A political geography of 'waste wars' in Campania (Italy): Competing territorialisations and socio-environmental conflicts

Salvatore Paolo De Rosa[1]

Lund University, Sölvegatan 10, 223 62, Lund, Sweden

"We cannot dump toxic waste there, we're going to contaminate the aquifer!"

"Who cares, we'll drink bottled water"

A camorra affiliate and a boss discussing illegal dumping of hazardous waste.[2]

1. Introduction

This quote reveals a glimpse of insight by a waste trafficker while he arranges the disposal of hazardous scraps in a *camorra*[3]-controlled area in the region of Campania, southern Italy, in the mid-1990s. His dilemma - should they dump toxic waste where they and their families live? - comes from the visceral realization that certain uses of the environment hamper others: toxic pollution and life do not go well together and he is well positioned to grasp it. The boss instead, despite residing in the same area, is less hesitant and simply plans to rely on commodified water from elsewhere. Fast forward to 2014 V., a woman architect turned activist that had gone already through ten years of anti-waste campaigns, told me: "*I call it rootedness: we live in this place and we'll claim it until death, it is our land and there is a relation with its life that cannot be broken. Therefore, it is fundamental for us to imagine alternative sustainable models in contrast to the ones that are winning.*"

These two quotes sketch the extremes of the 'waste wars' of Campania: more than two decades of social conflicts around waste management, environmental change and spatial organization. From about the 1980s, a network of camorra clans, waste entrepreneurs, landowners, public officials and politicians cooperated in making Campania the *trashcan of Italy* by trafficking and disposing in improper sites at least ten million tons of *hazardous* waste, mostly from industrial firms seeking cheap disposal options (Legambiente, 2013; Massari & Monzini, 2004). The legacy of such massive dumping of toxic by-products is today a patchy geography of pollution and health risks for the residents. Next to the illegal waste disposal, from 1994 to 2009 Campania has been in the grip of the 'emergency' regime for the management of *urban* garbage. During fifteen years of state of exception, the special government agency in charge of implementing the regional urban waste management plan targeted specific neighbourhoods and towns for hosting landfills, storage sites and incinerators. Besides multiple corruption scandals, overall failure of the plan and accumulation of garbage on the streets, the realization of the project entailed the suspension of democracy for the promotion of substantially private interests (D'Alisa, Burgalassi, Healy & Walter, 2010). Against both of these processes of authoritarian spatial and biophysical rearrangements through waste, grassroots movements of activists and inhabitants have arisen to (re)claim alternative waste management schemes (Armiero & D'Alisa, 2012) *and* uses of the land other than as trash receptacle (Caggiano & De Rosa, 2015). Their long-lasting resistance not only constituted a social barrier against waste occupation but also progressed into a reclamation of space from below, configuring a compelling case study of contemporary grassroots environmentalism.

Indeed, the politicization of space and ecology manifested in Campania exemplifies the competition between different users, uses and meanings of portions of land, and between the divergent socio-ecological processes these engender or imply, that underlie many other socio-environmental conflicts. In this article, moving from a theoretical encounter between Urban Political Ecology (hereafter, UPE) and two approaches to territory and territorialisation, I develop an analytical framework to inquire into such spatial and socioecological antagonisms. Subsequently, I apply it to the Campania case, showing how it can assist both scholars and activists in disentangling historical processes and core dynamics behind conflicts around land-use and socio-environmental change.

[2] This exchange was referred to prosecutors in 1999 by Gianfranco Mancaniello of Muzzoni clan of Sessa Aurunca, who witnessed it during a meeting to address the requests by some entrepreneurs of the Italian Northeast to dispose a few tons of toxic waste (available at "http://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2007/06/04/news/ecco-i-padrini-dei-rifiuti-1.3800").

[3] Camorra indicates, in both popular culture and scholarship, the wide array of mafia-like criminal groups, at times allied with each other and more often rivals, originating in Naples and other cities and towns of the Campania region but today widespread nationally and internationally (Sciarrone and Storti 2014).

1.1. Bridging UPE and political geography for socio-environmental conflicts' research

The current explosion and exposure of socio-environmental conflicts worldwide (Martínez-Alier, Temper, Del Bene & Scheidel, 2016; Temper, Demaria, Scheidel, Del Bene & Martínez-Alier, 2018a; see also GlobalWitness.org and EJatlas.org) has reinvigorated research on their causes and stakes, on the strategies of grassroots movements and on their contribution to transitions to sustainability (Rootes, 2013; Schlosberg & Coles, 2016; Temper, Walter, Rodriguez, Kothari & Turhan, 2018b). I define grassroots environmental mobilizations as forms of local contestation and social organizing arising from potential or experienced material livelihoods' degradation, dispossession or contamination, and from related clashes of meanings, imaginaries and desired futures articulated around socio-environmental conditions and changes (Watts & Peet, 1996; Martínez-Alier, 2002; Escobar, 2008). They often involve subaltern groups struggling to (re)gain material and symbolic power over the definitions and uses of a given space and of the 'nature' in and around it (Franquemagne, 2007; Holmes, 2014; Zografos & Martínez-Alier, 2009).

