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Working-class ecology and union politics: a conceptual topology

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Environmental Labour Studies may benefit from incorporating the perspective of environmental justice. We offer a theorization of *working-class ecology* as the place where working-class communities live and work, being typically affected by environmental injustice, and of *working-class environmentalism* as those forms of activism that link labour and environmental struggles around the primacy of reproduction. The paper's theoretical section draws on a social ethnography of working-class ecology in the case of Taranto, a mono-industrial town in southern Italy, which is experiencing a severe environmental and public-health crisis. We show how environmental justice activism since the early 2000s has allowed the re-framing of union politics along new ways of politicizing the local economy. We conclude by offering a conceptual topology of working-class ecology, which situates different labour organizations (confederal, social/community, and rank-and-file unions) according to their positioning in respect to environmental justice.

KEYWORDS

Environmental justice; environmental labour studies; mono-industrial towns; job blackmail; ecological class consciousness; working-class environmentalism

Introduction

In setting the stage for a new field of inquiry called Environmental Labour Studies, Nora Räthzel and David Uzzell pointed to the twofold rationale that underlies it. First, the theoretical, as an inquiry into 'the way in which nature and labour are intrinsically linked and equally threatened by globalising capital', and second, the empirical, as a critical reflection on 'the development of environmental trade unions policies worldwide' (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013, p. 10). Most studies on labour environmentalism share a common vision of ecology as an intrinsically working-class issue that has been present in workers' struggles for reproduction since the very beginning of the labour movement. Part of this literature addresses the issue of coalition building between labour and environmental organizations, or convergence between labour and environmental politics at different levels (Gould, Lewis, & Timmons Roberts, 2004; Obach, 2002; Rose, 2003; Russell, 2017), while other studies focus on trade unions as environmental actors (Burgmann & Milner, 2011; Felli, 2014; Mason & Morter, 1998; Räthzel & Uzzell, 2013). In both fields, however, the problem of internal relations between work and ecology remains an under-theorized aspect of labour environmentalism. We show how this internal relation can be best understood by incorporating in our analysis environmental justice as a fundamental dimension of working people's life.

Environmental justice emerged in the USA in the late 1980s as a distinct form of environmental activism, mostly consisting of anti-toxic struggles at the grassroots level within an anti-discrimination

(largely anti-racist) framework (Bullard, 2000 [1990]; Harvey, 1996, pp. 366–402; Taylor, 1997). In the following three decades, however, the movement has evolved into a national and even international network, shifting from a civil to a human rights law framework (Agyeman, 2014). Environmental justice has become a global activist/academic approach adopted by a variety of social movements, including climate justice movements (Temper, Del Bene, & Martínez Alier, 2015). A less well-known, earlier history of the environmental justice movement in the US, however, signals how some labour organizations and workers had an active role in promoting the concept of ‘environmental justice’ since the 1970s (Rector, 2014). Rather than considering the environment as a post-materialist issue, the environmental justice movement took positionality as a vantage point from which to criticize environmental politics. Positionality means that it is people’s position within a given class-racial-gender order that largely determines the way they experience and respond to environmental issues (Peña & Pulido, 1998). The recycling and energy-from-waste industries, for example, while considered undisputable progress by the urban middle class, have implied an increase in the unequal burden of social costs for workers in these sectors and for working-class people whose neighbourhoods have been targeted by the new facilities (Armiero & D’Alisa, 2012; Pellow, 2004). A working-class perspective on waste and recycling is thus not only different from, but theoretically more emancipatory than that within the urban middle class, in so far as it articulates environmental with social justice concerns.

Labour environmentalism and environmental justice activism are organized in substantially different ways. Typically, workplace-based labour and trade unions led the first, while community based and informal, grassroots oriented the latter. There are, however, at least three important arguments for Environmental Labour Studies to include environmental justice activism within their area of interest: first, environmental justice and labour environmentalism share a basic characteristic, that of putting inequalities (and the need for their levelling via compensation, remediation, or economic planning) at the top of the environmental agenda.¹ Second, environmental justice activism is a working-class struggle, even though reflecting an extended concept of class that goes beyond income and occupation to incorporate other subaltern positionalities. Third, Environmental Labour Studies cannot be confined to existing trade unions, but need to look at the possibilities for developing forms of social/community unionism that may be able to connect labour and environmental justice struggles – what we call *working-class environmentalism* (see also Barca, 2012 and 2014). This implies the need for including the struggles of un-organized, un-waged, migrant, informal workers, and the multitude of subjects that are re-composing the world’s working class in the post-Fordist organization of labour. It is in the encountering between workplace and community struggles, we argue, that working-class environmentalism can best develop its potentiality for ‘differently politicizing the economy’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 84), i.e. for reinventing the local economy based on community needs, rather than enduring its rules as a set of given constraints. Our reformulation of Gibson-Graham’s concept of ‘differently politicizing the economy’ factors in the ecological dimension (Barca & Leonardi, 2016). In a context of environmental injustice, we argue, working-class environmentalism is that form of activism that comes to link production with reproduction and ecology as inextricable elements of a struggle for re-framing the economy from below.

