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Environment as « nature », environment as « place of dwelling ». Plural modes of engagement in environmental mobilisations.

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In this presentation my aim is to discuss the tensions that can arise between *environmental activists* mobilised locally to denounce an environmental problem and *local people who are directly affected* by it. The relationship between environmentalists – meaning activists of the cause of the environment - and concerned inhabitants is not always straightforward. The engagement of inhabitants in the cause denouncing environmental problems affecting them and the place the live in is far from being automatic. I analyze these tensions as related to *conflicting valuation* of the environmental damage.[1]

My discussion today is mainly based on a research I have conducted on the environmental damage "reparation" process in the town of *Seveso* (in the Northern region of Lombardy in Italy). The name of this town is very well known at least in Europe because of a dioxin contamination that affected this town in 1976 following an industrial accident in a small chemical plant (ICMESA) owned by the Swiss corporation Hoffmann La Roche. In my research, I have analyzed what is usually called in literature as the "recovery" after the disaster, that is, I have studied how the disaster has entered the collective life of Seveso, in what ways the disaster have changed the life of this town, in a period of time that goes from the accident to the inauguration in 2004 of a "memory pathway" devoted to the disaster. This memory pathway - made up of displays telling the accident's story through texts and photos – is located in the "natural" park, the Oak Wood, that was created in Seveso, in 1984, on the most polluted area, once the decontamination was completed.

My research interest in the Seveso disaster was motivated by two paradoxes. First, this disaster is considered as a milestone in the development of a European environmental policy. A European Directive on industrial risks was named after Seveso in 1982.

[1] On environmental conflicts as conflicts of environmental valuation see Martinez-Alier (2002).

However, in the history of Italian environmentalism, the political mobilisation of social movements to denounce the damages inflicted to the population and the environment was a failure in terms of involving local people. A large part of them didn't join the mobilization and some of them actually fought against social movements denouncing the environmental risks of dioxin (Centemeri 2010, 2011). Second paradox: in Seveso there are no official victims of the dioxin contamination, nor a group of victims as political actor. No casualties officially followed the disaster. However, the epidemiological studies of follow up of the Seveso population have been crucial in the process that brought in 1997 the International Agency for Research on Cancer to classify dioxin as a human carcinogen (Centemeri 2012a, forthcoming).

I have studied the recovery from the environmental damage in Seveso focusing on *conflicts of social valuation* of this damage. In fact, the question of how we value the environment is key to the definition of what accounts for an environmental damage, since a damage is a harm impairing something valuable. In order to agree on what accounts for a damage we have to agree on what accounts for something valuable.

Through this research, I try to give my contribution to the development of a "sociology of valuation processes" (see Lamont 2012) based on a *pragmatic sociology of regimes of engagement*, as developed by Laurent Thévenot starting from his work with Luc Boltanski on justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

One of the most original traits of this "pragmatic perspective" on valuation is to break the so-called "Parsons's pact" (Stark 2009) which assumes that the "value" as studied by economics is something different from the "values" as studied by sociology. Beyond this dichotomy, different ways to value and to socially define what makes the value are explored in pragmatic sociology, thus showing the normative complexity hidden behind the models and instruments used to give account of economic value.[2] There are not such processes of revealing a supposedly "true" value (as assumed by economics) but processes of collective construction of conventions establishing what makes the value and how to test it.

If we consider environmental conflicts as conflicts of "valuation", a key issue becomes that of understanding the plural ways we have, as human beings, to value the environment.

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[2] The French « Convention Theory » develops this perspective on valuation inside economic theory (Dupuy et al. 1989; Thévenot et al. 2005).

In this respect my starting point is that of taking seriously into account an ambiguity, which is inherent to the very same word "environment", an ambiguity that in my opinion is not duly explored in sociological analysis of environmental issues.[3]

The ambiguity of the word "environment" is related to the fact that environment can be used to point to "my environment", meaning the more proximate material reality that surrounds a person, that a person came to know through progressive familiarization, because of repeated use and frequentation. But "environment" can mean "the Environment" as natural environment, including species, ecosystems, natural laws, natural resources; in a nutshell, what we are used to call "nature" which is potentially common to the entire humanity.

To highlight this ambiguity is a first step to draw attention to the fact that we can establish various kinds of practical relationship with what surrounds us. We have personal ways to establish a relationship with the environment, progressively creating an intimacy with the materiality surrounding us –based on appropriation, use, and frequentation. We have, at the opposite, those ways to establish a relationship with the environment that are based on general definitions of what makes the value of the environment, based on scientific knowledge or generalized and conventional categories (like natural capital, natural heritage, landscape). We have as well relationships with the environment based on an instrumental use, which are not clearly framed by generalized conventions of valuation nor based on familiarization and personal appropriation.

These diverse relationships with the environment are socially acknowledged, meaning that we can recognize a valuation of the environment as based on familiar attachments, instrumental use, or conventional appraisal. The instruments, tools, rules and objects shaping our life in common rely on the existence of these different vocabularies of valuation, based on pragmatic modes of relationship with the world around us.

