Steps to an Ecology of Community: the challenge of joining grassroots forces to fight Mafia culture and socioecological exploitation

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Abstract
This article provides an in-depth analysis of emerging social and economic networks for an ecological society in the so-called Land of Fires. The area, located between Caserta and Naples provinces (Southern Italy), is infamous for the socio-environmental impacts of two decades of waste disposal, mismanagement and contamination. The article moves from the empirical case of social and ecological conflicts currently ongoing in the Land of Fires, connecting the actions of grassroots movements for environmental justice with the emergence of social cooperatives that reclaim lands and assets confiscated to Mafia. The practices of grassroots environmental movements over fifteen years are described and analyzed, pointing out their shift from resisting contamination to the physical and symbolic re-appropriation of territories and communities. The work of social cooperatives is put forward as the realization of a bottom-up model of socio-economic and ecological wellbeing. Confronting the present crisis of the European welfare state, the social cooperatives propose a model of welfare community able to integrate in the labor market “disadvantaged people”, combining the care of people with the care of the local resources, nurturing anti-Mafia culture through ethical economy. Thus, the interests of environmental activists meet the interests of social cooperatives at the crossroad of territory reclamation with the spheres of social and economic production and reproduction. Framing the case as a place remaking project (Anguelovsky, 2013) and as a cultural and physical re-appropriation of territory (Escobar, 1998), we aim to analyze this experience as a place-based development pathway enhancing community self-organization, by connecting symbolic, material and structural dimensions (Turco, 1998). Our contribution aims to highlight the mutual strengthening of resistance to inequalities and self-organization of social reproduction.
I Introduction

Steps to an Ecology of Community echoes the well-known Gregory Bateson's book "Steps to an Ecology of Mind" (1972). The first lesson that we learn from one of the most original thinkers of the late 20th century is the idea that "everything is connected" and the invitation to look to "patterns that connect" because "what can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a thing" (Bateson 1972).

In our paper, we focus on the connections developed within local communities facing social exclusion and widespread contamination. We focus on networking and partnerships that allow consciousness changes and nurture emancipatory patterns, both on a social and individual level. Through these connections, local communities seek to organize and resist processes of contamination, dispossession and impoverishment, and to free themselves from a Mafia culture, developing a sense of belonging to "the patterns that connect" and promoting a significant epistemological paradigm shift (Kuhn 1962).

The communities observed live in the so-called Land of Fires, an area between Caserta and Naples provinces in the Campania region (Southern Italy). This area is infamous for the power wielded by organized crime and for the socio-environmental impacts of two decades of waste disposal and mismanagement. In this context, we provide an in-depth analysis of emerging social economies networks, involving cooperatives who work land confiscated to Mafia, environmental activists, associations and private actors (citizens and companies) fighting against dispossession and contamination of territories, and against Mafia culture. The action of these actors progresses through successive feedbacks and integrations. In an attempt to decolonize their imaginary both from Mafia values and from economic imperialism, they try to integrate individual and community wellbeing in the socio economic structure, to reconnect people with land, agriculture with welfare, environmental struggle with social justice, ethic with economy. In doing so they seem to adopt Bateson’s wider perspective through acts that change both the material reality and the way they understand this reality and themselves within it.

Our research work, in the same way, tries to proceed through integrations and adopting a cross-disciplinary perspective. We incorporate theoretical approaches coming from different academic disciplines, in particular economics, political sciences, sociology, psychology and anthropology. We mobilize different theoretical approaches pertaining to these disciplines, or rather the interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches developed across their theoretical intersections that criticize the very idea of “science” included in the classical disciplines. It is the case of the ‘Post-normal’ science originally described by Silvio Funtowicz and Jerry Ravetz (1993) for dealing with complex systems and associated irreducible uncertainty. According to it, this paper supports the argument that we need to move across disciplinary boundaries to...
understand and to deal with complex realities, exploring connections, commonalities, shared properties between different elements and levels of reality, including an 'extended peer community'. Despite the increasing theoretical and political emphasis on systems thinking in several domains (De Savigny 2009, Bausch 2001), its practical application remains a major challenge. This challenge is intimately connected to another big challenge: to find an effective response of civil society to processes of environmental and human degradation, dispossession and impoverishment. Our article contributes to the ongoing debate on these two interlinked issues, by focusing on the cooperation and reciprocal awareness between resistance practices and social economies in a contest of environmental conflict, reflecting on strategies and limits of this symbolic and practical project of social re-appropriation of the commons (De Angelis 2010).

According to Escobar (2008) and Leff (2012), an effective grassroots political strategy has to entail the re-appropriation of knowledge and space through the reinvention of cultural identities and through the reshaping of territories. The connection of symbolic, material and structural dimensions (Turco, 1998) is assumed as a distinctive element of the processes of place based development enhancing community resilience and self-organization (Magnaghi 2010). In Campania the experience of conflict is producing a bottom-up culture of socio-ecological relationships linked with practices of commoning that open up possibilities for a transformative politics. These grassroots critical spatial practices influence the eco-social nexus by framing, acting and organizing alternative representations of reality and alternative ways of providing goods, services and safety. Here we find the more concrete steps toward an ecological society.

II Methodology

The fieldwork of research is still ongoing, therefore the results are to be considered provisional. We are conducting an ethnographic study of the grassroots environmental movements and of the social cooperatives in Campania. The methods used for collecting data are individual semi-structured interviews, oral histories, participant observation and documents reviews. So far, we have collected twenty interviews to activists involved in environmental struggles and around twenty interviews to members of social cooperatives or other external stakeholders (representatives of institutions, private consultants, members of associations, etc.). The interviews were transcribed and coded in order to detect common themes and meaning making processes. We refer to several documents from press, official sources (trials and police

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1 'Extended peer community' consisting not merely of persons with some form or other of institutional accreditation, but rather of all those with a desire to participate in the resolution of the issue' (Funtowicz & Ravetz 2003).
investigations, government projects and reports), institutional bodies (national statistic institutes) and unofficial documents (grassroots movements’ reports). The background of De Rosa as activist involved in the Campania conflicts allowed us to rely on an extensive network of personal relations and to have familiarity with the history and the geography of the field.

