. Despite numerous arrests and seizures of companies involved in the illicit traffic of toxic waste, illegal disposal practices have continued. With the environmental pollution and the health concerns never really addressed by the State, the grassroots movements remained alert. The physical repression experienced by people contributed to the outflow of mass participation, but the core groups of activists kept on organizing campaigns and monitoring the environmental conditions. What follows is a descriptive account of the formation of social movements' coalitions and of how they addressed several nodes of the socio-environmental crisis. The analysis of two strategies of grassroots environmental politics will constitute my contribution to the task of thinking through effective activists' practices that may further the transition toward more equal socio-ecological arrangements.

At the church of *Parco Verde* (Green Park) in Caivano, an economically depressed area at the outskirt of Naples, the priest Don Maurizio Patriciello began organizing in the summer of 2012 a series of public meetings where ordinary citizens and representatives from the grassroots committees started once more to gather en masse. The call from the priest to reinvigorate public participation against the unresolved issues of environmental contamination
(particularly visible in Caivano because of the hundreds of toxic fires occurring daily in renowned places, but widespread over a much larger area) found the immediate cooperation of experienced activists. From those meetings took form the *Coordinamento Comitati Fuochi* (Coordinator body of Committees against Fires, hereafter CCF), a coalition grouping more than fifty local committees and associations. CCF is a protagonist of the current resurgence of popular mobilization in Campania. They base their strategies on four main axes:

1) Systematic collective filing of denounces to the judiciary for failures of the local, regional and national institutions in removing and preventing illegal disposal

2) Monitoring, reporting and archiving of illegal landfills and of failures to comply with regulations of authorized landfills and facilities, also lobbying successfully for media attention on these reports

3) Dissemination in public meetings of documented knowledge about the health risks connected to waste-ecosystems interactions

4) Nurturing of local and national initiatives, also beyond the waste issue, toward the bottom-up cultural and physical re-appropriation of territories and for the valorisation of grassroots networks

The ability of CCF to elicit growing social participation relies on the capacity of framing the relations between waste, ecosystem contamination and human health in immediate personal terms. The narratives of the central government minimizing the pollution and dismissing any linkage between the contaminants from waste and the rising of cancer lost legitimacy thanks to the work of CCF. The issue of health, indeed, became the main vehicle of grievances. The insistence of the CCF, and in particular of some local churches, on the link between pollution and health became a general cry articulated in marches, art performances and through the investigation of the biological recesses of the social body reacting to an environment turned toxic. The unusual deaths of children caused by rare tumours led to the formation of an association of mothers: “Victims of the Poisoned Land”, who shared their painful testimonies to social assemblies. Banners with photographs of the loved ones allegedly killed by cancer appeared during demonstrations and silent marches. The dead were walking with the living. The strategy of collective mourning functioned as a strong aggregator, working on the emotional disdain of people finally perceiving the exploitation in their very own bodies. Death
became a mean for increasing political engagement and for articulating resistance: “We are not used to death, we use death as a scream”, in the words of an activist. It is necessary at this point to emphasize the risks, also signalled from areas of the movement, of disempowerment produced by a rhetoric focused on death: the accounts depicting an apocalyptic condition could offer to the political establishment a side for co-opting the demonstrations in the name of extraordinary measures and for quashing once again a real democratic debate on the causes of and the solutions to the disaster. However, it is undeniable that by insisting on the public and political causes of the private mourning, it has been achieved an enlargement of the ranks of activists. It is through the merging of the emotional charge with a proper political one that co-optation could be avoided, and this has happened with the deployment of the concept of *Biocide*.

**Biocide**

In a recent paper, Martinez Alier et al (2014) collect a repertoire of grassroots concepts emerged around the world in decades of struggles for environmental justice. They argue that the mutual work of social movements and scholars reinforced the effectiveness of these concepts for framing problems and demands, contributing to the solicitation of responses from policy-makers, to the global awareness of environmental injustices and to the exchange of meanings and practices among movements in different geographical settings. I seek to add to their list a concept recently formulated by Campania grassroots movements: *Biocide*. The origin of this term are not clear. The researcher Antonio Giordano is credited by many as the first to use the word *Biocidio* (in Italian). With this term, he expressed “the progressive weakening of the genetic heritance of the people of Campania caused by toxic pollution, such as to lower the immune system effectiveness and increase the likelihood of cancer”[^5]. According to Giordano, the DNA of people in Campania is disrupted by decades of pollutants transiting from waste to the local ecosystem. He points to scientific evidences and to his own researches and blames the Italian State for dismissing the health issue and for having had a prominent role in the socio-environmental degradation of Campania. The movement of *Rete Commons* (Commons Network), grouping committees and social centres from the Naples' neighbouring towns of Mugnano, Marano and Chiaiano, embraced the concept and deepened it, turning it into a flag.

