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From waste to climate: Tackling climate change in a rebel city

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Abstract

It has often been said that the problem with climate change is its invisibility. People do not mobilize about climate change because they cannot see it; even less can they see CO₂ emissions, that is, the most relevant material element causing climate alternations. Although I would argue that for some people climate change is more visible than for others, it remains a global environmental problem not easily felt on the ground. On the other hand, waste appears to be an incumbent presence, almost impossible to avoid; it also seems more localized than global climate change. People mobilize around waste because it stands in front of their eyes and noses. This is how the story has been told so many times. In this article, instead, I am going to tell another story, one in which climate activism is rooted into the struggles against waste contamination. In Naples, Italy, twenty years of mobilization against toxicity—which, by the way, is much less visible and much more harmful than the urban garbage in the streets—has generated an epistemic community trained to understand the invisible connections linking local problems, global issues, and socio-environmental inequalities. Their original elaboration of biocide as the theoretical framework explaining the production of toxic communities provided them with an equally original framework to understand climate change and its unequal impacts on people and ecosystems. In moving between waste and climate, local and global, those epistemic communities have not only changed the ways in which climate activism has been conceived but they have also changed themselves.

Keywords: Climate activism, waste, biocide, Naples

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1. Naples: Wasted City

From 1994 to 2012 Naples and its region were under a special administrative and legal regime due to a so-called waste emergency.¹ Everything started from the fact that most of the landfills of the region were exhausted or working under illegal and unsanitary conditions. For this reason, most of them were closed by the judiciary, leaving the metropolitan city of Naples without a functioning system for the disposal of waste. Almost immediately, the streets of Naples started to be flooded by urban garbage; heaps of trash were piling up, sometimes reaching the first floors of the buildings. Journalists from every corner of the world arrived in Naples, attracted by the lure of this urban apocalypse. Mothers zigzagging with their children among piles of garbage became an iconic image of the city.² When the trash reached the posh areas of Naples, waste became visible, so real to be televised. Nonetheless, the tension between what was visible and what remained hidden stayed unsolved. The underground flows of toxicity, the unjust distribution of burdens, and the effects of all this on human health needed a different ability of seeing and understanding the socioecological relationships producing not the garbage in the streets but the wasting of subaltern people and communities. The combination Naples/waste is a staple in the global imaginary about the city. Almost all foreign travelers visiting Naples in the 19th century would remark on the dirtiness of the streets, the cohabitation of humans and garbage, often making a disturbing connection between this external disorder and some kind of innate characteristics of Neapolitans. In this respect, the narratives about Naples seem to follow the typical colonial/modernist trope described by Dipesh Chakrabarty for the Indian cities³: dirtiness and diseases go hand in hand with the local resistance to the modern order which parts dirt and clean, private and public, healthy and sick. The same kind of Orientalist discourse can be found in the 1926 Alfred Sohn-Rethel's description of the Neapolitans as pre-modern subjects in their almost superstitious approach to technology.⁴

Later on, several times during the 19th and 20th century, the love story between Naples and its waste has become more visible, producing minor or impressive apocalypses. In 1884 and 1973 the cholera epidemic hit the city, unleashing an impressive number of social scientists, all roaming around the ruins of a never fully modern metropolis. Whatever the etiology of the epidemic was, it was clear that the dirtiness of the city, the disordered blend of any kind of matter, the cohabitation of waste and people were crucial for the development of contamination.

In 1973, the cholera epidemic again visited Naples, bringing with it the usual parade of reporters and writers, ready to resuscitate the waste pornography of a city soaked in its own filth. Hence, the 1990s-2000s waste emergency was not an unexpected apocalypse, but rather an epiphany confirming what was already known: Naples has always been a dirty city where waste overflows everywhere contaminating places and bodies. In the descriptions of urban environmental disasters, the dirtiness of a place is almost always connected to the dirtiness of its inhabitants. After all, the Italian historian Benedetto Croce--himself a Neapolitan by adoption--crystallized this vision about the city with his famous definition of Naples as “a paradise inhabited by devils.” Croce meant to contrast the astonishing beauty of the city with what he considered its major problem, that is, the completely unruly, almost wild character of its inhabitants. The stigma against Neapolitans, and more broadly Southern Italians, has a long history, and found its apex with the unification of the country in the 1860s, when several scholars tried to demonstrate the inferiority of people from the Italian South on a “scientific” basis.⁵ Things have not changed so much since then, considering that during the waste emergency many commentators and politicians went back to the reassuring narrative of the paradise inhabited by devils. Even scholars are not immune from this. Once a reviewer of one of my publications did not have any problem in writing that I did not consider in my text the reluctance of Neapolitans to recycle and their habit of littering. Neapolitans are dirty and an epidemic or a waste emergency are clear exemplars of their “nature”--this seems to be the mainstream narrative about the city.

