

WORKING CLASS COMMUNITIES AND ECOLOGY: Reframing Environmental Justice around the Ilva steel plant in Taranto (Apulia, Italy)

In July 2012, a local Preliminary Hearing Judge ordered the closing of the most polluting furnaces of the Ilva steel plant in Taranto, the largest and one of the oldest such factories in Europe, finding its management guilty of environmental and public health disaster (Barca 2014a). After decades of imperturbable – if unequal – balance amongst social actors, the confiscation set in motion an unprecedented conflict between environmental and community activists, on the one hand, and the company owners, backed by government support, on the other. The conflict inevitably extended to the Metalworkers' unions confederation, sparking a profound and irreversible crisis; its initial manifestations of loyalty and support to the company – in continuation with decades-long attitudes of quiescence towards the job blackmail – encountered the unexpected opposition of substantial parts of the rank-and-file (and the local population at large), causing the union to lose much of its credibility and a significant number of affiliates. Such an explosive situation – which attracted the attention of international broadsheets such as the *NY Times* and *The Guardian*, as well as of influential weeklies like *The Economist* – opened up entirely new social dynamics, and a still fluid process of cultural and political re-framing, at the community level. How to make sense of this epoch-changing event in the history of the city?

To answer that question, some background data need to be taken into the account. The Ilva facility is simply startling with regard to its physical extension, economic relevance, and polluting record. With a surface of 1500 hectares (scattered by 200 kilometers of railways, 5 blast furnaces, 10 coke oven batteries, 6 exclusively dedicated docks), Ilva accounts for more than 30% of Italy's steel production, and for approximately 75% of Taranto's GDP. Furthermore, it currently employs 11,980 workers (including blue collars, white collars, and managerial staff) which become over 20,000 if we consider variously induced activities. Such gigantism is perfectly mirrored by the dramatic data concerning pollutants emissions: in 2010 ILVA emitted over 11,000t of nitrogen dioxide, 11,300t of sulphur dioxide, 1.3t of benzene. All pollutants are emitted well beyond the thresholds established by national as well as EU legislations. As a consequence the evidence about health issues in the area is truly worrisome: both time trend mortality (1980-2008) and cancer incidence (2006-2007) show epidemiological evidence of excess risks for a number of causes of death, amongst which prominently figure lung cancer and cardiovascular/respiratory diseases, both acute and chronic (Piratsu *et al.* 2013).

These data give an idea of the sheer dimension of the environmental and public health damage brought about by (and through) the ILVA plant in its 50-year operation, and make this case of utmost relevance to current EU policies regulating a variety of phenomena: industrial hazards, public health monitoring, carbon emissions, contamination of life-support systems by Persistent Organic Pollutants (POP) and heavy metals, environmental clean-up and economic transition. All of the above characterize the Taranto area as an industrially-contaminated site, with ample social and legal repercussions. In the language of Environmental Justice – an action/research approach emerged in the USA in the mid-1980s and currently adopted in social science and community activism worldwide (Bullard 1990) – Taranto is a 'sacrifice zone' of industrial development, and its population configures as a discriminated community, whose right to a safe and clean environment has been disregarded and heavily discounted in politico-economic terms.

This paper will consider the theoretical implications of this case for a reframing of the Environmental Justice approach in the sense of fully incorporating issues of interest to working-class communities undergoing processes of industrial restructuring and economic transition. We will first illustrate and discuss the Environmental Justice approach from a working-class community perspective, and propose an innovative framework for integrating the two, which we term the Working-Class Community Ecology framework (WCCE). Ecological struggles often contain an

unobserved or undertheorized link between labor and environmental concerns. Paradoxically, work and its complex relationship to environmental concerns is probably the less known aspect of environmental justice struggles and of environmental conflicts. And yet work is and has always been relevant to those struggles, for the simple reason that “subaltern” people, racially discriminated people, or “the poor” are typically also working-class people, that is, people who occupy the lower ranks of the labor hierarchy, making a living out of the most dangerous and most unhealthy jobs while also living in the most polluted places. Workers thus develop a more or less explicit perception of the work/environment tradeoff that shapes their lives and the places in which they work and live. Such bargains are often overly simplified as ‘jobs versus the environment’, which obscures the nature and the diversity of environmental activism that develops from working-class ecological consciousness (Barca 2014b).

In what terms can we speak of working-class communities as an environmental subject, and how can we understand their ecologies? How does the concept of working-class community help us advance our understanding of ecological crises and of environmentalism? To answer these questions, we will make use of J.K. Gibson-Graham’s concept of ‘community economy’ in a post-capitalist perspective (Gibson-Graham 2006), but extending it to the ecological dimension, in order to originate what we call a Working-Class Community Ecology (WCCE) framework. In their *A post-capitalist politics*, Gibson-Graham elaborated an extended conception of ‘class’ as something that can be used ‘to supply ethical coordinates for negotiating interdependency’ and ‘as a discourse that can promote self-recognition and foster connection’ (Gibson-Graham 2006: 81). This idea of ‘class’ extended to a human community is employed to counter the market/capitalist logic of individualization and competition, which did not eradicate community and interdependence but obscured them as marginal and irrelevant. Our Working-Class Community Ecology framework enlarges the view to the working-class community’s *environment* as a crucial dimension to help finding such coordinates. In doing so, it applies a view of ecology as the interdependence among humans and non-human nature, advocating for an ethic of partnership, i.e. of mutual support and co-evolution. Community wellbeing cannot be thought of outside of its interdependencies with the physical and biological environment and the non-human world. The WCCE thus understands the ‘class’ concept as extended to include workers’ families and all those who share with them the space they inhabit (the air they breathe, the ecosystem where they reproduce, the living and non-living world with which they share the local space) in a relation of mutual interdependence. Sharing Gibson-Graham’s understanding of community as ‘being-with’ or ‘being-in-common’, WCCE looks at the working-class community as a web of interconnections between production and reproduction in place.

The application of a WCCE approach to the Ilva case represents the second part of the paper. Our aim is to show how it can account for the environmental injustice played out in a working-class community in the throes of crisis/rupture of preexisting equilibria. As a conclusion, we highlight the innovative methodological aspects of the WCCE framework and conclude with some open questions concerning its further development.

-Relevant Theme: 4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change.

-Relevant Subthemes: 2.5. Environmental justice; 3.2. Distribution, equality, and social justice, including the rural-urban divide; 4.1. Power relations and overcoming vested interests; 4.2. The role of social movements in the sustainability revolution.

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