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Southern Chronicles: The Political Ecology of Class in the Italian Industrial Periphery

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Abstract

This article focuses on class as a central concept for analyzing the common ground of labor and environmental struggles. Through the examination of the frictions between industrial workers and environmentalists in Brindisi, an industrial city in the Italian South, the article unravels the socio-ecological dilemmas underlying their valuation frameworks. It addresses the job blackmail as a central element of the framework through which workers and environmentalists understand the contradictory forces at work in the local socio-ecological crisis. The article looks at the critical junctions that underpin the making of the local working class. As concrete determinations of capitalist socio-ecological contradictions, these junctions constitute the focus for the political ecology of class pursued in this article. To illuminate the place-bound experience of these contradictions, the article looks at the tension between value and values in shaping the experience of the work–environment nexus. Assuming the centrality of class for labor and environmental struggles, the article argues for the re-articulation of the fields of workers and environmentalists as a crucial step towards the definition of a common emancipatory socio-ecological project.

Keywords: class, environment, Italy, valuation, work

Work, Environment and Class

In April 2014, under a light spring rain, two groups of demonstrators were rallying outside a shut-down power station on the outskirts of Brindisi, an industrial city in

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southern Italy.[1] The power plant was built by the national electricity company Enel in the 1960s, shortly after the nationalization of the energy sector in 1962. Initially operated with fuel oil, it was converted to coal in 1979. According to an agreement between Enel and the municipality, the power plant had to be dismantled in the late 1990s, following the construction and full operation of a second coal-fired power facility. However, the dismantling never occurred and the original power station – then known as Brindisi Nord to be distinguished from the new plant built further South – was privatized in the early 2000s. Power generation was halted in 2012, with the drop in energy demand following the 2008 financial crisis. The 250 workers were put under the protection of the wage guarantee fund and job security agreements. The company had submitted a new industrial plan to the public authorities to revamp the plant as a waste-to-energy facility. Workers and unions were hoping for a positive evaluation of the project. Environmentalist groups, on the contrary, were pressing for its rejection and the definitive shutdown and dismantling of the plant. Workers and environmentalists were the two groups demonstrating outside the facility. The local press reported: "On one side the workers' banner. On the other side that of environmentalist associations. Demands on environment and labor confronted each other in two different demonstrations at the gates of the power station."[2] Workers and environmentalists were thus identified as the bearers of two distinct and opposing demands – that of environment (*ambiente*) and that of labor (*lavoro*). However, the workers' and unions' banner claimed that "labor and the environment can be reconciled." In their public statement, they emphasized how new technologies would guarantee environmentally

[1] This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Brindisi between 2015 and 2016 (15 months). First-hand data were collected through semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and extended observation among working-class households, unions, and environmentalist groups.

[2] See Edipower: davanti ai cancelli le istanze di operai e associazioni ambientaliste. *BrindisiReport*, 24 April 2014.

sustainable energy production. Environmentalists were less prone to reconciliation and their banner was unequivocal: "Close and remediate."

This episode reproduces a rather common – even stereotypical (White 1996) – opposition between labor and the environment. Yet, environmental historians have drawn attention to the more complicated ways in which work and environment are mutually constituted, and how class, gender, ethnicity, and "race" mediate the complexity of this relationship in the uneven articulations of capital accumulation (Barca 2014; Montrie 2008). Looking at the variations of the work–environment relationship across industrial societies, environmental historians have also highlighted the seminal role of industrial workers in raising ecological awareness about air pollution or unsafe working conditions (Dewey 1991). Contributing to undermining the labor–environment dichotomy, this scholarship has emphasized the importance of "working-class environmentalism" in the face of the universalist claims stemming from mainstream bourgeois environmentalism (Barca 2012). Thinking through this critical reappraisal of work–environment relationships in industrial societies, this article addresses the conflict between industrial workers and environmentalist groups in the Italian South. My aim is to contribute to discussing the "common ground" (Obach 2004) of labor and environmental struggles. The political ecology of class pursued in this article unravels the socio-ecological dilemmas, articulations and contradictions underlying the conflicting frameworks sketched out above. Assuming the centrality of class for labor and environmental struggles (Barca and Leonardi 2018), this article maintains that the re-articulation of the fields of workers and environmentalists beyond the dichotomous oppositional scheme is a necessary step towards the definition of a common emancipatory socio-ecological project aimed at "mending the breach between labour and nature" (Uzzel and Räthzel 2013).