I call these plural ways to establish a practical relationship with the environment and to value it, "regimes of engagement" as theorized by Laurent Thévenot (1990, 2001a, 2006, 2007).

Thévenot distinguishes three main "regimes of engagement" to point to different practical relationships with the environment and modes of valuation of the environment: the *familiar regime* based on a relationship of familiarity with the

[3] On the contrary, this ambiguity is explored in philosophical accounts of the plurality of « environmental values ». See O'Neill et al., 2008.

environment, the *regime in a plan* based on an instrumental relationship with the environment and the *public justification regime* based on a "conventional" relationship, that is, a relationship based on frames of qualification of the environment that are publicly shared.

These regimes can be distinguished in terms of their diverse potentiality to assure a common valuation across increasing relational distance, the public justification regime being the one assuring to the largest extent the possibility of common valuation while the familiar regime being the one putting the strongest constraints to it. The possibility of the agreement on a common valuation is based on the possibility to *test* this valuation, to check its appropriateness. The concept of "reality test" of valuation is crucial to this frame of analysis.

But let me clarify first an important point in this discussion. In the pragmatic approach, the *public space* is explored as an historically determined dimension of collective life that have progressively emerged, in which specific ways to value are considered as more legitimate than others. This is the case of justifiable modes of valuation, that are those that frame the value (of things and people) according to legitimate "orders of worth". The publicly justifiable valuation is tested through appropriate conventional objects and instruments, which assure the "objectivity" of valuation.[4] Other regimes of engagement imply forms of valuation that are tested in ways that we could consider as less objective but they are nevertheless sharable with others. For example, when an evaluation is based on familiarity, agreement requires a shared and direct experience of familiarization since what makes the value, in this case, is the good of the "ease" of familiarity. Still, far from being limited to the sphere of "the personal" and "the particular", this form of valuation based on the goods of personal attachments can be shared with others and it can sustain critical claims. Nevertheless, critique based on valuations resting on familiarity cannot find an easy way to be expressed in the public space, which is historically and culturally built on forms of valuation requiring detachment, not attachment.

[4] From a perspective of pragmatic sociology, objectivity historically emerged in modern western societies as a fundamental category in the construction and organization of modern politics, to qualify a knowledge produced according to conventions (rules and procedures) supposed to guarantee impersonality, impartiality and fairness (Porter 1995). On objectivity revisited in light of orders of worth see Centemeri (2012b).

How a critique can be expressed relying on forms of valuation stemming from familiar attachments? How this critique can be taken into account in the public space and in the construction of a public cause? And why is it important to take into account these forms of valuation? In fact we could consider them as irrelevant for collective life.

However, as extensively discussed and investigated by Marc Breviglieri (2002, 2012), the ease and comfort assured through a familiar engagement with the environment are key to the human experience of "dwelling" (*habiter*). The experience of dwelling, nurtured by familiar attachments to places, things, people, is investigated by the author as key to the development of those human capacities that are required in order to successfully act with others in the public space, as an agent having a will or being capable of discussing about the general interest or the common good. Relying on the anthropology of capacities developed by Paul Ricoeur, Breviglieri shows, through his research on situations of exhaustion of capacities, how the familiar space of dwelling can be conceived as a sort of "transitional sphere" between the environment as a biological "milieu", space of vital functions, and the space of the human life in common with others. This transitional sphere, and the goods it assures to the human being, are theorized by Breviglieri as the source of an intimate assurance of the person which is key to the expression of capacities. These goods assured to the person through her familiar engagement with the places of dwelling contribute to the "maintaining" of the person, to her "consistency", so that the person can be "capable to be capable".

In this perspective, the well-being guaranteed thorough a familiar engagement with the environment endows a person with the self-assurance and the intimate support needed to enter progressively more detached (or generalized) forms of action with others.[5] That is why the question "how are modes of valuation resting on familiarity taken into account in the public space?" becomes an important sociological question.

Conflicts on environmental valuation are thus research objects particularly propitious to discuss issues concerning deliberation and critique, civil society, political action and social movements, in a frame highlighting the conditions of access to the public space "from the bottom", that is, starting from engagements of proximity (Thévenot 2001b).

[5] In a similar line of reasoning, the French geographer and orientalist Augustin Berque introduces the concept of "médiance" (1996, 2000) to point to the fact that a human being needs a "milieu" to structure herself, that is, an ensemble of relationships of dependency to other human beings and objects. Through distinguishing diverse kinds of dependencies from the material and social environment, a pragmatic approach allows to better qualify the dependencies (based on familiarity) accounting for self-assurance and existential consistency.