and into an explanatory device. In the conception developed by activists, *Biocide* articulates the relationships between political-economic processes and their complex interaction with ecosystems and bodies: it catches this phenomenon dialectically by connecting the “killing of life” to strategies of profit making. The term illustrates the interdependent features of cost shifting and life-killing as a deliberate project to which Campania has been sacrificed by networks of powers. In Marxists terms, we could argue that *Biocide* indicates the colonization of the extractive logic of neoliberal capitalism in the reproductive sphere of society. This means that in the political economy of the *Biocide*, profit margins are earned through shifting costs of production and management of economic processes directly in the biology of environmental matrices and bodies. The dimension of the *bios* of life, becomes a tool for the enrichment of certain individuals who earn by destroying. This causes the loss of the right to life and health for those suffering the *Biocide*. To observe the socio-ecological degradation from the perspective of *Biocide* allows for the framing of contamination in all its complexity: as the result of political-economic processes outside the control of populations and as the effect of exclusionary policies. The very making of nature, including humans and non-humans and their interrelations mediated by specific arrangements of socio-ecological metabolism, is posited at the centre. To speak of *Biocide* also authorizes the transition from a merely defensive plan to that of the re-appropriation of direct services and rights, embracing the complex dimension of life as a general terrain of struggle. The effectiveness of the concept as a mobilizing and descriptive device is demonstrated by the fact that it “jumped scale” from Campania to other settings where the nexus health-environment acted as a political trigger. Grassroots movements in other Italian regions and environmental NGOs picked the *Biocide* concept and adapted it to their contexts, laying the groundwork for a universalization of its potential to make visible and to politicize structural mechanisms of socio-ecological exploitation.

Around the call to “Stop the Biocide”, the different social movements of Campania coalesced and begun implementing a common platform that could gather the knowledge produced in myriads of particular experiences of struggles. From interviews with activists, all the difficulties for building such a cooperation emerge, explained by several as the necessary and winding path towards the formation of a common identity between very different subjects. Despite their

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divergences, the movements constructed through mail exchanges and public meetings a single document that tackled the multifaceted mechanisms of the socio-ecological exploitation\textsuperscript{7}. The first and the most important point of this document is the request of real democracy, considered as the base for addressing all the other inequities concerning urban waste management, toxic waste disposal, special laws, health prevention, agricultural sector and public participation in the decisions on how to allocate and manage common resources. Moving from the shared platform, the movements came to a general call for a joint demonstration under the slogan "Stop Biocide" and "Raging River". More than one hundred thousand people took the streets of Naples on 16\textsuperscript{th} November 2013, making visible in the heart of the regional capital city the presence of an organized and rooted social force.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Reclaiming Commons}
\end{itemize}

Having to engage with the socio-ecological inequality inscribed in urban and rural environments, activists in Campania also dealt with the materialities and the meanings constituting the spatial relations of their places. I focus here on those grassroots critical spatial practices that acted on the eco-social nexus by framing, acting and organizing alternative representations of reality and alternative ways of providing goods, services and safety. The remaking of places by activists in urban distressed neighbourhoods has been highlighted by recent studies (Anguelovsky 2013) as a mean through which marginalized communities build their sense of belonging and intervene on the materiality of the urban fabric for improving their quality of life. Furthermore, according to Escobar (2008) and Leff (2012), an effective grassroots political strategy has to entail the re-appropriation of knowledge and space through the reinvention of cultural identities and through the reshaping of territories. I argue that in Campania the experience of conflict is producing a bottom-up culture of socio-ecological relationships linked with practices of commoning that open up possibilities for a transformative politics.

The first practice I want to highlight is the mapping of territories enacted by activists. Using simple technological devices and internet platforms, activists begun monitoring the environmental conditions of their places already ten years ago. The main reason to produce

\textsuperscript{7} http://www.fiumeinpiena.it/cms/index.php/piattaforma-fiumeinpiena-16nov.
autonomous maps was the need to make visible the degradation of land in the face of the denials of the central government. This practice evolved in an instrument for reinforcing complaints through visual evidences, and it was performed collectively in “denunciation days”\(^8\), during which the countryside was crossed by hundreds of citizens investigating their territories. From the “visualization of the bads” to the “perception of the goods”, the step has been a political one. Activists reformulated their practice of mapping by including in their searches also all those elements that they considered as common resources and means of identification, often finding “beauty” surrounded by degradation. The rural and the urban revealed abandoned archaeological sites, uncultivated fertile lands, ruined public spaces, forgotten springs of water, that through the inclusion in projects of social valorisation redefined the territory. This shift signals a reworking of the representation of and the relations between territory and identity: it was no longer only the resistance against unwanted land-use that had to be performed, activists also felt they had to answer to themselves the question of what they were defending. The mapping practice thereby became a mean to remake local identities through the detection and the caretaking of portions of land considered as common resources worth defending.