In what follows, we lay out some proposals for theorizing working-class environmentalism as the expression of an internal relationship between work and ecology and offer a social ethnography (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 2002) of the case of Taranto, a mono-industrial town of the Italian South, currently affected by a massive environmental and public-health crisis. After a brief background analysis, based on secondary sources, of the historical process by which Taranto became a mono-industrial

town (1960s–1990s), we conducted semi-structured interviews,² with the aim of building a conceptual topology (Marcus & Fischer, 1986) of working-class environmentalism. We interviewed (ex)workers and their families, unionists, and activists in local environmental organizations, and constructed their different stories into a narrative of the multiple relationships that unions and other working-class subjects have entertained, during the last three decades, with the experience of environmental contamination. We paid special attention to those subjects that, operating at the intersection between factory and community struggles, are silenced by the official narrative on labour controversies – which are typically centred on three key actors: corporate management, confederal unions, governments (national as well as local). Based on this social ethnography approach, we have built a conceptual topology of working-class environmentalism, which situates trade-union actors according to their positioning vis-à-vis environmental justice.

Working-class ecology and environmentalism: a theoretical framework

Our theoretical point of departure is the assumption that, as living beings that reproduce in particular biophysical environments, working-class people are intrinsically ecological subjects, whose existence is dependent upon that of a healthy ecosystem – including air, water, soil, the food chain, and local bio-geo-chemical cycles. We thus define *working-class ecology* as the web of systemic relations between working-class people and their living and working habitats. Being positioned as the key mediators of social metabolism, while being themselves part of nature, industrial workers typically embody the ecological contradictions of capitalism (Barca, 2012). At the same time, consciousness of the material contradictions embodied in working-class ecology can generate particular forms of social and political activism, i.e. *working-class environmentalism*.

The relationship between working-class people and their environments is mediated by multiple positionalities: not only income and occupation, but also racial and gender identification. These positionalities reflect the different forms of work that sustain and reproduce the working-class community: factory and domestic work, in the first place, but also various forms of social reproduction work, such as education, nursing, communication, gardening, etc. Many of these may be developed outside of a wage relation. However, working-class ecologies are typically shaped by quasi-total economic dependency upon some external income generator, such as industrial manufacturers, mining, or energy companies, agri-business, retail companies: these activities thus mediate the relationship between working-class communities and their environment, and generate environmental stress of variable intensity, which may evolve into ecological and public-health crises. Here we adopt Carolyn Merchant's theorization of ecological crisis as resulting from contradictions that arise between production, reproduction, and ecology (Merchant, 1990 [2010]). In our understanding, working-class ecologies are characterized by specific contradictions, depending on the type and combination of activities on which the community relies for its subsistence. What all working-class communities share, however, is their particular vulnerability to what has been called the job blackmail, which in turn strongly impairs their capacity to react to environmental stress and prevent ecological crises from happening.

Kazis and Grossman defined the job blackmail as the corporate practice of threatening employees with a choice between employment and health, thus making the public believe there is no alternative to 'business as usual' (Kazis and Grossman, cited in Bullard, 2000, p. 10). The job blackmail is a widely used mechanism of industrial relations, which affects working-class communities of all types, normalizing ecological contradictions as a 'natural' fact of life for working-class people, and thus making them the subjects of environmental injustice, i.e. the unequal distribution of

environmental costs. How can this perverse normalization be explained? What conditions are necessary for it to be enacted? The key element, we argue, is the fact that working-class communities are positioned in racialized and gendered spaces (Bullard, 2000; Massey, 1994) and share a subordinated position in the racial/colonial and sexual divisions of labour.

The environmental justice literature has shown how the industrial division of labour locates racialized groups at the lower positions of the production and social reproduction structure, turning them into the subjects most affected by ecological degradation and risk. Scholars in environmental justice have convincingly demonstrated that racialization is a powerful instrument of capitalist supremacy, not only within given societies but also internationally, by means of colonial and post-colonial relations in the global political economy (Pellow, 2007; Pulido, 1996). Racialization must be understood as the process of producing difference based on discursive naturalizations of difference itself: this goes beyond skin colour and employs a variety of pseudo-scientific categories, e.g. the Lombrosian discourse of inferiority of Italian southerners (Guidi, 2016). Racialization is an effective way of producing an undervalued nature, including both labour and territory, that must be open to capitalist valuing processes via colonization and over-exploitation. This includes the possibility of shifting the social costs of capitalist development towards the racialized or colonized subjects and their environments: for example, by concentrating toxicity levels higher than tolerable in particular areas. Harvey (2010) suggests that capital solves its ecological problems by 'moving them around', not only at the global scale but within national geographies via processes of internal colonization, by which capitalism creates 'sacrifice zones' (Bullard, 2000), i.e. marginal economic areas where the disposable bodies of racialized/colonized subjects live. Sacrifice zones and disposable bodies are what allows national economic accounts to benefit from industrial production beyond the limits of natural reproduction (Barca, 2014).

The sexual division of labour, we argue, is also of primary importance in working-class ecologies. While feminist political economy has convincingly shown it to be a form of social subordination hidden within class subordination (Fraser, 2014; Mies, 1986), eco-feminism has given the phenomenon a second meaning: that of a hidden abode where the subordination of reproduction to production rests (Mellor, 2006; Salleh, 1997). From this perspective, the ecological crisis is the result of a global system of domination based on the production of inequalities, which puts exchange value over use value, productivism over human and non-human reproduction needs. In our understanding, the sexual division of labour is a fundamental basis for the job blackmail, and thus a fundamental condition for environmental injustice. In its modern-industrial form, this gender order has given men the role of breadwinners, making them bargain for wages that heavily discount their health and safety, or accept job blackmail that compromises the health and safety of entire communities and their territories. It has assigned women the role of reproducers and caregivers, but also of economically marginal and/or dependent subjects, with little or no bargaining and decision-making power in society. This makes (typically women-led) environmental justice struggles for reproduction of enormous importance to the emergence of working-class environmentalism.

