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Investigating the “Discrete Memory” of the Seveso Disaster in Italy

Laura Centemeri

In this text, I bring a long term perspective to bear on an industrial accident that resulted in the contamination of an inhabited territory. Going beyond the immediate temporality of the event itself, I seek to recount the manner in which a disaster persists, is diluted and transformed in the life of the affected community. I also question the link often drawn in the literature between the experience of disaster and the emergence of a “local risk culture.”¹ From a reflexive point of view, finally, I seek to shed light upon and discuss some of the difficulties and tensions involved in research that above all aims to understand how a population responds to the radical disruption of its relationship to a territory.

The present study does not focus on the need to intervene or efforts to define good practices, which are frequently emphasized in research into post-disaster situations. Rather, I investigate the limits of framing matters in terms of risk in order to capture the complexity of the “personal troubles” that emerge in the aftermath of harm to the “dwelled-in” environment.² This requires an effort of distanciation vis-à-vis the imperatives of the disciplinary field of risk studies, which often privileges the “applied” dimension while leaving implicit the normative content of its guiding framework. By taking into account “dwelling” as a “familiar regime of engagement,” one may better grasp the costs of framing environmental problems as risks, understood in terms of the detachment from familiar modes of engaging with the environment that is required of inhabitants.³ And by recognizing goods that are anchored in the sphere of proximity, one may

better understand the difficulties and hesitations that emerge when “personal troubles” are transformed into “public issues.”⁴

My discussion focuses on the case of the Seveso disaster.⁵ I briefly review the chronology of this accident as well as the most striking aspects of the resulting health crisis. Along the way, I examine the conflicts that emerged locally in terms of the differing interpretations offered of the accident and the damage it caused the environment—interpretations based on various “justifications” and “regimes of engagement.”⁶ Finally, I consider the ways in which, to this day, traces of the event remain publically recognizable and also, at times, notably absent.

The Persistence and Absence of the Seveso Disaster

Seveso is a small town of 20,000 inhabitants located roughly 20 km from Milan in the province of Brianza, an historically Catholic territory with an economic organization centered on woodworking for furniture production.⁷ After the Second World War, the large scale chemical industry established itself alongside small, family run businesses.

On July 10th, 1976, one of the reactors of the ICMESA chemical factory—run by the Givaudan corporation on behalf of the Swiss multinational Hofmann-La Roche—released a toxic cloud that caused dioxin contamination on the territory of the towns of Seveso, Meda, Desio and Cesano Maderno.⁸ Strange as it may seem, the explosion went more or less unnoticed by the inhabitants of adjacent neighborhoods, who were used to gas leaks. The factory had existed since 1945 and its relationship to the territory had always been marked by a series of accidental pollutions.

While requiring intervention on the part of the relevant inspection authorities, there had never been a genuine effort to secure the facilities.⁹ There followed a “week of silence,” during which Roche technicians sought to prevent the “desectorialization of the crisis”¹⁰ by endeavoring to keep the accident within the bounds of a technical problem without broader consequences. The crisis was mainly set off by the appearance of a skin disease, chloracne, among a growing number of children living in the neighborhood of the factory.¹¹

Field analyses by experts from the region of Lombardy confirmed that the accident had resulted in a dioxin leak, opening the prospect of a possible health and environmental disaster. At the time, however, little was known concerning the toxic action of this molecule and their analyses were thus marked by a high degree of uncertainty. Laboratory toxicological testing had demonstrated the extreme toxicity of dioxin, though its effects varied significantly from one species to the next. Prior to the accident, moreover, studies of dioxin poisoning had mainly focused on cases identified by industrial medicine of high contamination among adult men; its effects on human beings were thus still poorly understood. Nothing was yet known of dioxin’s effects on women, children or the environment.¹² This situation of “radical uncertainty” led some scientists to anticipate disastrous scenarios and others to play down the risk.¹³ Despite this uncertainty, however, the disastrous scenario immediately made the front page of the national and international press, thereby contributing to the decision to evacuate the contaminated zone.

On July 26th, 213 inhabitants of Seveso and Meda were evacuated by the army following a decision on the part of the Lombardy regional authorities responsible for managing the health crisis. Over the course of the following days, other residents were obliged to leave their homes. Altogether, 736 people were evacuated, 200 of whom would never return to their homes, which were destroyed in the course of decontamination operations. The evacuation went hand in hand

with the delimitation of the contaminated territory, which was divided up into “risk zones.” The most seriously contaminated zone, “Zone A” (108 hectares), was evacuated and delimited with barbed wire. The army was responsible for policing this frontier, which was located in the heart of Seveso. In “Zone B” (269 hectares, more than 4600 inhabitants), an expert commission judged the high levels of dioxin present there to be tolerable on condition that the inhabitants observed very strict rules of conduct, which drastically disrupted their day-to-day lives. In order to limit contact with polluted earth, for example, children living in Zone B were required to leave their homes and neighborhood during the day for daycare centers located elsewhere, only returning in the evening. The “Zone of Respect”¹⁴ (1430 hectares and 31,800 inhabitants) was not significantly contaminated: nevertheless, rules of conduct were established, including a prohibition on cultivating the land. A special commission defined the risk zones using available data on the extent of contamination as well as considerations concerning the social feasibility of massive evacuations.¹⁵ Their decision left no room for participation by citizens or representatives of the affected towns.¹⁶

Suspecting the risk of dioxin’s teratogenic effects, the authorities requested that the inhabitants of Seveso “abstain from procreation.” But it was the decision to exceptionally grant women from the contaminated zone the right to therapeutic abortion that sparked the most intense conflict and forever marked the course of the crisis. This decision was all the more controversial given that it clashed with the region’s strong Catholic sensibilities and appeared in the midst of a national struggle in support of a law recognizing the right to abortion (passed in 1978). The protagonists of this debate instrumentally seized upon the case of the “women of Seveso.”¹⁷ Between fall 1976 and spring 1977, 42 therapeutic and four spontaneous abortions were recorded among women in the contaminated zone.

In October 1976, decontamination operations began. In the midst of protests from the population, the Region proposed constructing an incinerator in Zone A to burn contaminated waste. The inhabitants of Seveso opposed this project: incineration would only create new risks and would forever change the landscape of the town, adding permanent disfigurement to the damage that dioxin had already done the environment. After a series of demonstrations and gestures of protest on the part of the inhabitants (including the reoccupation of Zone A), the Region's project was abandoned in favor of a plan to bury waste in Zone A in special waste dumps produced according to standards for storing nuclear waste. In response to popular pressure, the authorities decided to transform the surface of the waste dumps into an urban forest via an experimental reforestation program that would reproduce a type of forest traditionally found in the region: this was the first step in the creation of what is today known as the "Seveso and Meda Oak Forest" park.

In June 1977, a special office was established to manage efforts to bring about a return to normalcy: alongside decontamination and health checks, these actions sought to promote the resumption of local economic activity, which had seriously suffered from the accident. The fear of possible contamination, for example, sometimes led buyers in Italy and abroad to refuse furniture manufactured in Seveso. Farmers were also harmed: all activity ceased at the region's 61 farms and 80,000 head of cattle were slaughtered as a preventative measure. The Office ceased its activities in 1986, three years after the end of decontamination operations.