III The Land of Fires and the criminal economy

The field of our research is located in the Northern part of Campania region in Southern Italy and corresponds to the area labelled by local activists, and recently mainstreamed by Italian media\(^2\) and politicians\(^3\), as the “Land of Fires”. During the last two decades, this wide plain became the setting of struggles around contested socioecological transformations materialized by the intertwining of authoritarian governances of urban waste management and illegal disposal of hazardous materials, both spurring long-lasting practices of resistance performed by local grassroots movements.

The area comprises the provinces of Naples and Caserta, the two main regional cities, a large and complex urban/rural system stretching on 3.800 sq. km and inhabited by approximately four million people, which makes it the most densely populated area in Italy. In comparison with other Italian regions, Campania has the lowest GDP pro-capita and it shares with the rest of the Mezzogiorno the highest losses in terms of productivity and jobs since the outburst of the global economic crisis\(^4\). Agricultural sector, one of the main regional economic activities after industry and services, currently trudges next to industrial plants, rampant overbuilding, contaminated areas and waste management and disposal activities.

Campania is also one of the Italian region in which the presence of rooted criminal organizations (the so-called Camorra) had historically a great impact on the regional economic and socio-environmental change\(^5\). Camorra groups are armed organizations whose main will is to maintain power positionalities through a complex interplay of territorial control, service provision, political patronage, violence and the spreading of specific cultural values. The upholding of power positionalities allows for the maximization of profits through a predatory economic

\(^2\) All Italian major newspapers have recently picked up the term in their reports on Campania socio-environmental situation (e.g. cfr. La Repubblica, Corriere della Sera and Il Mattino from January to March 2014).

\(^3\) The law drafted in February 2014 as a government response to the social mobilizations of Campania people, has been labelled by politicians and popular press the “Land of Fires law” (http://www.camera.it/leg17/465?tema=973&D.L.+136%2F2013%3Aemergenze+ambientali+e+industriali+).\(^*\)

\(^4\) http://www.istat.it/en/archive/105458.

\(^5\) “Mafia is any set of criminal organizations (...) acting in a large and networked relational context, setting up a system of violence and illegality aimed at the accumulation of capital and at the acquisition and management of positions of power, which makes use of a cultural code and enjoys a certain social consensus” (Santino 1995).
behavior, pursued even at the cost of social legitimacy in the territories in which they operate. Moreover, criminal capitals circulate constantly between legal and illegal realms of economy, supporting processes of accumulation coherent with the imperatives of global capital (Arlacchi 1979). In its contemporary manifestations, criminal economy can be seen as an extension or an extreme form of capitalist accumulation, providing legal companies and the State with the channels, the instruments and the territorial control suitable for boosting economic performances, for cutting costs and for creasing social unrest.

In order to frame the field of socioecological relations in which practices and imaginaries of grassroots recreation of commons are embedded, an excursus in the recent history of Campania is required, or better, the deployment of a narrative that can account for the transformation of *Campania Felix* into Land of Fires. During the last two decades, two intertwined, multi-scale processes have had a remarkable influence on the changes of the socio-environmental and economic relationships of this area. The first process is the implementation of the regional urban waste cycle, supervised and managed by a special government agency and carried out by private firms, operating under the legal framework of the "urban waste emergency". The second process is the illegal dumping and burning of hazardous waste in unsuitable landfills and on portions of land accomplished by a complex network of entrepreneurs, state officials, industry managers, land owners and organized crime groups. These two processes have complex interrelations that blur the demarcation between legal and illegal practices of waste management. The common factor that best exemplifies their functioning is the profit-driven logic of what we term, following Harvey (2000), "accumulation by contamination": the conversion of waste into a commodity that allows for the realization of profits through the appropriation of socioecological space. Thanks to a web of political, economic, cultural and ecological articulations, powerful actors increase their profit margins by shifting costs of production and waste management directly on the biology of environmental matrices and bodies. The dimension of the *bios*, of life, becomes embedded into market mechanisms, even though unaccounted, turning life itself into an accumulation strategy. The arrangements required to carry out the commodification of waste imply an unequal distribution of power, which manifests itself in the shrinking of the democratic space of negotiation on environmental management issues and in the loss of the fundamental rights to health, to safety and to self-determination for the local communities.

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6Ancient Romans used to call the region *Campania Felix* (Happy Campania), to indicate the mild climate and the fertility of the soil. Cfr. the famous sentence "Hinc felix illa Campania est" of Pliny The Elder, a well-known naturalist lived in the 1st century AD.
The “waste emergency” has been the legal framework through which a special government agency, the Commissioner for the Waste Emergency in Campania (hereafter CWE), enjoyed the power to act in derogation of ordinary laws for organizing the management of urban waste. Created by the central government according to a law that disciplines “situations of extreme danger”, the CWE was invested with “extraordinary means and power” (Law 225/1992), ultimately lasting in office for fifteen years (1994-2009) and thus becoming an almost permanent governance body for the management of urban waste. In a non-transparent and controversial way, the CWE assigned to a partnership of private companies the task of dealing with all the urban waste daily produced in Campania (D’Alisa et al 2010). The private firms had presented an industrial plan based on two waste-to-energy plants and seven waste processing facilities. Within the framework of the emergency, the companies were granted complete freedom to decide on the location of the infrastructures according to their needs, thus avoiding negotiations with the local communities and environmental impact assessments. The factual realization of the plan entailed the dispossession of municipal land, the deployment of “technological fixes” for dealing with waste and the financialization of waste as the guarantee of revenues for the banks loaning the money to the companies. The interest of the private investors focused on the public subsidies that the operators of incinerators enjoy in Italy. These incentives, introduced as promotion for “renewable energies”, establish a 7% increase of the selling price of electricity produced from the burning of trash. Final consumers pay for these incentives, directly through the electricity bills. Therefore, more trash to burn meant for the private firms more public money to collect through the selling of electricity. Their interest in accumulating as much waste as possible resulted several times in the clogging of the waste cycle. When the garbage was flooding Naples and other municipalities of Campania, causing an eco-social catastrophe with worldwide media coverage, the CWE used its powers to impose the opening of landfills and storage sites in rural areas already jeopardized by previous pollution. These belated countermeasures caused increasing unrest among the targeted communities, simply relocating the source of concerns far from the capital city center.