As the Italian Autonomist Marxist collective *Uninomade* expressed it: 'there is no capitalism without racialization and genderization, i.e. without race and gender being assumed as a terrain for building practices and discourses of de-valuing of someone's work'. Race and gender are thus mechanisms of fragmentation and hierarchizing of labour, through which subjects are made into 'class', or through which 'class' is composed. Consequently, any political project alternative to capitalism must be built upon a rupture of the racial and sexual division of labour in society. In workerist political thought [operaismo], it is this breaking with the fundamental dispositifs of class fragmentation and differentiation that creates the space for the subversive subject to emerge in collective form

(Collettivo |Uninomade, 2012). Class positionality is thus both a point of view on the totality of the social order, and a leverage point to subvert it.

Our point here is that class positionality can give rise to specific forms of ecological consciousness. In Merchant's theorization, ecological consciousness expresses the way people make sense of the biophysical world around them and of their place in it. Ecological class consciousness is what may allow working-class people to recognize the ecological contradictions that affect their communities, and to act upon them in specific ways, thus generating *working-class environmentalism*. Recognizing that the environmental subordination that characterizes working-class ecology is not a natural fact but a historical product, rooted in the sexual and racial division of labour, allows us to see environmental injustice as a leverage point to subvert 'the economy'.

We consider the separation between labour and environmental justice struggles as a historical product of the job blackmail, which is both premised on and reproduces social and environmental inequalities. From this perspective, we define *working-class environmentalism* as those forms of environmental activism that aim to radically transform 'the economy', based on principles of mutual interdependency between production, reproduction, and ecology. If working-class environmentalism is to challenge the racial/colonial and sexual divisions of labour, from the local to the national and global level, then it (1) can only be built from the convergence between struggles at the point of production with struggles at the point of reproduction, and (2) can only be intersectional, i.e. emerge from the place where class/race/gender positionalities meet with production and reproduction needs. Clearly, this is not the equivalent of a blue-green alliance, a perspective which is impaired by differential class/gender/racial positionalities among labour and environmental constituencies (Gould et al., 2004) and that can only have a limited impact on working-class ecology. Contesting the division of activist work between (mostly men-led) labour and (mostly women-led) environmental justice requires transcending existing forms of organizing at both the workplace and the community level and experimenting with new forms of activism. Such new forms of labour/environmental justice activism would lead to opening a new terrain of political subjectivity whose horizon is the space of fundamental equality and commoning (De Angelis, 2017).

We now offer a social ethnography of working-class environmentalism as it has been developing in the city of Taranto (Apulia, Italy), home to the largest and most polluting steel plant in Europe. Here, against the historical background of a public health and environmental disaster generated by 50 years of operation of the job blackmail, we look at the recent transformation of union politics, asking how this process is contributing to 'differently politicizing the economy'.

Labour and ecology in a mono-industrial town: a case study from the Italian south

In a previous essay, we have suggested that mono-industrial towns such as Taranto could be analysed through the lens of what we called a 'working-class community ecology' (WCCE) perspective (Barca & Leonardi, 2016). WCCEs are typically characterized by the job blackmail, which is supported by the subjective figure of the *cognitively dissonant worker*, a governmental *dispositif* in the Foucauldian sense. This is a form of intentional denial that, by closing any possibility for imagining economic alternatives, leads to passive acceptance of the job blackmail on the part of its victims. Here we add two further elaborations. First, we show how environmental injustice in Taranto exemplifies the colonial and sexual division of labour described above. Second, we describe the breaking of the cognitive dissonance apparatus via the emergence of environmental justice struggles that challenge such twofold division of labour at the territorial level and enact a refusal of the job blackmail

by mobilizing around the primacy of reproduction. In other words, we look at working-class environmentalism as the terrain where labour and environmental justice can meet.

The production of environmental injustice

Taranto is a town of roughly 200,000, which hosts one of the oldest operating steel plants in Europe: ILVA. Covering 1500 hectares (including 200 kilometres of railway, 5 blast furnaces, 10 coke oven batteries, 6 exclusively dedicated docks), the steel plant accounts today for more than 30% of Italy's steel production, and for approximately 75% of Taranto's GDP. It employed 11,980 workers in 2012 (including blue collar, white collar, and managerial staff), rising to over 20,000 if we consider associated services (Comito & Colombo, 2013). This gigantic scale is reflected by the dramatic levels of pollution emissions: in 2010 ILVA emitted over 11,000t of nitrogen dioxide, 11,300t of sulphur dioxide, and 1.3t of benzene, all well beyond the thresholds established by national as well as EU legislation (Vulpio, 2012). Health issues too are serious: both early mortality (1980–2008) and cancer incidence (2006–2007) show epidemiological evidence of disproportionate risk for several deadly pathologies, amongst which prominently figure lung cancer and cardiovascular/respiratory diseases, both acute and chronic (Comba et al., 2012). Such data, extrapolated from an important epidemiological study, also show for Taranto a 7–15% excess of mortality compared with the national rate in the periods 1995–2002 and 2003–2009 (Piratsu et al., 2013). More recently, a study commissioned by the Apulia Regional Government (concerning the 2009–2014 period) detects an unmistakable correspondence between mortality rates and ILVA's productive activity (Congedo, 2016). The ample disregard of health and safety and emission regulations on the part of the company and its subcontractors, and the lack of enforcement of workers' and citizens' rights in those matters, makes Taranto a striking example of environmental injustice, intended here in its basic meaning as lack of implementation of legislative principles and missing enforcement of environmental regulations.