In the meantime, starting in 1978, the population of Seveso resumed its natural growth rate. This followed a drop in births in 1977. No significant variation was recorded in the rate of mortality. Concerns nevertheless persisted of possible long term effects.

In regards to known damage—chloracne, the destruction of homes and businesses, dead animals—the multinational Roche corporation created a “Damage Evaluation and Compensation Center” in February 1977 to directly negotiate compensation with *danneggiati* (“people who had suffered damages”) in the form of private party transactions. These negotiations, carried out in Milan in offices chosen by the firm and at its own pace, excluded third parties: victims’ collectives, journalists, association activists and so on. As a result, there was neither public debate nor a clear, publically verifiable definition of the conventions determining the monetary equivalents for various losses. This gave rise to rumors concerning the amount received by “people who had suffered damages,” causing a serious rift in the affected community. “People who had suffered damages” were denounced by those who refused (or did not have access to) the transaction with Roche as having individually profited from collective misfortune.

Roche also compensated the affected towns, the Region and the Italian state, in every case by way of extrajudicial transactions. At the time, no legal framework existed to oblige Roche to pay for the damages caused by ICMESA. It is to be noted, however, that these compensations were paid without the Swiss multinational ever recognizing its responsibility for the accident.

In 1983, a criminal trial began for the ICMESA accident. In 1986, it resulted in sentences (less than two years in prison) for two technical managers charged with “involuntary damage.” Once the criminal trial had come to an end, civil proceedings got under way on the initiative of two committees of “people damaged by dioxin” (*danneggiati dalla diossina*). The committees consisted of a thousand or so members and demanded recognition for the harm they had suffered as a result of the accident. Reactions were mixed within Seveso’s population: the monetization of harm was central to the committees’ efforts and the memory of the conflicts to which this had given rise in the immediate aftermath of the disaster was still fresh. Moreover, the type of actions

they undertook (with a delegation consisting of the committees' founders and limited involvement on the part of the plaintiffs themselves) did not inspire broad solidarity in support of the cause of compensation. These legal actions ended with all charges dismissed in 2007.

In terms of health monitoring, studies were conducted beginning in 1996 on the inhabitants of the various contamination zones using data for the period 1976-1991. These identified an increased risk for various types of cancer, such as Hodgkin's lymphoma, and an elevated incidence of cases of diabetes and pulmonary and cardiovascular pathologies—that is a broad and varied range of effects.¹⁸ From the point of view of standard epidemiology, this data suffers from an excessively small data set relative to the reference population. It has thus been impossible to establish clear causal relationships, which explains why the Seveso disaster is officially considered a victimless disaster.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Seveso studies contributed to a 1997 decision on the part of the International Agency for Research on Cancer's to classify dioxin as a "human carcinogen."²⁰

The public opening of the Oak Forest on July 10th, 1996—the twentieth anniversary of the accident—was an important sign of Seveso's return to normalcy. The park's inauguration was contested by the environmentalists from the local Legambiente Circle,²¹ which denounced the purely formal nature of this act, which fell short of genuinely restoring this place to the population. According to the activists, such a restoration would require work on the memory of the accident. They denounced as dangerous the desire to forget the disaster. In 2002, this same group thus launched a project, the "Memory Bridge", to create a "Path of Memory" in the Oak Forest together with an archival collection devoted to the disaster. The Path of Memory project provided for the production of information panels narrating the relationship between the park and the accident. These were to be disseminated throughout the park and collectively produced with

the participation of the affected town. In May 2004, the Path of Memory was officially inaugurated. In 2005, the park was even recognized as a “natural park” by the region of Lombardy! Though an important sign of a desire for normalcy, it nevertheless raised questions.

Alongside its local impact, the ICMESA disaster quickly became a symbol in the struggle to regulate industrial risk in the European space. This was due to the “Seveso” Directive (1982), which contributed to the process that in 1986 led the European Union to assert its political responsibility in the area of environmental protection.²² In discussions of the terrible steps by which contemporary societies were transformed into “societies of risk,” what’s more, the name of Seveso is frequently cited alongside the place names of other major technological disasters (such as Minamata, Bhopal, Tchernobyl).²³

The Local Construction of Seveso’s Exemplarity: A Conflict of Cultures?

In contrast to the international publicity surrounding the accident, what immediately struck me upon my first trip to Seveso in June 2002 was the total absence of any material trace of the disaster’s memory. I was initially outraged by this absence, a reaction that allowed me to understand my own normative stance. I reacted in similar fashion after discovering that no public movement had arisen to address the long term health risks of dioxin. While not as disastrous as had been feared in the immediate aftermath of the accident, these health risks are nevertheless real and constitute a potential public health problem, albeit one that is not openly discussed. Moreover, the dioxin episode revealed a potential problem of chronic pollution in the region of

Seveso resulting from the operations of large chemical manufacturing facilities. Yet these environmental health concerns had never emerged as a cause.

My research thus turned towards understanding this twofold absence (“outrageous,” in my eyes). To do so, I sought to move beyond interpretive shortcuts that would account for this absence by reference to the supposed apathy, irrationality, domination or fatalism of the population affected by the disaster. In the course of my investigation, I accompanied the work of the local group of Legambiente Circle environmentalists. Like me, they were outraged by the absence of a collective memory of the disaster and were committed to contesting the “repression” of the accident, its effects and implications. Their efforts, which led to the creation of the “Path of Memory,” demonstrated the impossibility of simultaneously commemorating the accident and retaining a trace of the event in terms of vigilance towards still present risks.

“I was a receptionist at Seveso city hall when the dioxin thing happened. People called in desperation, terrorized. All these doubts about their health. They’re still there.”

“I wanted to say something. What have we come here to commemorate? There’s nothing to commemorate, there’s a problem to be solved. In the Forest, there’s a problem to be solved. This buried waste, it’s a problem to be solved. We made a commitment to do this when we demanded the burial and we must honor it. How can you deal with this heritage? It’s not so much a matter of commemoration as a question of action.”

“I was in charge of the team responsible for putting down contaminated animals. I can tell you we saw the dioxin. It was like a shiny veil on the animals’ skin.”

“I’m a member of the farmers’ association. The dioxin was a slaughter of the innocent, all these animals that we killed. I participated in the decontamination operations. I had to sign a document stating that I accepted the risks of doing so. Those of us who worked on decontamination aren’t dead. I’m not saying that dioxin isn’t dangerous, I’m saying that we were lucky.”

“We were told all sorts of things. We understood that we had to decide for ourselves. All of the artisans from Seveso were mobilized (from Seveso, I emphasize, not from Meda). For young people, the lesson to be drawn from this is that one must not accept everything that comes from above. We fought against the incinerator and the incinerator isn’t there. In any case, the waste had to be sent to Switzerland!”

“I was born in 1980. I studied chemistry and I found the name of Seveso mentioned everywhere. But it seems to me that all is well, my family is fine.”