In their analysis of the urban waste crisis in Campania, Armiero and D’Alisa (2012) argue that the state of emergency has granted legal justification for the proliferation of environmental injustices. The device of emergency allowed the removal of the democratic dialectic and legitimized an increase in repression against any kind of dissent. By deleting the space of discussion on the ways in which waste ought to be managed, the emergency rule imposed

Prosecutors also demonstrated that the cycle was blocked on purpose several times by the companies, so to exercise pressure on the CWE and being granted more law derogations and more freedom to shape the waste management according to their interests (Saraceno 2007, 326). For more on this judicial inquiry, see Sodano and Trocchia (2010); and, especially, Rabitti (2008).
technocratic and market-oriented solutions to the crisis, depoliticizing the issue of the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and blocking the way to alternative waste management procedures. Accordingly, the increasing unrest among local populations was dealt with by the CWE and the central government through the intensification of repressive measures, culminated with the decree no. 90 of May 2008 (then law 123/2008), with which waste facilities became areas of strategic military interest and the protests in proximity of landfills and incinerator became a penal felony. On February 2011, the European Parliament issued a resolution on the actions taken by the Italian government for managing the waste in Campania, in which it highlighted the failure, the squandering of money and the authoritarianism of public institutions during the years of "special powers".

The dynamics of the illegal trafficking and dumping of hazardous waste toward Campania have an older history that intersects with the "waste emergency". The main sources to gain an insight come from investigations and trials that dealt with different segments and actors of this profitable business, and from the grassroots records that have been mapping the territories object of illegal dumping. Since the early nineties, million tons of hazardous waste travelled to Campania through networks provided by stakeholders, often belonging to organized crime, whose main role was to connect industry managers willing to cut the costs of correct waste disposal procedures with the routes and the places where their waste could be accommodated at lower costs in illegal ways (Iacuelli 2008). Corruption of public officials, political protection and patronage, and the lack of credible deterrents by the State, have made this business one of the main revenues for criminal groups and allowed legal as well as illegal businesses to socialize the costs of production while privatizing the profits. According to the Parliamentary Commission on Illegal Activities Related to the Waste Cycle (Pecorella et al. 2013), the regime of emergency has offered to the illegal traffickers a veil for hiding hazardous waste under the category of urban one and created a situation in which the same actors provided their services both to the state and to the criminal organizations. Extensive activist archives, police investigations and NGOs reports have exposed the places where the waste was illegally disposed of: inadequate legal landfills, mixed with cement for constructing homes, disguised as compost, buried under cultivated fields or set on fire in the open air (Legambiente 2006).

\[8\] In this regard, the ex-post assessment of the waste emergency era by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Activities Related to the Waste Cycle (2013) is quite clear: "We can certainly say that the administrative apparatus has favored substantially illicit interests. [...] It is evident that the system, at this point, appears to have been reprogrammed so to operate as a machine capable certainly of producing profits, but not solving the problems, because solving the problems would obviously stop any possibility of making profits with the waste cycle".

\[9\] Resolution number 2012/C 182 E/04.
The environmental impacts of these intertwined processes have slowly shown their magnitude. According to surveys of the Campania Regional Agency for Environmental Protection, there are today 2551 contaminated sites in all of Campania, with the majority of them clustered in the area between Naples and Caserta. The pollutants found are mostly coming from urban and industrial waste incorrectly disposed (ARPAC, 2008). A recent re-classification of contaminated sites in Italy for which land remediation works are planned, identifies four *Aree Vaste* (Wide Areas)\(^{10}\) in Campania: these are sites of national interest to be reclaimed for the high levels of pollution. More than fifty regional municipalities are included in the *Aree Vaste*: here, a few hundred meters from each other, there are landfills, temporary storage sites of waste blocks and illegal dumping sites. Spatially, the contamination affects the soil discontinuously throughout the plain between Naples and Caserta: besides well-known “ecological bombs” (like the Resi landfill), contaminated sites are often found next to thriving cultivated fields. Particularly alarming though, are the places where the ashes from toxic fires fell (which have surface contamination) and the deep underground illegal deposits of industrial waste (which threatens groundwater springs). The outcomes of the environmental degradation caused by the accumulation of urban and hazardous waste are the risks in terms of health for the residents. Several scientific studies connect the higher rates of cancer diseases among the population of this area to the presence of pollutants from waste (Senior and Mazza, 2004; Comba et al., 2006; Fazzo et al., 2008; Martuzzi et al., 2009), while popular epidemiology records also signal increasing health impairments that by now turned into a general existential fear.

The stigma attached to the people and to the land, reverberates on the agricultural sector. Local agriculture, already impoverished by the economic crisis and by the de-regulation of exports, suffer the exclusion from consumers’ choice for the fear of contamination, even when scientific evidence certifies the safeness of the commercialized products. Many small-scale, family owned farms are at risk of being sold, loosening further the control of local residents on their territory and resources.

### IV Campania’s Grassroots Movements: from resistance to re-appropriation

Alongside the continuous “waste emergency” and the illegal dumping of noxious waste, a complex constellation of grassroots movements emerged on the toxic fields of Campania. Local committees of concerned citizens organized campaigns against the localization of landfills and incinerators on their territories and took a clear stand against the illegal dumping. They rarely called themselves environmentalists: personal reasons linking health concerns with the loss of

\(^{10}\) [http://www.sogesid.it/campania_2.html](http://www.sogesid.it/campania_2.html)
control over the environment acted as mobilizers, more than any supposed will to “protect the nature” (Armiero 2008).