Taranto represents a specific type of working-class ecology, where the ecological crisis results from contradictions between the environmental and public-health costs of industrial production and the inescapable dependency of social reproduction on industrial jobs. Such dependency results from a long history of discrimination and subalternization, which testifies to the specific ways in which the sexual and colonial division of labour have been enacted in Taranto.

The plant was built in the early 1960s (by Italsider), after the Italian Government decided to enlarge its domestic steel production capacity by investing in a fourth publicly owned integrated steel mill.³ The governmental Committee for the Development of Employment and Revenue was instrumental in ensuring the siting of the new facility in the South. Justified by the modernizing ethos, this industrialization plan via State investments took the form of internal colonization based on a deeply racialized representation of Southerners, discursively constructed as subaltern subjectivities to be 'civilized' (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013). According to Vercellone (2015), the development of heavy industries in selected areas of the Southern 'periphery' was functional to the competitiveness of 'core' Italian capitalism, namely the industrial triangle Genoa-Milan-Turin. From the beginning, the Italian Government envisaged a plan of partial industrialization in the South which allowed the latter to be instrumentally *compatible* with the needs of northern industries in a number of ways: (a) as a provider of base-products (mostly steel and chemicals); (b) as a source of social control of the newly formed working class, whose 'release' from agricultural backwardness was supposed to be met by thankful docility; (c) as a means of political consensus for the ruling Christian Democrats; (d) as an ultimate reservoir of cheap labour for Northern industry through massive internal migrations. As Adorno and Serner (2009) suggest, the choice of localizing heavy

impactful industrial plants in the South was mainly due to geographic advantages – abundance of water and already operational harbours, but had as an invariable outcome the destruction of pre-existing economic activities (agriculture, fish farming, etc.) and the erasure of alternative economic possibilities, turning each site into a specific industrial *monoculture*. In the last five decades, Taranto gradually became a ‘sacrifice zone’, i.e. an area with a high concentration of polluting activities variously linked to steel production - a refinery, waste landfills, illegal dumping sites – accompanied by the annihilation of fisheries and tourism, and the progressive degradation of the urban environment. The normalization of this model of economic dependency and environmental sacrifice, which condemned Taranto to the job blackmail, may be explained as a result of an internal colonization process, by which the people of Taranto had internalized their subalternity by representing themselves as ‘backward people’, and thus welcomed the opportunity of accessing ‘modernity’ by means of State-led industrialization (Petrusewicz, 2014). This explains why the Italsider plant, inaugurated in 1964, benefitted from a virtually unanimous consensus by political parties and social actors. The mayor Angelo Morelli, for example, recounts how ‘the atmosphere in Taranto was festive, we were proud to be part of such an important project. We were so poor that we would have built the factory even in Vittoria Square [centre of the downtown area]’ (quoted in Pavone, 2014, p. 33). Still in the early 1980s, two decades after the first casting, former Italsider worker’s daughter M. P. remembers the factory consensus as follows: ‘When I was a kid everybody literally revered the factory – not only workers – because it brought wealth, economic security. People would shout “long live Italsider”, in Taranto but also in the whole region. Not so today, of course’.

Nevertheless, the production of environmental injustice in Taranto can only be fully understood by adding to the equation the generalized acceptance of a rigid sexual division of labour. In fact, the paradigm of industrial development described above intersected with a deeply patriarchal value system in allowing the emergence of a (male) working class that gained the status of a social protagonist through a productivist identity. At the same time, a masculine narrative about the provision of steel for national development accompanied and justified the workers’ ‘sacrifice’ as breadwinners in a risky job for the wellbeing of their families. As former Italsider worker C. P. recalls:

... the workplace was unhealthy, we knew somehow. All that dirt on the clothes, and the constant coughing ... But I was an ILVA worker, I felt the factory as my own. Myself and my workmates, we were recognized by everybody outside and envied by many (because we made more money, sure, but it wasn’t just that: there was a feeling of emancipation involved).

This extraordinarily enduring and resilient narrative of sacrifice and reward constituted the basis for a strong and progressive conflict between workers and management at the wage/collective bargaining level, which allowed a steady increase of income and employment levels throughout the 1970s. Nevertheless, such confrontational class politics in Taranto rested on a discursive framework in which the contribution given by domestic and care labour to social reproduction (and, along with it, the sacrifice of women’s social emancipation) were completely silenced. Such silencing eventually translated into an undisputed hegemony of *risk monetization*, i.e. the politics of accepting occupational hazards in exchange for wage increases. In short, the widespread social consensus that ILVA enjoyed, as the only viable economic opportunity for the people of Taranto, reflected a patriarchal value system that undervalued reproductive labour and that only attributed political agency to three social subjects: a male working class, a male management, and an equally male political elite. Conflicts arose between them but did not fundamentally modify the underlying structure, deeply marked by a silent yet coercive sexual division of labour between gendered subjectivities, e.g. male breadwinners vs. female

housekeepers/care-providers, thus reinforcing the invisibilization of reproduction (both domestic and social) and its subordination to industrial production.