“I believe it’s important to commemorate the fight against the incinerator. What we’ve experienced and observed is that politicians try to profit from every situation. I of course understand these strategies, which can be justified but also harm us. That’s why one must always think for oneself to understand these strategies.”

“I’m a Legambiente regional official. I agree that one must think for oneself but only after having tried to understand and having listened to the experts. I don’t like these remarks about politicians always profiting from situations. Seveso was an industrial accident relating to globalization. It was a laboratory for

understanding the general dynamics of today. You suffered from that. Seveso was useful but you've paid with your health.”

The preceding remarks are drawn from a 13 May 2004 debate organized by the Legambiente Circle of Seveso in the auditorium of the De Gasperi Street school (at the time of the crisis, the site of an emergency medical analysis laboratory established by the authorities). On that evening, the Circle officially unveiled the Oak Forest “Memory Path.” The comments made there nicely illustrate the variety of public reactions that are provoked in Seveso by efforts to revisit the ICMESA accident. On the one hand, there is the memory of the terror that gripped the town immediately following the dioxin contamination. On the other, there are the claims that, despite it all, “we’re not dead,” “all is well,” “we were lucky,” suggesting that the significance of the event is widely seen as having been exaggerated. On the one hand, political “strategies” for profiting from the situation are condemned while pride is voiced at “having decided for ourselves.” Roche, meanwhile, which is never directly named or mentioned, is given a marginal role in responsibility for the disaster. On the other, it is agreed that the responsibilities entailed by these decisions—and, in particular, the choice to bury contaminated waste under the Oak Forest—must be recognized and accepted

Two elements intersect in these reactions: a feeling of isolation confronted with adversity, particularly experienced in relations with the institutions responsible for managing the crisis; suspicion and refusal of externally imposed interpretive frameworks that generalize the scientific or political significance of the Seveso dioxin event. These testify to a difficulty in relating the anchored and embodied experience of the disaster to efforts to share it from the perspective of broader solidarities.

In order to understand this difficulty, one must reconsider the manner in which the dioxin crisis was managed by the public authorities as well as the mobilization to which it gave rise. In examining contemporaneous documents and testimony, it becomes clear that, from the very start of the crisis, the response of the regional authorities was guided by technocratic decision-making. This excluded the disaster victim population from any possibility of intervening in the definition of management measures. In the absence of clarity on the real contours of the crisis, institutional statements vacillated between reassuring formulae and dramatic decisions, such as that to evacuate the site. Locked into what was considered an irrational stance, the public authorities did not consider the population capable of understanding the complexity of this exceptional situation.²⁴

Among the inhabitants concerned, the manner in which the evacuation of Zone A was decided gave rise to a feeling of impotence vis-à-vis the institutions. The evacuation was decided upon behind closed doors by a commission of experts and was imposed without explanation of the real considerations guiding the delimitation of these risk zones:

“Medical bigwigs, university professors, scientists and politicians closed themselves in a room. No one was allowed to disturb them [...]. Finally, the door opened at 1:45 PM. ‘We will be taking measures but we must first discuss them with the prefect and local administrators,’ said Rivolta [the Region’s Director of Health Policy]. And, at 5PM, in the Seveso city hall, the Prefect and Director of Health Policy arrived with the die already cast. Embarrassed, Domenico Amari [the Prefect] began to speak: ‘179 people must leave their homes in the next 24 hours. Their homes are in an excessively polluted zone’.”²⁵

The “dioxin risk” was occasionally called upon to delegitimize the voice of inhabitants. As a result, they felt at the mercy of considerations that escaped them, provoking a feeling of anxiety vis-à-vis the future awaiting them, a future over which they felt they no longer had any control:

“The day of the evacuation, I was there, with the evacuees. In agreement with the others—my brother, our friends—we decided to participate in this departure, in order to see what awaited us in the future. Other people we knew had already had to leave their homes, their work, the things dear to them (*affetti*), their personal things. We wanted to make sense of the situation and participate in the terrible situation these people were going through by giving them our moral support by being physically there for their departure. I remember several of us were present that morning for this sad departure.”²⁶

For the inhabitants of Seveso, the decision to evacuate dramatically underscored the real possibility that their town would disappear as a result of dioxin pollution:

“I was on vacation on July 10th. My husband worked at the hospital in Mariano [a little town near Seveso] and every night he joined us at the vacation house. A few days after July 10th, he arrived and told us to not eat the salad he had brought us. There were children at the hospital with a skin disease, chloracne. We sought to inform ourselves, we watched TV. I was with two girlfriends. Watching the TV, we had the impression that the town had been destroyed, that it was a situation to which we could never return. But later, listening to our husbands who travelled back and forth to the town, we decided to return to Seveso to see what had happened for ourselves. What we saw on TV was horrible, absolutely horrible.

We returned and we realized that the image on TV was one-sided. Even if obviously something very serious was happening. But on TV you had the impression of total devastation. There was an exacerbation of the polemical aspects, perhaps just because this sort of accident is usually played down. We felt as if we had been caught up in a whirlpool that amplified everything that happened to us but it was amplified in the service of causes that weren't ours. For you, it's your life, your village, your family, your people. So you need to know what's really happening.'²⁷

This desire to know “what's really happening” contrasts with what is denounced as an “exacerbation” of the situation for the purpose of advancing particular “causes.” This refers to the activities of the Scientific Technical Popular Committee (STPC) created in Seveso after the accident on the initiative of Democratic Medicine (Medicina Democratica). This movement, which was created at the time and is still active today, promoted meetings between workers, citizens, scientists and intellectuals to develop a new form of shared expertise concerning the health of workers and industrialized territories.

The damage done by dioxin was described by the STPC as “damage to health caused by the capitalist system of production:” the public authorities were held to be complicit in a “crime of capitalism” against health and the environment.²⁸ From the perspective of a social critique of capitalism, the case of Seveso was seen as exemplifying capitalist exploitation. By its exemplarity, it thus contributed to the general cause of class struggle. Support for this cause required the inhabitants of Seveso to exist in public space as *victims* of an irreparable harm, something of which they absolutely had to be made aware.

The field of mobilization in this way came to focus on the existence, severity and construction of scientific evidence of harm, which scientists working for the political authorities might conceal. Hence the importance assumed by counter-expertise activities, which are based on a conception of the production of knowledge in the area of environmental health that integrates the experience of those affected. In this framework, however, the aim was to prove the reality of harm: uncertainty surrounding the dioxin risk was thus treated in a way that accentuated indications that the harm inflicted was irreversible. Uncertainty, in this way, was seen as the (temporary) lack of evidence for an already established harm.

This model of action won little support among the population. Exclusively focused on decrying the damage done and its severity, it seemed to ignore the inhabitants' need to preserve their ties to the territory understood as a good to be protected. Taking this need into account would require exploring the compatibility between the uncertainty of harm and a return to normalcy in this territory.