The sensuous perceptions of environmental changes unsettled the experience of everyday life and foregrounded the work of continuous, collective self-formation by active citizens that begun investigating the causes and the effects of waste flows disrupting rural and urban environments. Local committees produced autonomous forms of environmental knowledge through the merging of sensuous perceptions and scientific expertise. The influence of unequal power relations at work in the rearranging of the landscape became the focus of activists. This led to the politicization of the processes linking biophysical change, spatial restructuring, technological and scientific discourses, governance methods and waste flows. From the specific issue of waste and contamination, the scope of the grassroots movements grew to embrace the dimensions of local economies and public participation in the making of cities, fostering the emergence of a grassroots environmental politics focused on building new relations between territories and communities, through both self-organization and political lobbying.

The social mobilization in Campania has been striking for its heterogeneity: in more than fifteen years of struggle, radical activists from Centri Sociali (social centers) cooperated with ordinary citizens and farmers; local politicians from left and right wing marched with football fan groups and religious associations. Even though participation has had a "variable geometry" (spanning from thousands people taking the street to pickets and actions organized by small groups) the mobilizations have cut through the social fabric involving people from economically deprived areas, middle class and scientific community on the same side of the conflict. Strong divides also crossed the movements: on the strategies to adopt, on the degree of cooperation to maintain with public institutions, on the priorities to address. However, what began as a form of civic engagement by disarticulated local movements, evolved into a recognizable regional coalition that linked with other national and international movements in a common struggle for environmental and social justice.

Throughout the recent history, we can identify two main periods of popular environmentalism in Campania. This periodization follows the changing patterns of repression and delegitimization enacted by economic and political elites, and exemplifies the dynamic changes in time between knowledge building and political strategizing. The first wave of mobilization runs from 2000 to 2011: eleven years of “waste wars” during which the State’s plans for dealing with urban trash encountered the steady opposition of local communities. Throughout these conflicts, the involvement of organized crime in the waste business emerged as a systemic issue, especially in the light of investigators reports and of trials to Camorra affiliates, politicians and
entrepreneurs. These findings became then widespread thanks to activists’ independent reports. The second wave runs from 2012 until today, representing a shift of Campania grassroots movements from the fight against toxics to the physical and symbolic reappropriation of territories, extending at the same time the political agenda and the areas of intervention.

Between 2000 and 2011, thousands of people from the poor neighborhoods of Naples and from the municipalities of the plain felt threatened and dispossessed by the waste policies implemented under the emergency regime. The most proactive among them built up local coordination units through the organizational form of “grassroots committees”, opposing what they perceived as an authoritarian governance of waste not concerned with environmental and human safety. Acerra, a town 15 km north of Naples unilaterally chosen in 2000 for placing a 600000 t/y waste-to-energy plant, is usually indicated by activists’ accounts as the first organized reaction to the rule of the emergency. The mobilization quickly spread to several other towns where the CWE decided to accommodate the urban trash by opening storage sites and landfills, often in socio-economically deprived and already polluted areas. From “the battle of Acerra”, at least in other 37 localities grassroots committees directly confronted the government plans (Festa 2012). Major events occurred in Chiaiano, Pianura (2008), and Terzigno (2010); here the conflict included guerrilla actions and roadblocks going on for days. The committees aroused in this period grew around the local perceptions of past and present urban degradation and land dispossession, and had a prominent defensive stance. With the increase of repression and the proliferation of front lines of the conflict, activists implemented trans-local coordination efforts between local committees, drawing a geography of mutual support and concerted efforts. The government’s waste policies were contested on the basis of alternative waste cycles projects formulated by the movements through knowledge exchanges and affiliations with international networks (like Zero Waste Alliance). The elaboration of alternatives, focused on reduction, recycling and redesigning of materials, became the most powerful critical instrument for contesting the top-down waste policies based on incineration and commodification of waste. New narratives concerning the local history of pollution and health impairments were produced through the investigation of past and present contaminating activities and collecting personal histories of sickness. With the involvement of experts in disagreement with the government’s technicians, movements politicized the uncertainties and the biases of scientific knowledge, thus valorizing the historical perceptions of environmental change experienced by lay people. The physical repression deployed by the State crushed the resistance most of the times, imposing the companies’ plan through the force of police batons. Besides violence, the delegitimization of activists was built and reinforced through discursive formations drawn from a repository of enduring stereotypes (Petrillo 2010, Festa 2012), based
on the characterization of Southern Italian people as ‘primitive’, ‘mafia associates’ and ‘uncivil’. National media reports and political statements dismissed any alternative proposal of environmental management and blamed Campania people's lifestyle as the main cause of their cancer diseases. The paradox of this way of dealing with social unrest has been that organized crime and corrupted officials continued, in the heat of the events, with their practice of illegal dumping of toxic waste.

The second wave of mobilizations runs from 2012 until today. With the official end of the “emergency regime” in 2009, the national and regional institutions settled the management of urban waste within a fragile cycle that incorporated the environmental injustices imposed by force in previous years. Moreover, the legacy of the emergency are between 6 and 7 million tons of trash packed into waste blocks and amassed in “temporary” storage sites located amidst the cultivated fields of several municipalities in the provinces of Naples and Caserta. Despite numerous arrests and seizures of companies involved in the illicit traffic of toxic waste, illegal disposal practices have continued. With the environmental pollution and the health concerns never really addressed by the State, the grassroots movements remained alert. The physical repression experienced by people contributed to the outflow of mass participation, but the core groups of activists kept on organizing campaigns and monitoring the environmental conditions. In the most recent years, we identify three main coalitions of Campania’s local committees that came to the forefront in terms of coordinating inputs, nurturing actions, formulating proposals and receiving institutional recognition. These three coalition differ from each other for member’s class belonging, geographical location and political attitude. Hereby we offer a short description of each:

- **Cittadini Campani** (Campania’s Citizens). It groups mostly people from the richer neighborhoods of Naples and from the city’s middle-class. The main political attitude within it is center-left and liberalism. With strong belief in science and rational argumentation, their main path of intervention is the institutional lobbying and the attempt at influencing government decisions through democratic means.