Instead of these trite stereotypes, one might read those various emergencies as demonstrations not of some natural disposition of the city inhabitants but of long-lasting structures of injustice creating vulnerable people and wasted places. The entire body of scholarship and activism on environmental justice has precisely argued that if people live in unhealthy environments, most of the time it is due to the unequal power relationships which have targeted them as the ultimate dump

for someone else's wellbeing. While it is crucial to restore the truth, I argue that it is still insufficient to frame these waste crises only in terms of victims, subaltern people forced to endure contamination as the price to pay to the capitalist organization of space and production. These are also the forcing house of powerful community's infrastructures, catalytic moments of massive social mobilizations.⁶ In my research on the Neapolitan case, I have argued that the embodied experience of contamination has caused a political subjectification creating resisting communities and activist knowledge. Since the waste emergency exploded, several grassroots organizations have mushroomed both in the metropolitan region of Naples and in the entire region. Most of those grassroots organizations were connected to specific sites, mobilizing to stop the construction or enlargement of waste facilities in their communities. This might seem a typical NIMBY--not in my backyard--approach to environmental problems and indeed this is how those mobilizations have been depicted by mainstream media. After all, hordes of wild Neapolitans rioting against "rational" and "modern" waste infrastructures fit perfectly well with the age-old adage about a paradise inhabited by devils with a complicated relationship with technology, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel would add. It matters little that those infrastructures—being them incinerators or landfills--were much less modern and rational than it was claimed or that they were always placed in communities which had already paid a high price to maintain clean other parts of the region.

In this article, I wish to explain how this waste struggle legacy has intertwined with the current climate activism. Waste and climate are both crucial ecological problems; the exponential increase in CO₂ emissions could be considered in itself a problem of disposal of waste⁷. But in many ways waste and climate are radically different ecological problems; issues of scales—both geographical and temporal--, perceptions, and scientific frameworks affect the kind of social activism they may generate. Rather than exploring the relationships between mainstream and grassroots environmentalism, something which has been analyzed so many times in the literature,⁸ I aim at interrogating what may occur when a community with a long history of environmental and social justice struggles meets climate change. And I will do so from a personal, situated point of view, being myself involved in the environmental and political activism in Naples, Italy.

2. The performative politics of waste

In my attempt to understand the continuity between the waste and climate activism, I believe that there are two notions which are crucial: the construction of epistemic communities and the rejection of single issue politics. According to urban theorist Edgar Pieterse, the production of knowledge, and thereby of new imaginaries, occurs through what he calls "epistemic communities" where collective knowledge "can be assembled or networked" with the aim to "challenge conventional orthodoxy (the mainstream) about what is possible and not possible in terms of transformative urban development agendas"⁹. I argue that those epistemic communities have been the most remarkable result of the long lasting waste struggles in Naples. Because while the mainstream pornography of waste has an easy understanding of what we are talking about--the heaps of trash and the smell in the air--social struggles bring more nuances into the picture. As I have argued elsewhere, looking at environmental issues through the lens of conflicts "can reveal the structure of power embodied in nature as well as the socially diversified contents of humans' agency"¹⁰. The geography of landfills, incinerators, and toxic waste does not speak only of technological solutions and environmental contamination; it also draws the hierarchies of power relationships between groups and places. Looking at waste through socioecological struggles it is clear that waste is never just a matter of trash. Every environmental justice conflict is at its core a scientific controversy. In the Neapolitan case, activists had to become experts of urban and industrial ecologies in a spasmodic attempt to restore the truth and connect the dots linking health, contamination, production, and corruption.¹¹ Accused to be anti-science and primitive, after all nothing so different from 1926 Alfred Sohn-Rethel's arguments, – for their critique of incinerators and their skepticism towards mainstream scientific knowledge --, those activists were rejecting neither technology nor science. Rather they tried to appropriate and critically analyze that knowledge while aiming to co-produce new knowledge for radical change. Often this has implied to uncover and mobilize the plurality of science, discovering and even fostering the radical divergences between scientists – indeed, not all scientists say the same thing. In many cases, activists have been instrumental in the production of militant knowledge, for instance through the experiences of popular epidemiology or citizens' monitoring of air quality. On a more epistemological level, activists have contributed to question the usual binary opposition between impersonal scientific knowledge and embodied personal experiences, claiming that the two are more deeply connected then it is acknowledged.¹² The activists' crucial contribution to a more accurate understanding of the waste crisis in Campania brought the shift from the bags of urban

trash in the streets to the illegal disposal of toxic waste in the rural areas around the metropolis. In other words, while with climate the challenge seems to make visible an invisible threat, with waste activists needed to shift the attention from the cumbersome presence of waste in the city streets to the subtle infiltration of toxicity in the bodies and ecosystems. It was still an issue of visibility/invisibility, as often it be with environmental issues, but I argue that the waste struggles produced an epistemic community trained to navigate between the two, equipped to look for underlining power relationships within ecological problems. With Venn, I would argue that the waste struggles provided those activists with an embodied theory of waste which brought “into visibility the constitutive relation between the visible and the invisible.”¹³