Things began to change in the early 2000s, when struggles at the point of reproduction, exemplified by a convergence of public-health and environmental activism, shook the productivist normality of the cognitively dissonant worker. Women played a prominent role in this phase, by leading or actively participating in old and new organizations and local committees. The most significant among them was the organization *Donne per Taranto* [Women for Taranto], founded in 2009, which sought to raise awareness about public-health issues related to the widespread pollution of the city, and particularly of the Tamburi neighbourhood, and promoting petitions for the public-health. *Donne per Taranto* was inspired by a feminist collective named Health and Environment Committee [*Comitato Salute e Ambiente*] that had been founded in Cornigliano (home to one of the four ILVA plants in Italy) in the mid-eighties. After 20 years of struggle, the collective had obtained the closure of the heat treatment area of the local ILVA plant, without any worker being laid off (Alfonso & Avagnina, 2006). By taking the political initiative against environmental injustice, the women of Cornigliano had questioned the sexual division of labour and opened the possibility to re-politicize the economy by connecting production with reproduction struggles.

In Taranto, women's activism in the 2000s was documented in a movie called *The Turning Point – Women against ILVA* [La svolta – donne contro l'ILVA], by the local journalist Valentina D'Amico, released in 2010. The movie was instrumental in breaking the veil of silence and acceptance of the job blackmail on various levels, including that of denouncing the scandalous violations of labour rights and active discrimination against dissenting employees that were common practice within the company after privatization. Overall, however, the refusal of ILVA (as expressed by the very title of the film) was mainly elaborated as a refusal of the employment vs. public-health trade-off, especially with regards to the new generations. In the testimony of Caterina, mother of an infant born with leukaemia, the silent acceptance of the sexual division of labour on the part of Taranto's women is torn apart. As she recounts:

My father worked at ILVA. The company allowed us to live a comfortable life, my two brothers and I could study. We never lacked anything. If this is the price, though, then I would probably prefer a tough life, with no comforts. A sick child is too high of a price to pay.⁴

This phase also saw the active mobilization of environmentalist groups, chief among them the organization *Peacelink*, which issued a worrisome report on dioxin emissions in 2007. Such dossier documented that the ILVA plant in Taranto – alone – emitted 90.3% of the dioxin emitted by the entire Italian industrial system (Peacelink, 2014).

ILVA workers were inevitably affected by this process of collective awakening. The convergence between environmental and public-health struggles at the territorial level, accompanied by data collection, popular epidemiology, and campaigning, produced a disruptive effect on the *dispositif* of cognitive dissonance and on the masculinist narrative of industrial development described above. In an interview, collected for another film documentary called *Lungs of Steel* [Polmoni di Acciaio] (produced by *Peacelink* in 2014), an ILVA steelworker recounts how he and his workmates were suddenly struck by the discovery that their 'sacrifice' – as breadwinners and workers in a risky job – had been meaningless, because industrial toxins had escaped the factory gates and got into their children's bodies through the mother's milk.⁵

The most important, and unexpected, outcome of this first cycle of environmental justice struggles in Taranto was the judicial enquiry that eventually led to a court sentence, issued in 2012, which found ILVA's management *guilty of environmental and public health disaster* and

ordered the shutting off of most furnaces at the steel plant. Reflecting the spirit of a decade of activism in the sphere of reproduction, the preliminary hearing judge, Patrizia Todisco, decided that:

There is no room for ILVA to make lesser proposals regarding measures to be taken and sums to be spent. The goods in question - public health, life and environment, and even the right to decent work without compromising the health of a human being - do not allow for bargaining. (Todisco in Leone, 2012)

The disruptive effect of this sentence should not be underestimated. It allowed a new awareness to emerge in Taranto, breaking once and for all the masculinist narrative of industrial development by revealing its colonial nature and the environmental discrimination on which it was premised. Betrayed by the Government in their legitimate quest for an equitable reparation of the damage inflicted by ILVA, Taranto people (including most workers at ILVA) could now perceive themselves as second-class citizens, whose constitutional rights had no value compared to private and public economic interests. The comparison with Genoa-Cornigliano was illuminating and fomented a bitter disappointment not only with the Italian Government but also with the politics of grassroots environmental activism. As S. F., an activist of the Donne per Taranto committee, commented:

a way out from the steel monoculture was being envisaged in Genoa as early as the 1980s. Taranto, on the contrary, was and continued to be sacrificed. What's worst, the closure of the heat treatment area in Cornigliano was accepted [by the company] in exchange for a dramatic increase of production (and pollution!) here. Our politicians, industrialists, and union leaders have been complicit in that trade-off, and are responsible for the disaster of this city.

This bitter disappointment helps explain why the 2012 sentence was a landmark in the history of the city. For the first time in five decades, it became legitimate to question the job blackmail not only at the community level but also, and most notably, *from within* the factory. Even though the sentence was never fully implemented – only two out of four operating blast furnaces were actually shut down, while production continued with increased intensity – it played a key leverage force in the rise of working-class environmentalism in Taranto. The inherent contradictions between production, reproduction, and ecology, embodied by generations of Taranto's workers and citizens via the contamination of their community, became the terrain from which the economy could be re-politicized in different forms. A decade of environmental justice activism had finally allowed the ecological consciousness of the working-class community to cross the factory gates, generating new forms of union mobilization.