Drawing upon scientific uncertainty concerning the severity of the consequences of contamination, local committees were created to demand that the public authorities take the need to preserve the ties to the local community into account in crafting their response to the crisis. The groups that were thus mobilized led to the creation of the Assistance and Coordination Office. This organization was run by volunteers and formally recognized by the Archbishop of Milan as the expression of Catholic initiatives in the contaminated territory. The Church's recognition was important. As we have seen, social, political and economic life in the region of Seveso has long been marked by a tradition of local action and mobilization on the part of the Catholic Church, making it a central actor in local dynamics.

These groups above all mobilized around the question of evacuees relocated to hotels in the suburbs of Milan. A network was organized to allow these families to return to live in Seveso. Owners were asked to make all apartments free for rent available for use by the evacuees. In the meantime, activities were organized for children:

“I remember that, from July 1976 to spring 1977, we very often went to the hotel of Assago [a town south of Milan] to visit people who had been evacuated so that they weren’t left alone. Two or three of us would go at a time to spend time with these people. We thought that, were we in their place, we wouldn’t have wanted to be isolated, left alone. I remember that two issues were involved in our solidarity: trying to find people who could rent apartments to help bring the Seveso evacuees home so as to put an end to the artificial life they were leading in these hotels, where people who had never lived together were obliged to live an absurd—because not chosen by them—communal life. The other thing was to look after children since the ban on playing in Zone B was serious for it represented a real risk. For that, we said we were available to look after the children as they played, draw with them, sing with them. They came to these centers in the morning and left in the evening.”²⁹

Though more familiar with the most pressing concerns of the inhabitants directly affected by the accident, these groups also sought to assert the exemplarity of the Seveso experience in the public sphere. The *Comunione e Liberazione* (CL) movement, in particular, was at the forefront of those voicing this demand.³⁰ In the name of the principle of subsidiarity, the movement petitioned the public authorities to recognize the affected town’s ability to actively contribute to the response to the crisis. This demand for subsidiarity was justified as guaranteeing respect for

the cultural specificity of the affected community. More particularly, these groups asserted that the relationship to the territory was an expression of a specific “local culture.” Rooted in Catholicism, its particular values were said to be threatened, not only by the damage to the environment, but also by the considerations driving intervention by the public authorities, who gave little attention to the threat of uprooting. While the health risks associated with dioxin contamination jeopardized the existence of Seveso, the intervention of public actors would, these groups asserted, result in another type of threat. In its response to the crisis, the state was said to be taking advantage of this exceptional situation to impose forms of organization on social life that neglected or scorned local culture. The decision to authorize therapeutic abortion for pregnant women in the contaminated zone (within the space of the first trimester) due to dioxin’s suspected teratogenic effects was therefore condemned as an example of public intervention that, on the pretext of health, in fact aimed at a form of cultural colonization. It was this specific expression of dioxin’s harmful effects—that is, the risk of neonatal deformity—that allowed what had been a socio-technical controversy regarding the health risks of dioxin and the best ways of managing it to be transformed into a conflict over values.

The conflict over abortion was just an extreme expression of the conflict between two ways of describing the damage to the environment that took place in Seveso. While the leftwing mobilization presented dioxin pollution as a crime, the Catholic mobilization saw it as an “ordeal” through which the “Christian community” of Seveso had to pass while at the same time remaining united and thereby demonstrating its common values. Among these values was attachment to the territory in the sense of attachment to a community of neighbors. This attachment, it was claimed, was the public manifestation of a sense of belonging that deserved respect and recognition.³¹ Leftwing activists, for their part, saw this local culture as a collection

of dispositions that prevented detachment from relations of proximity and thereby precluded awareness of the injustice that had been inflicted.³²

What one sees here is a dynamic centered on the promotion of the attachment to the local community and its environment that takes the form of a shared cultural identity (promoted by the Catholic mobilization). This shared identity, in its turn, is denounced by the leftwing mobilization as conflicting with a civic frame of understanding of the crisis in terms of global socio-economic injustice. These two critical movements, which occupied the space of debate by monopolizing it, made it difficult to recognize the specificity of the harm dioxin caused the dwelled-in environment.

Each of these two visions simplified a situation in which the complex consequences of damage to a dwelled-in environment are neglected. What was lacking was a capacity—on the part of those taking action—to recognize the specificity of the personal troubles caused by contamination and the need to create the conditions in which they might be recognized and a place made for them in public debate.

The Personal Troubles of Contamination and the Continued Difficulty of Expressing Them in Public

The failure to draw a connection between the ICMESA event as it was experienced by inhabitants and its more general significance as an exemplary case of environmental damage was

closely linked to the way in which this exemplarity was constructed by the actors who mobilized in support of victims.

In the case of the leftwing mobilization, the lack of familiarity with the territory and its inhabitants created distance, an inability to draw upon shared vocabulary and reference points to express and describe the harm that had been done. In the case of the Catholic mobilization, such familiarity was not lacking. But considering the goods of proximity as the expression of a shared culture and “Christian community” crushed other ways of living-together in Seveso. In both cases, what was lacking was a discussion that recognized and took account of the harm inflicted upon the environment as harm to the dwelled-in territory.

The complex nature of this type of damage is revealed in the contradictory manner in which the disaster is to this day present in the life of Seveso and its inhabitants. A stated desire to look to the future and stop talking about dioxin comes up against the fact that the disaster left indelible traces in both individual lives and that of the community. This is particularly obvious in the case of the observable traces it left in the urban fabric, such as the Oak Forest. A process of restoration guided by a desire to forget collided with the fact that present day Seveso cannot avoid a return to the disaster. But how should the disaster be revisited and what is one to say about it? As we shall see, these are questions with which the actors on the ground are directly confronted. Throughout my research, I also had to face these questions.

I came to Seveso with the idea of exploring processes for repairing environmental damage and, more particularly, controversies over the health effects of dioxin. But I was immediately faced with a discrepancy between the reality on the ground and the “ideal” situation of victim mobilization in “hybrid forums.”³³ I thus sought to explain this discrepancy. During my first

visits to Seveso, the town's inhabitants denied the scale of the health consequences brought about by the accident.

It was only after I had gradually become familiar with the territory and its actors that some individuals spoke to me of ongoing personal troubles relating to the experience of contamination, including health problems. At the same time, they confided in me regarding the difficulty—or, rather, the impossibility—of publicly discussing them.

Initially, the inhabitants saw me as “the sociologist” (or “the journalist”) and remarks were made indicating that my observation was a source of discomfort. These remarks always related to their memory of the publicity surrounding the disaster. Gradually, however, my presence gave rise to fewer and fewer reactions. Constructing relations of trust took time. To win their trust, I first had to demonstrate my own attachment to the territory. This involved long visits to significant places in the town, participation in various gatherings and acting as a volunteer in the “Memory Bridge” project. This requirement of attachment reflected the fact that the community had a troubled relationship with scientists in the past, marked by a feeling of exploitation—that is, a feeling that Seveso inhabitants had always been treated as “guinea pigs.”

