

In the name of science and technology: the post-political environmental debate on the Taranto steel plant (Italy)

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Abstract

"This article contributes to the environmental justice debate by analyzing the case of ILVA in Taranto (Italy). It accounts for the radical polarization of the public debate between industrialists and environmentalists. These dominant perspectives are polarized but not politicized. In the reading of the crisis, both fronts adopt similar techno-scientific arguments while failing to problematize the multiple dimensions of environmental injustice and to connect the crisis to the broader social relations of production. The article contends therefore that the environmental debate in Taranto unfolds in a post-political scenario, where technical narratives prevail at the expense of more political positions. In this context, any attempts to politicize the public debate is either absorbed by the dominant views or marginalized.

Keywords: environmental debate, post-politics, environmental justice, Taranto, steel production.

1. Introduction

In May 2016, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg opened proceedings against the Italian State for allegedly having failed to protect the life and health of the citizens of Taranto (Southern Italy)¹ from the emissions of the ILVA steel plant. The publicly owned steel complex appeared problematic from an environmental perspective since its establishment in 1959. Nonetheless, developmental ambitions and employment concerns prevailed over concerns about the environmental and health impacts of the plant; caught up in the dilemma between employment and environment, Taranto soon chose the former. With the privatization of the industrial complex in 1995, the regulatory framework that had survived up to that point collapsed, and the environmental question started to enter the public agenda. The judicial decree issued in July 2012, ordering the confiscation of the plant amid accusations of ‘environmental disaster’, constituted a turning point for Taranto’s history.² Against the backdrop of a market situation characterized by worldwide overcapacity, decreasing consumption, and falling prices, the largest steel plant in Europe was also hit by the most serious socio-environmental crisis of its history. The subsequent government interventions, aimed at maintaining production and, at the same time, satisfying the magistrates’ requests for environmental protection, further heated the confrontation.

This article contributes to the environmental justice debate by analyzing the case of ILVA in Taranto. It first accounts for the radical polarization of the public debate between industrialists and environmentalists. Their discourse continues to be based on similar technical and post-political arguments that end up eliding themselves, but also annihilating the capacity of other actors to elaborate and endorse a political reading of the crisis. The public debate in Taranto appears, in other words, polarized but not politicized. Second, the article reveals how the prevailing stances find it

¹ Proceedings were requested by 182 Taranto’s citizens.

² After five years of extraordinary public management, in June 2017 the Italian government decided to start a negotiation with AM Investco (a joint venture between the Indian group ArcelorMittal and the Italian company Marcegaglia) whose bid to purchase ILVA surpassed the one proposed by another joint venture consisting of the Indian group Jindal, the Italian Arvedi-Delvecchio and the CdP (a financial company participated in by the Italian State).

difficult to problematize the multiple dimensions of environmental injustice and to conceptualize them in connection with the social consequences of production. Besides the lack of acknowledgment of the different responsibilities and vulnerabilities in the processes of production, restructuring, or closure, such stances seem unable to consider the contradictions involved in the process of capitalist accumulation and to recognize the social nature of environmental governing arrangements.

The article contends that the environmental debate in Taranto unfolds in a *post-political scenario* where technical narratives have prevailed at the expense of more political positions. Any attempts to politicize the public debate have either been absorbed by the dominant views, or marginalized because they mimicked the use of an over-technical language and defused the political dimension of their own narrative in order to find public legitimization.

By reviewing the literature, section two analyses the most influential perspectives of the environmental debate which are useful in grasping the positions animating the public discussion in Taranto. Section three shows that, despite the emergence of additional political perspectives in the environmental arena, the politicization of the environmental issues is far from being a given, as technical and unpolitical framing and solutions often prevail. After describing the area's long-lasting environmental problems in section four, section five outlines the environmental debate in Taranto as it has developed since 2012. It analyses the prevailing positions and discourses and it seeks to grasp the contours of alternative viewpoints that have aimed to politicize such a debate. A discussion of the research results is presented in section six: it provides evidence of the polarization of the dispute in Taranto and, at the same time, it reveals the inability of more political readings to emerge. Finally, section seven draws some conclusions.

From a methodological perspective, the article uses Taranto as a crucial case study to investigate the contours of the public debate which unfolds during environmental and social crises. Despite the magnitude of Taranto's situation, this research speaks for the numerous similar cases in which

socio-economic and environmental crises evolve simultaneously³. The article builds on the analysis of policy documents, technical reports, news coverage, online resources, and on sixteen interviews carried out in the period of 2012-2017. The document analysis was used to identify the relevant voices shaping the public debate around the socio-environmental crisis of the area after the production stoppage (2012). It focused mainly on moments of perceived increased contentiousness, such as after the government's interventions to authorize the continuation of production or the aftermath of street demonstrations. Data collection, familiarity with the context⁴ and daily interactions with the local community allowed for a preliminary detection of the relevant actors participating in the public debate and for an understanding of the contours of the diverse positions. At the same time, five semi-structured interviews with local experts⁵ were carried out to further deepen the knowledge of such positions and to assess their relative prevalence in the debate. Both data sources (document analysis and semi-structured interviews) highlighted a Manichean debate with contrasting environmentalist and industrialist fronts. However, data also showed the existence of nuanced viewpoints in between the two more consolidated perspectives. Their differentiated understanding of the environmental crisis in Taranto deserved further investigation. Therefore, targeted interviews were carried out with representatives of the groups that appeared to disclose an alternative reading of the crisis⁶; these interviews aimed to reconstruct in detail their positions and their strategies to displace or influence dominant narratives. In addition, six interviews were also carried out with those actors that reflected the views of industrialists and environmentalists⁷. The logic of the interviews' selection aimed at the saturation of the different voices in Taranto's public

³ Taranto is host to the largest steel plant in Europe –ILVA– upon which it is dependent, as steel production represents 75% of the provincial GDP (*Il Sole 24 ore*, 2015). At the same time, Taranto experiences higher-than-average regional rates of mortality for various diseases and of soil and air pollution.