In 2006 the intellectual fulcrum of the Neapolitan epistemic communities, the Assise,¹⁴ published a pamphlet with the unequivocal title *Warning: Toxic Waste* [original title: Allarme Rifiuti Tossici] in which the activists aimed to switch the public attention from the extremely visible mess caused by the urban garbage to the invisible though more harmful flow of toxic substances.¹⁵ As Rob Nixon has argued, slow violence goes hand in hand with its invisibility or, to be more precise, with its invisibilization.¹⁶ Restoring the truth has been the main mission of the Neapolitan epistemic communities. While mainstream media and politicians were deriding those who were protesting and denying any connection between their health conditions and the disposal of toxic waste, epistemic communities were at work making research and gathering materials which could prove their claims. Every Sunday for seven years (2005-2011), the Assise provided a venue where the Neapolitan activists could meet with sympathetic experts (medical doctors, geologists, jurists, and others) for a self-managed education. It is enough to read the documents produced by the two wider coalitions of civil society organizations (the Waste Regional Coordination and the StopBiocidio Network) to have a sense of the knowledge produced by those epistemic communities.

Precisely the comparison between these two big coalitions can help in highlighting the other point I believe is crucial for understanding the connections between waste struggles and climate activism, that is the rejection of single-issue politics. Green parties and environmentalist organizations have often been defined as handbook examples of single-issue politics; they are supposed to target ecological problems and nothing else. The entire environmental justice movement started from a radical critique of the mainstream environmentalist organizations,

accused to be blind – if not complicit with – class, race, and gender structural inequalities. I argue that while the Waste Regional Coordination has been truthful to its mission, focusing exclusively on the issue of waste, the StopBiocidio Network has chosen to stay in the Italian radical leftist tradition merging environmental and social issues. In the end, the former has now stopped its activities while StopBiocidio still is the most lively coalition of environmentalist grassroots associations in the region and perhaps on the national scale, playing a crucial role both in the struggles for the reclamation of toxic communities and in the new mobilization for climate justice. In a document written in preparation for a national meeting held in Naples, StopBiocidio activists wrote:

*Capitalism is the virus infecting our communities and the biocide is the disease brought by this virus. Biocide is the pathological development coming from capitalism because capitalism is in direct contradiction to life. Climate change is the most transversal symptom of this disease. We are not all equally responsible for climate change, we are not all victims and guilty parties in the same way, as if the problem were the human species. Instead there are a few who have enriched themselves exploiting both the resources of the planet and the majority of people.*¹⁷

Biocide as a theoretical category to understand the socio-ecological crisis reveals to be a key bridge between waste and climate. Thinking with biocide implies to attribute responsibilities; biocide does not just occur but it is implemented. Biocide helps to avoid the usual identification between symptoms and causes, or, in other words, the reification of socio-ecological problems as if waste or CO₂ emissions were what should be solved. While biocide brings power structures at the core of the ecological thinking, it also opens up to a more-than-human understanding of the crisis. Although generated from the experience of human sufferings, biocide frames that experience in terms of a broader violence exerted by capitalism against life. Indeed, after years of waste struggles, the StopBiocidio coalition was not only organizationally prepared for entering into the climate movement; the category of biocide gave them the intellectual tools for bridging local anti-toxic campaigns and global climate actions. Something similar occurred also in New Orleans, when after Katrina environmental justice organizations started to engage with climate change bringing in that arena their long-lasting commitment to social justice.¹⁸

By hosting the national meeting of March 3, 2019 in Naples, StopBiocidio placed itself as the hinge between the environmental justice struggles and the growing mobilization against climate change. Nonetheless, it was not an immediate, easy transition; employing the category of biocide to understand and act on climate change needed some time and thinking. Figure 1. StopBiocidio Banner at the Climate March in Naples (Sept. 27, 2019). Photograph by the author



3. The two tales of one organization

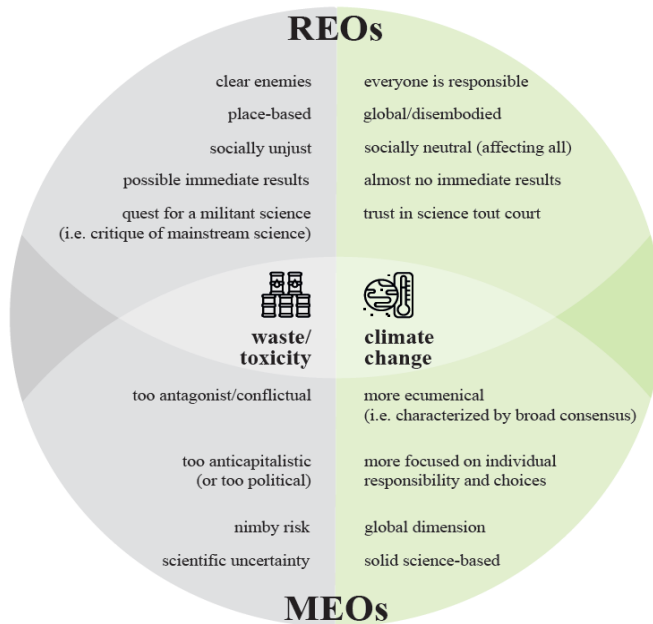
When I started my research on climate change activism in Naples in 2018, it was an obvious choice for me to begin from the groups I have been working with since the time of my research on waste. I convened a focus group with the youth branch of a grassroots organization I have become close with during my many years of fieldwork. Around twelve students--mostly high school students--came to the meeting in a squatted room at the local university. They knew me quite well since I have offered them several classes for self-education on political ecology and environmental justice; however, that time they did not want to be recorded and I could perceive they were not so happy about the theme of the meeting. As they clearly stated, climate change was not their priority, it was something distant from their lives and their struggles. One of them, A., explained that climate change was something she had learned at school, where the science teacher told her about