Drawing on Thompson's approach to "the making of" the English working class, the concept of class mobilized in this article is relational and processual (Thompson 1963). However, rather than focusing on the making of the working class, I also look at the junctions that underpin its metamorphosis. As concrete determinations of capitalist socio-ecological contradictions, these junctions constitute the focus for the political ecology of class pursued in this article. The historically specific intersection of production and reproduction provides the "critical junction" (Kalb 2015) that helps frame how the working class is situated in larger fields of forces, and how the uneven geography of power and accumulation shape the local configuration of value – the ways capitalist value relations unfold in that locale and thus produce "concrete" configurations of class and labor (Ekers 2015; Wolf 1982). Socio-ecological conflicts reveal how the class geographies that emerge within labor and environmental struggles are bundled both with global forces and with the locally specific, historically constituted configurations of their becoming (Gibson-Graham 2006), such as the case of the southern Italian space.

Brindisi is a city of 86,000 inhabitants along the south-eastern Italian coastline and is home to large-scale energy and petrochemical facilities.[3] The 1981 National Energy Plan – a response to the energy crisis of the 1970s – included the project of a second power station in Brindisi, which would be named Federico II. The new plant aimed also at compensating the city for the job losses that followed the crisis and restructuring of the national chemical sector. In Brindisi the situation was made particularly problematic by a major industrial accident in 1977. Even so, the power plant project triggered various conflicts: between local authorities and the central state; between the environmentalist movement and the powerful national electricity company;

[3] The industrial area also includes metal-mechanical production, aeronautics, pharmaceuticals, LPG storage facilities, waste disposal plants and a sugar refinery.

between supporters (political parties, workers and unions) and opponents of the project. The latter made up a heterogeneous front that included the local Catholic church, civic and environmentalist associations, groups of the extra-parliamentary Left and the anti-nuclear movement (Prato 1993). As soon as construction was under way, in the mid-1980s, the conflict escalated, leading to the first significant clash between industrial workers and environmentalist groups. Subsequently, in the late 1980s, Brindisi was classified by national authorities as a "high environmental risk area" (Portaluri 2012). This was the legacy of persistent industrial pollution, particularly in the petrochemical area. In these circumstances, the dispute over the Federico II power plant became the main ground for the refusal of heavy industries and large-scale energy production, in ways that resonated with wider post-oil shock debates on energy politics (Franquesa 2018, 57–60; Nebbia 2015; Papa 2020). After two decades, in the early 2010s, the city was shaken by a new upsurge of environmentalist mobilizations, involving a new generation of activists who identified with the motto "no to coal" (*No al Carbone* – NAC henceforth).

Explanations of the defeat of the early environmentalist movement against the power plant project emphasize job blackmail (*ricatto occupazionale*). In the dire situation characterized by job losses, declining employment opportunities in the industrial sector and chronically high rates of unemployment, the prospect of new jobs made people unwilling to understand the environmental risk entailed in the acceptance of a new coal-based plant (Ravenda 2018, 65–66). As a matter of fact, the range of options was further narrowed by the power relations in place, with the building of the plant being enforced by the state, which presented industrialization as the only available choice – in fact, not a choice at all. The overall socio-economic situation was described in contemporary media commentary as decisive; the livelihood dilemma faced by the

local working class was outlined and recast ideologically through the oppositional framing of jobs and environment. Workers and unions convincingly endorsed the new project as an emergency plan for the recovery of the local economy, for which the preservation of industrial production was regarded as imperative.

Despite the differences in their positioning, workers and environmentalists articulated their views through the lens of the job blackmail as *the* individual and collective livelihood dilemma, stemming from the socio-ecological contradictions between capitalist production and social reproduction. To illuminate the place-bound experience of these contradictions, I look at the tension and interaction between value and values in shaping the local experience of the work–environment nexus. In the following two sections, I illustrate two examples of workers' and environmentalists' valuation frameworks (Martinez-Alier 2002, 2009) and provide a brief historical reconstruction of how the work–environment relationship was recast through the job blackmail framework.