⁴ One of the authors carried out extensive academic research in Taranto (Dunford and Greco, 2007; Greco and Di Fabbio, 2014; Chiarello and Greco, 2016).

⁵ They included two economic journalists and writers, one former plant manager, an economic historian specializing in the steel sector and industrial relations, and one of the most voted-for local politicians to the Regional Assembly.

⁶ Specifically, five semi-structured interviews were carried out with the representatives of the trade union FIOM-CGIL, the environmental group Legambiente, and the political party Rifondazione Comunista (PRC). Attempts to contact the representatives of the Committee of Free and Reflective Citizens and Workers (CFRCW) were unsuccessful; however, their online communications and public statements during demonstrations were carefully scrutinized.

⁷ Interviews involved one of the representatives of the local business association, three among the most publicly committed environmentalists, and two ILVA's workers who are also involved in civic associations.

debate rather than at their representativeness (Small, 2009). The fieldwork was stopped when it appeared reasonably clear that further interviews would not have disclosed new and different perspectives on the crisis. The fieldwork was carried out in a reflexive and iterative manner through a continuous exchange between empirical research and theoretical analysis (Burawoy, 1998).

2. Environmental crises between modernization, justice and politics

The following section provides insights into the theoretical development of the environmental debate over time and allows for reflection upon the contours of the conflict currently ongoing in Taranto. Early forms of environmentalism were inspired by what Martinez-Alier (2002) described as the ‘cult of wilderness’: it deals with a form of *deep ecology* that calls for the protection of nature on the basis of its sacredness, the right of other species to live, and the incommensurability of these values with any potential economic gain that could be triggered through the commodification of the environment.

In the late 1980s, the development of the Ecological Modernization Theory (EMT) provided a new perspective from which to address environmental concerns without problematizing the causes of environmental deterioration (Spaargaren and Mol, 1992). Starting from the assumption that economic growth and environmental protection are not inherently in contradiction with each other, the EMT contends that environmental crises could be addressed without abandoning the path of modernization (*ibidem.*). It also suggests that science, technology and economic dynamics are crucial elements for ecological restructuring. Specifically, two intertwined processes pave the way to ecological modernization: first, the “ecologization of the economy” that is achieved mainly through applying new clean technologies to production; and second, the process of “economizing ecology”, which urges economic actors to internalize the environmental externalities of their production (*ibidem.*:335).

Early versions of the EMT focussed mainly on firms' adjustment to environmental crises by adopting labour- and energy-saving technologies (Christoff, 2006). Later on, new contributions stressed the role of public policies and regulations, environmental movements, and critical-thinking consumers that actively foster efficiency and rationalization strategies (Andersen and Massa, 2000; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008). In this perspective, the potential advancements in eco-friendly production depend on the overall transformation of the institutional architecture and the functioning of modern societies: in particular, the State should abandon hyper-regulation and move towards preventive policies and participatory processes of policy-making, as well as towards the enhancement of consumers' and producers' sound practices. It should also valorise market mechanisms (through incentive-based policies and monitoring activities) since they are considered intrinsically more efficient in tackling environmental problems (Mol, 1995). The EMT provides a comprehensive belief and a value system (Christoff, 2006) that seemingly accommodates the claims of environmentalist movements while legitimizing the existing relations of production (Hajer, 1995). Indeed, it is both a pragmatic political programme for change and a theory of social transformation. As a political programme, ecological modernization includes all transformations aiming to modify production and consumption processes through the introduction of greener technologies, economic valuation of environmental externalities, stricter monitoring of production cycles, the promotion of recycling, and eco-friendly institutions (Andersen, 1994; Hajer, 1995; Mol, 1995). As a social theory, the EMT draws on the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1994) to contend that modernity causes growing environmental deterioration but, at the same time, it is capable of addressing and overcoming such self-created problems (Buttel, 2000). In this vision, EMT and the concept of sustainable development overlap; despite the differences existing between the two frameworks, they share the fundamental assumption that an ecological transformation of society can be achieved without a radical change in the model of capitalist accumulation (Blowers, 1998; Magnani, 2012).⁸

⁸ According to Blowers (1998), the EMT is a weak form of sustainable development as it does not tackle questions such as the

Nonetheless, the ‘gospel of eco-efficiency’ that inspires ecological modernizers does not problematize the uneven distribution of environmental goods and burdens that are inevitably produced by economic growth (Martinez-Alier, 2002). The protection of the environment is not just a matter of ‘getting the price right’ and fostering technological innovation through incentives; it also requires distributional and procedural justice (Todd and Zografos, 2005). The environmental justice perspective started therefore to consider both the distribution of hazardous facilities and the structure of potential environmental risks, quality of air, access to food and water, green spaces, and transport (Taylor, 2000); it also incorporated global environmental concerns, such as the uneven effects of climate change and the consumption of resources (Walker, 2009). The initial focus on black communities and ethnic minorities as major victims of the unjust distribution of environmental burdens shifted towards new and different categories, i.e. class and gender (Buckingham and Kulkur, 2009; Di Chiro, 2008; Davoudi and Brooks, 2014).

The acknowledgment of the existence of multiple vulnerabilities and of several objects of analysis increased the opportunities for environmental perspectives to go beyond mere distributional inquiries (Cutter, 1995). Pollution and environmental risks affect different social groups in different ways according to the resources and power that are available to them. Even a uniform distribution of environmental burdens can be perceived as unjust by certain social groups if they consider the decision-making process causing it to be illegitimate (Walker, 2009). Therefore, the analysis of environmental justice is not a question of mere proximity to polluting facilities, since “pollution is socially contextualized” (Walker, 2009:620) and multiple dimensions of injustice can be at play. In other words, distributional impacts of environmental burdens and benefits may vary according to the distribution of vulnerabilities (Davoudi and Brooks, 2014).