the melting ice of the Poles, while no teacher has ever discussed at school the issue of toxic contamination in the region. For this activist, this was a clear sign that climate change was a conflict-free zone, an area which she was not interested in being engaged with. Indeed, those were not the usual environmental activists, rather they were militants of a radical leftist organization, with quite strong ties to Italian autonomia and inspired by the Zapatistas' and Kurds' insurgencies. Nonetheless, during the 2000s their organization became a key player in the struggles for environmental justice in Naples, mainly because their headquarter--an abandoned primary school they occupied illegally since 2003--is located in the working class neighborhood of Chiaiano, where a gigantic landfill was planned and built. Theirs was a place-based struggle, though not at all a NIMBY one, since they were behind several coalitions coordinating the struggles and mobilizations in various communities, starting with the Rete Commons [Commons Network] and culminating with the still active StopBiocidio. Hence, the objection of A. was perfectly in line with an activist tradition and culture which privilege place-based struggles and an antagonist agenda. At that time, those activists were also supporting the struggles against the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)¹⁹ occurring in the neighboring region of Apulia--proving once more that theirs was not an egoistic/NIMBY approach. However, when I asked them why they were not framing that struggle in terms of climate change, they argued that it was much better to think of it in terms of territorial struggles. The TAP was jeopardizing the local ecosystem, with its centuries-old olive trees, amazing beaches, and crystal sea and those were the main issues raised by local activists. Being in solidarity with them, the Neapolitan activists did not consider it appropriate to bring themes on the table which were not locally developed. On a more general level, my interlocutors argued that climate change was an excessively abstract theme that people would not feel particularly connected to. In addition to this, they also raised the issue of the absolute disproportion between the possible actions done at the grassroots level and the magnitude of the problem. The situation was even more depressing since they have been part of a progressive coalition which had won the municipal elections twice, ruling the city since 2013.²⁰ For them the local government could not do anything to address climate change.

I left Naples with the impression that radical environmentalist organizations (REOs) were not interested in the climate struggle. As much as they had become acquainted with ecology during the garbage struggles of the early 2000s, they did not seem willing to embrace what appeared to them a global issue, too ecumenical to become a terrain for social conflicts. The situation was

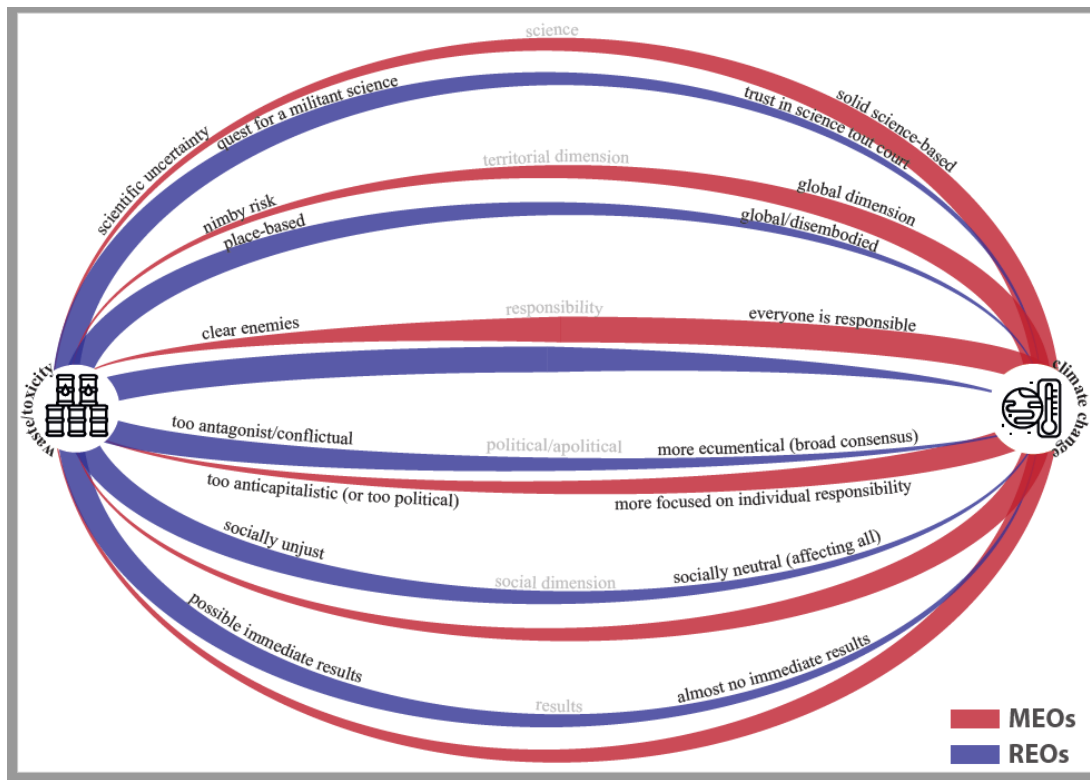
different for mainstream environmentalist organizations (MEOs), such as the WWF and the Italian NGO Legambiente. In the focus groups I held with them, they seemed more prepared to embrace climate change as a major theme for their actions. They were involved in national and international campaigns on climate change and they had also animated local campaigns to promote the greening of the city, now reframed in terms of mitigation strategies. The divergence between these two kinds of environmentalist organizations did not surprise me at all. Having worked for a long time on the histories of environmentalism, I am familiar with the “varieties of environmentalism” which have characterized the evolution of the movements.²¹ But it was still a revelatory experience to notice that there was some kind of inverse correlation between the rate of involvement in local struggles and the willingness to embrace climate change as a major theme for mobilization. In fact, mainstream environmentalist organizations such as WWF and Legambiente were almost absent in the cycle of struggles over waste and toxic contamination, at least at the grassroots level. My impression was that the main problems felt by the radical activists in respect to climate change were precisely the main reasons for those mainstream organizations to tackle it.