- **Rete Commons** (Commons Network). It is a coalition that embrace the several popular movements emerged in the northern part of Naples, an economically depressed area with high presence of criminal activities and legal and illegal dumping sites. The core group of activists also belong to a social center located in Chiaiano (the theatre of a long battle between activists and the State), that has radical leftists and anti-capitalist agenda. *Rete Commons* has produced probably the most penetrating critiques of the connections between capitalist mode of production, waste colonization in Campania and the role of organized crime. They also work on several social and agricultural project.
Coordinamento Comitati Fuochi (Coordination body of committees against fires). It is the most recent and bigger coalition organized by activists. It groups more than one hundred local committees from the municipalities of the plain. It involves many ordinary citizens with no previous direct political experience, scientists, farmers, associations, and it has strong ties with the Church (one of their most famous spokesperson is the priest of the local church of Caivano). It was able to organize several marches in recent years to urge government action against contamination, where thousands of people took part. At the same time, it is a highly differentiated coalition, with several ongoing socio-ecological projects addressing education, agriculture, grassroots mapping, popular epidemiology, the formulation of alternative local development paths and political lobbying.

These three coalitions have been at the forefront of the current resurgence of Campania's grassroots eco-politics. We locate in their cooperation a shift compared to the past mobilizations in terms of the political scope, and we argue that their current coordinated projects signal a shift in terms of eco-political performances. In the fall of 2013, in the course of several general assemblies, they created a common regional coalition with the name of Fiume in Piena (Raging River). The new coalition organized a rally in the city of Naples and formulated a common platform to frame the problems and advance the alternatives. Despite their divergences, the coalition constructed through mail exchanges and public meetings a single document that tackled the multifaceted mechanisms of the socio-ecological exploitation. The first and the most important point of this document is the request of real democracy, considered as the base for addressing all the other inequities concerning urban waste management, toxic waste disposal, special laws, health prevention, agricultural sector and public participation in the decisions on how to allocate and manage common resources. Moving from the shared platform, more than one hundred thousand people took the streets of Naples on 16th November 2013, making visible in the heart of the regional capital city the presence of an organized and rooted social force.

Thanks to the work of the coalition, the health risks suffered by Campania residents, the continuous wild illegal burning and disposing of hazardous waste and the unresolved legacy of the “waste emergency”, were imposed to the national political agenda. However, government institutions involved only marginally the activists in the drafting of potential countermeasures, failing to implement the first request of the movements: direct involvement and consultation in every step. The channels opened with State institutions represent a field of the struggle on which the coalition is still actively pursuing its shared agenda. But for the argument advanced here, we now focus on the array of other initiatives performed the movements beyond political lobbying. Indeed, while engaging with the socio-ecological inequality inscribed in urban and
Our findings bring evidence of how the strategies recently deployed by the movements combine physical rearrangements of the urban-rural relations with the articulation of new imaginaries of desired futures, prefiguring the terms of an ecological society. The struggle against toxics revealed to the activists the interconnectedness of waste colonization operated by networked powers with the loss of community control on their environments. The exclusion of community supervision and involvement in the forms of local and regional economic development had left to private multi-national companies backed by the government and to criminal groups a space to exploit ruthlessly the land according to the rules of exchange values over use values. Through formulating a notion of territory that signifies the interdependence of communities’ wellbeing with the care of their surroundings, Campania activist are today performing practices of reappropriation of knowledge and space aimed at improving self-organization while developing an anti-mafia culture critical with the effects of capitalist economy.

The mapping of territories enacted by activists is one of these strategies. Using simple technological devices and internet platforms, activists begun monitoring the environmental conditions of their places already ten years ago. The main reason to produce autonomous maps was the need to make visible the degradation of land in the face of the denials of the central government. This practice evolved in an instrument for reinforcing complaints through visual evidences, and it was performed collectively in "denunciation days". From the "visualization of the bads" to the "perception of the goods", the step has been a political one. Activists reformulated their practice of mapping by including in their searches also all those elements that they considered as common resources and means of identification, often finding “beauty” surrounded by degradation. This shift signals a reworking of the representations of space and subjectivities: besides and connected to the resistance against unwanted land-use, activists feel they have to intervene in their environments to reclaim them for community use.

The partnership between grassroots movements’ coalitions and farmers’ associations is another of the strategies deployed, closely related to the first. This cooperation attempts to provide both an alternative food provision chain and a territorial control against further exploitation. Besides the creation of networks with already existing local small farms, groups of activists begun taking care of small portions of private or public lands formerly left abandoned, to turn them into cultivated fields. This practice is flourishing, drawing knowledge and means of identification from the rooted local agricultural tradition. Their attempts at valorizing socially uncontaminated lands amidst territories stigmatized and in deep economic crisis, want to be the beginning of “the realization of another model of development against the mafia-state, for asserting new
spaces of democracy, building new institutions of the commons and reclaiming control on our territories”, as claimed by an activist. Sticking to their land, refusing to go away, activists are working today on a deeper level compared to the previous years of mobilizations. The aim is to recuperate local agricultural knowledge and to merge it with the social movements’ objective of constructing strong multi-scalar networks of cooperatives, inspired by similar examples like the Community-supported agriculture (Grasseni 2014). Farmers are joining the activists into consortia that self-certify the safety of their products. The certification procedure is grounded in personal relations of trust built between movements and ordinary citizens. Moreover, as emerged in interviews, activists believe that by rooting social cooperatives on their territories these can function as “dams” against further dispossession and contamination. To re-appropriate lands for common use works by creating protective bastions as in a “war of position” with top-down attempts at restructuring spaces in unequal ways, nurturing a participatory political project aimed at the preservation and recreation of beni comuni, the commons. Very interesting among these is the experience of the NCO consortium that we analyze in the following paragraph.

V NCO – Social Economy Network

The NCO (Nuova Cooperazione Organizzata – New cooperation organized) is a consortium, founded in 2012, involving five so-called ‘social cooperatives’ 11 that share common interests and principles, and have the same vision of their community 12. The consortium ironically takes the acronym of the Nuova Camorra Organizzata (New Organized Camorra known as NCO), a powerful mafia organization founded in the late 1970s by Raffaele Cutolo to renew the old rural Camorra and create a real business organization. The vision of the consortium contends that it is necessary to organize people and to build networks for joining forces in order to fight against the mafia while also struggling against the prejudices referred to disadvantaged people. The cooperatives begun to collaborate together within the Christmas initiative ”Let’s give Camorra a package” 13, a joint selling including the products of several cooperatives, associations and private companies that denounced racketeering or that were involved in the fight against criminal organizations. After the success of this initiative, some cooperatives decided to leave

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11 In Italy the law 381/91 recognises the social cooperatives as private non-profit enterprises finalised “at the human promotion and social integration of citizens”. Social cooperatives produce social services (type A) and manage different kinds of activities providing work integration of disadvantaged people (type B). They are the most common type of social enterprise in Italy. It is an important economic actor constantly growing and increasingly playing a key role within the national economy (Andreaus et al. 2012).