Union politics in Taranto before and after 2012

The new phase of environmental justice activism which had begun in the early 2000s must be located in the context of a significant shift in the management of Italsider, after its privatization (1995), when the company was bought for a fraction of its market value by entrepreneur Emilio Riva and renamed ILVA. The privatization led to a profound modification of the workforce structure: older unionized workers joined pre-retirement programmes and were replaced by young workers with no experience in confrontational industrial relations. This shift entailed a massive process of employment casualization, whose main implication was a further weakening of the unions (Nistri, 2013), which led them to fully embrace non-confrontational bargaining and surrender to job blackmailing even in the absence of monetary compensation. At the same time, a new generation of unionists formed in ILVA, with no link to the risk monetization framework, and began to denounce the company management in respect of environmental and public-health crimes. Soon enough, these new delegates

became aware of how the job blackmail rested upon an extensive system of unions' corruption and connivance with management, evidence of which came out in 2007, seriously damaging the reputation and popularity of the confederal unions (Pavone, 2014). Unfortunately, the efforts of the new delegates to reform the system from within the left wing of the metalworker's union (FIOM) were unsuccessful: they received no support from the national leadership, and four of them ended up being expelled.⁶

The turning point for the ILVA male workers thus only occurred in 2012, just after the sentence against the company had been pronounced. Initially, the majority of workers protested against the court decision: on July 26th, more than 8000 ILVA employees took to the streets to demand that the plant be kept in operation. Deeply concerned that the partial closure of the factory ordered by the magistrates would threaten their livelihoods, angry demonstrators shouted: 'If the judges shut off the furnaces, we'll all go feeding our families at their homes!' (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2012). All the confederal unions joined the management in this massive demonstration, which paralysed the city for the whole day, and caught the attention of national and international broadsheets.

A week later, though, a different kind of demonstration took place, one that for the first time expressed a refusal of the job blackmail on the part of ILVA workers themselves. At a rally organized by the national Union Confederation CGIL-CISL-UIL, and that was supposed to conclude with speeches from the three General Secretaries, a self-proclaimed Committee of Free and Reflective Citizens and Workers [Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti (CCLLP)] made a surprise appearance from within the crowd. Surrounded by activists from the independent rank-and-file Cobas union and from occupied social centres in town, and accompanied by thousands of people chanting the motto 'no to the poisoners', the CCLLP made its way to the stage onboard a three-wheeler. Here, one of the dissenting FIOM delegates expelled in 2007, Cataldo Ranieri, took the microphone and addressed the unions' General Secretaries on behalf of the CCLLP, accusing them of complicity with the company owners, and declaring the Committee's support to the court's sentence. In their vision, the State should be required to guarantee the existing employment levels and the protection of environmental and public health through the immediate release of extensive funding for clean-up operations (CCLLP, 2012).

This liberating explosion of dissent against the Confederal Unions opened entirely new social dynamics and a process of cultural and political re-framing which is not yet concluded. Our ethnographic conceptual topology is built around this unprecedented re-framing of union politics that was created by the environmental justice sentence of 2012 (Figure 1).

Figure 1 represents the possible re-framing of union politics in a working-class community where environmental justice activism has taken place, creating a historical discontinuity and the possibility for 'differently politicizing the economy'. The outer circle represents the working-class community, while the inner square represents the trade-union organizations operating within it. The left side of the environmental justice line represents what typically dominates working-class communities, i.e. job blackmail, and those trade-union organizations (in our case the Confederal Unions) that accept its logic. The right side represents working-class environmentalism, intended as the politics of challenging job blackmail by bridging environmental justice and labour activism and enacting a repositioning of working-class unity around the primacy of reproduction. Two different types of trade-union organizations are located in this section: social (or community) unions (here, CCLLP), and rank-and-file unions (here, the USB).

Although reflecting social ethnography in Taranto, the scheme provides a tentative framework for comparative analyses on working-class ecology in general, as theorized in the first part of this article. In what follows, we give an account of the three trade-union positions that emerged in Taranto after 2012.

