Political ecologies of value: Austerity and socio-environmental conflict in the Italian South

Antonio Maria Pusceddu
Researcher, Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA), Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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Abstract

In Italy, the lack of massive mobilisations against austerity politics can explain the re-awakening of environmental conflicts as catalysers of social discontent. This chapter explores how austerity intensified already existing environmental conflicts, and how this helped to recast the environmental question in ways through which the intersection of multiple experiences of dispossession was comprehensively understood. I develop the notion of political ecologies of value to illuminate working people's lived experiences and their reactions to persistent socio-environmental disenfranchisement and devaluation particularly in times of crisis and austerity. Drawing on a single case study, an industrial city in southern Italy, I address the revaluation projects underpinning the conflict around socio-ecological arrangements that are considered unfair, unsustainable and detrimental to life. In the context of the austerity crisis, the environmental question provided the basis for building a politics of articulation between different stances and sectors of society, thus voicing multiple experiences of dispossession in the face of a longstanding history of environmental degradation and lasting socio-economic crisis.

Introduction

In the wake of the austerity crisis, Italy did not witness massive mobilisations like it was happening in Spain and Greece. Popular protests against austerity remained fragmented and confined to specific locales or workplaces, and were ultimately unable to build enduring and effective political movements at the national level (Andreatta, 2017; Della Porta, 2015). The lack of convincing nation-wide responses to austerity and the widespread disappointment with institutional politics could account for the re-awakening of localised environmental conflicts as catalysers of social discontent. Long-lasting mobilisations such as the *No Tav* movement against the Turin-Lyon high-speed rail project in the Susa valley provided the blueprint for territorially based struggles (Della Porta et al., 2019). The politicised ecologies that emerged in the past decade developed into meaningful junctions of popular politics, mobilising together – much the same as austerity protests – "coalitions" of various social groups (Della Porta, 2015), united by the sense of outrage and diversified experiences of dispossession.

In the Italian South, environmental conflicts have often become important sites for boosting popular mobilisations, capable of addressing broader issues of inequality and justice (Armiero & D'Alisa, 2012; Barca & Leonardi, 2016; Ravenda, 2018; Zinn, 2007). In this chapter[1], I explore how already existing environmental conflicts intensified during the past decade of austerity, and how this helped to recast the environmental question in ways through which the intersection of multiple experiences of dispossession was comprehensively understood. Drawing on a single case study in the Apulia region, that of Brindisi, home to oil and coal-based industries and classified by national authorities as "high environmental risk area" since the late 1980s (Portaluri, 2012), I examine environmental mobilisations as "revaluation projects" (Collins, 2017) that aim at readdressing socio-ecological arrangements that are considered unfair, unsustainable and detrimental to life, thereby refusing to pay the socio-environmental cost of industrial pollution in exchange of a handful of jobs (Curcio, 2014). I address these questions by developing the notion of 'political ecologies of value' in order to illuminate working people's lived experiences and their reactions to persistent socio-environmental disenfranchisement and devaluation. Framing the production and contestation of capitalist natures through the lens of value (Andueza, 2020; Franquesa, 2018; Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017), my analysis builds upon the relational dimension of capitalist value and its uneven articulation with values in the reproduction of socio-ecological relations. In this framework, the politicised popular ecologies are understood as the contestation of existing value relations (and the underlying forms of devaluation) *and* as laborious and embryonic "projects of mutual creation" (Graeber, 2013, p. 222) grounded on vernacular socio-ecological understanding of what is "a life worth living" and a place worth living in (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014).

The city of Brindisi is a telling example of "ecological distribution conflicts" (Martinez-Alier, 2002) in contemporary Italy, also reflecting the legacy of the spatial history of capitalist development in the peninsula that installed the main network of oil-based industries in the peripheral southern regions. Indeed, Brindisi, and Southern Italy more generally, provides a relevant case to address the nexus between uneven development and environmental inequality in Europe, and for highlighting a paradigm shift of environmental struggles in areas historically targeted by heavy industrial development projects. Focusing on the trajectory of local environmentalism, I argue that the intensification of the socio-ecological crisis escalated the shift of environmental conflicts from the sphere of production, characterised by the workers' struggles over health issues within the factory, to the broader relations of social reproduction. This shift can be linked to the increasing severity of environmental issues (especially in sites of heavy industrialisation, due to hazards deriving from greater exposure to CMR – Carcinogenic, Mutagenic and Reprotoxic substances) and the restructuring of social reproduction with the decline of the male-earned family wage, the augmented pressure upon (female) reproductive labour and the neoliberal reconfiguration of redistributive welfare, in ways that have made the intersection of social and ecological issues for life-sustaining practices more visible. Austerity politics exacerbated the experience of social and environmental dispossession, radicalising socio-ecological conflicts well beyond the industrial relations within the factory to the broader socio-ecological relations upon which the productive operation of the factory relies. Following Salleh (2010, p. 212), these relations can be conceptualised as the "meta-industrial labour" which is not directly implicated in the production process – on

the contrary, it is marginalised as unproductive – but is essential in sustaining the reproduction of life and its ecological integrity.