12 Formally, only 4 cooperatives join the consortium (Al di là dei sogni, Eureka, Agropoli, Millepiedi), but in our analysis we also include the cooperative Resistenza whose adhesion procedure is relatively advanced.

13 The name ironically refers to the popular Neapolitan expression “fare un pacco” (give a package) that means cheating.
their label and to commercialize their products together under the umbrella brand NCO to increase consumer awareness and improve visibility. Progressively, the strategic alliances among cooperatives reached organizational and productive assets, developing a common log frame and work plan that facilitate knowledge exchanges and that affected the partnering organizations’ performances. Regarding differences within the case, each cooperative arises in the 2000s thanks to the effort of a strongly motivated small group of people attempting to develop innovative experiences of community welfare and social inclusion of disadvantaged people. A red thread running through all the cooperatives is the tradition of antipsychiatry or Democratic Psychiatry and specifically the "Basaglia revolution” as a prism to look at the mental illness. The Basaglia reconfiguration of psychiatry as a mean for the well-being of the entire society is the paradigm that frame the cooperatives work. They take as a starting point the potential of people who are deemed mentally ill or psychologically/socially different, rather than focusing on their limitations (Driest, 1997, Elings M. 2007). This attitude prevents them to move on a merely medical therapy terrain, fostering a more comprehensive social rehabilitation and empowering role. The care is based in their integration into the social, economic, ecological and community framework. All life conditions are considered as constitutive factors of wellbeing: housing, training and work, interpersonal and social relations, a clean and nurturing environment. In other words, the fundamental rights of citizenship are assumed also as the most significant determinants of social health. This “care-for-the-community”, or community welfare, is not simply performed on individual problems, but it has intrinsic effects on the entire local community, since it aims to address the social causes of the disorder. The cooperatives put people and community, rather than profit, at the centre of their missions, adopting an integrated and innovative approach in their narratives and daily practices. Starting from this systemic vision, the fights against the mafia culture, pursued by the cooperatives, as well as the fight against social and environmental injustice, are the natural consequence of seeking the community wellbeing. The legislation of Campania region in health services has supported the social cooperatives development by allowing them to manage health, social and educational services and other activities (agricultural, industrial, commercial and service) aimed at helping vulnerable persons, thanks to special agreement with the local Department of Mental Health that define personalized care programs with specific budgets. These innovative collaborations,  

14 According to the Italian law, disadvantaged individuals are: prisoners, ex-prisoners and prisoners on release programs, former drug addicts, the mentally, psychologically and physically disabled, alcoholics, working age minors in difficult family situations, and gambling addicts.  
15 The Democratic psychiatry movement in 1978 also led to the so-called 'Basaglia Law' (Law 180) that established a gradual shutting down of psychiatric hospitals and assigned prevention, care and rehabilitation in mental health to new community-based services. An important feature of this reform was the shift from a national health service toward a decentralized system based on local health districts. However its implementation is still in progress and the reorganization differs strongly from region to region.
establishing a co-management of health services, present a great challenge (for both social cooperatives and public authorities), but they are able to produce very positive impacts for users and for local communities, and they represent cost effectiveness and budget savings measures respect to public spending (Hassink et al., 2007, Sempik et al. 2010). The NCO cooperatives organized several cohabitation groups within the towns to ensure people with mental illness or other problems to live autonomously but not excluded. Over the years, towards the end of the decade, the NCO began to link agricultural practices and care services and to implement different green care\(^{16}\) activities, including elements of healthcare, social rehabilitation, education or employment opportunities for various vulnerable groups. The choice to practice agriculture combines the strong potential of agricultural activities to involve and integrate “problematic people”\(^ {17}\) with the objective to promote community well-being, mobilizing the multifunctionality of agriculture\(^ {18}\). Only one of the NCO cooperative, Agropoli, does not practice agriculture but it runs a restaurant located in a villa confiscated from the mafia. The other cooperatives cultivate the lands confiscated to Mafia.

These lands were granted by the State to the cooperatives through a free loan, according to the law 109/96 on the social reuse of the property confiscated to the criminal organization. This law establishes the allocation of assets and illicit profits to those (associations, cooperatives, municipalities, provinces and regions) that are able to return them to the citizens, through services, job, promotional activities and social work\(^ {19}\). It allows cooperatives to have important symbolic value in the fight against mafia culture, because the assets are a symbol of the mafia

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\(^ {16}\) “Green care is an inclusive term for many ‘complex interventions’, such as care farming, animal-assisted therapy, therapeutic horticulture and others. What links this diverse set of interventions is their use of nature and the natural environment as a framework in which to create these approaches. It is important to remember that green care is an intervention i.e. an active process that is intended to improve or promote health (physical and mental) and well-being not purely a passive experience of nature”. (Sempik et al. 2010)

\(^ {17}\) “The potential of limited intellectual skills has been well-known in rural areas for decades. It should be noted that in the traditional peasant family the ‘disabled’ where unknown, at least as a specific category separated from the ‘able’, for all family members contributed to the running of the farm. Even those with reduced capabilities could perform a task, although limited or marginal. Disability became an issue of major concern when society moved away from the old rural economy and non-agricultural labour markets began to discriminate people with special needs” (Di Iacovo at al. 2006).

\(^ {18}\) The multifunctionality of agriculture may be defined as the full range of contributions of agriculture to economic and social development as a whole (Laurent 2001). The multifunctional properties of agriculture concern a wide range of issues: commodity production, food quality and safety (including consumers, farm labour and public health), environmental management, services (amenities for urban populations, landscape management, etc), contribution to social and economic cohesion in rural areas (through job creation, diversification of farm activities), and political functions (rural development, landscape management, food security).