Once my presence had become familiar, my conversations with the inhabitants—and not just moments of formal interview—gradually became friendlier. In the course of these, my interlocutors revealed the existence of tensions and contradictions that are excluded from public discussion. This, for example, is what happened with Max F., an activist of the Legambiente Circle and director of the “Memory Bridge” project. Among the activities he promoted in the framework of this project were organized walks in the Oak Forest for the region's elementary and high school students. Invited to participate in one of these walks, I found myself an

involuntary witness to a peculiar episode. A pregnant young woman—a teacher and native of Seveso—was accompanying a group of 8 to 10 year olds who had come to visit the park. Upon arriving at the entry to the park, she said that she wanted to remain outside. As the children went ahead with other teachers, the woman explained to Max that she could not understand her own reaction but could not bring herself to enter. She was afraid, she said, but not that the park was contaminated and dangerous for her health. Rather, what frightened her was the fact that, underneath the artificial mounds that one could see and which concealed the contaminated waste, there were houses that had been torn down during the decontamination as well as dead animals. “It’s like a cemetery,” she explained. In discussing this episode with me later in the morning, Max told me that many people in Seveso have complicated and ambivalent feelings about the park. For some inhabitants, it is their homes that are buried under the soil. He then pointed to where his parents’ home could be found. It was located in the Zone of Respect but very close to the ICMESA facilities that had been destroyed and buried in the park. Max had been born six years before the accident with a congenital handicap (phocomelia). He told me that he knew that ICMESA was at the time already polluting the territory with toxic waste from its production of trichlorophenol. He had seen it referred to in official documents. His handicap may have had a link to industrial pollution by the factory. Nevertheless, his parents had decided not to bring a lawsuit against ICMESA even though they knew that his case might have been widely reported after the accident, thereby resulting in significant compensation. He explained that his parents had preferred to give him the “normal life” of a “normal child” rather than that of a “media phenomenon.” This is what happened, he told me, to two little girls – sisters – from Seveso who had been very severely affected by chloracne. Images of their disfigured faces were shown

around the world. He added that he was grateful to his parents for this “courageous choice,” which allowed him to have the same childhood as other children of his age.

In these friendly conversations, people told me about the way in which the accident had profoundly changed—indeed, marked—their lives, the costs they thought they had paid, their ever present doubts and fears. At the same time, alongside this awareness of the harm that had been inflicted, they spoke of their hesitation, their reluctance to publicly express this awareness, implicitly asking me to recognize its legitimacy. Frequently, they justified this hesitation by reference to their distrust of the institutions that were supposed to guarantee that these experiences were converted into a “public problem.” But they also justified them by reference to their fear of once again finding themselves locked into the status of victims. In the experience of the inhabitants of Seveso, this status was marked by voicelessness, powerlessness and stigmatization.

Luisa S., an inhabitant of Seveso who runs a recreational center for the elderly on behalf of city hall, thus recounted how, while on vacation with her family at a place on the Adriatic Sea in the years immediately following the accident, the hotel’s owner asked her to not tell the other guests they came from Seveso. “It was like we had the plague!” she remarked. Luisa also recounted her experience of being seven months pregnant at the time of the contamination. She spoke of how her fears led her to “shut herself in” at home and not participate in meetings because “[she] didn’t want to know” and “people only argued with one another.” She was able to share these fears with her husband only. He subsequently died of cancer and she suspects it was related to dioxin exposure. As a member of two Seveso committees, Luisa submitted a request for compensation. Her request, however, was denied. She stated that she is convinced her husband’s

death was caused by dioxin. At the same time, she explicitly told me that she did not want to talk about the request for compensation because it is “too personal.”

Another inhabitant of Seveso, Giuliana B., explained her reaction to living in the Zone of Respect and the difficulty of constantly living in a state of vigilance and distrust vis-à-vis the world around her:

“We were really afraid when we were told what it was. It felt like there was something in the air. It was all, ‘I won’t touch this, I won’t touch that.’ You didn’t put anything outside anymore—for example, the laundry. It was a bizarre feeling. I remember that very well. If you say: ‘I have a headache, my stomach hurts,’ it’s a reality. Here, it was something invisible, impalpable, that could strike at any moment. I still have that feeling inside me. And I know that maybe one day something will happen to me, we know things have happened to other people... I doubt that we’ll be told it’s because of dioxin. Later, this talk of dioxin was put aside. We knew it was there. But we began to tell ourselves: ‘you have to live.’ *Que sera, sera*. We’ve always had check-ups, we’ve always had blood work. At a certain point, you have to live, so you live.”³⁴

She also spoke of how the contamination meant giving up the idea of having a second child. Other women spoke of concerns during their pregnancies in the years following the accident and how peace gradually returned after the first healthy children were born.

Though they acknowledge that they were affected by the disaster, these people claim that their priority was to return to and preserve a normal life for themselves and their loved ones. This was not a matter of denying or repressing the severity of what happened but rather of refusing to

allow the experience of the disaster to completely define their relations with the world around them.

To this day, the extreme publicity that accompanied the disaster thus seems to represent an obstacle for the affected population in conceiving of a possible balance between preserving a normal life and publicly condemning the environmental and health problems from which they have suffer.

As the quoted extract of my interview with Giuliana suggests, the vigilant attitude in regards to health risks manifested itself via the delegation of medical expertise, mainly to generalist doctors working in the territory. It was up to them to indicate whether something was wrong. Many inhabitants had their blood tested on a regular basis and participated in follow-up studies concerning the effects of contamination. But despite a show of distrust towards the authorities, who might be led to conceal certain worrisome matters, there was no desire to become involved—whether individually or as part of an association—in questioning the manner in which health data was produced in Seveso or to get a better idea of the severity of the situation. This data resulted from research conducted by epidemiologists who were not in contact with the territory. Rather, they employed a laboratory-based molecular approach that has been criticized by some experts. The resultant data was published in international scientific journals without being shared with the affected population. What the rich epidemiological literature made of the case of Seveso is almost completely unknown by the town's inhabitants.³⁵

The search for normalcy as a good (for oneself, one's loved ones, one's town) therefore seems incompatible with forms of mobilization capable of converting the still very present "personal troubles" caused by dioxin into a "public cause," whether relating to public health or to

recognition and compensation for the moral harm suffered. This is one of the most striking aspects of the ICMESA disaster: an incompatibility developed between the status of inhabitant of Seveso and the possibility of publicly denouncing the damages suffered according to a logic of “civic worth.”³⁶ Even when a demand for compensation was presented via membership in a committee, as in the case of Luisa, such participation was considered a matter of individual choice. Luisa thus explained her membership by reference to her friendship with the committee’s founder, a generalist practitioner who came to Seveso after the accident. The committee was seen as guaranteeing the aggregation of interests that must nevertheless remain individual. It was thus set up as a collection of individuals rather than as a “circumstantial group” capable of converting the demand for compensation into a search for justice.³⁷

The absence of a structured dioxin victim entity therefore does not reflect a fatalistic attitude towards risk on the part of the population or repression of that same risk. Rather, it is the product of the combined action of several factors, among them the manner in which the authorities and mobilized actors managed radical uncertainty concerning the effects of dioxin at the time of the crisis. All parties took a reductionist approach to this uncertainty, presenting it variously as a risk that could only be assessed by experts, an already established harm requiring further investigation (leftwing activists) or a political manipulation to be condemned (Catholic activists). What all of these ways of treating uncertainty had in common was to limit and even exclude the voices of those affected together with their concerns in defining the response to contamination. It is this experience of powerlessness and voicelessness that came to “haunt” the town’s inhabitants.³⁸ Every time Seveso made the headlines, the fear returned that one would be deprived of the possibility of having a say in one’s own future.