I take the case of a short-lived female environmentalist group (mostly active from 2012 to 2015) as one paradigmatic example of the shifting grounds of environmental struggles, which I examine within the general re-awakening of the environmental question in Brindisi. The *Red Stroller* (*Passeggino Rosso*) movement (as a matter of fact, barely a dozen women activists) was born out of broader mobilisations that found in sensitive local environmental issues (such as the impact of emissions from coal-burning) a suitable ground to operate connections and intersections between different subjects, groups and movements under the label of the commons. In the context of the austerity crisis, the environmental question provided the basis for building a "politics of articulation" (Di Chiro, 2008), capable of voicing multiple experiences of dispossession in the face of a longstanding history of environmental degradation and persistent socio-economic crisis.

This chapter is based on ethnographic materials collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Brindisi (15 months between 2015 and 2016), a city of 85,000 inhabitants along the southern Adriatic coastline. The research was part of a broader collective anthropological project that investigated livelihood practices, conceptual frameworks and social reproduction strategies among working-class households during the European austerity crisis (Narotzky, 2020). In this project, I set out to explore the links between practices of making a living and the moral and conceptual frameworks that underlie the social and material worlds of working people in a crisis-ridden context. Since the start of the fieldwork, the recurrent intersection of social and environmental concerns revealed how they were bound up in the same conflictive field. Environmental issues had become the contentious ground where residents opposed each other – in favour of, or against living with and living alongside gigantic industrial plants. I draw from interviews with activists and founders of the *Red Stroller* group and other environmental activists, as well as from fieldnotes on participant observation and informal conversations during regular attendance at weekly meetings and other events in which the same activists were involved. Moreover, a broader range of information about the perception of socio-environmental issues was collected during interviews and regular conversations with factory workers and union delegates. Likewise, besides regular interaction with a broad network of households, participation in charity activities and church organisations provided further insights on how discussions about crisis, labour and making a living in Brindisi intersected with concerns about environmental degradation and quarrels over the 'real' impact of industrial plants.

In the first section, I briefly sketch out the theoretical framework that helps contextualise the thrust of my argument. In the second section, I analyse the historical dynamics of capitalist appropriation of nature (and labour) in Brindisi, showing how the dialectics of value and "waste" (Gidwani, 2012) created the South as an undervalued space, thus laying it open to capitalist valuation processes. I situate the case study in the context of austerity politics in Italy and its uneven impact upon the diversified social and economic geography of the country. In the third section, I uncover how Brindisi has come to be perceived by its inhabitants as a sacrifice zone, and how their lived experience of environmental dispossession has defined the framework for them to understand and react against the disenfranchising effects of austerity. In the fourth section, I analyse the political ecologies of value as reactions to the experience of being turned into waste and as the groundwork for advancing an effective revaluation project that lays claim to fairer socio-ecological arrangements. In the conclusion, I return to the link between austerity and environmental struggles.

Political ecologies of value

Similar to other concepts designed to account for sets of ideas and practices that inform collective agency (for instance, the "moral economy" underlying the food riots in eighteenth century England; Thompson, 1971), the political ecologies of value aim at identifying some basic features of working people's conceptions and practices revolving around the defence of the environment as the frontline of the struggle for the commons. As a conceptual framework, the political ecologies of value builds upon Marxist approach to

the production and contestation of capitalist nature, feminist perspectives on social reproduction, and anthropological theories around value and values.

I conceptualise the political ecologies of value as the lived experience of and reaction to the socio-ecological contradictions generated by the tension between capitalist value and non-capitalist valuation frameworks; between the logic of accumulation and the fulfilment of human needs. The contradiction between exchange value and use value lies at the core of the concept, which I explore in relation to the emergence of different agencies in understanding and reacting to socio-ecological dilemmas shaped by the imperatives of capital over the necessities of social reproduction and by the contradiction between securing a livelihood and concerns over the ecological integrity underlying ideas of human well-being. Marxist green thought has focused on the ecological implications of the use value/exchange value contradiction, addressing the planetary ecological crisis as "a more general culmination of the fundamental contradiction between production for profits and production for human needs" (Burkett, 2014, p. 13). At the core of this principal contradiction is the fact that, under capitalism, humans' metabolic relations with nature are mediated by capital's value form. Eco-Marxist perspectives, however, and with few exceptions (Kovel, 2007), are not always concerned with the contradictory entanglement of exchange value and use value in the concrete unfolding of human practice and life-sustaining activities, which are driven by meaning, social pursuits and moral universes (values) that are hardly reducible to the capitalist mode of production but are essential to its own working (Graeber, 2001). The political ecologies of value also rely on critical perspectives that – addressing the tangling up of value and values (as worth) – have called attention to the struggles over value in the process of capitalist social reproduction and how these are driven by concrete and practical understanding of worth (Collins, 2017; Graeber, 2001; Kalb, 2017; Narotzky and Besnier, 2014; Skeggs, 2014). Marxist feminist engagements with social reproduction, gender domination and labour exploitation have proved the most effective in disclosing the linkages and intersections between social and ecological issues, by tracing their interdependences in the "fleshy, messy, indeterminate stuff of everyday life" (Katz 2001, p. 711; Floro, 2012; Mies, 1986).