Figure 2 Radical Environmental Organizations (REOs) vs. Mainstream Environmental Organizations (MEOs) - Dealing with climate change and toxicity. Graphic design by Simona Quagliano



The REOs made an excoriating critique of the established arsenal mobilized in climate change debates and activism: the individualization of responsibility, the neutrality of its effects, and the search for technological solutions. I did not ask the MEOs to elaborate on their reluctance to fully engage with the waste crisis but building upon more than a decade of research on the theme, I would imagine that their answer would have mirrored this: it had become too divisive and it was monopolized by radical activists with a repertoire of actions which were too far away from their usual practices. Instead, MEOs were much more comfortable in the climate change arena, where they seemed to have the right tools and approaches to tackle it. Another and perhaps key point of divergence is the relationship with science and scientists, since climate change activism--at least in its mainstream version--relies heavily on scientific knowledge in order to frame its claims as non-partisan, while the anti-toxic activists often have to challenge mainstream scientists, who are generally reluctant to acknowledge their claims. The divergence between the two strands of environmentalism could not be clearer in front of my eyes. But, in the following months, everything changed.

Figure 3 Engaging with toxicity and climate change - REOs and MEOs. Graphic design by Simona Quagliano



NOTE: The intensity of the engagement is represented by the thickness of the lines. The thicker the line, the more engaged the organization.

In March 2019 the same association I had met in the fall hosted a national assembly in Naples with the aim of connecting place-based environmental struggles to the growing climate change movement. The assembly was hosted in the city hall with the discrete but clear support of the municipal government. Since then, they have become a key player in the Neapolitan and national Fridays For Future movement. The weekly meetings of the city chapter have been held in their office and they were the only organization from Naples to participate in the Venice Climate Camp in 2019. Finally, they were instrumental in the organization of a climate change training camp in Naples, again in the fall of 2019, which was preceding the national meeting of Fridays For Future (hereafter FFF) Italy, held in Naples on October 6th, 2019.

Figure 4: Life vs. Capital. A training school for climate activists. Photograph by the author



4. Changing the climate of the movement

I wonder what happened in the few months between my first focus group in the fall of 2018 and the new course which places this REO at the very core of the climate change mobilization.

An easy answer to the question can be that what happened was Greta Thunberg. Starting from 2018, the Swedish climate activist radically changed the landscape of environmental activism. Some observers have spoken of a “Greta effect.” When she started to protest every Friday in front of the Swedish parliament, sitting alone with a poster in her hands, I thought she was the best example of the Nordic version of activism, one based on individual choices not only in terms of consumerism but even of social mobilization. The difference with the environmental movements I have studied in Italy and also in other Southern European countries was remarkable. In my research in Italy, I have never encountered this kind of individual mobilization but rather the collective construction of resisting communities. However, in the case of Greta, what had started as an individual protest relatively quickly became a global mass movement, Fridays For Future.

The Greta effect, though, can explain only partially the radical change experienced by a grassroots organization as StopBiocidio. I have also detected some skepticism or even open hostility towards not so much Greta per se--that kind of hostility has been more common among the extreme right-

-but against the type of environmentalism that she embodies. In a debate hosted by the Italian leftist online magazine *La sinistra quotidiana* (The Daily Left), all the four articles were quite critical of Greta Thunberg's environmentalist agenda. Although with different degrees of criticism, the authors stressed the apolitical nature of Greta's environmentalism, which they accused of not being explicitly anti-capitalist.²² Other leftist intellectuals have voiced similar reservations, as for instance the French Marxist philosopher Georges Gastaud, who blamed the apolitical nature of the movement generated by the Swedish activist.²³ However, it is true that Greta has also encountered positive reactions in the leftist circles; for instance, both Slavoj Žižek²⁴ and Naomi Klein²⁵ have expressed their sympathies for the young Swedish activist, while on a more institutional level Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez has also supported Greta's activism.²⁶

