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A Matter of Class? Environmental Conflict and the Vernacular Politics of the Commons[1]

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Abstract: A few years ago, while attending the weekly meeting of a social movement in an industrial city in southern Italy, I was struck by the comment of one of its leaders, who pointed to "the environmental issue" as the "real ground of class struggle." I was struck by this rare reference to "class." In this paper, I explore the implications of that claim in the socio-political context of a city ridden by a profound socio-economic crisis and severe issues of environmental degradation. The paper explores how the class dimension of environmental struggles is reflected in the discourses and practices of the movement. Starting from the hypothesis that the movement pursued a 'class politics' without a 'class language,' I examine their attempt at rephrasing 'class struggle' on the ground of popular ecologies and the rearticulation of the relationship between 'labour,' 'environment' and social reproductive politics.

Keywords: Crisis, Commons, Class Struggle, Environmental Movements, Southern Italy

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1. Introduction: In search of the lost maps

Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella (2014), reflecting on the disappearance of class and labour in the mainstream social science debate of the past decades, observed how the understanding of (and attention for) labour has been deeply shaped by what Michael Denning (2004) defined the "class maps" inherited from the recent past. They were referring to class and labour as two interrelated concepts so that the decline of conventional labour narratives entailed the decay of class as a relevant, visible and recognizable social category. The decline of the Fordist working-class ("a specific historical/ geographical formation") came to epitomize the end of class itself, and the cognitive crisis of the class maps through which that working-class made sense; socially, economically and – overall – politically (see also Kalb 2015). The weight of these conventional class maps, with the Fordist working class as a powerful synecdoche, made it even more difficult to grasp the metamorphosis of labour and its fragmentation, blurring the link between workers and class, and its political saliency.

Kasmir and Carbonella were raising a point that has fundamental implications for our capacity to understand how labour and class are intertwined across the globe and beyond the North-South divide. While they build upon David Harvey's theorization of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), they question the latter's division between skilled/privileged workers in the Global North and exploited/dispossessed workers in the Global South, emphasising instead how dispossession operates, unfolds and manifests itself in a variety of ways, cutting across conventional macro-divides such as Global North and Global South (Carbonella, Kasmir 2014, pp. 6-7). Anthropological scholarship shows how the varied and uneven ways in which dispossession unfolds reveal the many-sided dimensions that the experience of class can take across the globe. It also reveals how the continuum of labour relations (from waged to unwaged) can articulate in different and contextual ways with ideas and perceptions of inequality and social differentiation (Carrier and Kalb 2015; Collins and Gimenez 1990; Palmer 2014), inviting us to read class more as the turbulent subtext of contemporary world rather than the definitive script of the past.

This chapter brings into discussion language and class, the critical examination of how explicit or implicit meanings of class are made relevant (or not) into politically minded responses to the experience of socio-environmental dispossession. I will draw from my own ethnographic fieldwork in Brindisi, an industrial city in southern Italy, and particularly on fieldnotes and interviews collected during the regular participation in the assembly of a local political platform, born out of environmental struggles, which eventually found in the language of the commons (*beni comuni*) the connecting thread of different

social, political and environmental stances. Drawing from my field research in a provincial urban context, my aim is to highlight the variations in the politics of the commons, which reflect the political and linguistic functionality of *the commons* in shaping a broad and multifaceted range of struggles (De Angelis 2007). I describe the varieties of politics of the commons, shaped by geographically and historically specific configurations, as "vernacular" politics of the commons. Leaving aside the juridical conundrum of what the commons really are (and how they can be given codification and recognition), this chapter addresses the spreading of the commons narrative and the proliferation of vernacular politics of the commons. My exploration seeks to unpack the connection between class dispossession and these vernacular politics of the commons, along the following interrogatives: are there any subtexts of class in civic and environmentalist mobilizations? How do we read such subtexts? How environmental degradation and the socio-economic crisis of deindustrialising southern urban areas shape the experience of dispossession and disenfranchisement? How does this experience find expression through the distinctive political forms and languages that I described as "vernacular politics of the commons"?