From the standpoint of social reproduction, livelihood dilemmas unfold not only in connection with the need to ensure social and material well-being for present and future generations but also in relation to the very preservation of health, and of life ultimately. The experience of the "corporeal rift" exposes the effects of industrial productivism on the social metabolism of disposable communities, and their reproduction as both "social and physical beings" (Foster & Clark, 2018, p. 10). The political ecologies of value allow to grasp this fundamental reproductive dimension of socio-environmental struggles, as that is how they can link concerns about sustaining life on a daily basis *and* inter-generationally to the ecological understanding of the nexus between production and reproduction. The twofold temporal dimension of social reproduction provides the basis to think the political ecologies of value through the temporal agency of social reproductive practices and how these are bundled together with capitalist value and worth (Kalb, 2017). This conceptualisation of value highlights how socio-ecological relations are shaped by tensions and contradictions between the logic of accumulation and varieties of valuation practices and value struggles, and how such value practices and struggles are closely related to livelihood contingencies and dilemmas, temporal agencies and strategies of social reproduction. In the context that I investigate, the experience of disposable communities defines the framework for mobilising a critique of the socio-ecological relations that are identified with heavy industrialisation, corporate and financial powers and the (de)regulatory role of the state. Environmental and social degradation are understood as strongly intertwined in the form of subordination implied in subcontracting chains, labour exploitation, petty corruption and clientelist relationships. The political ecologies of value, in this respect, outlines a framework for thinking about how people deal with the socio-environmental contradictions in which they live, and their struggles for dignity and worthiness (Franquesa, 2018; Narotzky, 2016). In the following section, I show how the dialectics of value and "waste" (Gidwani, 2012) turned the South into a region of "cheap nature" (Moore, 2015), and how the environmental struggles responded to the experience of being turned into the 'garbage dump' of high-impact industrial development projects.

Like a stone thrown in a pond

In the early 1960s, Brindisi was targeted by the state-driven program for the development of Southern Italy. The localisation of the industrial 'growth pole' on the southern coastline profoundly reshaped urban profile, rural hinterlands and the overall relationship with the sea in the region. Spatially proximate and yet set apart from the urban fabric, the petrochemical complex replaced a vast rural area that had recently been transformed by the implementation of the agrarian reform in the early 1950s. Launched in 1950 with the creation of a special state fund, the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*, the "extraordinary state intervention" for the development of the South had continued in 1957 with the direct industrialisation programme (Barbagallo, 2013, pp. 145–170). The extraordinariness of public intervention followed on from the main assumption of the Southern Question, that is the long-standing view of the South as a problem, metonymically instantiated by the exemplarily rural backwardness. The long story of racialisation of Italian southerners (Schneider, 1998; Teti, 1993) and the marginalization of the South as a racialised space in the moral geography of the Italian state were effective ways of producing and appropriating an undervalued and "cheap nature" (Moore, 2015), which could be open to capitalist valuing processes (Smith, 2010).

State-sponsored industrialisation in the South took mainly the shape of heavy industries, amounting to two-thirds of new steel plants and 40% of new petrochemical plants built in Italy after 1960 (Barbagallo, 2013, p. 157). In order to attract private investments, the state gave northern-based companies non-repayable grants and subsidised loans (Law 29 July 1957, n. 643) to set up new industrial complexes in the South. Brindisi was chosen for logistical reasons since it provided a safe coastline, abundance of space and railway connections. On top of this, in the province of Brindisi the cost of labour was among the lowest in Italy at the time, according to the salary zone system that was abolished only later (1969), after intense workers' struggles. Commonly known as *gabbie salariali*, the salary zone system was a system of wage determination based on parameters such as the cost of living, corresponding to different indexed salary zones. Although the salary zones were not territorially defined, the zones with lower indexes corresponded mostly to southern regions. In the 1960s, Brindisi was classified as Zone 6, with the lowest salaries.