The second practice refers to art performances seeking to provoke while also generating participatory forms of working. Campania activists have used creative arts since the early demonstrations. Local characters from the regional folklorist tradition “participated” in marches and road blockades, merging the humourist feature with a much more combative one. However, only recently have art performances inscribed in the urban space the symbolizations of the socio-ecological death in powerful ways. During an October night of 2013, in the towns of Casal di Principe, Casapesenna and San Cipriano, epicentres of contamination and stronghold of a mafia clan, an art collective referring to the CCF, *Work In Progress*, disseminated one hundred fifty transparent mannequins made from plastic bottles that contained inside them visible black clusters representing tumours\(^9\). The following morning, the mannequins gazed at the passers-by from various street corners and squares, reminding and representing to them their destiny if they do not act for curbing the contamination. From that day, the mannequins have been made by other committees and have travelled in several towns of the provinces of Naples and Caserta, appearing mysteriously during nights and eliciting interest from mass


\(^9\) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ-zPTtGhSo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ-zPTtGhSo).
media and art galleries. They represent a kind of knowledge that from scientific data transited to popular perceptions and materialized into art forms throughout the city. The grassroots version of an epidemiological report, shaping the perceptions people have of themselves and of their environments in deep and emotional ways.

The third practice is the establishment of social cooperatives that through collective agricultural work and connections with the urban dwellers, attempt to provide both an alternative food provision chain and a territorial control against further exploitation. These cooperatives are formed by groups of activists that take care of small portions of private or public lands formerly left abandoned, to turn them into cultivated fields. Among the rural-urbanites are long-time activists disappointed by the ineffectiveness of institutional lobbying, which passed to forms of political action related to material production and cultural valorisation. Usually these are young people with higher education collaborating with the radically disenfranchised from poorer classes, both groups finding themselves excluded by late neoliberal policies coupled with contaminating exploitation. This practice is flourishing, drawing knowledge and means of identification from the rooted agricultural tradition. More articulated experiments are the ones of New Cooperation Organized in Casal di Principe and the Fondo Rustico Amato Lamberti in Chiaiano, both using as coordination base lands and buildings confiscated to mafia by the State and assigned to their associations. Here the political stance is prominent. Their attempts at valorising uncontaminated lands amidst territories stigmatized and in deep economic crisis, want to be the beginning of “the realization of another model of development against the mafia-state, for asserting new spaces of democracy, building new institutions of the commons and reclaiming control on our territories”, as one activist told me. Sticking to their land, refusing to go away, activists are working today on a deeper level compared to the previous years of mobilizations. The aim is to recuperate local agricultural knowledge and to merge it with the social movements’ objective of constructing strong multiscalar networks of cooperatives, inspired by similar examples like the GAS (Grasseni 2014). Already now, small private farmers are joining the activists into consortia that self-certify the safety of their products. The certification procedure is grounded in personal relations of trust built between movements and ordinary citizens. Moreover, as emerged in interviews, activists believe that by rooting social cooperatives on their territories these can function as “dams” against further dispossession and contamination. To re-appropriate lands for common use (the
cooperatives sustain themselves through labour but they do not make profits) works by creating protective bastions as in a “war of position” with top-down attempts at restructuring spaces in unequal ways, nurturing a participatory political project aimed at the preservation and recreation of *beni comuni*, the commons.

5. Conclusions

The practices of Campania activists have evolved from the early attempts to resist local contaminating exploitation. They extended the scope of civic engagement by producing autonomous imaginaries of socio-ecological relationships and by re-appropriating portions of territory. They passed from a grassroots political practice focused on local litigations to a wider political project constituting strong coalitions of committees in the region allied with other social movements at several scales. In doing so, activists are today addressing inequality in a much more complex way: producing subjectivities that are more difficult to co-opt for the establishment and working on the links between the materiality of places and the spheres of social production and reproduction. On the other hand, the mass mobilizations have opened channels to influence policy-makers, but the laws implemented by the parliament following the pressure from below do not provide for greater inclusion and participation of the communities, as implicit in the requests of “real democracy”. The self-organization and the attempts at controlling the processes of socionatural metabolism are therefore interesting as a field of political practice that insinuates in the interstices of the governance by creating alternative institutions from the ground-up. More research is needed for assessing the efficacy of such political performances, in order to sharpen the tools and strategies available for an egalitarian transformative politics.

References