This analysis builds upon different theorizations about class, the commons and commoning as a relational practice. The work of Gibson-Graham (2006; 2016) on post-capitalist politics, class and diverse economies provides challenging insights to think critically through the "politics of possibilities" that shape the vernacular politics of the commons. The same attention to diversity and variation is present in De Angelis' exploration of "the struggles of the commoners" as problematic articulations (and ruptures) "between the measure of capital and other measures, between capital's value and other values" (De Angelis 2007), which opens up to the understanding of implicit value practices in terms of politically minded "revaluation projects" (Collins 2017). Understanding such "value practices" and "revaluation projects" in class terms also requires an anti-essentialist view of class, understood as relational and multisided, intertwined with other differences and inequalities (race, gender, environmental etc).

The chapter is organized as follows. In the second section I read the problematic relationships of language and class in Europe, taking the case of left and right-wing populism as starting point to elaborate on class as a "subtext" (Kalb and Halmai 2011). In the third section, I illustrate of how local politics in Brindisi is discussed through the category of "class", while providing the background context for understanding the rise of civic and environmental movements in the local political arena. In the four and last section, I examine the connection between class, environmental conflict and the vernacular politics of the commons.

2. Revolutionary Ants, angry citizens and other subtexts of class

In 2014, Podemos entered the political scene in crisis-ridden Spain, achieving a stunning electoral result in the parliamentary elections. Largely capitalizing on the experience of the *indignados* – the Spanish mass movement reacting to the 2008 financial and economic crisis – Podemos shunned conventional class language, opting instead for a careful rephrasing of the social conflict as a conflict between the people and the oligarchic elite in an attempt to transplant the Latin-American experience of left populism in Europe (see Mouffe 2016). The new party emerged as a political translation of Laclau and Mouffe's theorization of hegemony along the lines of a progressive, leftist populism, which puts strong emphasis on the "the people," while downplaying "class." Whereas Podemos has been criticized for this omission (Narotzky 2015), one could reasonably ask whether Podemos did actually try to develop a class politics along new lines. In spite of all the critiques that can be raised about the tactics and politics pursued by Podemos, it has somehow proven capable of creating consent not only over dissatisfaction with traditional left parties but also through the crafting of a political discourse that made sense to the dispersed experience of class and the diversified experience of dispossession.

The project of Podemos, while thriving in the critical years of the financial crisis, took shape as a leftist response to the rise of right-wing populism and the resurfacing of nationalist politics across Europe. Introducing a collective book about the rise of nationalist populism in Europe (Kalb and Halmai 2011), anthropologist Don Kalb asserted the relevance of a class perspective for assessing the entanglements of capital, the state and transnational capitalist order (otherwise called the neoliberal order) on locales and sites (Kalb 2011, p. 1). Focusing on working-class people as one of the "key constituencies" of rising right-wing populism, he addressed "working-class neonationalism as the traumatic expression of material and cultural experiences of dispossession and disenfranchisement in the neoliberal epoch" (ibid.). The gist of the argument – and the key interpretative core of the whole book – was that beneath the "nationalist headlines" of new political entrepreneurs mobilizing angry citizens' votes against the "neoliberal rule", could be tracked to vigorous subtexts of class that had lost any political representation in the fast-changing post-1989 political scenario.

Departing from Kalb's tracking of the subtexts of class in contemporary nationalist populism, my analysis approaches civic mobilizations in a southern industrial city through the problematic interrogation of the "subtext of class." More specifically, I ask how environmental degradation and the socio-economic crisis of deindustrialising southern urban areas shape the experience of dispossession and disenfranchisement and its rephrasing into distinctive political forms – what I here describe as "vernacular politics of the commons."

The "subtext of class" approach – so to say – allows me to "read between the lines" of a civic movement which, in spite of its leftist political undercurrents, turned out a successful experiment just because of the absence of political mediations (in terms of recognizable party politics, and even left or right connotations). The motto chosen by the activists of this movement, "the ants' revolution" (*la rivoluzione delle formiche*) is a telling verbal expression of the counter discourse of ordinary citizens who are inoffensive individuals but have their strength in the capacity to build an effective collective body.[2]