Consistent with this idea, a major conceptual shift occurred, from a distributional to a multidimensional idea of environmental justice which draws on the extensive literature of

distributional effects of ecological changes and the relationship between global South and North in the new wave of eco-modernization.

procedural justice in the realm of political theory. While the first generation of the environmental justice approach built on the liberal perspective of ‘justice as fairness’ (Rawls, 1971), new contributions integrated distributional issues with an analysis of the processes that create maldistribution and the political conditions that cause it (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1997; 1998). If Rawls looked at procedures and schemes to achieve justice in an abstract, albeit highly sophisticated, model of liberal society, Fraser and Young looked at the social, institutional, political and symbolic contexts that impede certain ideal schemes from working fairly. For such scholars, maldistribution is caused by the lack of recognition – expressed in terms of insult, degradation and stigmatization at the individual and collective levels – of the social differences affecting marginalized groups; it is thus nurtured by the practices of domination and oppression embedded in the institutional, social and political structures that marginalize certain social groups. The relevance of distributional justice is not questioned, but the focus shifts towards social relations and institutions that first shape recognition and then affect distributional patterns. Yet, the focus on recognition brings to the fore a third dimension of justice: truly democratic and inclusive decision-making is a necessary condition for distributional justice and it cannot exist when institutional and cultural forms of misrecognition and exclusion persist (Young, 1990). Participation parity is, thus, a condition for both reducing institutionalized oppression and misrecognition and a means to gaining a more just distribution (Fraser, 1998). As Schlosberg (2007:29) clearly summarizes, justice is a “trivalent package” in which distribution of environmental goods and bads, participation in decision making, and the recognition of how various actors influence each other are equally crucial. Within the environmental justice framework, the linkages between environmental concerns and broader issues of identity and social justice are spelled out in the “environmentalism of the poor” literature (see among others Martinez-Alier, 2002; 2014; Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier, 2014). Such an approach epitomizes the multidimensional reality of environmental struggles by linking environmental preservation concerns with the protection of the livelihoods of specific and often economically vulnerable social groups. In these cases, poorer social groups build their livelihoods,

and even cultures and identities, in strong connection with—and dependence upon—the surrounding environment. Therefore, conflicts to protect the environment intertwine with struggles for social justice, human and social rights, identities, and the rejection of the economic commodification of nature.

In continuity with environmental justice practices, the political ecology approach challenges ‘apolitical ecologies’ that focus exclusively on resource scarcity and the physical limits to economic growth as the main features of environmental change and deterioration (Robbins, 2004). By contrast, political ecology looks explicitly at the linkages between the capitalist mode of accumulation, its social relations of production, and the environment. It emerges with the aim of deconstructing the objectivism applied to the analysis of environmental deterioration used by earlier environmental movements and ecological modernizers (Bridge et al., 2015). Political ecology combines ecological concerns and political economy approaches, outlining how political and socio-economic processes influence the way nature is transformed, perceived, and managed (Harvey, 1996; McCarthy et al., 2015; Smith, 1984; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003). In this framework, environmental conflicts are seen as social conflicts related to the environment (Le Billon, 2015) and analyses try to explicate how regimes of accumulation, relations of production and consumption, privatizations, class structure, and marketization processes shape the management and distribution of environmental resources and risks and trigger changes and social conflicts (Watts, 2015). Environmental issues are seen to have a socio-political character, and conflicts over resources, environmental deterioration and distributions are inherently political. While classical environmentalist discourses framed environmental risks as natural consequences of resource scarcity, political ecologists look at how resources are socially distributed and managed and how scarcity or risks are created for certain social groups, classes or races as compared to others, because of the position they hold in the structure of production (Robbins, 2004). In this perspective, the capitalist mode of production is a socio-economic as well as an environmental project; environmental changes are consequently the result of its accumulation regimes and of the social

relationships it builds upon (Castree, 2008). The ways in which nature is perceived, resources are managed, and environmental goods and bads are distributed are the result of a *socio-environmental metabolism* necessarily dependent on the specific set of social relationships within capitalist societies (Altvater, 1993; O'Connor, 1998). In this picture, environmental crises themselves become opportunities to foster further profit accumulation and deepen the unevenness of existing power relations and the unjust distribution of environmental deterioration effects (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007; Castree, 2008; Le Billon, 2015).

3. Politicized environment and post-political scenarios

While environmental justice and political ecology approaches problematize the relationships between social justice and ecology, capitalist economic growth and environmental degradation, an explicit politicization of environmental issues should not be taken for granted since technical approaches often supersede political arguments. Indeed, environmental crises are often framed under a managerial, technocratic, and consensual mode of governing, as the literature on post-political transition has insightfully recognized (Swyngedouw, 2009; 2010; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2014; Žižek, 1999). In this picture, the identification of problems and solutions often refers to technical knowledge and scientific, allegedly, objective data. The search for consensus on apparently 'win-win' solutions prevails, and the emphasis on common risks displaces and delegitimizes political divisions. Within such a framework, every social group officially has the same access to public spaces, which include even antithetical positions. However, such conflicting viewpoints must abide by the roles assigned and the common rules that make consensus-based policymaking possible. In other words, actors should not analyse, challenge and problematize the existing order of economic and social relations that led to the environmental crises if they want to be part of the policymaking process. Multi-stakeholder governance strategies, third-expert knowledge and technocratic management all contribute to expunging adversarial politics and social conflicts, leading to a "reduction of the political to the 'mode of governing'" (Swyngedouw,