Valuation Frameworks

This article builds upon recent anthropological perspectives that critically address the articulation of value and values (as worth) in the material and semiotic complexities of social reproduction (Collins 2017; Franquesa 2018; Graeber 2001, 2013; Kalb 2017; Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Skeggs 2014; Turner 2008). Huber (2017, 41) observed that "many debates about nature and value conflate two distinct meanings of value," suggesting that value should be rigorously clarified, hence avoiding the ambiguous back-and-forth between capitalist value and cultural constructions of values. This critical reminder warns us about the analytical perils surrounding the uses of "value," which is indeed "a word with innumerable meanings" (Collins 2017, 6). Mindful of this

cautionary note, my aim is to examine the contradictory articulation of value and values to make sense of the ways working people cope with the socio-ecological contradictions in which they live, ensuing from the tension between everyday livelihood practices and the struggle for a better future. Examining the complex intertwining of value and values is also integral to the endeavor of outlining what the “struggle for use value” could look like (Kovel 2000). Framing the production and contestation of capitalist natures through the lens of value (Kenney-Lazar and Kay 2017), my analysis builds upon the relational dimension of capitalist value and its uneven articulation with values in the reproduction of socio-ecological relations. The contradiction between use value and exchange value lies at the core of the problem. I explore this contradiction 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 (Katz 2001). These dilemmas are also reflected in the tension between securing a livelihood and concerns over the ecological integrity underlying ideas of human well-being. The case examined in this article points to job blackmail as a fundamental element in understanding the socio-ecological dilemma (jobs vs environment), while workers and environmentalists exemplify two conflicting responses to that dilemma. The clash between these conflicting responses can be conceptualized as a valuation conflict (Martinez-Alier 2002, 2009) that reflects different positions in relation to heavy industry in the framing of socio-ecological issues at the local level. For a better illustration of the framework I am mobilizing, I need to briefly return to the frictions between workers and environmentalists, and to the contested case of the shut-down power plant mentioned at the beginning of the article, to ethnographically illustrate the specific views from each side and the valuation frameworks that sustained them.

One year after the demonstration, the situation was unchanged. Cosimo,[4] a plant technician in his early 50s, was at risk of being transferred far away to other facilities if the industrial plan was rejected. Growing up in a working-class family, Cosimo ended up working in the same power plant where his father was employed – until the latter died of stomach cancer in his 50s. Cosimo thought that the waste-to-energy conversion plan was the best option for safeguarding jobs *and* the environment. He was confident that the available technologies provided high safety standards and that – at the same time – the incinerator would be the solution to the recurrent problem of waste disposal. He was rather disappointed with the lack of understanding in the city and the "unmotivated" fears over the reactivation of the plant. He blamed "environmentalist propaganda" for circulating distorted accounts about the whole project, stirring up suspicious attitudes towards plant workers, who were treated like "plague spreaders" (*untori*). Cosimo's view about the benefits of new technologies and the lack of knowledge among the *ambientalisti* was shared by many other workers and union leaders I interviewed. Though acknowledging the noxious impact of industrial activities in the past – especially in the early years (1960s) of petrochemical production – they were assertive in defending the industrial facilities as the backbone of the local economy and its future. In their valuation framework, technological innovations of the production process were crucial, constituting the linchpin of improved work–environment relationships.

Teodoro, an activist of the NAC movement, was one of my first contacts in Brindisi. To introduce me to the problematic environmental situation of the city and so I could see it "like a protester" (Armiero 2009), in early 2015 he led me on a tour across the extended industrial area, which replicated the *Veleni tour* (Poisons tour), a "toxic

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

tourism" initiative (Pezzullo 2003) organized by the movement in the recent past (No al Carbone Brindisi 2015). We set out along the industrial docks where coal is unloaded and made our first stop in front of the old power plant, Brindisi Nord, which Teodoro described as "an old coffee machine," explaining that the only desirable solution was to dismantle the plant. Then we drove along the petrochemical area, reaching a wide contaminated landfill facing the Adriatic coastline. The tour ended in front of the Federico II power plant, after a 10 km ride along the conveyor belt, built across cultivated fields to transport coal from the docks to the plant. There we made our last stop, paying a visit to a farmer's house, just a few hundred meters from the plant. We were welcomed by Maria, a combative woman affected with thyroid cancer. She was among those farmers who sued Enel for the thick coal layer on their cultivated fields along the conveyor belt (Ravenda 2018, 105–111). The NAC movement supported the farmers in the lawsuit, thus reinvigorating the alliance between activists and farmers that dated back to the 1980s contestations over construction of the plant. For the movement, the farmers epitomized the defenders of the "natural economic vocation" of the area, marginalized by the destructive force of the "imposed" heavy industrialization. In this view, the industrialization process appropriated natural and social resources (e.g. peasants and fishermen turned into factory workers) through the devaluation of people's livelihoods. For Teodoro and his mates, reversing the process was a way to make these livelihoods worth again and being able to "plan the destiny of the territory" was a necessary precondition for this. Reversing industrialization was a way of restoring use values.