The present analysis draws from ethnographic materials collected in Brindisi during a long-term fieldwork research – a total 15 months between 2015 and 2016. I take the case of a local movement, Brindisi Bene Comune (BBC hereafter), founded in 2012 as a hub platform for connecting local movements and struggles, which eventually became a well identified political subject of the Left in the local arena. In the 2018 mayoral elections, thanks to an alliance with centre-left parties, BBC managed to have its leading figure elected as mayor of the city; several activists elected as council members, while others achieved important positions in the new city's government. The analysis of this chapter is limited to the debate taking place within the movement after the 2016 mayoral elections and the successful rise of consent. Having obtained an encouraging electoral support, the movement, which had also witnessed an expansion of its basis of active militants during the mayoral campaign, started to discuss the need to set up a more formal organization. This entailed a discussion of what kind of subject they were going to shape – a cultural association? A political association? – and the discussion about the main values and programmes that underpinned the re-foundation of the movement as a new bigger subject. The analysis carried out in this paper will focus only on the latter debate; more in particular, it will analyse one single discussion of the "charter of values", which took place during one of the weekly meetings of the movement in November 2016. Drawing on fieldnotes taken while attending the meeting, I analyse "class" as a subtext of this discussion. There is one motif that makes this meeting a good starting point for my analysis about language and class. References to "class" were anything but absent in the various discussions I had with activists, as well as in the ordinary talk with other people throughout my fieldwork; indeed, class was widely used to qualify people, urban areas and behaviours. However, while attending that meeting, I was struck by a single occurrence of the term in the phrase "class struggle." It did occur in a debate where "class" was never mentioned, remaining the untold motif around which the debate seemed to revolve. Before detailing the analysis of this discussion, I need to provide the

[2] On environmental populism, see Cortes-Vazquez 2020.

broader context of its occurrence, presenting both the framework of my research and the socio-economic background of the city.

Brindisi is a small city of 88.000 inhabitants along the Adriatic coastline. Historically, an important harbour at the end of the ancient Roman Appian way, much of the history of the city has been marked by its strategic location and the peculiar shape of its well-protected harbour. Its recent history, however, has been mostly marked by the presence of a large industrial area created in the early 1960s in the framework of the state-driven industrialization programme. The extraordinary intervention for the industrial development of the South,[3] officially launched in 1957 with a specific set of measures and funds, sustained the creation of a number of growth poles, which aimed at sparking the socio-economic transformation of the wider regions in which the plants were located (Ginsborg 1990, pp. 229-231; Graziani 1998, pp. 74-86, 96-103). Brindisi was targeted by the massive investment of the chemical and mining company Montecatini for the construction of a big petrochemical complex for the large-scale polymer production. Along with the Montecatini (later Montedison), other companies followed while others already present – such as aeronautics, since the 1930s – expanded their facilities. The public electricity company built a first power plant in the 1960s, initially fuelled with crude oil and later converted to coal, and a second and bigger coal-fired power plant in the 1980s. In spite of the large concentration of industrial facilities in the area,[4] the capital-intensive type of industrialization that was being promoted did not fulfill the expectations of employment it gave rise to (Graziani 1998, pp. 93-94). The big plants remained a relatively self-contained economic reality, fully integrated into larger national and international networks, but poorly connected with the local fabric of economic activities, which in fact were limited to low-skilled services and maintenance work strongly dependent on the big companies' outsourcing chains. Whilst industrial employment reached its peak in the mid 1970s, to start declining after the 1970s oil crises and subsequent restructuring, the service sector expanded greatly, intertwined with the growing public sector and the ever-present shadow economy (see Mingione 1985). Between the 1980s and early 2000s Brindisi was also a national stronghold of cigarette smuggling, involving hundreds of households, while providing the material

[3] Law 29 July 1957, n. 643, "Provvedimenti per il Mezzogiorno."

[4] Industrial facilities include metal-mechanical productions, LPG gas storage facilities, waste disposal plants, pharmaceuticals, and a sugar refinery. The Brindisian area is also a major national site of energy production, which counts two power stations (one built in the 1960s and shut down in 2012) and two other power-generation facilities, one located inside the petrochemical area and one fuelled by the sugar refinery.

basis for the growth of local criminal organizations such as the Sacra Corona Unita (Tornesello 2009).[5]