2009:605). Such a scenario is inherently post-political since the framing of the problems, the configuration of actors, roles, powers and the policy solutions are pre-determined and cannot be challenged (Ranciere, 2006; 1998). By contrast, real conflict and dissent imply not only the existence of different interests and aims but also the possibility that new political subjects could emerge to challenge the current assignment of roles and propose new policy alternatives. The political moment arises precisely when “the given order of things is questioned, when those whose voice is only recognized as a noise by the police order claim the right to speak, acquire speech” (Swyngedouw, 2009:607; Ranciere, 1998). Therefore, whereas policymaking decides what the matter of public discussion is, what remains in the private domain, and who has the possibility to debate in the public political arena, politics “consists of calling the social/political, private/public divide into question” (Ranciere, 2004:7). Consequently, environmental politics should set justice and equality not only as normative goals but as founding principles by recognizing that all actors have an equal right to access the public debate and should acknowledge, therefore, the existence of conflicts among parties beyond the assigned configuration.

In the remaining sections of the paper we will explore the public debate unfolding around the environmental crisis of Taranto. We will unveil how, despite an apparent clear-cut polarization, the public debate obeys the rules of a post-political scenario.

4. Steel production and the environment in Taranto

Established in 1959 as a part of a wider project that ambitiously pursued the development of the Italian *Mezzogiorno* region and of a modern base industry deemed crucial for Italy’s expansion, the steel plant in Taranto was a gigantic complex next to the urban area (Greco and Di Fabbio, 2014)

(graph 1).⁹ Despite the restructuring and downsizing processes it underwent, particularly during the 1980s (similar to other Western steel industries), the Taranto plant has always played a key role in national steel production and, obviously, in the local economy.¹⁰ In 2015, it produced slightly less than five million tonnes of steel, employing around 14,000 workers while many others are indirectly involved.

ILVA has produced pollution and deaths since its creation¹¹, but the environmental question arose *de facto* only after its privatisation in 1995. Daily press accounts reported numerous cases of heavy pollution¹², as well as attempts on the part of management to solve the problem.¹³ The environmental impact of the plant was already apparent at that time but no local actor ever questioned it. ILVA produced wealth and well-being in Taranto, and its social consensus and economic power silenced all criticisms connected to its production. Additionally, at that time no system of pollution control existed, nor was an epidemiological map of the area drawn. Episodes of social mobilisation occurred both during the seventies (when some of ILVA's workers requested a healthier and safer workplace) and during the eighties (when a few demonstrations organised by Legambiente¹⁴ saw significant participation from steel workers), but they had no meaningful consequences (Corvace, 2011). It was only in 1990 that Taranto (which alone produced 92 per cent of the total Italian dioxin emissions) was declared a 'high environmental risk area', and only in 1998 did official documents, recalling a WHO research, certify the existence of a serious environmental and health situation (Greco and Di Fabbio, 2014). Arguably, a meaningful turning point in ILVA's history occurred in 1995 when it was sold to the private Riva Group. The

⁹ The plant size, 15 square kilometers, was (is) twice that of Taranto. Internally, there were (are) almost 200 km of rails and 50 km of streets.

¹⁰ In 2011, before the onset of the crisis, the plant produced nearly 8 million tonnes of steel—roughly 30% of the total Italian production (Colombo and Comito, 2013); its production accounted for 0.06% of the national GDP, around 7.5% of the regional GDP (*Inchiostro Verde*, 2012), and, as anticipated, 75% of the provincial GDP (*Il Sole 24 ore*, 2015).

¹¹ After 15 years of activity in 1974, 93 workers had died (Attino, 2012).

¹² These ranged from the illicit release of benzene in the plant soil in 1979 to the constant smoke emissions, to the production of dioxin dust which affected the surrounding environment. ILVA's mineral parks, located close to the city, amplified considerably the dispersion of dust in the air.

¹³ I.e. from the plantation of trees to render the plant invisible from the outside to the construction of a wall which never occurred for lack of financial resources.

¹⁴ Legambiente is an Italian environmental association which rose from the ashes of the first ecology groups and the anti-nuclear movement in the late-1970s.

privatization called into question the previous *status quo*, leading to the demise of the macro-economic pact which had involved the institutional, the economic and the social spheres and which had allowed the social reproduction of the steel accumulation process in Taranto, i.e. institutional and workers' acquiescence towards the company and its activity in exchange for job creation and protection and the persistence of political clienteles (Greco and Di Fabbio, 2014; Chiarello and Greco, 2016).¹⁵ From the environmental viewpoint the wicked compromise, which during public management had led to the community's tacit acceptance of the plant's huge environmental impact in exchange for improved general social and economic conditions, ceased to exist. Riva managed the plant firmly, not willing to make any compromises, and cultivated the ambition of plant self-sufficiency, even from its natural environment. However, such a choice could not have been without consequences: in the absence of a *do ut des*, but also because of a greater environmental and health consciousness, the local population started to question its presence and especially its environmental load (Chiarello and Greco, 2016; Leogrande, 2015). This occurred despite Riva's occupational blackmail, according to which any categorical requests addressing the environmental compatibility of the plant would have an immediate impact on production and workforce levels.¹⁶

In the socio-environmental dynamics taking place in Taranto, judicial interventions were also present but powerless. Following a 1982 sentence condemning ILVA's managers for pollution linked to the plant's mineral parks, in 2002 a crucial conjuncture emerged to re-balance the relationship between the plant and the city. The town hall, the province of Taranto, and Legambiente sued the company after a sentence that confiscated ILVA's mineral parks. However, nothing happened: local institutions gave up their requests for compensation as ILVA and the

¹⁵ The new management modified the composition of the local workforce by hiring young and non-unionised workers and dismissing older ones. It also put an end to the residual cultural activities funded by the company in the local community (Dunford and Greco, 2007).