The violence inherent in this reductionist approach to uncertainty is clearly in evidence in the cases of pregnant women faced with the possibility of abortion.

Such was the case of the Catholic activist Isa F., whose child was among the first “dioxin children” born in 1977. Recalling the mobilization in favor of therapeutic abortion, she remarked:

“I remember the groups of so-called feminists who came to Seveso carrying signs that read ‘either monster or abortion,’ with drawings of pregnant women with monsters in their bellies. But I don’t remember any of them returning to tell us they were happy our children had been born in good health. They should have returned to tell me they were happy for me. That was very hard. Above all, there were women who were pushed... How to put it... I knew people who were a little manipulated... The strong ones resisted.”

Isa’s remarks reflect a judgment frequently encountered in Seveso concerning women who had recourse to abortion in the aftermath of the contamination. It is a judgment in terms of moral strength and weakness and helps explain the absence of these women from the debate over the harms of dioxin, their silence.

As in the case of pregnant women facing a decision as to whether or not to abort, there was also a failure to take the family life of evacuees affected by these situations into account. In both cases, the worries and concerns of the town’s inhabitants were exposed to the crushing light of the generalizing categories required of public debate. With the world of the familiar under threat from environmental disaster, the local community and its members gradually grew recalcitrant to any attempt to generalize on the basis of the ICMESA event. This recalcitrance was reflected in

local criticism of the decision to name the European Directive on the Control of Major Accident Hazards the “Seveso Directive.”³⁹ It was also reflected in the desire shown by local administrators throughout the 1980s and 90s to put the disaster behind them. This tendency notwithstanding, a group of activists from the Seveso Legambiente Circle succeeded in their efforts to impose the issue of memorializing the health crisis on the local scene, choosing for this purpose the emblematic site of the Oak Forest. To better grasp the relationship between the issue of commemoration and the impossibility of publicly discussing the personal troubles resulting from dioxin pollution, it is important to consider the conditions that allowed these activists to impose their project upon the town. For this purpose, a brief digression is necessary.

The Compromises of “Discrete Memory”

The Legambiente Circle of Seveso was founded by three young leftwing activists (Laura B., Gabriele G. and Marzio M.) initiated into the world of activism via participation in the activities of the STPC. When this mobilization failed, they immersed themselves in other political experiments far from Seveso. Marzio, for example, worked for the International Civil Service on local development projects in Latin America and Africa. Laura participated in the feminist experiment launched by Milan’s “Libreria delle Donne.”⁴⁰ There, she met Gemma B., a philosopher, and Angela A., a mathematics teacher, with whom she started to discuss the peculiar situation of the lack of memory of the Seveso Disaster.

Despite their differences, these experiences all placed an emphasis on the importance of developing practices at the local level as part of political activism. This accompanied a broader

reflection seeking to open leftwing activist circles up to discussion concerning what should be considered as political action. Beyond the usual repertoires of mobilization and protest, political activism was expressed through practices anchored in the territory. For the environmentalist movement, in particular, this was to prove fruitful, allowing it to also conceive of the environment as a dwelled-in territory to which people are attached.

It is important to note that, in the context of the political ecology of the 1970s, taking the issue of territorial attachment seriously was seen as suspect due to the “bourgeois character” of the conservationist movement, which had traditionally been concerned with territorial issues.⁴¹ In Seveso, STPC activists thus found themselves deprived of a vocabulary for understanding and integrating demands on the part of the affected population that their ties to the territory be taken into account in the response to the dioxin crisis.

Italian feminist thought—in particular, the idea of “basic politics”⁴²—as well as developments within Italy’s environmentalist culture (especially that part of it influenced by the work of Alex Langer) contributed to a new understanding and original political expression of the issue of environmental attachment.⁴³ Far from being seen as a type of closure, the personal feeling of attachment was seen as the first step towards constructing broader forms of responsibility.

Seveso activists directly participated in these experiences and emerged from them with a shared political project: to critique the local desire to forget the ICMESA accident. Their first step was thus to move back to Seveso and put down roots in the local reality. As they did so—particularly after the creation of a local Legambiente Circle in 1990—they honed and revised their political project.

Initially, the Circle struggled to get the people of Seveso involved in its activities. In 1992, the opportunity for a different relationship to social life emerged. That year, one of the Circle's members, Damiano D., wrote the mayor of Seveso to seek authorization to "take care" of the "Fosso del Ronchetto," a piece of fallow land that had become a dump.

The mayor's assistant for environmental policy decided to call a meeting of the environmentalist associations present in Seveso (Legambiente and WWF) to suggest a formal agreement: the mayor's office would finance the work necessary for transforming the grove into a "natural oasis" and the associations would carry out the project.

The "Fosso" episode represents an important moment in the process by which Circle activists took root in the local community. The work of maintaining the grove became the occasion for meeting and collaborating with people who would otherwise never have participated in the Circle's activities. At the same time, it represented a shift to a relationship of collaboration with the local administration. Other initiatives seeking to recuperate abandoned natural places in Seveso were carried out by activists with the support of local institutions.

Direct action to promote Seveso's natural heritage was only one of the ways in which the activists of the Circle sought to fit into Seveso's collective life. Another was direct involvement in local politics. In 1998, the Circle thus participated in the creation of a citizen list that won the municipal election.

Appointed assistant to the mayor for environmentalist policy, Marzio decided to give city hall's support to the realization of the Legambiente Circle's "Memory Bridge" project. This project consisted of two initiatives: the creation of an archive to collect documents relating to the disaster and the realization of the "Memory Path," a "significant path across the territory and

polluted places,” by “writing and producing information panels to be located within the Oak Forest.”⁴⁴

At this time, the Circle counted on the participation of young members in its activities. Though they did not share the founders’ political past, their interest in the environment had led these young people to form ties with Legambiente. Natives of the Seveso region, they were children at the time of the accident. Responsibility for following through with the Memory Bridge project was delegated to these members and, in particular, Max F., who had studied history at the university and written a Master’s thesis on the ICMESA disaster. Significantly, it was up to Max to coordinate the “Memory Bridge” project for he came from the world of Catholic associations, where he continued to play an active part. He thus helped mediate between two worlds (environmentalist activism and the parish) that were traditionally far removed from one another in Seveso.

Another important decision made by promoters of the “Memory Bridge” project was to conceive of the work of writing the panels to be placed in the Oak Forest as a community effort. The activists believed that it was only by way of participation that the panels would be recognized as genuine artifacts of collective memory. Two positions, however, emerged in the Circle regarding this demand for participation. For Marzio, in his dual role as elected official and activist, participation in the process of writing the panels had to be an occasion for the creation of a local consensus around the idea of the disaster’s experience as an “opportunity for change.” This change should impact the relationship to the territory, be guided by objectives of sustainability and be supported and promoted by the town.