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, Brindisi was facing a difficult socio-economic downturn, made more acute by already high unemployment rates and the looming of deindustrialization in core industries such as aeronautics.[6] Along with socio-economic distress, the city had to cope with the environmental degradation and the hazardous exposure to oil and coal-based industries, with severe consequences on the population's health. In 2017, the results of the epidemiological study (Forastiere et al. 2017), carried out by a research group supported by the regional government, highlighted the correlation between the concentration of specific atmospheric pollutants, mortality and the anomalous incidence of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and (certain types of) cancer, as well as congenital malformations. Declared "high environmental risk area" in the late 1980s, in 1997,[7] Brindisi was listed among the Sites of National Interest (S.I.N.), which includes areas in urgent need of site clearance and soil decontamination (Portaluri 2012). In such a context of chronic socio-environmental crisis, conflicts of various kind have been proliferating, related to the poverty of local welfare provisions (eg. housing); to unemployment and under-employment; to the alarming effects of population's exposure to industrial air pollutants; to the marginality and segregation of urban peripheries (Pusceddu 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; see also Ravenda 2018). This is the main socio-economic scenario in which the activists' discourse examined in this chapter must be understood.

3. Talking about class

My research in Brindisi was part of a collective anthropological project that investigated livelihood practices, conceptual frameworks and social reproduction strategies among working-class households in southern Europe, during the austerity crisis (Narotzky 2020). The Grassroots Economics project aimed at exploring how the interaction between experts and lay economic models shaped the vision and experience of economic realities. In Brindisi, I

[5] A report of the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission (2001: 58) estimated that in the mid-1990s, in the province of Brindisi (nearly 400,000 inhabitants), cigarette smuggling provided the main source of income for around 5,000 families.

[6] The 2011 national census registered 20,3% unemployment rate in Brindisi, higher than the regional rate (17,3%) and almost double the national rate (11.4%). More in general (see ISTAT 2013), unemployment rates in southern regions doubled from 8% in 1977 to 17.2% in 2012, registering a far higher increase than the center and north of the country (respectively, from 5.5% to 9.5% and from 5.8% to 7.4%).

[7] Legislative Decree 22/1997.

explored 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. The urban and social geography of my fieldwork was also a reflection of the articulation of working class livelihoods across different spaces, ranging from institutional contexts to the diverse social networks that connected contexts and urban settings, including the variety of formal and informal organizations – from unions to charities; from cultural associations to environmentalist movements. The meetings, activists and activities of Brindisi Bene Comune were, therefore, part of the ethnography I was pursuing and conducting in Brindisi.

Brindisi Bene Comune started in 2012 as a political platform created to connect different struggles and activities carried out by distinct groups and movements. The national referendum against the privatisation of water resource management in 2011 was seminal for the maturation of the project, as it favoured the emergence of the commons as a shared ground to link and articulate different struggles. As early as 2012, BBC was running the mayoral election with its own candidate, who became the movement's first elected council member. An important subject in giving flesh and blood to the project had been a new environmentalist movement started in late 2000s as No al Carbone (NAC henceforth), which managed to build large mobilizations against polluting industrial activities – particularly, the coal fired power plant owned by the national electricity company Enel. In 2015, the backbone of BBC was still composed by former NAC members while other NAC activists had quit BBC, protesting against the risk of institutionalisation of the movement. As the 2016 mayoral elections were approaching, a new stock of activists, most of whom already engaged in various type of social activism, became active in the BBC movement, giving a substantial support to campaigning and organizing. The growth of activism was a positive sign of the rising consent of the movement in the city. This time, also thanks to a short-lived alliance with minor political parties of the Left, BBC managed to get two council members elected, both founding figures of the movement. The electoral results, however, in spite of growing support, did reveal its limits in reaching the peripheral urban areas, thus exposing the class composition of its constituents as being mainly middle-class.

In the 2016 mayoral elections, BBC obtained an appreciable increase in electoral consent compared to the previous 2012 elections, managing to elect two council members (one being the mayoral candidate) thanks to a coalition.[8]

[8] Considering the disjointed voting system, in 2012, BBC's council candidates obtained 2294 votes and the mayoral candidate 3132; in 2016 the former gained 3572 votes (1141 the other party in the coalition), while the latter obtained 6793 votes.