"Like a stone thrown in a pond" – as the prime minister put it at the time – the new petrochemical plant would generate multiple "circles of wellbeing" (Russo, 1964, p. 114). In the 1970s, the peak decade for employment, the overall petrochemical area provided jobs to 10,000 employees (direct and indirect), half of whom came from the surrounding towns and provinces. As the city's population expanded, the surplus working class population was absorbed by the precarious circuits of the informal economy (Mingione, 1988) and illicit activities, such as cigarette smuggling, tolerated by the state until the early 2000s. Besides the ebbs and flows of the construction sector, other forms of precarious employment started to increase in the service sector in the 1980s. The promises of industrial prosperity heralded by the short-lived southern Fordist experiment started to wane with the 1970s oil crises. In Brindisi, layoffs and downsizing were facilitated by a tragic accident in December 1977, which destroyed the core plant of the petrochemical complex, killing three workers and injuring around fifty. This event was a turning point in the local perception of industrial hazards; it also marked the definitive decline of industrial employment opportunities in the petrochemical factory (Greco, 2002, pp. 113–117). To partially compensate for layoffs and tackle unemployment, the 1981 National Energy Plan (PEN) approved the construction of a new coal-fired power station in Brindisi by the national electricity company Enel. This project added to an oil power plan built in the 1960s and converted to coal in 1979.

The construction of the power plant was contentious and faced opposition from a broad environmentalist front, ranging from Church institutions to *Legambiente* (a green national association close to the Italian Communist Party, founded in the early 1980s), up to various groups of the extra-parliamentary left and the anti-nuclear movement. Unions and industrial workers – until then the backbone of environmentalist struggles *within* the factory – strongly supported the project, finding themselves in anti-environmentalist positions *outside* the factory. Chemical workers' organisations had played a fundamental role in bringing health issues to the fore of the workers' movement struggles, carrying out an intense information campaign on the noxious effects of chemical productions (Barca, 2012). However, the restructuring phase of the 1980s, and the uncertain prospects of local petrochemical production, made the preservation of jobs a primary

concern for the labour movement. In the five years following the 1977 accident, 30% of the plants were dismantled and 4.600 jobs in the local petrochemical industry were lost (Randazzo, 1984, p. 29; Greco, 2002). Outside the factory, a heterogeneous environmentalist coalition started to oppose the invasive presence of gigantic industrial complexes in favour of alternative development options. This transformation was also a reflection of the international crisis of labour movements within the complex restructuring and tertiarization of labour markets in the industrial economies of advanced capitalism. In Brindisi, where popular epidemiologies were catalysing the discontent over the impact of industrial facilities, environmental mobilisations escalated in the mid-2000s, growing in intensity during the post-2008 financial crisis and the implementation of austerity politics. In spite of the ideological mobilisation of moralities of collective responsibility and sacrifice through which austerity measures were implemented (Alves de Matos & Pusceddu, 2021), the economic downturn made even more acute the perception of industrial hazard and environmental injustice as the hard cost to pay for the survival of the local economy, as though the sacrifice demanded by austerity politics resonated with the idea that Brindisi had been sacrificed a long time before.

In Italy, austerity measures exacerbated the enduring process of state and economic neoliberal restructuring, which had begun in the 1990s through large-scale privatisation of public assets, administrative decentralisation, welfare reforms, labour deregulation and a strong fiscal austerity programme (Cozzolino, 2021). While framing this process as a project of modernisation, policy-makers and economic elites have also deplored its incomplete character, calling for more decisive reform policies to 'fully modernise' the country. The discursive strategies used to legitimise unpopular reforms deemed necessary to redress the flaws of the Italian economy (e.g. excessive public debt, low competitiveness), relied on the constant appeal to external constraints like Europe or the financial markets. The implementation of more radical austerity measures during the sovereign debt crisis rested on similar discursive strategies. In August 2011, the European Central Bank delivered a 'strictly confidential' letter to Silvio Berlusconi's government – as a matter of fact, an informal memorandum – listing a number of structural reforms (including the revision of welfare and labour legislation, and the liberalization and privatisation of public services) "to be implemented as soon as possible" (Financial Times, 2011). A few months later, outstripping the austerity policies undertaken by the previous cabinet, these measures were urgently addressed by the so-called 'technocratic government' headed by former EU commissioner Mario Monti. The core decree tellingly labelled *Save Italy* (*Salva Italia*) was aimed at reducing the budget deficit and improving the country's competitiveness by reforming the pension system, cutting public expenditure, increasing labour flexibilization and indirect taxation.

Austerity measures, besides further increasing public debt (Paternesi Meloni & Stirati, 2018), had dramatic social consequences, with growing unemployment, social insecurity and deprivation (Caritas Italiana, 2016). Austerity politics have also had a different territorial impact, even more widening the divide between the richer and export-oriented economies of centre-northern regions and the weaker southern economies. In the latter, unemployment rates doubled from 8% in 1977 to 17.2% in 2012, registering a far higher increase than the centre and north of the country – respectively, from 5.5% to 9.5% and from 5.8% to 7.4% (ISTAT, 2013). In Brindisi, the situation was particularly dire in 2011, as the national census registered 20,3% of unemployment, higher than the regional rate (17,3%) and almost double the national rate (11.4%). In 2015, the job centres recorded that 30% of the active population was in search of employment. Likewise, the combination of welfare retrenchment and decentralisation intensified the territorial inequalities in terms of welfare provisions – from social assistance to health care (Pusceddu, 2020). In this context, the environmental question provided the connecting thread to contest the extractivist logic of pro-growth policies of large-scale industrial infrastructures emerging as a solution to economic crisis, thus, addressing broader issues of power, inequality and social reproduction.