Teodoro was a man in his mid-30s who had spent years away from Brindisi. Benefiting from a special regional fund for young entrepreneurs, he returned with a university degree and started a cooperative with the aim of developing sustainable

tourism in the area. He considered the local industrialization process a socio-environmental failure and struggled to build a new narrative of alternative economy. Other members of NAC shared his trajectory, although they did not represent the bulk of the movement, which was also formed by factory workers, self-employed, service workers and schoolteachers. In sum, it was not the expression of mainstream middle-class environmentalism but gave voice to a broader spectrum of social figures representative of the heterogeneous metamorphosis of the local working class. In their attempt to re-envision the social and material landscape of the area, these activists promoted a series of "persuasive images" (Ravenda 2018, 86) through a careful communicative campaign in which nostalgia for the pre-industrial past and the longing for the post-industrial future were deeply interrelated and mutually constituted.

Within the perspective outlined in this article, Cosimo and Teodoro articulate two widespread valuation frameworks at work in the local arena: one that defends the work-environment nexus underlying the socio-industrial complex (capital intensive industries employing increasingly skilled labor); another that identifies the latter as *the* problem (capital intensive industries devouring human and environmental resources). In the following sections, I provide a short historical analysis that helps contextualize working-class formation and the rise of environmental struggles within the local configuration of value. The analysis highlights how the spatial development of Italian capitalism combined the appropriation of "cheap nature" (Moore 2015) with the production of the underdeveloped "other" (Ferrari Bravo and Serafini 2007; Gramsci 1957). The logic of cheapness shaped the moralities of job blackmail, which became a key element in the ways people understand the contradictory forces at work in the local socio-ecological crisis.

Cheap South

Endowed with a well-protected harbor in the lower Adriatic Sea, historically Brindisi owed much to its strategic position on the way to the East. During the 19th century, within the general infrastructural reorganization of the peninsula, the Brindisi area benefited from land reclamation projects, construction of a more functional road network and the operation of the railway connection to the northern regions (from 1864). Changes in the land tenure regime and the rise of agricultural prices in the international market stimulated the formation of a dynamic landed bourgeoisie. The widespread use of tenancy contracts with rent payment in money favored small and medium investments from the local petty bourgeoisie, which, along with foreign capital investment, played an active role in the agrarian transformation of the region – particularly towards wine production. Agriculture development also benefited from the recovery of port activities, which made the harbor a transport hub for the eastern Mediterranean and beyond, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Alongside the agricultural sharecroppers and day laborers of the rural inland, the development of proto-industrial activities set the condition for the embryonic formation of the industrial working class. The appearance of mechanical workshops and shipyards for the maintenance of the vessels, and the creation of a seaplane base, laid the ground for the aeronautic industry that developed in the 1930s. Mechanical factories and shop floors expanded rapidly as auxiliaries to the military industry, facing deep crises in both post-war periods.

In 1958 the main national chemical and mining company, Montecatini, announced the construction of the largest ever Italian petrochemical complex in the newly created area of industrial development. It was a massive investment sustained by

state policies for the development of southern regions (Law of 29 July 1957, n. 643). To attract private investment, the state contributed non-repayable funds and subsidized loans (Ginsborg 1990, 229). This large-scale program of industrialization was launched in 1957 through the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, a special board created in 1950 to manage the "extraordinary state intervention" in the South, the "underdevelopment" of which lay at the core of the Southern Question debate (Gramsci 1957; Schneider 1998). This intervention aimed at realizing a vast program of infrastructure construction, which could absorb the large mass of labor surplus and – along with mass migration to the industrial heartlands of northern Italy and Europe (Ginsborg 1990, 217–229) – create the conditions for defusing the post-war peasant social unrest (Arrighi and Piselli 1987). This project of modernization was also underpinned by a narrative of backwardness, immobility, and emptiness – a narrative of "waste" in the sense pointed out by Gidwani (2012), as antithesis of capitalist value, through which the South was recast as a greenfield site open to industrial capitalist valuing processes (Ferrari Bravo and Serafini 2007). This narrative followed on from the history of racialization and marginalization of Italian southerners (Forgacs 2014), which contributed to the production and appropriation of the South as the location of an undervalued "cheap nature" (Moore 2015).