The field of UPE has added conceptual sophistication to theories of socio-environmental conflicts by explicitly politicizing the socio-ecological processes that make up cities and social worlds, and by reading environmental struggles in terms of the reproduction of capitalist relations (Heynen et al., 2006; Keil, 2003). However, UPE has been less receptive of emerging debates around territorial dynamics in socio-environmental conflicts. Indeed, recent contributions in geography have devoted renewed attention to both the logics of territorialisation that underpin contested environmental projects (Di Bella, 2015; Holmes, 2014) and to the (re)making of territories from below by grassroots activists striving to regain agency over their spaces and their lives (Halvorsen, 2012, 2015, 2018; Arampatzi, 2017a, 2017b; Escobar, 2016; Ince, 2012; Zibechi, 2012). While the metaphor of territorialisation has been deployed by UPE's authors to hint at the spatial dynamics of the urbanization of nature, it has not been fleshed out theoretically, nor operationalized as an explanatory tool, nor expanded to include eco-political performances from below. To address these gaps, I advance an integration of UPE with two strands of research on territory and territorialisation. Rather than proposing an entirely new approach my aim is to consolidate in a single analytical framework mutually enriching bodies of theory.

Territorial approaches to the re/ordering of space and society in specific historical conjunctures inform studies of nature conservation (Bluwstein & Lund, 2018; Corson, 2011), geopolitics (Bruslé, 2013) and development (Berdegué, Escobal & Bebbington, 2015), following a tradition going back to Sack (1986) and revived by Vandergeest and Peluso (1995). These authors build on a definition of territorialisation as the social strategy of creating bounded geographical areas for particular outcomes by classifying, regulating and enforcing certain uses of space, people and resources within (Rasmussen & Lund, 2017; Sack, 1986), thus seeing territories as *strategic* phenomena and *political projects* of control (Murphy, 2012).

Another rich stream of research on territoriality is found in the work of several post-colonial and decolonial authors from Latin America, offering critical insights over the relevance of territorial thinking for understanding socio-environmental conflicts (Porto-Gonçalves & Leff, 2015; Sandoval, Robertsdotter & Paredes, 2017). I refer specifically to scholars that focused on territoriality as the set of practices, relationships and situated knowledges performed by social groups to maintain a collective form of life (Escobar, 2001, 2016; Magnaghi, 2005) or life-project (Blaser, Harvey & McRare, 2004) grounded in place. From this latter perspective, territories are conceived as *relational* entities and *lived* realities (Raffestin, 2012).

By integrating these insights with UPE, I elaborate the analytical framework of *competing territorialisations*. My aim is twofold. First, to approach UPE's concept of socioecological metabolism from the vantage point of its territorialisation in order to read historically and dialectically the local socio-spatial and ecological changes that feed inequalities and conflicts. Second, to foreground grassroots movements' place-remaking practices and meanings in the analysis of socio-environmental conflicts from a UPE perspective. Besides contributing to political geography theory, I hope to provide an interpretation of socio-environmental struggles in tune with the framings and aspirations of grassroots movements that can potentially complement and orient their strategies.

My contention is that an UPE of competing territorialisations allows a more grounded understanding of how the making and remaking of socioecological relations and metabolisms, their contestations and their symbolizations, inevitably need to be *written on the land* (Peluso & Lund, 2011). In this perspective, crucial consideration is devoted to the ways in which different social groups define, defend and utilize the geographical areas at stake during environmental conflicts in the pursuit of competing socio-spatial project that reflect alternative (and often mutually excluding) socioecological configurations.

To illustrate this point, I apply a political geography approach to the conflicts around waste in Campania. Waste is a complex 'stuff', inquired by a heterogeneous literature (cf. Hawkins & Muecke, 2002; Moore, 2012). To delimit my focus, I do not investigate how objects and materials are made into waste, but rather engage the management and disposal of what is considered socially as waste (in particular, urban garbage from consumption and hazardous by-products from production). I tackle it in two ways. First, as an object being commodified through trade and regulation, in order to disclose the ways in which waste is remade into a mean of profit and rent generation (O'Brien, 2007) with particular attention to the spatiality of these processes. Second, I give equal importance to the unstable materiality of waste and to its entanglements with local socioecologies (Gille, 2010) which often make handling and disposal the trigger of social conflicts (Rootes, 2009).

During the last two decades, Campania's land - its uses, property regimes and the regulations, networks and imaginaries generated around it - intertwined with flows and immobilizations of waste. Different instances of spatial organization enacted by a plethora of actors constituted sites of profit making and rent extraction through waste metabolism, establishing the conditions that allow for the circulation and accumulation of waste as circulation and accumulation of capital - for waste entrepreneurs - and as bioaccumulation and biomagnification of contaminants for the local human and non-human populations. Arising from the popular resistance against the territorialisation of the waste economy, grassroots movements expanded through time their scope by re-signifying and re-appropriating (portions of) the land to ground in place alternative socio-spatial configurations that prefigure different socioecological futures. Drawing on this case, I show how UPE's grasp of the antagonisms intertwined with the urbanization of nature can be deepened and enhanced by integrating the territorial dynamics that contribute in triggering such conflicts and that result from them.

Concepts of *space* and *place* are fundamental entry points in the proposed framing. I conceive of space as simultaneously objective (measurable) and as the product of social forces, changing historically according to the logics imprinted on it by different societies (Lefebvre, 1991; Smith, 1984). Space therefore is a physical reality that is socially and dialectically produced, constituting at once the platform for capitalist accumulation as well as the barrier that needs to be circumvented (Harvey, 2006). In theorizing place I follow Escobar's (2001) understanding of it as emergent - a process defined in part through resistance to changing 'strategies of power' - and as grounded - linked to the everyday engagement of specific peoples with specific landscapes, environments or 'natures'. At the same time, I consider place a continuously (re)negotiated geographical fiction (Castree, 2004) inextricably linked with the consequences of wider interdependencies (Massey, 2005).