In the Italian case, as always with social movements, there have been attempts to co-opt or domesticate the Fridays For Future movement. The new secretary of the Democrat centre-left party dedicated his election as the chairman of the party to Greta, thereby committing his leadership to the struggles against climate change. The day after his election, he also went to Turin to stress his support for the construction of the extremely controversial high-speed train between Turin and Lyon, the blocking of which has become a key symbolic fight for the Italian REOs.²⁷ The risk of co-optation from the political establishment became even more evident during Greta's visit to Italy in April 2019. On that occasion she met the president of the Senate and received the honorary membership of Italy's largest union organization; both moves were not welcomed positively by Italian activists, who feared supporting the greenwashing of these mainstream institutions.

Greta's presence in Rome--that is, at the core of Italian political power--revealed some frictions which are constitutive rather than episodic in the national climate change movement. And, I would argue, it may also explain the "conversion" of an REO such as StopBiocidio; instead of merely observing the contradictions within the climate movement, they have decided to enter in the arena and foster their radical agenda. During my fieldwork in Naples, especially in the preparation for the training school Life vs Capital, it became clear to me that FFF was traversed by diverse political--or self-declared apolitical--cultures. I was deeply involved in the organization of the training school but in the process it became more and more evident that something was wrong. FFF official social channels did not include any news about the school, thereby avoiding endorsing it. . It was not easy to decipher the jungle of signals which populated the communications among

activists in the hectic preparation for the training school and the FFF national assembly. In the end, the school became the expression of only a few of the grassroots organizations which are part of the FFF network, mainly the most politically radical and explicitly connected to an anticapitalist agenda. Rumors arrived that in the FFF national coordination some were uncomfortable with the title of the school Life vs Capital. This does not mean that the school was a failure; more than one hundred youths participated in the courses, and not only well trained activists but also students without any political commitment who were reached thanks to an agreement with a local high school.²⁸

I believe that the Life vs Capital training school became involved in a wider confrontation between diverse political tendencies present in the Italian FFF network, a confrontation which everybody knew would have inevitably exploded once they decided to bring the FFF national assembly to Naples. In fact, Naples is without a doubt the emblem of Italian radical environmentalism; as I have illustrated above, twenty years of struggles over toxic contamination merged with a long tradition of leftist activism have created a radical environmental culture which has even produced an institutional result with the election of a radical leftist local government.

In this sense, the history of the StopBiocidio coalition illustrates a dialectic relationship with what has been called the Greta effect. Those activists did not join a pre-packaged movement but entered into it with their own agenda and the ambition to affect its possible direction. The final document of the Neapolitan national assembly represented the efforts of the most radical groups to provide a political agenda for the movement.²⁹ The document affirms the unity of all the struggles against oppression and exploitation, defining FFF as an antifascist, antiracist, and transfeminist movement; a move which seems not different from the intersectional alliance between proposed for instance by Giovanna DiChiro in the name of social reproduction.³⁰ The document also supports the need for an alliance between environmentalists and workers rejecting the job blackmail which forces people to choose between health and salary. It is true that the word capitalism is not present in the final report of the assembly and from my fieldwork I know that including an explicit anticapitalist agenda was at the center of an extremely heated debate inside the group working on that document.³¹ The option for an explicit anticapitalist politics was mentioned in several of the speeches and in the reports of some of the working groups, including the one on collective practices:

*Although the movement is split on the issue of embracing an anticapitalist agenda, it is true that Greta herself has pronounced an excoriating critique of capitalism in her speech at the United Nations (...). We do not want to use anticapitalism just as an empty identitarian label, rather we want to express our anticapitalism in our practices and direct actions against extractivist capitalism.*³²

Tellingly, a few lines below, the same document stated that the struggles to save humans from extinction should be connected to the struggles for a decent life. Finally, the activists gathered in Naples wrote down that individual actions are useful but not sufficient to stop climate change, committing FFF to fight against the capitalist organization of society.

This stress on the practices was partially a device to bring an anticapitalist agenda into the FFF debate avoiding the frictions caused by that kind of politics among the participants in the national assembly. In other words, the reports from the working groups –and one was dedicated precisely to practices--did not need to be approved by the general assembly, thereby, they were easily steered towards more radical positions. However, I would argue that this was not only a tactic device to include some otherwise controversial slogans. Rather, I believe that the choice to include the anticapitalist agenda in a document on the movement's practices represents a strategic posture. Some REOs, and perhaps especially StopBiocidio, have always been skeptical of what they call “identitarian politics”, meaning with this expression not the identity politics of the New Left but rather an attachment to political minoritarian identities, which can be quite strong among Italian leftist organizations. In this sense, “identitarian politics” means a reproduction of old symbols and slogans, without any attempt to reinvent them in tune with the challenges of the present. In opposition to that approach, REOs as StopBiocidio have interpreted radicalism more in their practices than in what they have often defined as “liturgies from the past.” Instead of labels and slogans, they proposed radical political practices; for instance, during the national assembly in Naples the local organizers, thereby mostly activists from StopBiocidio and other REOs, organized a blockade of the Q8 oil deposit,³³ while during the Venice Climate Camp, also promoted by the most radical area of FFF, the activists decided to occupy the Red Carpet of the Venezia Film Festival.