\(^ {19}\) The National Agency for Administration and Destination of Assets Seized and Confiscated from Organized Crime, founded in 2010, manage the attribution of confiscated assets. Out of the 12,944 assets managed by the agency for confiscated assets, 5,859 land properties have been assigned to an entity having public interest. To this day, the agency has yet to find a destination for 3,995 assets. In Campania region there are 500 assets and 340 companies confiscated not still assigned. Bureaucratic procedures and their inefficient implementation, such as staff shortage slow down the process of re-use of assets, often affecting their value.
power. Indeed, at the beginning of the endeavor nobody wanted to cultivate the mafia lands. "This land were seized in 1991, confiscated by the State in 94 and transferred to the Municipality in 98. We made an application to have them only in 2005, whereas before no one had ever noticed their existence" (S. P., coop. Al di là dei sogni). However, cultivating these lands has also a very important material value: it represents an innovative way to unlock a strong constraint on access to land (and other productive assets) by young people. The cooperatives choice of farming thus comes both from the land availability and from believing in the so called one-straw revolution, as the Japanese visionary and environmentalist Masanobu Fukuoka framed it: "the ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings" (Fukuoka 1978).

The cooperatives assume agriculture as the focus of a new approach to built fairer and healthier relationship with the environment in every way: physically, mentally, spiritually and also politically, engaged as they are in practices of Food Activism (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013). The aim of NCO cooperatives is not only to break the mechanisms of the criminal economy, but also "to challenge the agro-industrial food system and its exploitation of people and resources" (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013). In those areas marked by unemployment and by irregular and exploited work, especially in the agricultural sector, they promote fair and horizontal work relations, even with marginalized people. They practice mostly organic agriculture, avoiding pesticides and inorganic fertilizers, adopting crop rotation systems to replace nutrients in the soil. They minimize and recycle the farm waste making compost as fertilizer. The cooperative also try to regenerate and use local seeds and plants, sometimes in cooperation with a regional research institute, becoming both users and custodians of biodiversity in connection with local knowledge and farming communities. This land use involves a cognitive and cultural re-orientation which assumes a non-purely instrumental relationship with environmental and territorial resources, with labor force and with consumers. This agricultural value is not only measured in economic perspective but also in social value provided for and with the community.

Over the time, the NCO cooperatives have reached closer relations with local communities, despite several mistrusts, especially in regard to living with mentally ill people20. In some cases, these relationships are formalized with the official participation in local committees or associations that fight against mafia culture, such as the Don Peppe Diana committee (an association nurturing the legacy of a famous anti-mafia priest killed by Camorra in 1994). These formal or informal links, at local and national level, have been very relevant in supporting

20 «At the beginning local people complain, they were afraid of "crazy", and then it happened that the police arrested a dangerous fugitive leaving right next to our apartment. People had more fear of the mentally ill people than of a dangerous Mafia member wanted throughout Italy». P. P., coop Agropoli.
cooperatives in hard times, when, for instance, they received intimidation and damage by the Camorra. Their projects have faced many problems, particularly in the startup for the rehabilitation of managed assets, due to the lack of funds and the difficulty to get loans from banks with the consequent unavailability of technical equipment. This was associated with the difficulties of the ordinary public administration mismanagement. For example, in 2011 for more than 11 months, the local health centers have not paid the amounts due to social cooperatives for the rehabilitation programs. Their members resorted to a hunger and thirst strike to protest against this situation threatening the cooperatives closure. In addition, at the beginning, the cooperatives did not have agricultural technical knowledge and experience. Practicing organic farming has been a major challenge, as the area lacks the specialized advisory services as well as a supply chain capable of transforming organic products. To solve the latter problem, in 2014 they opened a small processing plant reserved for organic agricultural productions that will enable the cooperative consortium to transform their products with a significant cost reduction.

Despite the difficulties, NCO cooperatives have achieved many results, producing positive externalities for the local community through innovative actions in different areas, such as in the rehabilitation of several disadvantaged people, in the creation of jobs, in the requalification of derelict properties and land, in promoting organic agriculture and in preventing illegal waste disposal in rural areas. Considering only the four cooperatives formally members of the consortium, they develop a total turnover of approximately €2,500,000 and employ about sixty people, including part time. Furthermore, there are several seasonal contracts and voluntary workers, for instance one of the NCO cooperative employs about thirty seasonal workers for three months a year in order to manage the educational farm. Very relevant is also the educational work carried out by NCO cooperatives to spread the anti-mafia culture and to raise citizen awareness. Their educational efforts include the organization of festivals and other public events, structured projects with schools and volunteer work-camps organized in collaboration with the association Libera. Nevertheless, NCO co-operatives reach the more relevant educational goals through their daily work and their being immersed in the local community, building relations with their neighbors, with local farmers, with schools and associations. The successes achieved by the NCO cooperatives derive from the whole-hearted commitment and the hard work of their members, together with their ability to cooperate jointly and effectively.

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21 "Libera. Associations, names and numbers against Mafia" was born on 1995 to support the fight against Mafia and organized crime. Libera is presently a network of more than 1,200 associations, groups and schools.
with several stakeholders: public (such as Municipalities, health services, etc.), private (farmers, local entrepreneurs, etc.) and civic associations.

To keep this close link with the local community and to have a full power of self-determination, NCO cooperatives decided not to join the consortium Libera Terra Mediterraneo (Free Land Mediterranean) while adhering to the association Libera. This consortium, created in 2008, brings together nine social cooperatives that cultivate the land confiscated to mafia in Southern Italy. It supports its members in the production process and it directly manages the processing and marketing of agricultural products with a common brand. Libera Terra Cooperatives also benefit from the advisory support of the non-profit organization "Cooperare con (Cooperating with) Libera Terra", which coordinates the global Libera Terra project and consolidates and supports their economic-entrepreneurial development. For NCO cooperatives, the adhesion to Libera Terra could have resulted in an effective strategy to improve competitiveness, and to develop or stabilize their financial returns. This is a further proof that the strategy of cooperatives is not mainly driven by purely economic and commercial motivations. The NCO cooperatives collaborate in different circumstances with the only one cooperative belonging to the consortium Libera Terra in Campania, Le Terre di Don Peppe Diana. They are all involved in the ambitious project of developing "RES – Rete Economia Sociale" (Social Economy Network). The project, founded with € 889,200 by the Fondazione con il Sud (a bank foundation), involves a network of 31 public and private organizations with the main objective to promote and implement social economy sector chains (food, tourism and social communication) through the use of property confiscated to the mafia in eight Municipalities of Caserta province. The project is still in the startup phase that results extremely slow and complex due to numerous actors involved.