In Brindisi, where new environmental mobilisations started taking place in the late 2000s, the unifying element of different social and political platforms was the successful campaign for the national referendum against the privatisation of water resource management in June 2011 (Carrozza & Fantini, 2016). The cooperation and organisational endeavours that sustained the campaign found a new output in the creation of the platform Brindisi Bene Comune (BBC henceforth), which was born as a 'container' – as described by activists – of different struggles around the commons, where environmental and health issues held a central position. Since 2012 BBC have run three mayoral elections, managing to elect one leading figure as mayor in

2018, after joining a broader coalition of centre-left parties. This achievement, not devoid of internal tensions leading to ruptures and separations of early activists, can be seen as a telling outcome of the politicization and articulation of environmental issues with broader issues of justice, equality and the commons. In the next section, I provide a description of the experience and perception of dispossession that underpinned the politicisation of environmental issues.

Sacrifice Zone

The Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) is a pipeline built across three countries: Greece, Albania and Italy. It is part of the Southern Gas Corridor, a major energy infrastructure sponsored by European institutions that is intended to supply Western European countries with natural gas from the Caspian gas fields. Since the early 2010s, the National Energy Strategy began to envision the Italian peninsula as a southern European gas hub. This entailed the support of large-scale infrastructure projects to transport gas from north Africa, the Caucasus region and the Middle-east, thus making the country a fundamental high added value service provider and natural gas exporter (Ministero dello sviluppo economico, 2013, pp. 52-70). In 2011, the south-eastern edge of the Apulia region, sixty kilometres south of Brindisi, was chosen as the TAP final destination. This choice, however, remained a contentious matter even after the construction started in 2016. Local populations opposed the construction works, fearing damage to the local tourist industry and the rural landscape from coastal excavations and the uprooting of centuries-old olive trees. In the attempt to smooth the opposition, in March 2017 the regional governor of Apulia proposed shifting the pipeline further north, to the industrial area of Brindisi, arguing that the latter was "already damaged territory" (BrindisiReport, 2017). From an environmental justice perspective, Brindisi had been designated a 'sacrifice zone' – an area whose residents are exposed more than others to the environmental risks related to heavy industry, pollution, toxic waste, and contamination. Local environmentalist groups, echoing a broader common-sense discourse, often mobilised the view that the 'troubled history' of local industrialisation had made the area a suitable site for polluting plants and infrastructures, implying that the area had been sacrificed a long time before. When the proposal to shift the TAP connection to the industrial area of Brindisi was reiterated a year later, environmentalist groups denounced the recurring attempt to consider the area as the "natural garbage dump (*ricettacolo naturale*) for everything damaging and polluting" (Forum Ambiente, Salute e Sviluppo, 2018). Only ten years earlier, a massive protest had opposed another energy infrastructure project. In 2002 a subsidiary of British Gas (Brindisi LNG Ltd) obtained authorisation for the construction of a regasification terminal in the port of Brindisi. The project was opposed by the mobilisation of civic and environmental associations, local institutions and even the left-leaning union confederation *CGIL* (Italian General Confederation of Labour). The project was first interrupted by a corruption scandal in 2007 and eventually abandoned in 2012.

Between the two episodes – the demonstrations against the LNG terminal and the indignation over the governor's proposal to shift the TAP project to Brindisi – a new wave of activism revamped protests against the two most representative industries: the coal-fired power station, among the twenty most polluting industrial facilities in Europe and the most polluting in Italy (European Environment Agency, 2011, p. 25), and the petrochemical complex, respectively owned by the Enel electricity company and Eni oil company, two corporations under public control. Behind the straightforward demand for stopping existing plants carrying on polluting, there was an attempt to articulate a "liberation narrative" (Barca, 2014) that aimed at moving forward from the oil- and coal-based heavy industrialisation 'imposed' on the city in the early 1960s. In spite of no clear outline of alternative economic projects, besides generic references to sustainability and the often-nostalgic idealisation of the pre-industrial past, the narrative promoted expressed the resolute demand for a "diverse economy" (Gibson-Graham, 2006), freed from subordination of the region to the demands of high-impact industrial production and the asymmetrical power relations that big corporations entailed and reproduced locally. The "coal moment" in local mobilisations – as recalled by a leader of the movement – sustained the rise of a new "living environmentalism" (Di Chiro, 2008), as a result of which people became more responsive to environmental campaigns when these address the consequences of heavy industrial production for everyday life. As the same leading figure put it: "There was a moment [in 2009–10]

when everyone, even those not taking part in demonstrations and mobilisations, everyone in the city was talking about coal" (personal communication, November 20, 2016).