Figure 5 Venice Climate Camp. Occupation of the Red Carpet. Photograph by the author



Synergistic compost rather than hegemonic plans: A Conclusion

The friction between what I have called REOs and MEOs is neither new nor exclusive to the Neapolitan case. During the Climate Camp in Venice, an activist from the Susa Valley reported a heated debate over the opportunity to have the NO TAV flags at the FFF march in Turin.³⁴ For parts of the climate movement, those flags--and the twenty-year struggle they symbolized--were controversial because they referred to a quite antagonistic, even violent, fight. Someone would even say that opposing the construction of a high speed train has been detrimental to the cause of limiting CO₂ emissions. At the same Climate Camp another activist criticized the part of my speech in which I campaigned for building an alliance between workers and the climate movement, arguing that workers in polluting industries were part of the problem and not victims of the capitalistic organization of production, as I stated. Finally, during the occupation of the Red Carpet, a group of activists complained about some slogans we were singing against fascism and xenophobia, saying that we were driving attention away from climate change.

In this article, I have explored the history of the encounter between an REO like StopBiocidio and the climate change movement. I have illustrated how the intellectual and organizational know-how accumulated during almost twenty years of struggles against toxicity has been mobilized in the climate change movement. In particular, I argue that the category of biocide was instrumental in this transition. As an interpretative tool, biocide frames ecological problems in terms of symptoms and etiologies while rejecting the idea that we are all guilty in the same way. According to such a

radical approach, toxicity and climate change are not the causes of socio-environmental problems but are symptoms of the capitalist virus which accumulates profits by sorting out what/who has value and what/who can be disposed of in the name of profit. However, the attempt to shape the political agenda of the climate change movement--in particular of the FFF--does not reproduce the usual, demeaning practice of avant-garde hegemony. StopBiocidio has entered the FFF movement with its political agenda and its asset of intellectual categories and bricolaged practices, but also with a clear awareness that those are not enough to build the mass movement the climate crisis needs.

Thinking with the category of biocide and living through it in their bodies, those activists were already available to leave their political comfort zone, engaging with the notion of “life” while acknowledging that capitalism does not oppress only subaltern humans. The encounter between StopBiocidio--and more in general REOs—and the climate movement did not only bring a more radical political agenda to the latter; it also changed the former.

The case of the Venice Climate Camp exemplifies this dialectic relationship between REOs and the climate movement. In organizing the Venice Climate Camp, the centri sociali³⁵ of the North East decided to embrace values and practices which were not characteristic of their tradition, such as an all-vegan menu, a plastic-free camp, and a water saving practice for all the camp. Similarly, in Naples, the radical leftist organization which is the engine of the StopBiocidio coalition has embraced a plastic-free philosophy for its festival, forcing all the participants to think of their own consuming practices. Perhaps, the most remarkable sign of this mutual contamination between REOs and the climate movement occurred on October 18, 2020 when a coalition of centri sociali and antispeciesist activists have attacked a pen where several bears were held in captivity because of their behavior—coming too close to humans or their animals. The platform for that march clearly shows the mutual learning between a radical anticapitalist agenda and a more-than-human understanding of the ecological crisis:

Just as human beings have always resisted oppression and discrimination, also all non-human animals do not tolerate imprisonment and exploitation, they attack to defend themselves and try to escape, sometimes with success. On the side of the rebel bears, this is the slogan that accompanies the mobilization (...) to ask for the release of the imprisoned bears: M49-Papillon, M57 and Dj3.³⁶

I argue that these examples prove that rather than a one-way hegemonic project, we have witnessed a dialectic relationship in which a new hybrid, plural, and non-sectarian movement was born.

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¹ On the waste crisis in Campania see: Armiero, "Garbage under the Volcano;" Armiero and D'Alisa "Right of Resistance;" Iovino "Naples 2008, or, the waste land."

² Searching for images of Naples and waste in Google provides abundant proof of my argument; see, among many others: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-garbage-of-naples-how-the-mafia-helped-send-italy-s-trash-to-germany-a-681469.html>; <https://www.newsweek.com/naples-suffers-garbage-piles-73753>;

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-rubbish/president-piles-pressure-on-italy-government-over-naples-trash-idUSTRE75N20Q20110624>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/31/world/europe/31naples.html>.

³ Chakrabarty, “Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze.”

⁴ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Das Ideal des Kaputten. Über neapolitanische Technik* [1926], in: *Das Ideal des Kaputten* (Bremen, 1990), quoted here from <https://saladofpearls.wordpress.com/2018/11/03/the-ideal-of-the-broken-down-on-the-neapolitan-approach-to-things-technical-1926-by-alfred-sohn-rethel/>

⁵ On this see: Verdicchio, “The preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy;” D’Agostino, “Craniums, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race’: Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thought, 1861-1924;” Armiero, *A Rugged Nation*, 62-75.