¹⁶ For years, and differently from other steel plants in Europe, Riva refused to contribute financially to any system of pollution control. Concrete results required public money, the approval of the so-called anti-dioxin law (regional law 44/2008), and the setup of Taranto's Cancer Register in 2013.

Puglia Region subsequently signed two agreements through which they committed themselves to tackle the environmental issues in Taranto.¹⁷

As anticipated, one relevant event in the history of Taranto occurred on July 26, 2012 when a local magistrate ordered ILVA's closure, accusing its management and ownership of creating an environmental disaster. Government intervention¹⁸ on behalf of one of Italy's crucial industries resulted in a compromise that allowed the continuation of production together with a programme of interventions and investments towards the plant's environmental upgrading. Such a compromise satisfied national economic strategies, the local workforce (trapped in the employment blackmail), and the local institutions that, during more than fifty years, had not been able to design alternative development scenarios. However, according to Attino (2012), the confiscation hit Taranto deeply as it tore aside the veil of collective illusion under which the community had lived for half a century: ILVA might not be there forever. Consequently, the public debate became heated. Its key contours are examined in the next section.

5. Taranto's environmental debate between mainstream responses and politicizing voices

5.1. Modernization and closure in the name of science and technology

The environmental modernization of steel production in Taranto has emerged as the most prominent position in the public arena. This stance reflects a firm technological creed positing that the achievement of both environmental compatibility and the international competitiveness of the plant is possible. At the same time, this position contends that the economic future of the area is still linked to the industry, although efforts should be made to diversify its industrial base. The modernization position is supported by a wide range of actors, i.e. public institutions (national,

¹⁷ To this purpose 56 million euro of (public) funds were put aside.

¹⁸ To achieve this aim, the government approved a special law, n. 231/2012 called AIA (environmental integrated authorization).

regional and local governments), business associations (i.e. national and local *Confindustria*), trade unions and the majority of workers. Together they constitute the so-called ‘industrialist front’.

In these actors’ narratives ILVA’s sustainability is equated with its technological upgrading. Concretely, it takes various contours and may indeed be the result of a mix of strategies. First, the special law for ILVA envisages a number of technical interventions intended to ease the problem of industrial pollution. Spanning several years, and with a total financial commitment of 3,5 billion euro, these interventions require that the mineral parks and the conveyor belts – the main sources of pollution- be covered and the blast furnaces modernized with the installation of modern filters. Another technical answer to the crisis comes from those who push for a more radical solution for the plant’s sustainability. This lies in a process of restructuring involving the replacement of mineral ore with shale gas as the raw material used to feed the plant. This option was considered by the plant managers and was strongly supported, for instance, by the President of the Puglia Region, Emiliano. At the 2015 climate conference in Paris, he hinted that: «ILVA could restructure its production system with greener technologies. The use of natural gas would lead Puglia out of the carbon grip» (*La Repubblica*, 2015).

In any case, as a trade unionist underlined:

*Technological solutions exist and can also be applied to the ILVA plant; why are other steel plants in Europe and in the world compatible with their local areas and here this becomes a problem or something that cannot be done? The plant closure based on this argument would be complete nonsense.*¹⁹

The faith in the possibilities offered by technical progress is so robust that personal stories and experiences seem to passionately rely on it. As a manager of an important local business association stressed:

¹⁹ FIOM-CGIL trade union representative, interview with authors, Taranto, March 2, 2017.

*The child of one of my relatives had a serious health problem ... so I know what we're talking about. Also my children live in Taranto. I'd be irresponsible to talk about the plant's sustainability if I did not believe in it.*²⁰

The sense of responsibility towards the area and its inhabitants emerges strongly in the discourse of industrialists; at the same time, this is the major weakness attributed to environmental groups who are accused of being detached from the concrete life experiences of the locals. The past responsibility of the previous ILVA management is considerably diluted whilst there remains confidence that things will definitely change in the future. In the words of the above mentioned manager:

*There's been a rush to discredit the private owner. Well, I perfectly remember that when ILVA was owned by the State, it polluted in the same way and even more, but nobody had anything to say. Past responsibilities fall on everyone who had public roles ... The future will be different: from now on, everybody will have to do their own part.*²¹

By contrast, a great number of Taranto's citizens, whose concerns have been voiced by several environmental groups (from the early founded *Peacelink* and *Fondo Anti-diossina* to *Legamjonici*, to the more recently born *Genitori Tarantini* and *Verità per Taranto*), have advocated for ILVA's closure and for the end of the area's dependence upon the steel industry (Greco and Di Fabbio, 2014). Any argument concerning the plant's ecological sustainability is strongly rejected. On the contrary, they appeal to scientific evidence to support the enduring impact of industrial pollution in the city and advance stances of distributive environmental justice. As a local environmentalist underlined and an ex-ILVA manager now speaking for ecologists stressed, respectively:

²⁰ Local branch of Confindustria representative, interview with authors, Taranto, May 16, 2017.

²¹ Local branch of Confindustria representative, interview with authors, Taranto, May 16, 2017.