For Angela, Gemma and Laura, participation was necessary because the work of writing could provide an opportunity for shedding light on the conflicts to which the disaster had given rise in the local community. In their view, this would further the objective of allowing the personal troubles associated with dioxin—effects on health, abortions, damage—to be discussed in public. The panel writing process thus had to be guided by experts in “community psychology,” and understood as a therapeutic process.

The project developed by the three psychologists with whom the activists ultimately decided to collaborate provided for the creation of a “committee of guarantors”, a handful of individuals chosen for their “sensitivity, role, availability and public recognition” to act as “representatives” of the local community.⁴⁵ Not without some difficulty, the committee was created.⁴⁶ Between December 2002 and June 2003, it met five times, each time under the psychologists’ supervision.

The efforts made by the latter to use work on the panels **as a tool to shed light** on the “emotive dimension of the disaster” was opposed by a majority of the committee on the grounds that one should avoid reopening old conflicts and “unhealed wounds.”⁴⁷ The committee wondered whether it was legitimate for it to actively promote such an effort to revisit the accident, the consequences of which might prove difficult to manage. In response to this concern for legitimacy, it reached agreement to proceed with the writing of a “discreet memory,” one that would not “force people to speak about what they want to forget.”⁴⁸ This need for “discretion” did not so much reflect a desire to forget as a need for tact given the persistence of unmended damage. Yet, in the absence of a collective desire to construct the conditions of their recognition, this damage permanently retains the status of a “personal trouble”—that is, of a reality that cannot be discussed in public.

In the committee's internal debate, the idea of the disaster as an event constituting "an opportunity for change" therefore received approval from a majority of members. As it was developed, this idea took the form of a presentation of the disaster as an event that revealed the strength of the local community in the face of adversity. Among the activists, the work of writing the panels resulted in some dissatisfaction due to the abandonment of any effort to discuss unrepaired damage.

The possibility of transforming a stigmatizing accident that had been inflicted upon the community into an "opportunity for change" entailed accepting the idea that some of its consequences would not serve in the construction of a collective cause. For the activists of Legambiente, this meant in particular giving up on the effort to construct an environmental health movement in the territory. The opposition and resistance with which this framework was confronted emptied it of all possibility for action.

Yet a trace of the event remained in this "discrete memory" of the ICMESA disaster. The lesson drawn from the "drama of the unknown" that was dioxin allowed it to be put to the service of a vision of Seveso as a "sustainable" town.⁴⁹ In this way, it seems to sketch the contours of a learning process that may (or may not) result in new forms of collective action and institutional innovation. These may allow the personal troubles caused by harm to the dwelled-in environment to be addressed in a different fashion.⁵⁰

¹ On the concept of the "risk culture," see the introduction to this volume.

² On the notion of "dwelling" as a familiar regime of engagement with one's environs, see M. Breviglieri, "L'horizon du ne plus habiter et l'absence du maintien de soi en public," pp. 319-336 in D. Cefaï, I. Joseph (eds.), *L'héritage du pragmatisme. Conflits d'urbanité et épreuves de*

civisme, La Tour d'Aigues, Éd. De l'Aube, 2002; A. Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains*, Paris, Belin, 2000. On the concept of "trouble" in its relationship to "dwelling," see M. Breviglieri, D. Trom, "Troubles et tensions en milieu urbain. Les épreuves citadines et habitantes de la ville", pp. 399-416 in D. Cefaï, D. Pasquier (eds.), *Les sens du public: publics politiques et médiatiques*, Paris: PUF, 2003.

³ The reference here is to the concept of "engagement" as it has been developed by Laurent Thévenot: *L'action au pluriel. Sociologie des régimes d'engagement*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006. On the process of loss of familiarity required by framing an issue in terms of risk, see O. Borraz, *Les politiques du risque*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.

⁴ The distinction between "personal troubles" and "problems" (in the sense of a public issue) was put forward by C.W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954. This distinction represents a classic way of distinguishing between what is capable of publically appearing as a problem and what is condemned to remain in the private sphere.

⁵ My reconstruction of the case is based on data collected in the course of doctoral research between June 2002 and June 2004. See the subsequently published book: L. Centemeri, *Ritorno a Seveso. Il danno ambientale, il suo riconoscimento, la sua riparazione*, Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2006. For a synthesis in French of my research, see L. Centemeri, "Retour à Seveso. La complexité morale et politique du dommage à l'environnement," *Annales HSS* 1, 2011, pp. 213-240.

⁶ On the relationship between justification and public action, see L. Boltanski, L. Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

⁷ Until the late 1980s, the political map of Italy was organized around two territorially well-defined “cultures”: Catholic associationism in the “white zones,” which were politically affiliated with the Christian Democrats (DC), and the solidarity network associationism of the worker’s movement in the “red zones,” which were affiliated with the Italian Communist Party (PCI). See I. Diamati, *Mappa dell’Italia politica*, Bologne, Il Mulino, 2009. On the economy of “industrial districts” in Italy, see A. Bagnasco, *Tre Italie. La problematica territoriale dello sviluppo italiano*, Bologne, Il Mulino, 1977.

⁸ The toxic cloud was released following an uncontrolled exothermic reaction in the reactor, which was designed to produce trichlorophenol, an intermediary chemical product used in the production of herbicides and fungicides and which is also used in making hexachlorophene, an antibacterial substance.

⁹ The failure to respect security norms was proven by studies conducted by the parliamentary investigative commission, which was called upon to clarify the issue of responsibility for the disaster. See: *Relazione conclusiva della Commissione Parlamentare di inchiesta sulla fuga di sostanze tossiche avvenuta il 10 luglio 1976 nello stabilimento ICMESA e sui rischi potenziali per la salute e per l’ambiente derivanti da attività industriali*, Atti parlamentari, VII legislatura, doc. XXIII, no. 6, 1978.

¹⁰ Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques*, Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1986, pp. 39-40.

¹¹ See M. Fratter, *Memorie da sotto il bosco*, Milan: Auditorium, 2006, pp. 21-25.

¹² P. Mocarelli, “Seveso: A Teaching Story,” *Chemosphere* 43, 2001, pp. 391-402.

¹³ On the difference between risk and uncertainty: F. H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. On uncertainty and scientific knowledge, see M. Callon, P. Lascoumes, Y. Barthe, *Acting in An Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, Cambridge: MA, USA, and London, UK, MIT Press, 2009, chap. 1.

¹⁴ “Zona di rispetto” in Italian.

¹⁵ L. Conti, *Visto da Seveso. L'evento straordinario e l'ordinaria amministrazione*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977, pp. 44-45.

¹⁶ F. Rocca, *I giorni della diossina*, Milan: Centro studi “A. Grandi,” 1980, p. 99.

¹⁷ M. Ferrara, *Le donne di Seveso*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1977.