VI Highlights and conclusion

The interests of NCO cooperatives met the interests of grassroots movements’ coalitions at the crossroad of territory reclamation with the spheres of social and economic production and reproduction. Formal and informal ties between the actors facilitate the connection between cooperatives and movements. For instance, some grassroots committees establish the locale of their meetings in the cooperatives, or cooperatives members are themselves part of committees. In addition, the grassroots movements consider the NCO cooperatives as a concrete step toward the imagined future of an ecological society.
The action of NCO cooperatives and environmental activists is rooted on a common vision: they share a paradigm shift. By acknowledging that they belong to the same pattern that connects, they propose a transition from the logic of exploitation to the logic of care exploring socio-economic-ecological systems in relation to social equity. They reject the view of nature as a resource to dominate, to control and to exploit according to a profit-driven logic that belongs both to Mafia culture and to the current economic structure. Instead, they propose a new ethic of economic, ecological and social relations, based on the respect of human rights and on the recognition of the interdependence of society and nature. Their engagements with a transformative politics do not originate primarily from utopias, neither from critical theories of social change or environmentalism, but rather from lived experiences of struggle, environmental change, social exclusion, contamination and Mafia rule, perceived as unbearable. By searching for solutions moving from different paths, they realized these were not particular accidents but structural problems. NCO social cooperatives and grassroots movements have matured through time a critical consciousness, making connections with the social, economic and ecological contradictions in society. They joined forces through what Paulo Freire calls praxis: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1970). This paved the way for an increasing politicization of their common struggles, questioning the existing power relationships making them passive objects. NCO cooperatives and environmental activists are both engaged in a process of community empowerment. They reclaim real democracy and the right to self-organize, aspiring to develop a proximity democracy that would allow communities to participate directly in how local resources and services are planned and delivered. Moreover, they tend to assume a more proactive role in the management of common property resources through collective actions. These collective actions take place in the social networks involving cooperatives, associations, individuals and public actors, acting at local, regional or national level. Alliances built by the actors are more or less mutable and they include a broad spectrum of issues and aims, such as knowledge exchanges (to foster the social economy), alliances for influencing the institutional arrangements, mapping of resources, provision of services, community events and social valorization of traditional ties with the land. The connection with other environmental conflicts and with other experiences of social economies signals the interdependence and the multi-scalar dimension of the activists’ project.

Networking processes enhance the reproduction of "ethical social capital" and anti-mafia culture, opposing the negative social capital produced by the networks through which is nourished the power of organized crime (Cayli et al. 2010). NCO cooperatives and environmental movements promote in more or less explicit way mutually reinforcing activities for a cultural and physical reappropriation of territory (Escobar 1998), by
connecting symbolic, material and structural dimensions (Turco 1998). As a member of a social cooperative told us: “For us it was clear that the first thing to do was and is a cultural change. We need to involve the community with the aim to reverse the criminal values. The Camorra is first of all a cultural operation based on three elements: individualism, indifference, suspicion. You can try to counteract it pointing on common goods and investments for community wellbeing” (P. P., Agropoli cooperative). These groups are engaged in a real process of revitalization and co-production of place, according to the vision of territory as a set of relationships, a relational space, instead of a mere physical space or geographical area (Dematteis 1985). The alliance between these groups aspires to define and share a new local community’s self-narration, together with the implementation of new practices and the settlement of an ethical cultural and institutional and framework (values, norms and rules). These processes create a robust basis for a place awareness (Magnagni 2010) able to promote an innovative local path of territorial development with the transition from criminal economy to social/ecological economy grounded on the care of commons and on the autonomous self-organization of communities.

VII Room for debate and further research

The revolutionary challenges outlined, as well as our research on these issues, are still in progress, and leave room for debate. Specifically we would like to point out some critical limits/risks inherent in these processes. The NCO cooperatives are small-scale economic entities not very competitive, their current challenge is to gain economic self-sufficiency on the market, while actually their main source of income are the public contributions received from health care for their rehabilitation activities. These public revenues are problematic because they are not continuous, and too often the payments are delayed. A critical key point is how to be economically sustainable without distorting the project in the face of capitalist economy, considering that they provide community value and services, some of which are not accounted and/or not accountable through market indicators. A related problem is how to get out of a niche maintaining full adherence to ethical principles and to the vision of community wellbeing. Indeed, the change of the institutional setting requires the growth and consolidation of these experiences. However, cooperatives are often confronted with a trade-off between ethics and market and in addition there is a risk of being turned into a subsidiary welfare designed by the State to deflect its responsibilities. There is also a risk that capitalist production systems enclose these experiences, and try to exploit their symbolic power, reducing the subversive potential of subjectivities engaged in activism or using them as an escape valve of a general system which remains unchanged. As the famous article of Porter and Kramer suggests creating "sharing value" is the way to reinvent and revitalize capitalism (Porter and Kramer 2011), but without
questioning its dynamics and injustices, in fact "addressing social concerns in a company's business practices is not counter-intuitive to profit but instead can contribute to profit maximization" (Scanlan 2013).

This is why we see the cooperation with grassroots movements' coalition as a potential strategy to exercise continuously political pressure in order to change the broader economic and institutional arrangements. Resistance to inequalities, informed by a wide and multi-scalar critique of the status quo, and coupled with material organization of social reproduction, is a promising path for improving self-determination of communities, but not without risks. A question still open is how the social cooperation can achieve political and material changes toward equality and self-determination without being co-opted. These topics will be addressed in our further research.

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