In the aftermath of the elections, the local press discussed the electoral geography by marking the consent of each party in terms of the class-geography of the city. The main right-wing and left-wing coalitions received the largest share of votes in the popular districts of the periphery, while the 5 Star Movement and BBC reached the highest result in the central districts and in the main residential areas. Based on this spatial distribution of votes, the press emphasised the polarization between "popular" and "bourgeois quarters", with peripheral popular districts supporting "traditional parties" and central middle-class districts supporting "the anti-establishment movements."[9]

Besides the sensationalistic opposition between centre and periphery underlined by the local press, the geography of voting behaviour reflected the limits of BBC political action – able to attract a relatively educated low-middle class – but poorly present among the impoverished areas of the city, where conventional relationships of clientelist type allowed the main parties to guarantee their electoral consent. In fact, it was a massive shift of votes in the largest peripheral neighbourhood that decided the final result of the runoffs, raising heated arguments about conditionality (e.g. votes in exchange of benefits and/or favours) in the peripheral neighbourhoods. Supporters of BBC and the 5 Star Movement blatantly acknowledged the shift as a result of a new round of vote-selling, insisting that it was a practice common to both mayoral candidates and their coalitions.[10] Vote-selling practices were in fact commonly reported by people and allusively recalled in the press. Discourses among Brindisians commonly assumed that "politicians buy their votes" (*i politici si comprano i voti*). As far as vote-selling was considered a common practice, very often it emerged as the only explanatory discourse, along with the alleged "ignorance" of voters. However, other careful observers were more prone to draw a different picture. According to a local intellectual, vote-selling (which he could estimate around 500-600 votes) could not explain the surprising overturning of results of the first round. He rather urged to consider "the class distance" (*la distanza di classe*) as one of the reasons of the defeat of the rich entrepreneur leading the left-wing coalition who, he held, continued to

[9] I am here referring to the local edition of the newspapers *Quotidiano di Brindisi* and *Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*.

[10] While discussing with me the electoral results, a former member of local government suggested that the main mistake of the losing side (centre-left coalition) had been "to pay" for the first round of voting, while – according to the rule – payments have to be kept for the runoffs.

see the city "five metres above the ground", that is "the height of the bridge of his father's luxurious yacht."[11]

Comments about class were anything but unusual among many people with whom I could privately discuss the mayoral campaign. However, such a straightforward class language was virtually absent from BBC official discourse, which privileged a discourse centred on citizens equality and the need to guarantee equal rights for all. At the same time, in setting the respect of the law as the non-negotiable threshold of its way of doing politics, BBC often failed to build politically fruitful connections with those segments of the citizenry considered to be more subject to wrongdoings and malpractices as a normal basis of electoral consent. In fact, their campaign slogan Diritti per tutti, favori per nessuno (Rights for all, favours for none)[12] reminded the US democrats' slogan "Equal rights for all, special privileges for none" (credited to have been used by Thomas Jefferson for the first time), which intended to claim protection for the common people against the privileged elites. The egalitarian discourse underlying their campaign, while professing the protection of the weak against the arrogance of the powerful, shunned any explicit reference to class; inequality was then rephrased along the moral lines of honesty (and dignity) and dishonesty (and abuse). In the following section I elaborate more on this point by exploring the subtext of class in a discussion about the new "charter of values" of the movement.

4. The charter of values

A few months after the elections, BBC started discussing the possibility to formally become an association. The charter of values (*carta dei valori*) was, along with the statute, an important step in the formalization of the movement as a juridical subject. The discussions took place in the headquarters of the movement, where activists sat on the chair along the wall, forming a circle where everyone could see everyone. Whereas the discussion on the statute was essentially marked by the tension between the search for a more stable and formal structure and the need to maintain the informal and flexible management demands of the group, the discussion on the charter of value was more focused on contents and strategies of communication – that is how to make a clear point about what the movement wanted to achieve and how to express it effectively. The charter of value under discussion had been drafted by one activist on the basis of the foundational chart of the BBC movement. Unlike the often-tedious organizational discussions that were raised about the

[11] The mayoral candidate heading the centre-left coalition was an entrepreneur and the well-known president of the basketball team New Basket Brindisi.

[12] For the political and social relevance of "favours" in the Italian context, see (Zinn 2019).

statute, the debates over the charter of value triggered an interesting exchange of views among the activists, eventually turning into a gratifying moment of collective elaboration. As someone put it: "finally today we managed to talk about politics."