Brindisi provided favorable conditions for the new petrochemical project: a safe coastline, abundance of space and railway connections. In addition, the cost of labor in the province was one of the lowest in Italy at the time, according to the salary zone system that was abolished only later (in 1969), after intense workers' struggles. Commonly known as *gabbie salariali*, the salary zone was an indexed system of wage determination based on parameters such as the cost of living, which corresponded to different salary zones (0–6 in 1961). Although the salary zones were not territorially

defined, the zones with lower indexes corresponded mostly to southern regions. The petrochemical complex was planned for the large-scale commercial production of polypropylene, following the discoveries of the chemist and Nobel laureate Giulio Natta, whose research the company had helped finance. The petrochemical factory was also presented as the ground zero of industrial modernity in Brindisi: a forward-looking industry for a developing region. “Like a stone thrown in a pond” – as the prime minister, Antonio Segni, put it at the first stone placing ceremony – the petrochemical plant would generate multiple “circles of wellbeing” (Russo 1964, 114). His words echoed the growth pole theory of development that oriented the state-driven strategy for the programmed industrialization. The economist François Perroux, who developed the theory in the 1950s, described growth poles as abstract economic spaces and not geographic ones. This fundamental difference disappeared in Italian post-Second World War policymaking, and the growth poles acquired a prominently geographic (and specifically southern) significance. According to a trickle-down logic, the development poles were supposed to spark the socio-economic transformation of southern regions (Ginsborg 1990, 229–231).

Industrial polarization was paralleled by territorial processes of demographic polarization taking place all over the South. In fact, while population mobility towards the industrial North marked the main axis of intra-national mobility, intra-regional mobility had a similarly relevant impact in reshaping the territorial distribution of the workforce, which became increasingly drawn to the main towns and cities along the coast, including the ones targeted by the industrialization process. This double vector of labor force mobility – nationally, along the South–North axis, and regionally, from the poor hilly countryside toward the urban areas along the coast – resulted in a considerable imbalance between the formation of surplus labor and the labor absorption

capacity of the emerging industrial economy (Mingione 1985). The limited growth of industrially related employment was counterbalanced by the expansion of the low-service sector, public employment, and informal economic practices (Mingione 1988), together with the upsurge in cigarette smuggling from the 1970s to the 1990s. The making of an industrial working class in the area was also shaped by political intermediation and dependency relations of clientelistic type (see Zinn 2019). The Catholic Church and the dominant political parties (e.g. Christian Democracy) played a crucial brokering role with the main industrial companies (Gribaudi 1980), nurturing stereotypes of industrial wage workers as a privileged category.

The 1970s oil crisis hit national basic chemical production. Layoffs in Brindisi were facilitated by the industrial accident in December 1977, in which three workers died. Two decades of corporate restructuring followed, with downsizing, outsourcing and the introduction of labor-saving technologies, which reduced the number of stable jobs while expanding the precarious workforce. As unions and workers started losing ground and bargaining power within the factory, they were pushed closer to corporate positions. As a result, the safeguarding of jobs at any cost overcame all concerns, when, in 1981, the National Energy Plan approved the location of a second power plant in Brindisi.

Power Regime and Ecological Contestation

The construction plan of the Federico II power plant required long and exhausting negotiations between local institutions, labor unions, entrepreneurs, national parties, and Enel representatives. One telling episode illustrates the contestations surrounding the project. In March 1984, the municipal government and Enel signed the agreement in a small hut within the construction site, the town hall being besieged by protesters

(Ravenda 2018, 60–64). The construction process was also marked by recurring frictions, judicial investigations, corruption scandals and interruptions, which inevitably provoked reaction from the workers. The contestation over the power plant project in the 1980s defined the framework of intra-communal environmentally related conflicts, in which job blackmail shaped the controversies and dilemmas that underlay the support of large-scale industrial projects. Unions and industrial workers strongly supported the project. By doing so they aligned themselves with what came to be described locally as the Party of Coal (Prato 1993, 176, 177), which grouped local elites and representatives of political parties (particularly Christian Democrats and Socialists) that saw the new construction as in their interests. Likewise, representatives of the Communist Party (PCI) supported the plant on the basis that it provided new job opportunities to the unemployed and the redundant workers of the petrochemical industry.