Inside the mobilisations of a movement soon to be identified as *No al Carbone* (No to Coal; NAC hereafter; Ravenda, 2018), in 2012 a group of women started presenting themselves as *Mamme No al Carbone* (Mothers against Coal). The group was soon renamed *Red Stroller*, which "symbolises the protection of children, red because of our alarm for their health put at risk […] by the smokestack" (Silvestro, 2014, p. 29). The novelty of their positioning was not solely marked by the "motherly" call for the protection of children's health – which in fact mobilised a rather conventional gender role (Bonatti, 2015). They aimed at politicising life through the concrete elaboration of new strategies of communication and interaction that were able to reach social contexts otherwise cut off from mobilisations, or where people were even suspicious of environmentalist groups or unsympathetic towards the 'green' imaginaries of the post-fossil fuel transition perceived as a threat to the local economy.

Besides launching public initiatives, the *Red Stroller* activists managed to organise meetings in parish churches, meetings through children's school networks, in apartment buildings and everywhere that environmentalism and political activism might be met with mistrust. Overall, they reached a fraction of the female working-class population that was receptive to a discourse that posed the industrial question in terms of the threat to their children's health. The appeal to 'motherly' protection mobilised the value of meta-industrial labour to unravel the exploitative relationships that subordinated social reproduction to the benefit of corporate interests.

The *Red Stroller* movement was born out of a group of women who were already active in the newly formed BBC platform, which stood in the mayoral elections in 2012. According to an activist, the *Red Stroller* was also a way to overcome the suspicion they felt was aroused when they presented themselves as members of a political group, and hence was a way to broaden the basis of their mobilisations. Following the *Red Stroller* group's participation in successful campaigns for "concrete things", such as the national referendum against the privatisation of water resource management (2011) and the petition demanding an epidemiological study to assess the effect of the population's exposure to industrial pollution (2012), its strategy aimed at "enlarging the struggle" (*ingrandire la lotta*) by also reaching people who considered heavy industries as important job providers (personal communication, November 2, 2015). To address this livelihood dilemma in a context characterised by structurally high rates of unemployment, where even a precarious job in subcontracted plant maintenance work could represent a valuable source of income, was a difficult task. The job blackmail argument was hard to deal with in the attempt to articulate a liberation narrative that questioned the trade-off between work and health as well as the ideological dichotomy between labour and the environment (Curcio, 2014); a narrative that was also capable of rephrasing the relationship between production and reproduction through a patient and careful "politics of articulation" based on the intersection of socio-environmental and reproductive issues (Di Chiro, 2008). This is what the *Red Stroller* pursued by envisioning the possibility of an uncompromising and yet persuasive narrative which aimed at asserting the primacy of reproduction over the imperative of production at any cost, and over the financial imperatives driving austerity cuts of social spending, with severe consequences on local welfare provisions, and health care overall. Their initiatives, then, were not only aimed at campaigning on the effects of industrial pollution but also addressed a broader range of reproductive concerns, such as medical assistance, welfare provisions and services within a more general discourse of collective well-being. The experience of the *Red Stroller* provides an empirical illustration of how the sphere of reproduction became a privileged arena for environmentally oriented value struggles.

Liberation Narratives

A founding member of the Red Stroller explained how her mother's death of cancer triggered her environmentalist commitment, reminding how the loss of a beloved person was a common motivation for many activists (Silvestro, 2014; also Ravenda, 2018, pp. 74–77). In spite of the fact that the protection of health in the workplace had been a central demand of industrial workers' struggles, the environmental impact of industrial activities *outside* the factory became gradually and increasingly spoken about only in the 1990s.

The increasing number of cases of cancer among the first generation of workers in the petrochemical factory, who were then retiring, drew attention to the consequences of noxious substances and working conditions in the petrochemical area. In the mid-1990s, investigations into the executives of the leading national chemical companies, charged with the death of 157 workers and environmental disasters in the petrochemical area of Porto Marghera (Venice), were extended to Brindisi after a retired worker – who was diagnosed with cancer – reported the working conditions in the Brindisi plant to the Venetian judiciary. Investigations in Brindisi were eventually dismissed because the causal link between the workers' death and their exposure to noxious substances in the industrial production process (in particular the VCM – vinyl chloride monomer) was not acknowledged.[2] Finally, in 1997 Brindisi was included among the Sites of National Interest (SIN – Siti di interesse nazionale) – that is, contaminated areas in urgent need of site clearance and soil decontamination (Legislative Decree 22/1997).