The draft of the charter of values was divided into four parts: 1) freedom in difference; 2) the city as commons (*città bene comune*); 3) the practice of beauty; 4) transparency. The charter intended to present the "social, economic and political model" that BBC wanted to promote against "neoliberal politics." The reference to "neoliberalism" was suspiciously welcome as not appropriate since – someone observed – one should have "to explain what the terms does actually refer to." The longest paragraph was devoted to environmental questions and the protection of the territory, in which BBC "promotes the ecological reconversion of the economy, relations and labour", as well as "territorial sovereignty." Labour, on the contrary, was quickly mentioned as "a right" (*un diritto*). This was the more surprising, since many activists were precarious workers, often well-educated, many of whom returned to Brindisi from northern regions because they could not manage to make a living. While labour did not have a central position in the collective political discourse of the movement (though ever present), it did emerge often in private conversations with single activists, who struggled to make ends meet or were forced to live with their parents, hence experiencing tensions and frictions between autonomy and dependency within family networks.

The point about "the city as commons" (which appeared to enshrine the very meaning of the movement) was lively debated, given its importance for the elaboration and illustration of "the city we imagine" – the "paradigm" of the city to pursue. A lively discussion was caused by the reference to "the logics of self-pity" (*logica del vittimismo*) in a crucial passage where the movement presented itself as a "tangible example of transformation" in so far as it can "defuse the logics of self-pity (*vittimismo*) and of discouragement (*sfiducia*)." Someone contested this formulation as "assuming" (*presuntuosa*) and that it entailed the "risk of moralization." This observation started a long discussion about how that phrase clearly describes the local reality as "the common sense of Brindisi and the South," but also how BBC could not be entirely immune to it, for the simple fact of being composed by Brindisians.[13] The synthesis over this antinomy was found by rephrasing the negative reference to local self-pity into a positive reference to sustaining the collective effort towards self-determination. Someone phrased this point in terms of elaborating and providing "instruments for making citizens proactive… aware and participant." The reiteration of the adjective "proactive" throughout the

[13] About the representation of the South see (Schneider 1998; Teti 1993).

discussion eventually outlined a more precise idea of what "self-pity" could mean in relation to the political goals of the movement, that is a form of "de-responsabilisation."

Environmental and ecological questions held a founding position in the charter. Labour, on the contrary, appeared marginalized if not neglected at all. This was more explicitly confirmed by the leading figure of the movement, who commented that now the real ground of "class struggle" (*lotta di classe*) is the environmental question; and that the "class struggle" is waged "outside the factory" (*al di fuori della fabbrica*). This was the only occurrence of the word "class" throughout the discussion. The word "citizens" (*cittadini*) was regularly used to refer to the subjects and targets of their political action. The word "class" did not come up neither when discussing inequality, which was more often phrased in terms of unequal opportunities and discrimination between "citizens."

5. Vernacular politics of the commons

In this section I provide a brief analysis of how the environmental conflict became the main ground for forging a politics of articulation in the local political arena. Environmental issues provided a robust basis to the vernacular politics of the commons because of the direct experience of socio-environmental dispossession related (and increasingly read through) heavy industrialization. Environmental injustice served as the meaningful connection to the broader language of the commons via the mobilizations for the national referendum on the privatisation of water resource management (2011). To put it otherwise: whereas the latter mobilization provided a common struggle and a common language for grassroots political mobilizations nationwide, the environmental conflict played a significant role in shaping the local meaning of the politics of the commons – the connecting thread among different stances and different movements and groups of activists. Hence, the environmental issue easily became the idiom for rephrasing at the local level the politics of the commons. The meaningful history of local environmentalism (see Pusceddu 2020a; Ravenda 2018), along with the "intimate inventory" (Vasudevan 2019) of death, illness and toxicity, played a role in giving visibility to the relevance of environmental issues; it provided a meaningful framework for understanding the commons in relation to health, contamination, toxicity and death, as well as in relation to unemployment and the job blackmail that framed industrial activities as the necessary evil for the local economy. The language of the commons, therefore, came to encompass the intersection of different struggles – from public health to urban degradation; from political corruption to environmental degradation – and different political histories – from leftist groups to Catholics; from civic movements to radical environmentalists.