*As an integrated steel plant, ILVA is a source of multiple polluting emissions [dioxins, PM10 (dusters), PAHs²² (especially benzo-(a)pyrene)] which have devastating environmental and health effects... in addition Taranto is host to ENI [a petrol company], Cementir [concrete company] and they also want to build a pipeline for Basilicata's petrol ... they simply don't realize that this is an explosive situation.*²³

And

*ILVA's situation is unsolvable because of its many, basic, technical problems. The dimensional aspect is crucial... I know the plant very well and I honestly cannot imagine its restructuring.*²⁴

As for scientific evidence, the Sentieri Project (1995-2002 and 2003-2009) shows that the mortality rate among men and children exceeded the average for all causes during both periods (Comba et al., 2012).²⁵ Such a study and other specific research—i.e. an analysis of time trend mortality (1980-2008) and a research on cancer incidence (2006-2007)—show, in both genders, an exceeding of the averages for causes of death for which an etiologic role of environmental exposure has been either ascertained or suspected based on a prior evaluation of the epidemiological evidence. In addition, both recent and distant exposures to industrial pollutants, such as PM10 and SO₂, are found to have negative effects on health.²⁶

All Taranto's citizens are affected by the pollution, but the environmental burden is unevenly distributed among areas and categories of people. First, in the working-class neighborhoods of Tamburi, Paolo VI and Isola, the incidence of cancer, cardiovascular disease and respiratory disease is higher than in other urban areas and in Tamburi the concentration of PAHs is especially worrying. Together with Tamburi, Statte, a small village near the city, is also penalized by the wind

²² Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons.

²³ Local environmental association representative, interview with authors, Taranto, March 3, 2017.

²⁴ Former ILVA plant manager, interview with authors, Taranto, September 11, 2014.

²⁵ Reference is to neoplasms – especially lung and pleural cancers, dementia, cardiovascular diseases, but also respiratory and digestive diseases.

²⁶ See Peacelink's website for the reference to the epidemiological studies: <http://www.peacelink.it>.

direction.²⁷ Second, farmers located near the plant have been determined to have manganese concentrations and, to a lesser extent, arsenic, cadmium and lead, that are in the medium-high range of levels observed in the Italian general population (Iavarone et al., 2012). Besides their health, these citizens are also negatively impacted in their economic activities: because of soil and water pollution, farmers and mussel farmers struggle to survive on the revenues of their activities. At the same time, mitigating measures, such as greenspaces and trees, are insufficient. For all these reasons, ILVA should be closed.

The clear-cut position on ILVA's future, which undeniably widens the distance between environmentalists and workers, does not correspond to a clear identification of the responsibilities leading to the existing situation, nor to a credible development scenario for the area. Thus, the generic mistrust towards an inefficient political class (both at local and national levels) is blended with a dismissive attitude concerning ILVA's workers and trade unions. It is the belief of an environmental activist that:

*They [ILVA's workers] do not really fight for their workplace in ILVA; they fight for a workplace.*²⁸

For the future, the vague proposal of regenerating the area— turning to the tourism sector and agriculture (Peacelink, 2013) - is often intertwined with a romantic and bucolic aspiration that rejects industrial modernity *tout court*. Environmentalists' lack of elaboration on the socio-economic consequences of the plant closure is not due to their lack of awareness but to the belief that it is not up to them to suggest political solutions. However, as is ironically indicated by a local journalist:

*It may seem bizarre but deindustrialization also needs to be planned.*²⁹

²⁷ Recent analyses from the Health and Environment Centre certify the effects of short-term pollution on mortality. Specifically, there is a significant statistical correlation between an increase in the mortality rate and the 2 or 3 days after a windy day. To this purpose, the Regional Agency for Environment Protection issued guidelines for the area's inhabitants, urging them to avoid open air activities.

²⁸ Local environmental association representative, interview with authors, Taranto, March 3, 2017.

From this perspective, therefore, the post-ILVA scenario in Taranto remains a blind spot.

To conclude, the modernization discourse widely present in Taranto's public arena contends that, through proper techno-managerial devices, the current model of industrialization can endure without prompting significant socio-industrial change. Such a perspective predicates both socio-ecological harmony and the capacity of socio-technical systems to overcome potential environmental crises. Reflections on class relations and conflicts are eschewed; the social relations of production remain unquestioned while ecological rationality is embedded in the modes of production through the valuation of environmental externalities (Foster, 2012); the bads of modernity are tackled with further doses of modernity.³⁰ Despite a greater sensitivity to the unjust distribution of socio-environmental burdens in Taranto, amplified by the privatization, the environmental movement seems unable to tackle the case of Taranto in a holistic manner: it offers no serious viable alternatives to industrial production and subtly blames workers for their dependency on the factory. Paradoxically enough, their post-industrial future would have a greater impact on those categories of people that they often claim to be defending, that is, the social groups that have suffered most from the pollution so far.

5.2. A political reading of the industrial and social crisis in Taranto

Besides these two prevailing narratives monopolizing the debate in Taranto, a more fine-grained analysis identifies more politicized visions of the situation that, as anticipated, find it difficult to emerge on the public scene. Within the environmental panorama, Legambiente offers a powerful analysis of Taranto's crisis and a proposal in line with it. It first situates the case of ILVA within the wider sectoral dynamics by suggesting that Taranto's plant plays a role within the national and global accumulation processes (see Biasi and Romeo, 2017) . Indeed, as a local activist stressed:

²⁹ Local journalist, interview with authors, Taranto, September 4, 2014.

³⁰ By focusing on the techno-managerial complex that might deliver a sustainable context (i.e. good governance principles and the marketization of negative externalities), the sustainability paradigm evolves into a market logic that opens up new venues for capital accumulation (Castree, 2008; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2014).