The conflict over coal was not limited to environmental issues – as in the case of the Comitato Contro l'Energia Padrona di Brindisi, which included militants of the extra-parliamentary Left (see Archivio Storico Benedetto Petrone n.d.). The struggle in fact targeted the material and power relations imposed through the powerful role of Enel. The monopolistic board of the energy sector, together with the other pillar of state-capitalism, Eni, the multinational oil and gas company that took over the petrochemical pole,[5] epitomized the combination of economic and political power that dominated the mixed economy (public-private), characterized by the deep penetration of state institutions into the working of national capitalism and the integration of large sectors of Italian capitalism into the functioning of state institutions (Barca 1997; Segreto 1998). In this respect, opposition to the new power plant embodied the struggle

[5] The Eni (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) was established in 1953 as an oil and gas public company. After its privatization in 1992, the state remained the major shareholder. The Brindisi petrochemical pole is managed through the chemical subsidiary Versalis.

against the pervasive power regime and political economy of Italian state-capitalism so deeply entangled in the industrial history of Brindisi. When the oligopolist energy sector was nationalized in 1962, private companies were generously compensated. Among them, Edison, one of the largest national private electricity companies, started investing its revenues in the oil industry until, in 1966, thanks to confidential operations in the high echelons of national finance, it reached an agreement to merge with the declining Montecatini. The new company, Montedison, turned out to be the main competitor of the public company Eni. The latter became increasingly involved in the Montedison oil business, until a deal in 1989 gave birth to a monopolistic venture between the two – the short-lived colossus Enimont. Later, the Montedison executives sold their stocks to Eni for the highest possible price, thanks to the systematic bribing of major political parties. In 1992, this was uncovered by a nationwide judicial investigation that involved the national political establishment in what is known as the huge corruption scandal Tangentopoli (literally, “Bribesville”).

The uneven power relations that developed through the industrial complexes, marked by strong dependency relations with state and corporate powers, and the brokering role of local entrepreneurs, politicians, and union leaders, did not go unchallenged. Contestation broke out again in 2002, when a subsidiary of British Gas (Brindisi LNG Ltd) obtained authorization for the construction of an LNG terminal, part of national and European Union infrastructure priority lists, the project being agreed upon by the British and Italian governments. In the early 2000s the city was going through a profound social crisis, exacerbated by the unemployment backlash from the end of the power plant construction works in the mid-1990s, and the socio-economic effects of the dismantling – through a massive police operation in 2000 – of the flourishing cigarette-smuggling economy, which had been a source of livelihood for

thousands of households in the city (Parliamentary Antimafia Commission 2001). The LNG terminal project, opposed by civic and environmental associations, local institutions and the union confederation CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labor), was first interrupted by a corruption scandal in 2007 and eventually abandoned in 2012. Nonetheless, it fostered conflict between those who hoped for a new plant construction cycle and those who claimed there were safer and fairer alternatives for the area. This mobilization is often recalled for being massive and heterogeneous, for ordinary citizens joined in. Despite the apparently de-politicized character of this mobilization mentioned in many accounts, it contributed to laying the foundations for boosting the new activism against coal in the early 2010s.

Between the highly politicized mobilizations of the 1980s and the commitment of "ordinary citizens" in the mid-2000s, other facts intervened to change the perception of industrial hazard. In 1997, an extended area surrounding the city was classified as Site of National Interest (SIN) – which identifies areas in urgent need of remediation and soil decontamination (Legislative Decree 22/1997). In 2000 a lawsuit was filed against Montedison and Eni executives, accusing them of causing an environmental disaster and of manslaughter through workers' exposure to toxic chlorine-based chemicals for plastics – polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and vinyl chloride monomer (VCM). The lawsuit followed on from judicial investigations into the petrochemical area of Porto Marghera (Venice) regarding the death from cancer of 157 workers there (Allen 2012). In Brindisi, investigations were dismissed in 2012 since the causal link between the workers' death and their exposure to chlorine-based chemicals in the workplace was not acknowledged.[6] Concerns about the effects of industrial pollution started to appear with the rise of cancer and respiratory diseases among the population, above the

[6] See Morti Petrolchimico il gip di Brindisi archivia l' inchiesta. *La Repubblica*, 4 June 2008.

regional and national rates.[7] Although the evidence for this has not gone unchallenged – especially on the part of the main companies – it has nevertheless created a more binding framework for the understanding of the value–nature nexus, rerouting the job blackmail issue along two main alternatives: on the one hand, technological innovations for the preservation of the industrial economy and the safeguarding of the population's health; on the other hand, the closure and dismantling of the polluting plants, and remediation, as necessary conditions for the preservation of the population's health and the transition toward a more environmentally sustainable economy.