After the new power station entered full operation in the mid1990s, concerns about the consequences of industrial emissions began to shape explanations for the death of cancer of people who had never entered the factory. This "intimate inventory" of death, illness and toxicity (Vasudevan, 2019), in addition to the stories of relatives, neighbours and friends who contracted cancer after working in the petrochemical factory, contributed to enhancing the perception of the "slow violence" that exposure to polluting emissions entailed (Nixon 2011). Institutional responses were slower than popular epidemiologies in addressing the issue and the first official reports were released only in the early 2010s (Loiacono et al., 2012), providing evidence of the high rate of cancer and respiratory diseases among the population, above the regional and national averages (Bauleo al., 2017; Mangia et al., 2015; Portaluri, 2012).

By that time, the increasing evidence of the noxious effects of industrial emissions had further complicated the relationship between industrial workers and environmentalist groups. The dispute around coal started to redefine environmentalist narratives, not only *outside* the factory but *against* the factory, providing an indication of the changing relationship between the factory and the city. During the difficult years of industrial restructuring in the early 1980s, massive demonstrations supported factory workers in defence of their jobs. Two decades later, thousands of people took to the streets to oppose the construction of a regasification terminal and to protest against air pollution from industrial facilities, thus intensifying the friction between environmentalists and workers and their unions. This was made more acute by decades of corporate restructuring and workforce downsizing (Greco, 2002, pp. 106–129). The loss of bargaining power pushed unions closer to corporate positions, while increased outsourcing widened the gap between permanent workers and the precarious workforce in the subcontracting companies. In spite of this and the growing mistrust of the main union confederations, blamed for gaining power from their brokering position with the companies, workers often maintained cautious attitudes, thus finding themselves forcibly silenced with regard to unsafe working conditions (e.g., labour protections, presence of asbestos, etc.). The safeguarding of jobs overcame any other concern. A tacit consensus took shape around the assumption that environmental issues were a technological problem that had to be tackled with technological solutions. The union leaders I interviewed expressed this position by pitting workers' real environmentalism, based on their direct experience and knowledge of the industrial production process, against the alarmist slogans of the *ambientalisti*, who did not have any realistic idea of 'how things work' and that in the long run could harm the local economy by scaring away potential investors (Russell, 2018). By drawing this line between experts and lay people, they were reasserting the socially meaningful boundary between the factory and the city, and the value relations implicit in the separation of the skilled domain of production from the everyday contexts of reproduction – what Salleh (2010) conceptualises as the meta-industrial labour.

The reproductive concerns underpinning the environmentalist movement – and the *Red Stroller* in particular – questioned that separation, addressing the thick web of interconnections between production and reproduction. This entailed a revaluation project that reversed the order of priorities, claiming non-negotiable limits to the demands of industrial production. The call for a fair and sustainable nexus of production and reproduction, one that was not detrimental to life, resonated with concerns expressed privately by workers. For instance, some metal-mechanical workers I interviewed complained about the presence of asbestos along the pipeline paths in the petrochemical area, recalling how they brought asbestos home with their work overalls, which they unknowingly put in the washing machine along with their children's clothes (see Vasudevan, 2019, p. 9). A similar image of the factory spilling out noxious substances into the reproductive

sphere, harming the most vulnerable beings had been mobilised also by the Red Stroller in a successful communication campaign in collaboration with Greenpeace at the start of a trial of Enel power plant managers in 2012 (Ravenda, 2018, pp. 101-146), which involved allegations of “soiling” (*imbrattamento*) the cultivated fields alongside the conveyor belt transporting coal from the docks. Big billboards placed along the main streets portrayed children near the smokestacks, with the caption: “The coal-fired power plants of your city have new filters: the lungs of [child name]” (Gioia, 2012). This message conveyed a powerful counter-discourse to the technical expertise claimed by workers’ organisations and corporate executives, rephrasing the environmental issue in terms of caring for the defenceless children.

The *Red Stroller* articulated their discourse within the broader struggle for reducing polluting emissions, with the purpose of bringing into the open the silenced anxieties regarding environmental injustice as directly experienced by workers and their households. In doing so, they opted for a less aggressive and confrontational type of activism, which was nonetheless rigorous in addressing the dangers polluting industrial facilities posed for reproduction. Pointing to a straightforward and well-informed discourse on the effects of pollutants on children's health, they aimed at widening the front against industrial pollution – ‘to enlarge the struggle’ – without creating further cleavages among working-class people. Making visible distinctive valuation practices in the face of the perceived inevitability of the labour–health trade-off – a framework in which health, environment and the children’s vulnerable existence are not negotiable – they were also trying to envision and pursue a collective revaluation project (Collins, 2017) capable of redefining value relations to the benefit of social reproduction and long-term collective well-being; “a project of mutual creation” (Graeber, 2013) that aimed at building broader alliances (Russell, 2018) to break the logics of waste and devaluation that turned the environment *and* social reproduction as the ‘cheap nature’ of capitalist development.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have contextualised the escalation of environmental conflict in the framework of austerity politics, showing how the long-lasting conflict around heavy industrialisation and its socio-environmental legacy in Brindisi provided the link to build more articulated struggles for the commons. Thinking through value as a meaningful perspective to address the production and contestation of capitalist natures, I have proposed the political ecologies of value to frame contestation *and* the attempt to reconfigure the value relations that shaped the local history of environmental dispossession, hence advocating “the value of use” for all against capitalist interests that privilege the private “value of exchange” (Della Porta et al., 2019). This attempt mobilised the idioms of death and toxicity that were widely part of local intimate experiences, in order to disrupt the market-minded equivalence between lives and profits and to claim back dignity against the unfair system of political domination and economic production.