*if the steel sector were dead, nobody would be interested in this market. Vice versa, ILVA's crisis appeals to foreign producers that want to profit from the company's reduced production to enter our domestic market.*³¹

Second, by emphasizing environmentalists' lack of any long-term development program for the area, Legambiente promotes a class-based reading of the crisis. Consequently, and unlike other local environmental groups, Legambiente sustains a holistic approach which: (a) conceives the industrial question as strictly intertwined with the social-environmental one; and (b) claims the crucial role of political forces that are called to firmly govern the current process of change. The belief is that the complexity of the situation and the consequences of the crisis should not fall on the less privileged social groups—i.e. primarily the working class—that are already penalized by the uneven distribution of pollution and shrinking production leading to reduced wages. Starting with the consideration that the environmental discourse in Taranto has created a 'false' hierarchy of values, privileging the value of health over that of work, social cohesion and democratic participation, Legambiente is extremely critical of this deleterious radicalization. As indicated:

*in each Taranto family, there's both an ILVA worker or an unemployed person and someone who has died from cancer.*³²

Thus, Legambiente's proposal advocates for ILVA's reduction and modernization of production rather than for the plant closure. Ultimately, the steelwork is thought to be compatible with the area if it adheres to the requirements set by regional law, n. 21/ 2012 related to the Evaluation of Health Damage.³³

³¹ Legambiente representative, interview with authors, Taranto, March 24, 2017.

³² Legambiente representative, interview with authors, Taranto, March 24, 2017.

³³ To evaluate industrial emissions, public authorities should consider the impact of pollution concentration on health rather than in the atmosphere.

The left-wing Party of Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) and the metalworkers' branch of the left wing trade union FIOM-CGIL also provide a political reading of this crisis and of its solution. According to a FIOM delegate:

*The problem of Taranto is not only ILVA. This is an area that has lived beyond its possibilities and sat comfortably on what it had achieved with industrialization. The State is responsible ... and trade unions have always worried about job losses. They were not able to conceptualize the environmental issue. However, ILVA has its own market and if we close it, we will be responsible for both misery and illness.*³⁴

While in the words of a political activist of the PRC:

*Taranto is a sacrifice zone in the national accumulation strategy which has emerged as a real problem, especially after ILVA's privatization.*³⁵

The solution proposed by PRC calls for the nationalization of the plant. This is deemed the only way to assure that:

*profits are not maximized for private interests and are used instead to pay the costs of the plant's negative externalities, plus the costs of reclaiming previous damages and to ensure clean production from now on. Only public ownership can ensure that the shrinking work load is redistributed among all of ILVA's workers, that salaries are kept at the current levels, and that welfare benefits are also extended to subcontracting companies.*³⁶

Another interesting and alternative viewpoint on the crisis in Taranto was embodied by the early activities of the Committee of Free and Reflective Citizens and Workers (CFRCW).³⁷ As a grassroots organization born amid the 2012 events, the Committee initially interpreted the crisis in

³⁴FIOM-CGIL trade union representative, interview with authors, Taranto, March 2, 2017.

³⁵PRC representative, interview with authors, Taranto, April 18, 2017.

³⁶PRC representative, interview with authors, Taranto, April 18, 2017.

³⁷The Committee has a heterogeneous composition – i.e. ILVA workers, non-ILVA workers, students, unemployed people, local inhabitants, and professionals active in the public sphere. It was therefore able to build a convergence of interests between Taranto's different social groups whilst giving voice primarily to the weakest segments of the local society.

Taranto as the result of socio-ecological inequalities related to the production and reproduction of capitalist accumulation processes. In their view, too, Taranto should be framed as a necessary ‘sacrifice zone’ (Bullard, 1990), enabling broader national and supranational patterns of accumulation. An example repeatedly mentioned in the CFRCW public statements is ILVA’s strategic decision, made with the support of Italian public authorities in the late eighties and concluded in the early 2000s, to re-organise its national production system by closing the hot area at the Cornigliano plant (near Genova) and concentrate its steel production in Taranto.³⁸ The acknowledgement of unequal power relationships inscribed in the wider socio-ecological metabolism connected to industrial production led the CFRCW to recognise that the real political division was between labour and capital rather than workers and environmentalists.³⁹ Additionally, the awareness that the production of the socio-ecological environment is mediated by governing arrangements, which in Taranto had failed, urged the Committee to require that those same institutions face their responsibilities. Accordingly, any restructuring plan should have been financed in particular by those who had benefited the most from Taranto’s industrial growth, namely the private owner and the State. The latter was requested to guarantee full employment and to stop the continuation of the ‘miserable blackmail’ between health and work. As will be discussed, over time the Committee’s approach drastically changed by adhering to one of the two prevailing positions.

6. Discussion of the research results

Politics is not just the discussion of possible solutions to a given problem: it is rather the possibility to define what the problem is, and who gets to name and discuss it. More importantly, it implies

³⁸ The closure of the hot area of the steel plant in Cornigliano was justified by its incompatibility with the surrounding environment.

³⁹ In the case of a video posted in February 2016 by the leader of the Anti-Dioxin Fund (showing some ILVA workers that ‘seemed’ to be pleased with the slopping from the plant’s blast furnaces), the famous Taranto-born actor and CFRCW activist, Michele Riondino, firmly pointed out the incapacity of environmental groups to detect the class conflict existing in Taranto. In his view, such a video signaled the condemnation of the local working class rather than that of the company. Thus, while acknowledging the responsibility of some workers, Riondino rejected all attempts to establish a collective responsibility for the working class movement in Taranto (see *Il Corriere di Taranto*, 2016).

equality of access to the public debate, even when it originally does not include certain actors and roles seem to be already set (Ranciere, 1998; 2004). By contrast, a post-political scenario occurs essentially when positions in the public debate do not challenge the existent power relations and the given configuration of the roles assigned to the different social groups involved. Accordingly, the debate in Taranto appears to be unfolding in a post-political scenario: as was showed, it is polarized but not politicised. Prevailing perspectives tend to reinforce and legitimize only those actors that comply with pre-determined roles whilst, at the same time, they take for granted the subaltern role assigned to the local working-class and low-income social groups relying on the plant's local economic spill-overs. These groups are not granted an autonomous subjectivity to voice their interests, nor an independent role in the debate. For environmentalists, workers have little to say about Taranto's future, given that they are considered as a part of the ecological problem. For industrialists, the plant's sustainability will depend primarily on public authorities' decisions, as well as on management capacity rather than on different labour-capital relations. Both positions ignore the social relations of production and avoid the problematization of how gains and burdens have been and will be distributed among different actors and social groups before and after the environmental crisis.