Technological Fixes and Socio-Ecological Dilemmas

In July 2015 the petrochemical smokestacks triggered "an impressive flare-up" – the local press reported.[8] It was not an extraordinary event though. The emergency flares are important safety devices in refineries and petrochemical facilities, which burn excess hydrocarbon gases that cannot be recovered, thus preventing excess pressure building up in industrial equipment. Nonetheless, these flares had become a common – and yet disquieting – sight, provoking concerns among the local population. These feelings were formally expressed by environmentalist groups, who regularly requested oil companies to account for the flares. Together with coal emissions, the flares were among the most widely debated issues that related industrial activities to health and the environment. Flares were also a paradigmatic case of conflict over the truth of, and evidence for industrial air pollutants, their limits and measurement. When discussing

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[7] For an overview of scientific studies on the impact of industrial contamination in the area see Portaluri (2012). The epidemiological study by Forastiere et al. (2017) highlighted the anomalous incidence of cardiovascular, respiratory diseases and (certain types of) cancer, as well as congenital malformations.

[8] See Impressionante sfiammata dalla torcia del petrolchimico: cittadini in allarme *BrindisiReport*, 2 July 2015.

environmental issues with industrial workers or union leaders, the flares jumped into the discussion as an example of irrational fear. Salvatore, a former union leader of chemical workers, often remarked that "there is no danger at all" because the stacks were replaced in the 1990s with new modern technologies, some of them not even visible, such as the flares occurring at the ground-level in an earthen pit. On the same line of argument, for the provincial secretary of a chemical workers union, "pseudo-environmentalism" was a threat to the survival of industrial production, because its radicalism pushed away potential investors, as had happened in the recent past – alluding to the LNG terminal project.

These union leaders did not deny the environmental issues. On the contrary, they claimed to be judicious and well-informed environmentalists. Industrial workers were supposed to know "the problem" well from within, and they were always ready to recall the fundamental struggles waged by chemical workers in the past. Instead of questioning heavy industrialization, they argued that potential environmental issues had to be tackled with the proper technologies so that production (and jobs) could be ensured. Someone, among both workers and union delegates, admitted that emissions from coal burning were the problem, which could nonetheless be resolved by applying the necessary technologically advanced filters. Others were more supportive of the coal-to-gas plant conversion. Such disputes, in any case, turned environmental issues into an internal affair of the factory – a technical problem.

Not all of the industrial workers shared this view, showing how the technologizing of environmental issues could instead be a source of anxiety and alienation among workers. According to Fulvio, a professional welder in the petrochemical factory and a supporter of NAC, this tendency had a negative impact on the ways workers experienced the factory, as though they lived two separate and non-

communicating lives, one within and one outside the factory. This was apparently more common among the younger generation of workers, who were socialized to the disciplinary regime of outsourced responsibilities, which entailed a cautious silence on technological deficiencies. Others, like Mauro, a metal-mechanical worker and union delegate who was about to retire, clearly denounced the fact that "we always bring home the shit we find there" – alluding to the still relevant presence of asbestos along the pipeline paths. He recalled how, as a young worker, he unknowingly used to put his work overalls – "full of asbestos" – in the washing machine along with his children's clothes; a powerful sign of the ways the factory spilled out, "poisoning" the reproductive sphere. At the same time, Nicola showed understanding of younger workers' hesitation in confronting the company, given their often-precarious situation (Curcio 2014). Job blackmail remained a constant undertone. By the same token, workers were also concerned with the position of the local plants in wider corporate strategies.