As I have detailed in the previous sections, the environmental conflict was the outcome of a problematic history of industrialisation, shaped by powerful actors – from the state to national oil and energy monopolies, that left a lasting imprint on local socio-ecological relations. However, it was not only a temporal coincidence that environmental conflict escalated during the austerity crisis. The latter’s political and socio-economic consequences acted as the trigger that made popular discontent coalesce around the most proximate concerns, to gradually expand the goal of the protest to wider issues of inequality and justice, as these concretely appeared in the form of subordination to the extractive demands of corporate and political powers (see Barca & Leonardi, 2016, for the nearby case of Taranto). The increased visibility of *LULU*s movements during the past decade confirms how grassroots politics emerged against “the growth machine” fuelled by public spending cuts and growing territorial competition for the attraction of private investments pursuit by local political an entrepreneurial elite (Della Porta et al., 2019, pp. 480-481). I argue that socio-environmental conflicts have played an important function to the extent they managed to catalyse discontent and give it a political shape. The lack of relevant anti-austerity protests in Italy did not just mean the falling back of protests to localised conflicts, hence losing sight of the broader picture; on the contrary, localised conflicts provided the proper link for articulating (and imagining) protests at various scales and in wider

contexts. These conflicts were also capable of bringing together broad coalitions of various social actors (from precarious workers to self-employed and impoverished low-middle classes) who had been experiencing the disenfranchising effects of the economic crisis and the acute consequences of austerity (Della Porta, 2015). In many cases, environmental struggles provided the connecting thread to articulate wider discourses of inequality and justice, territorially defined but in connection with multi-level networks linking similar territorial struggles. Important nation-wide mobilisations such as the water movements contributed to recast environmental conflicts through the language of the commons, hence creating new arenas for locally organised political endeavours (Muehlebach, 2018).

There is hardly one single reason that can explain why Italy did not witness similar mass mobilisations as in Spain or Greece. As already pointed out, since the 1990s Italy has undergone a persistent fiscal austerity programme, and the largest privatisation plan was completed by the end of that decade, so that austerity enhanced continuities instead of marking ruptures. That is not to say that the austerity measures implemented in the aftermath of the financial crisis were without consequences (on the contrary!) but for various reasons (e.g., lower private debt) they did not have the same immediate consequences as in Spain or Greece, where austerity had a truly destabilising effect. Moreover, popular discontent and widespread disappointment with the political establishment were not met by any relevant organising political force, with the exception of the newly founded Five Stars Movement, which nonetheless played a conservative role, actually defusing discontent.

These two aspects help us trace the link between austerity and the re-awakening of the environmental conflict in Brindisi. As I have described in the previous sections, local environmentalism experienced the shift from the labour environmentalism of blue-collar workers to the heterogeneous environmentalism that started flourishing outside the factory in the 1980s. While this shift echoed the wider transformation of the international ecological movement, in Brindisi it unfolded around the construction of new industrial energy infrastructures in the 1980s, that polarised workers and environmentalists on two opposite fronts. In the late 2000s the conflict escalated. This time, a new generation of activists took a leading role in the mobilisations, managing to coalesce different subjects and to build a recognisable framework for publicly exposing the widespread concerns around the effect of industrial air pollution. This new mobilisation created also a new space for openly questioning the relationships between the city and the corporate powers of industrial conglomerates, adopting a resolute stance that claimed the shutdown and dismantling of the main polluting industries. Although the imaginaries of the post-industrial transition were never too clear, the endeavours to create new collaborative and cooperative ventures were aimed at building through practice new possibilities for the future. This chapter provided a closer examination of the *Red Stroller* as one articulation of this wider movement, and, particularly, as the more explicit articulation of the fundamental reproductive dimension of environmental struggles. In the midst of austerity and resurgent pro-growth discourses, the *Red Stroller* raised its voice to counteract the devaluation and marginalisation of meta-industrial labour's essential role in sustaining the reproduction of life and its ecological integrity.

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Endnotes

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2 On the mortality rate among workers exposed to VCM in Brindisi, where the production of VCM was definitively suspended in 1999, see Portaluri (2012, p. 7).