Paradoxically, workers and working-class communities, that so far have been the most affected by the environmental deterioration, will also bear the highest costs in the post-crisis scenarios. Indeed, if the eco-modernization prospective prevails, new investments will bring layoffs in any case, with only limited easing of the prior accumulated pollution. On the other hand, if the plant closes, as proposed by the environmentalists, job losses will affect primarily the workers, their families and the local community. Moreover, the two polarized mainstream fronts share a vision of a conflict-free society where solutions can be implemented without contestation. Environmentalists propose a naïf, almost romanticized, return to a pre-industrial economy spiced up with a rhetoric of self-activation and bottom-up entrepreneurship. On the other hand, eco-modernizers imagine a technologically upgraded plant that will eliminate once and for all the tensions between production

and pollution, let alone the conflict between capital and labour. Both fronts imagine a future of consensual policy that will start once this specific crisis is solved. The environmental crisis in Taranto is not, therefore, framed as the result of an inherent contradiction within the socio-economic system, but as the result of a specific deviant case for which inefficient management practices, questionable cultural attitudes, and institutional inadequacy should be blamed. Finally, besides the adherence to a technocratic language, the post-political scenario excludes solutions that fall outside of the perimeter officially granted to the debate, regardless of their real consequences. For instance, the options of nationalization or the restructuring of workplace relationships were soon dismissed as fanciful, radical, and therefore not worthy of consideration. In this scenario workers and local communities are left with limited or no space in which to manoeuvre: crucial subjects to be involved in the decision-making processes, these actors are neither supposed to have a role in the pre-ordered policymaking configuration, nor a language that fits the criteria of the public debate. Their voices get silenced in the general clamour but, as Ranciere (2004:5) underlined, “in order to understand what the plebeians said, then, it had first to be admitted that they spoke”.

As anticipated, Legambiente, PRC and FIOM-CGIL offer a political reading of the situation in Taranto. Their analyses and their political solutions, however, fail to reach the public arena. At the end, their stance becomes only a nuance within the industrialists’ arguments. In a similar fashion, they search for the internalization of the plant’s negative externalities; differently from the industrialists, however these actors suggest that it should occur within the context of ILVA’s nationalization. Yet, the technical language they use in search for visibility and legitimation ends up reinforcing their homologation to the mainstream position. Their most challenging proposal, namely the nationalization of the plant, is instead rejected as populist and unsuitable for the legitimate public debate. In the long run, the CFRCW has also been subsumed in the post-political scenario. Having emerged during the 2012 contestation, the Committee represented a clear discontinuity with the past. As Barca and Leonardi (2016) observe, the abrupt realisation that the steel plant was not

the indisputable destiny of Taranto and that the judiciary could block production – by appealing to the superior social value of the reproduction of life – entailed a twofold reaction. The first was the protests against the court decision; the second was a massive contestation of the job-health blackmail itself. Through the Committee agency, for the first time ILVA's workers seemed to have had the right to be environmentalists; for the first time, the environmental question was read from the workers' viewpoint and an unprecedented compromise between jobs (in the capitalist production system) and a clean environment (that would guarantee the reproduction of life in the local space) was sought.

This example of working class community unionism and of environmental justice struggle had a potentially disruptive power since 'the full compliance of industrial plants with environmental and public health regulations, and the internalisation of environmental clean-up and reparation activities on the part of polluting entities imply a fundamental rejection of the profit maximizing principle which drives private enterprise, with its inevitable production of social cost' (id.:65). However, the Committee's struggle for a post-capitalist political economy scenario of compatibility between the production of surplus and the community well-being was soon abandoned.⁴⁰

6. Conclusion

The socio-economic and political processes connected to the crisis in the Taranto area are extremely complex and still ongoing. Against this background, this article has attempted to provide evidence on a specific but crucial aspect of such processes by analysing the environmental controversy arising from the 2012 judicial confiscation of the ILVA steel plant. As anticipated, environmentalists and eco-modernizers take two alternative and apparently conflicting positions in the environmental crisis. However, both positions partake of a common apolitical understanding of

⁴⁰ During the electoral campaign for the local elections held on June 11 2017, the Committee supported the environmental movements against the "industrialist front", adhering to one of the mainstream positions in the debate (Quotidiano di Puglia, *n.d.*).

the crisis and avoid problematizing the contradictions involved in the process of capitalist accumulation, as well as the socio-economic consequences deriving from the plant closure or restructuring.

Two general aspects seem to be significantly overlooked. The first is the recognition that the production of the socio-physical landscape is intrinsically implicated in the circuits of capitalist accumulation and reflects the unequal power relations inscribed in socio-ecological metabolism. The second is that the production of nature is also mediated by governing arrangements that are the outcome of intense political and social struggles. In this respect the article has also explored the political reading of the crisis advanced by some marginal positions in the debate. By contesting the existing distribution of powers and roles and refusing to participate in the public debate within the pre-allocated positions, the CFRCW had initially managed to gather consensus. However, the failure to cultivate a truly social unionism led it to conform to the more mainstream discourse of environmental groups. Likewise, left-wing positions have been simply ignored by public and private institutions that label them as ideological (read: unreasonable) and extremist. They seem, therefore, unable to become hegemonic and to challenge the 'placebo politicalness' of the general debate (Marchart, 2007), where the polarization of different positions compensates for the lack of politicization.

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Graf.1 The area of Taranto in Italy and the ILVA steelworks

Source: Greco and Di Fabbio, 2014