¹⁸ P. A. Bertazzi, D. Consonni, S. Bachetti, M. Rubagotti, A. Baccarelli, C. Zocchetti, A. C. Pesatori, “Health Effects of Dioxin Exposure: A 20-Year Mortality Study,” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 153, no. 11, 2001, pp. 1031-1044. For a more recent study, see also D. Consonni, A. C. Pesatori, C. Zocchetti, R. Sindaco, L. Cavalieri D'Oro, M. Rubagotti, P. A. Bertazzi, “Mortality in a Population Exposed to Dioxin after the Seveso, Italy, Accident in 1976: 25 Years of Follow-Up,” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 167, 2008, pp. 847-858.

¹⁹ “There were no fatalities following the accident,” claimed Stavros Dimas, the European Commissioner for the Environment, while commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the accident in 2006. See *Seveso: The Lessons from the Last 30 Years*, Brussels: European Parliament, 11 October 2006, SPEECH/06/588.

²⁰ K. Steenland, P. A. Bertazzi, A. Maccarelli, M. Kogevinas, "Dioxin Revisited: Developments since the 1997 IARC Classification of Dioxin as a Human Carcinogen," *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 112, no. 13, 2004, pp. 1265-1268. The IARC, based in Lyon, is a UN institution under the aegis of the World Health Organization.

²¹ Legambiente is one of Italy's largest environmentalist groups. Created in 1980, the association is more directly linked than any other to the heritage of political ecology: in 2000, it had 115,000 members distributed among 20 regional groups and 1000 local groups, known as "circles." See D. Della Porta, M. Diani, *Movimenti senza protesta? L'ambientalismo in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004, p. 105.

²² The "Seveso" Directive (82/501/EEC) on the control of major accident hazards was adopted in 1982. On the process that led from the disaster to the Directive, see B. De Marchi, "Seveso: From Pollution to Regulation", *International Journal of Environment and Pollution*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1997, pp. 526-537.

²³ See U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage, 1992, and C. Larrère, R. Larrère, *Du bon usage de la nature. Pour une philosophie de l'environnement*, Paris: Alto/Aubier, 1997.

²⁴ On the presumption of irrationality as the basis for risk communication in the 1970s, see: B. Fischhoff, "Risk Perception and Communication Unplugged: Twenty Years of Process," *Risk Analysis*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1995, pp. 137-145.

²⁵ G. Cerruti, "Cento giorni alla diossina," in *AA. VV. Icmesa. Une rapina di salute, di lavoro e di territorio*, Milan: Mazzotta, 1976, p. 10.

²⁶ Interview with Natalina P., an inhabitant of Seveso at the time of the accident, November 2003.

²⁷ Interview with Isa F., an inhabitant of Seveso at the time of the accident, October 2003.

²⁸ G. A. Maccacaro, “Seveso un crimine di pace,” *Sapere* 796, 1976, pp. 1-6.

²⁹ Interview with Isa F. an inhabitant of Seveso at the time of the accident, October 2003.

³⁰ “Comunione e Liberazione” is a Catholic Church movement active in Italy since the 1950-60s. It has a particularly strong presence in Lombardy. CL’s action is inspired by a “Christianism of doing” that is accompanied by a critique of the welfare state. On the fundamentalist aspects of this movement, see D. Zadra, “Comunione e Liberazione: A Fundamentalist Idea of Power,” pp. 124-148 in M. E. Marty, R. S. Appleby (eds.), *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

³¹ F. Rocca, *I giorni della diossina*, op. cit., p. 24.

³² L. Conti, *Una lepre con la faccia da bambina*, Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1978, p. 10.

³³ On the concept of the hybrid forum, see M. Callon, P. Lascoumes, Y. Barthe, *Acting in An Uncertain World*, op. cit.

³⁴ Interview with Giuliana B., an inhabitant of Seveso at the time of the accident, November 2003.

³⁵ L. Centemeri, “What kind of knowledge is needed about toxicant-related health issues? Some lessons drawn from the Seveso dioxin case », in S. Boudia, N. Jas (eds.), *Powerless Science? Science and Politics in a Toxic World*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn , 2014.

³⁶ L. Boltanski, L. Thévenot, *On Justification*, op. cit..

³⁷ On the concept of “circumstantial group,” see J.-P. Vilain, C. Lemieux, “La mobilisation des victimes d’accident collectifs. Vers la notion de ‘groupe circonstanciel’,” *Politix*, no. 44, 1998, pp. 135-160.

³⁸ I am here referring to the category of “haunting” (*hantise*) as it has been developed in the work of Joan Stavo-Debauge, “Le concept de ‘hantise’: de Derrida à Ricœur (et retour),” *Etudes Ricoeuriennes*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2012, pp. 128-148. Haunting indicates a past harm that threatens to happen again and therefore a past that is not past. It accentuates vigilance but can also blind one to the present.

³⁹ For a recent discussion of the discomfort this caused, see A. Morra’s article, “Il marchio di Seveso,” *Corriere della Sera*. 23 February 2002. The feeling of exploitation was denounced in several articles that I was able to find in the local press.

⁴⁰ The “Libreria delle Donne” is a feminist cultural center organized around a library and was formed in 1975 on the initiative of a group of students, teachers, intellectuals and artists.

⁴¹ M. Diani, *Isole nell’arcipelago. Il movimento ecologista in Italia*, Bologne, Il Mulino, 1988, pp. 73-74.

⁴² The “basic politics” (*politica prima*) can be summarized as the idea that political action is above all that which responds to shared problems by way of practical involvement in the construction of possible solutions. See “E’ accaduto non per caso,” *Sottosopra*, January 1996. *Sottosopra* is the periodical of the Libreria delle Donne.

⁴³ Alexander (Alex) Langer (1946-95), a pacifist and environmentalist, was among the founders of the Italian Green Party. On his thought and the idea of “ecological conversion,” see A. Langer, “Giustizia, pace, salvaguardia del creato,” *Equilibri*, vol. IX, no. 3, 2005, pp. 627-634.

⁴⁴ Extract of the “Memory Bridge” project proposal (2002).

⁴⁵ S. Carbone, A. Carbone, M. Cellini, “Proposition pour recueillir et mettre en valeur la mémoire émotive, en complément de la réalisation des panneaux de commémoration pour le Bois des chênes dans le cadre du projet Pont de la mémoire,” Seveso, 2002.

⁴⁶ The committee was made up of nine members (all from Seveso): a representative of the Legambiente Circle; the owner of a newspaper stand; a retired literature teacher; the director of a center for the elderly; a doctor representing the Catholic movement *Comunione e liberazione*; the director of the Seveso Italian mountain-climbing club; a university professor.

⁴⁷ Michele S., Committee member, Committee meeting (December 2002).

⁴⁸ Franco T., Committee member, Committee meeting (December 2002).

⁴⁹ This is how Luisa M., a member of the guarantors committee involved in writing the panels, defined it.

⁵⁰ The recent mobilizations (2010-2011) to protect the Oak Forest against a projected highway (the “Pedemontana”)—according to the plans, the highway would pass near the park – can be understood in this light. The prospect of excavating park land in order to lay foundations for the project revived the question of the harm done to health by dioxin. The possibility that the dioxin

still present in the soil might be dispersed, thereby causing a health risk, is an argument employed by the local opposition (led by the Legambiente Circle) to this infrastructural project.