Within this controversial picture of industrial workers' perceptions of their condition, a key item in the unions' demands was "investment" – not only from the companies (e.g. Eni and Enel) but also through direct state financial commitment with regard to soil reclamation programs. The latter are essential to provide better conditions for attracting potential investors unwilling to undertake by themselves the expensive remediation of industrial wastelands. Any possible opportunity, the unions argued, must be seized since in the uneven geography of accumulation the boundaries of job blackmail and everything it implies – from over-exploitation to unsafe working conditions – have become less and less negotiable in the face of unpredictable investment and disinvestment flows (Gill and Kasmir 2016). They faced the contradictions and dilemmas entailed by the fact that environmental policies are

conducive of capital and pushing companies to improve environmental protection may, in the long run, have positive effects on the profit rate. At the same time, environmental regulations that push toward technological innovation may have negative effects on the size of the workforce, which results in declining employment opportunities – hence intensifying the working people's socio-ecological dilemma.

Conclusion: Toward a Common Struggle?

In 2015, rumors about Eni selling its chemical productions to a US-based financial equity fund started to circulate. The news sparked alarm among workers and unions, because of the lack of guarantees on long-term investment plans and fears of being sold to a speculative financial operator that was not really interested in manufacturing. In 2017, the National Energy Strategy set among its targets the phasing out of coal by 2025,[9] anticipating important changes for the possible restructuring of the Brindisi energy industry, with a new stage of investment or disinvestment related to the shutdown *or* reconversion of the power plant. Eventually, Eni's financial schemes failed to materialize, while Enel confirmed the coal-to-gas plant conversion. Both episodes were being followed apprehensively by industrial workers and unions, who kept insisting on the necessity of a large-scale program of investments to relaunch the petrochemical area and guarantee its productive competitiveness.

Enel's announcement of the gradual phasing out of coal raised different expectations, ranging from demands for a conversion project (which would keep the plant in operation) to shut down and dismantling, followed by a long-term environmental remediation project and a plan to reuse the site. As a result, Enel's public announcement

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[9] See: https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/documenti/BROCHURE_ENG_SEN.PDF (accessed August 26 2019).

of the coal-to-gas conversion project provoked contrasting reactions among the environmentalist movement. The NAC contended that the dismantling of the plant was the only real basis for the socio-ecological transition. Another fraction of the environmentalist movement – which had originated from NAC – accepted the coal-to-gas conversion as a transitional phase towards a fully renewable power-generation system. The plant conversion project had already been a source of disagreement in the past, when NAC members contributed to launching, alongside other movements, a political platform under the label of the commons (Brindisi Bene Comune), thus starting a project that aimed at broadening the boundaries of their action. Whereas the NAC remained focused on the environmental struggle, the new political platform entered the institutional political arena in 2012, managing six years later to elect its own mayor – a former NAC leader. The latter, eventually, agreed to a reconversion plan that in the long run would evolve into a broader redevelopment project for the area. This decision increased the distance between Brindisi Bene Comune and the NAC movement but, at the same time, was positively welcomed by segments of labor unions as a collaborative step towards the long-term sustainable transition of the local industrial economy. This was also made possible by the wider scope of the political action, capable of integrating the environmental struggle into a larger social and political platform targeting the overall spatial organization of the city, and thus territorial marginalization and social inequality.

The ongoing transformative process in Brindisi is not devoid of friction and it is still too early to evaluate the outcome. Overall, this cannot be read outside of broader issues addressing the alliances between labor and environmental movements (Russell 2018), and the practical imagination around ways of reconfiguring environmental politics beyond the job vs environment discourse (Lawhon and McCreary 2020).

Indeed, the answers to the socio-ecological dilemma are inseparable from the modification of broader fields of forces and collective imaginaries, which are problematically articulated with the situations described in this article. The case examined here highlights the problematic coexistence of different ways of experiencing the work–environment nexus, which is ideologically trapped in the oppositional framework of jobs vs environment. The possibility of overcoming the friction between different visions and experiences of the work–environment nexus represents a key point for the emergence of a common vision capable of addressing a capitalist socio-ecological regime characterized by the ruthless appropriation and dispossession of life.

The analysis developed here assumes that mending the breach between workers and environmentalists remains a paramount political goal for the construction of socio-ecologically emancipatory projects. This entails the reforging of new class solidarities, based on mutual recognition on the essential common ground woven by the thick interconnections between production and reproduction. Along these lines, politicized popular ecologies can emerge as the contestation of existing value relations (and the underlying forms of devaluation) *and* as laborious and embryonic "projects of mutual creation" (Graeber 2013, 222), grounded on vernacular socio-ecological understandings of what constitutes a life worth living and a place worth living in.

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