⁶ Armiero and De Angelis, “Anthropocene: Victims, Narrators, and Revolutionaries;” Armiero and Sgueglia, “Wasted Spaces, Resisting People: the politics of waste in Naples, Italy.”

⁷ See for instance Couze, “*Rubbish, the Remnant, Etcetera*,” 44.

⁸ On these themes I can once again refer to the foundational work by Joan Martinez Alier and Ramachandra Guha (1998).

⁹ Pieterse, *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development*, 149.

¹⁰ Armiero, “Seeing like a protester,” 59.

¹¹ Armiero, “Is there an indigenous knowledge in the global North?”

¹² In another article, I have analyzed the politicization of the official medical records gathered by the activists living in a heavily contaminated neighborhood in Naples: “Evidently, those medical records speak the language of the official science, and they even have the stamps and signatures of scientific knowledge--hospitals, laboratories, head physicians--nevertheless, they also tell personal stories, by definition private, even intimate, in their nature.”

Armiero, “Is there an indigenous knoweldge,” 7.

¹³ Venn, “*Rubbish, the Remnant, Etcetera*,” 45.

¹⁴ The Assise della Città di Napoli e del Mezzogiorno (The Permanent Assembly of the City of Naples and Southern Italy) was the most influential and active group of professionals and academics engaged in the struggles over garbage in Naples. They Assise served as a sort of self-education arena for the activists, holding a weekly meeting every Sunday and publishing a bulletin and several pamphlets. On the Assise see Capone, “The Assemblies of the City of Naples.”

¹⁵ Capone, Cuccurullo, and Micillo, *Allarme rifiuti tossici*.

¹⁶ Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

¹⁷ Stop Biocidio, Piattaforma contro il biocidio, la devastazione ambientale, i roghi

https://www.globalproject.info/it/in_movimento/stop-biocidio-piattaforma-contro-il-biocidio-la-devastazione-ambientale-i-roghi/20977.

¹⁸ Schlosberg and Collins 2014, 361.

¹⁹ More information about this project and the local opposition in the EJ Atlas <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/gasdotto-trans-adriatico-tap-trans-adriatic-pipeline>.

²⁰ This grassroots organization elected three members of the city council, one deputy mayor of a neighborhood, and since 2019 one of its leaders entered in the municipal government as deputy for culture and tourism.

²¹ Guha, *Varieties of environmentalism*; Armiero and Sedrez, *History of environmentalism*.

²² <https://www.sinistraiute.info/ecologia-e-ambiente/14814-quattro-interventi-sul-fenomeno-greta.html>

²³ <http://www.sinistra.ch/?p=8253>

²⁴ <http://myheartwillgoonandsoonandsoon.blogspot.com/2019/11/slavoj-zizek-2019-interview-why-i-like.html>

²⁵ <https://theintercept.com/2019/09/06/greta-thunberg-naomi-klein-climate-change-livestream/>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/29/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-met-greta-thunberg-hope-contagious-climate>

²⁷ On the NO TAV conflict see the entry in the EJ Atlas <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/no-tav-movement-against-high-speed-train-val-di-susa-italy>

²⁸ I wish to thank Professor Maria Federica Palestino who has worked for a year to involve high school students and teachers in our research activities. See Palestino, Quagliano and Vetromile 2019. , Pupils at the forefront. The school-work interchange on climate change between university and high school in Naples, published in 2019 in the www.undisciplinedenvironments.org blog.

²⁹ <https://www.fridaysforfutureitalia.it/report-2-assemblea-nazionale>

³⁰ Giovanna DiChiro, “Acting Globally: Cultivating a thousand community solutions for climate justice,” 234.

³¹ A counterprove of this argument comes from the more traditional Marxist organization Sinistra Classe Rivoluzione (Left, Class, Revolution), which expresses its critique of that FFF final document. For them, in searching for a compromise among the diverse areas of the movement, the national assembly failed to embrace an

explicitly anticapitalist agenda. In <https://www.rivoluzione.red/non-un-passo-avanti-un-bilancio-della-seconda-assemblea-nazionale-di-fridays-for-future/>

³² Report from the working group on the practices, shared through whatsapp.

³³

https://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/10/05/news/ambiente_friday_for_future_blocca_il_deposito_q8_di_san_giovanni_a_teduccio-237748931/

³⁴ TAV is the acronym of Treno Alta Velocita (High Speed Train) which should connect Turin with Lyon traversing the Susa Valley.

³⁵ The sociologist Nicholas Dines defined the centri sociali (social centers) as “urban spaces - generally disused factories or abandoned state property - occupied by groups of mostly young people who reuse them for political, social and / or cultural activities.” Dines, “Centri sociali”, 90. Politically, the centri sociali are characterized by a radical anticapitalist agenda and antagonist practices.

³⁶ Globalproject, Assedio alla gabbia del Casteller. Smontate centinaia di metri di rete, https://www.globalproject.info/it/in_movimento/assedio-alla-gabbia-del-casteller-smontate-centinaia-di-metri-di-rete/23051.