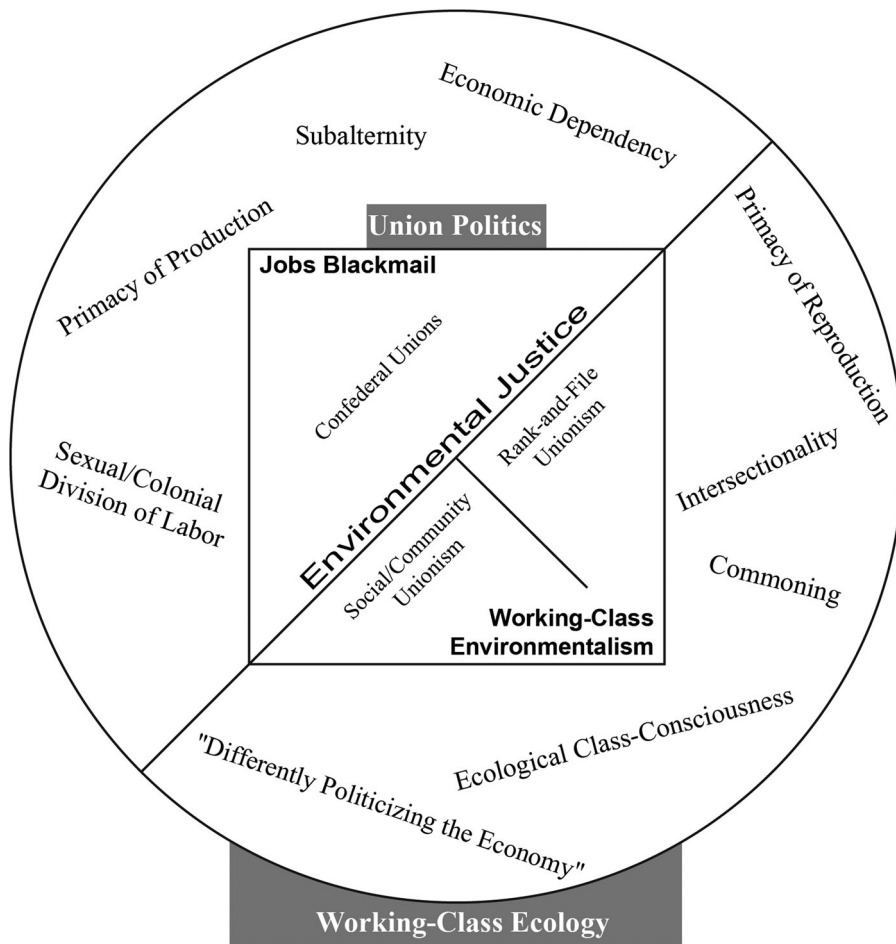


Figure 1. Working-class ecology and union politics in Taranto.

(1) Confederal Unions: Although the metalworkers' unions FIM-FIOM-UILM have regained a certain autonomy from company management, especially after the steel plant has been put under administration, and then temporarily nationalized, they still considered safeguarding current production (and employment) levels as a prerequisite for negotiation, while advocating possible 'environmentalization' of the plant via technical improvements. For example, Rocco Palombella the Secretary General of the moderate UILM, the most representative union in ILVA, declared: 'with 8 million tons of steel ILVA will produce wealth for Taranto and for the country, contributing to GDP growth while avoiding pollution' (Siderweb, 2016). This position reflects a consolidated productivist culture, which places the primacy of production over reproduction and ecology. As Democrat senator Muchetti, a consultant of the CGIL union, stated: "Two are the main objectives for the new ILVA. First, producing as much as possible, at least 8 million tons a year – possibly more – since this is necessary for the economic balance of the company [...] Second, opting for ecological research and investments so that it becomes possible to produce clean steel, which is to say to respect environmental regulations in terms of pollutants emissions' (Muchetti, 2017). The hierarchy of priorities – production first, emissions reduction second – is undisputed.

The assumption of eco-compatibility is predicated upon technological innovations such as Direct-Reduced Iron (DRI), an industrial procedure still unexplored in Europe, by which the use of several lethal pollutants throughout the steel-making process would be significantly reduced. Such option found expression in a detailed restructuring plan presented in 2014 by then ILVA Commissioner Enrico Bondi. Maintaining the increase of production capacity as a primary aim, the plan represented an attempt to significantly improve environmental records, and was strongly supported by the Confederal Unions, but it was rejected by the Government and the Riva family on the grounds that the DRI process represented an investment too big and risky for a 50-year-old plant, which was already wasting money at 2.5 million Euros a day in 2015 (Borrillo, 2016). Nonetheless, the Confederal Unions have reiterated their support for this plan, in view of a shared vision of the future of Taranto as one indissolubly linked to the expansion of ILVA. The Confederal Unions appear to completely endorse the perverse business logic that supports this discourse. As FIOM delegate F.M. explains:

in order to make the necessary investments to implement DRI-based technological innovations, ILVA must be fully operational and profitable – thus the need to increase production. Only in case it might become evident that DRI does not work, then production would be stopped.

(2) Social (or Community) Unionism: On the opposite side of our conceptual topology is the active endorsement of reproduction as the foundation of a different politicization of both the unions' role and of Taranto's economy, represented by the CCLLP. We can consider this as a type of 'social unionism', i.e. the *space of connection* in which struggles at the point of production and conflicts at the point of reproduction converge (De Nicola & Quattrocchi, 2016). As Hardt (2016) suggests, social unionism reconfigures the link between politics and economy by stressing their reciprocal internality as different but interdependent instances of commoning. Significantly, the Committee members refer to themselves as citizens *and* workers; in the course of five years of campaigning, the social composition of the movement has expanded from its original core (ILVA ex-unionists) to a nebulous *ensemble* of different subjects: younger ILVA (and also non-ILVA, often precarious) workers, the unemployed, residents of particularly affected neighbourhoods, students, and engaged civil society (e.g. paediatricians, physicians, and academics). In short, the Committee seems to perform an extended class identity along community and ecological interrelations (Barca & Leonardi, 2016). This extended performance of working-class subjectivity has allowed an ecological class consciousness to emerge in Taranto, and to decisively contest the job blackmail, along with the sexual and colonial divisions of labour that normalized it. Breaking with the consolidated unions' vision of undisputed link between production and employment, the Committee has asked for the State to guarantee employment levels by hiring the current ILVA workforce in extensive clean-up operations, while allowing community actors to design a long-term reconversion plan for a non-steel-based development. As C.R., a CCLLP activist and ILVA worker, contends: 'We are not eager to close the factory; where do you think my income comes from? I have no intention to lose my job. At the same time, we just can't ignore that our line of work kills our kids'. The immediacy of a public-health crisis which is making Taranto's children sick at an alarming pace is what makes the Committee as well as most environmental associations concerned about technological fixes like the DRI advocated by the Confederal Unions. Beyond the uncertainty about its effectiveness, the fact that implementing the DRI would take many years is considered an unsustainable option for Taranto (Peacelink, 2016). The Committee argues that citizens and workers should be the ones to decide about production issues, namely what, how, when, how much, where to produce. The 'economy' belongs to the community, and not vice versa.