The vernacular politics of the commons worked as a connector for the various socio-environmental stances emerging in local societies. This heterogeneous environmentalism was also a reflection of the broader transformation of the international ecological movement occurring in the past decades, from the labour environmentalism of male blue-collar workers and unions to a variety of green movements without constitutive links to labour issues. The marginalization of labour as a political subject (recognizable in the shape of the male-blue collar worker; see Gorz 1982) within environmentalist stances happened within the complex restructuring and tertiarization of labour markets in the industrial economies of advanced capitalism (Barca 2019).

In Brindisi, this transformation can be tracked between the 1980s and 1990s – up until the last decade of environmentalist blooming in the city. Starting as a stronghold of environmental struggles as early as the 1960s (with the leading role of chemical workers), which connected safety claims in the workplace to redistributive struggles, "the factory" has been progressively marginalized throughout the years of industrial restructuring, when its bargaining power started to decline and preserving jobs became the main priority. Parallel to this transformation, socio-environmentalist stances shifted from the factory to outside the factory, eventually turning against the factory itself (Pusceddu 2020a). The social profile of many new activists in the latest wave of local environmentalism reflects this whole set of transformations. One of the emerging leaders of the NAC movement, for instance, a man in his mid-30s, returned to Brindisi in the late 2000s after spending years away (and abroad). Benefitting 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. This pursuit was part of a shared narrative among new activists that industrialization was a socio-environmental failure and new alternative paths had to be shaped. In the attempt at re-envisioning the social and material landscape of the area, these activists promoted a series of "persuasive images" (Ravenda 2018, p. 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. Other members of the NAC movement shared his trajectory, although they did not represent the bulk of the movement, which was also formed by some factory workers, self-employed workers, various types of service workers and school teachers. The movement, in brief, was not the expression of mainstream middle-class environmentalism but it gave voice to a broader spectrum of social figures representative of the heterogeneous metamorphosis of the local working class. Likewise, this was manifest in the social composition of BBC movement, which provided a context for building and mobilizing collective claims beyond conventional class maps, now rephrased under the encompassing opposition between privilege and the common good. In this

mapping of social interests, the now reduced contingent of factory workers came to be viewed as "a privileged category" protected by local networks of power in the face of the precarious livelihoods of many other workers.[14] No doubt, for instance, that the vernacular politics of the commons gave some political shape to the resentment and frustrations of well-educated precarious workers in the service sector (see Bologna 2007).

6. Conclusions

This chapter started with a reference to a book on the anthropology of labour, which referred to the weight of inherited class maps as one of the reason that contributed to obliterate the continuum of labour relations (waged and unwaged) irreducible to the Fordist wage worker, from the master narrative of the working class, eventually viewing the gradual demise of industrial work in western capitalism as the end of the working class itself. My aim was to frame the main interrogative of this chapter: are there any subtexts of class in civic and environmentalist mobilizations? How do we read such subtexts? How environmental degradation and the socio-economic crisis of deindustrialising southern urban areas shape the experience of dispossession and disenfranchisement? How does this experience find expression through the distinctive political forms and languages that I described as "vernacular politics of the commons"? Drawing from ethnographic research in a southern Italian city, the analysis focused on the political discourse mobilized by a local political platform, which emerged as a container of different forms of activism and stances, among which environmental issues held a central position. The language of the commons was the connecting thread of these various stances, which started to act collectively during the national mobilizations against the privatisation of water resource management in 2011.

The vernacular politics of the commons represents, in this context, the well-suited idiom for making sense of (and react to) socio-environmental dispossession, while at same time shaping the junction between local politics and the larger political imagination of the commons and defining a practice of collective care from which ideas of the good life are made to depend. In this sense, the emphasis on interdependencies (between humans and non-human environments) underlying the commons and the idea of commoning as caring (prendersi cura) discloses subtexts of class; that is, commoning provides the connecting thread of diversified experiences of dispossession, as well as anxieties and hopes for change. Likewise, it gives meaning to their

[14] This view is widely shared among factory workers, especially among the more precarious factory workers hired through temp agencies – a real reserve army of labour whose fate often depends on their connection to union networks.

relational possibilities in political practice. This is possibly the main subtext of class of the vernacular politics of the commons.

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