(3) Rank-and-file Unionism: The third trade-union position in our conceptual topology is represented by the newly formed USB rank-and-file union [*Unione Sindacale di Base*], which attempts to actively resist job blackmailing *from within* the traditional workplace union. USB has been active in ILVA since December 2012 and its leadership has been close to the Committee during the summer and fall of 2012. As Francesco Rizzo, local USB Secretary, recalls: ‘In 2012, on August 2nd, I was on the three-wheeler. I actually do not know why they [the Committee] did not try to set up a union alternative to FIM-FIOM-UILM. The basic reasoning of USB is this: we did not protest *the* union or politics in general. We fought *that* union model and *that* way of doing politics. Our position was clear: if I say no to the union or politics in general, then I am an anarchist and the whole thing is self-referential chaos. So we asked: ‘ok, we have fought CGIL, CISL and UIL. Workers are with us for the most part – it was massive that day. But are we capable of building an alternative for these workers?’ You know, in the end you go back to the shop floor, to normal life and in the jungle of labour law in Italy workers need a union. So we put forward this argument and the other comrades [Committee’s founders] said they were not interested. So I started the whole thing with one comrade and now we have 1,000 members in ILVA and over 4,000 across the city’.

USB’s membership and recognition within the factory has grown steadily over the past four years, just as much as the social legitimacy gained by the CCLLP at the territorial level. However, their paths do not cross, the main bone of contention being the *political role of the union*. While they share a focus on the nexus deindustrialization-reconversion, USB asks for a full nationalization of the plant. Moreover, while the Committee is considering the possibility to get involved in municipal elections, USB sees itself as a purely labour organization, whose tasks are clearly detached from those of political actors. In a sense, this controversy revives an old ideological disagreement within the revolutionary traditions of the labour movement: whereas the CCLLP proclaims the primacy of socio-economic conflicts over their political composition (i.e. anarcho-sindicalism), the USB believes that workplace oppositions led by unions can acquire political consistency only through an overarching party line (i.e. Lenin’s vanguardism). To summarise, the Committee believes that envisaging a political alternative for Taranto is a process which cannot be disentangled from the struggles at the point of reproduction and the spreading of an ecological class consciousness within ILVA. The USB, on the other hand, maintains that a connection between the two is desirable but in no way necessary: the union exists to protect and expand workers’ rights, while the design of industrial policy belongs to politics and unions should not be directly involved in it.

At the time of writing (April 2017) anti-ILVA organizations in Taranto share a common political vision of how ‘the economy’ should be re-signified and redesigned, but they diverge in terms of organizational forms and strategies. Nevertheless, what matters most is that the normality of the job blackmail is irreversibly broken, challenging a system that had tied together capital and labour in a productivist front against reproduction and ecology for more than half a century. The outcome of this re-framing process will depend on the unity of the working-class environmentalist front, and on its ability to turn its new vision into a shared political strategy.

Conclusions

We have sought to demonstrate how, by including environmental justice in its sphere of analysis, Environmental Labour Studies can make sense of the internal relations between work and ecology in the experience of working-class communities. We have theorized working-class ecology as characterized by a colonial division of labour, which undervalues the bodies and environments of working-class people, and by a sexual division of labour, aimed at subordinating reproduction to production

imperatives. This has allowed us to understand environmental justice as a class issue, in which environmental and social inequalities are inextricably connected, thus also allowing to link struggles at the point of production with those in the sphere of reproduction and ecology. Finally, we have shown how working-class environmentalism, emerging from a recomposition of political subjectivities around the primacy of reproduction, is what allows to contest the normality of the job blackmail and re-politicize the economy as a site for becoming.

We hope this paper also demonstrates how an adequate analysis of labour environmentalism cannot rest exclusively with the study of official (confederal) unionism, but needs to embrace those working-class subjectivities which contest consolidated union visions and practices to enact different forms of politicization of ‘the economy’. In this new political space, which opens up in connection with the experience of environmental justice, we have located social (or community) unionism and rank-and-file unionism in view of their shared refusal of the job blackmail. In doing so, we have built a conceptual topology that may be of use to those scholars who will want to look at working-class ecologies in different contexts and make sense of how unions’ politics can be reframed along the perspective of environmental justice.

Notes

1. See for example the Climate Policy Equity Framework put forward by UC Berkeley’s Labor Center: <http://labourcenter.berkeley.edu/advancing-equity/>
2. We present here only a selection of interviews from a larger archive, still under construction.
3. The other three ILVA plants, all on the Western coast, were located in Bagnoli (Campania), Piombino (Tuscany), and Genoa-Cornigliano (Liguria).
4. More testimonies are collected in the recently published book – and theatrical pièce – *Rose d’acciaio* (Natalini & Bisconti, 2016).
5. *Lungs of Steel – Local Resistance Against Global Injustices*. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNK7br4nlYE>
6. This story, confirmed by official FIOM documentations, was told to us by one of the expelled delegates, Massimo Battista.

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