The interest of this approach is to study the public space as an historical construction relying on the privilege accorded to certain specific engagements and forms of valuation. Through this approach it is possible to clarify tensions that can emerge when mobilizing for the environment, between environment publicly qualified as nature and environment experienced as the place of dwelling. In fact, as human geographers have rightly pointed out, as terrestrials our experience of the material world is always based on both a capacity to commensurate (that is to measure, to establish equivalences, to have a detached approach to what is around us, as we were external to it) and the experience of the personal and intimate bonds we come to create with the places we live in, so to turn them into something constitutive of us and as such "incommensurable".

I am currently working on a project concerning incommensurability in environmental valuation processes, trying to analyze incommensurability as a social process through the lenses of the plurality of regimes of engagement. But today I would like to rapidly present my research on Seveso in order to give an example of what I mean when I say that tensions can emerge in the construction of a public mobilization on an environmental issue, between diverse modes of valuing the environment.

Seveso: when the goods of dwelling are ignored in the construction of a public cause

In 1976, when the accident at the ICMESA plant caused the contamination of Seveso, the extremely harmful effects of dioxin on human health were mostly supposed, on the basis of toxicological evidence. A dioxin environmental contamination affecting an entire population was without precedent. Besides, there were no technical instruments for measuring the level of dioxin in human blood. Therefore there was a "radical uncertainty" surrounding the contamination consequences to be expected on human health and the environment, their extent in space as well as in time.

The evacuation of a part of Seveso population was highly recommended. The worst nightmare of the industrialized world, that of a chemical contamination maybe implying the death of an entire city, became suddenly real. Images of the Seveso disaster were on the cover of newspapers and on the screens of tvs in Italy and in Europe.

736 inhabitants of Seveso were forced to leave their houses. "Risk zones" were created, officially on the basis of the estimated trajectory of the toxic cloud and of random tests of dioxin concentration on the ground, but mostly following criteria such as practical

feasibility and reduction of negative social side-effects to be expected in case of massive displacements.

Public authorities decided to reduce uncertainty through denying it, and acting "as if" uncertainty were not there. Technical-scientific committees of experts were created and asked for the solutions to be taken with respect to dioxin health risk, decontamination, socio-economic implications of the crisis, assuming that the definition of the problems at stake was non controversial. Citizens (and their political representatives at the municipal level) were not allowed to participate in decision making, even if decisions were taken that heavily affected them, as persons and as community.

However, it was clear to citizens that public decisions couldn't rely on any kind of scientific 'truth'. The scientific uncertainty surrounding dioxin effects was widely discussed in the media. This implied that decisions taken in response to the crisis were seen as based on public authorities discretion. Responding to dioxin contamination was claimed by public authorities to be a pure scientific and technological problem. Behind this framing of dioxin contamination, we find a specific way to define and value the environment, as resource assuring health and as support for economic activities.

Nevertheless different definitions of the damage emerged through the mobilisation of grassroots movements of affected people, on the one hand, and of social movements, on the other hand.

In particular, one controversial issue was that concerning what had to be considered as "safety" in responding to the environmental damage. Public authorities defined safety starting from the detached standpoint of experts and laboratory science. In this detached view, safety is the condition of not being exposed to risk, so that displacement from the contaminated area was considered the solution guaranteeing the higher level of safety. A different definition of safety was supported by grassroots movements of Seveso citizens. For these movements, not only dioxin risk should be considered but as well the risk of the Seveso community to disappear. It was not just individual safety that had to be preserved but as well the attachment to the place, shared in terms of being dwellers of this place. Since uncertainty was high concerning the consequences to be expected from dioxin contamination, people asked public authorities to act so to leave a chance to Seveso to continue to exist.

Let me clarify this point through an example. Grassroots movements fought against the decision by public authorities to build an incinerator in the most polluted area to assure

the disposal of the toxic wastes produced during the decontamination procedures. They fought two years to have these wastes finally buried in two special landfills, created in the most contaminated area, that was later on transformed into a urban park, the Oak Wood, following an experimental process of re-forestation. The fight against the incinerator (and for the wood) was - for people participating in it - not so much a fight for environmental health but a fight against a solution given to the problem of toxic wastes disposal that would have changed for ever Seveso landscape, the way people had to experience it. The incinerator was a way to condemn Seveso never to recover from the dioxin crisis, in terms of letting people having the chance to re-establish with their own environment the relationship they previously had.

These grassroots movements of affected people, fighting against massive displacements and the incinerator as an answer to the crisis, found themselves opposing not only public authorities but as well social movements mobilized in Seveso in order to denounce the environmental damage as a responsibility of the State and the multinational company Roche.

Social movements already active in Italy on the issue of environmental health –an issue particularly debated in Italy at that time, in its relationships with work related diseases - mobilized in Seveso. They organised a "Scientific Technical Popular Committee" (STPC) in order to help affected people to denounce the damages they were suffering. One of the most important actor in this mobilisation was the social movement Democratic Medicine. For Democratic Medicine, the Seveso disaster called for a large coalition (between citizens and workers) in order to impose in the political agenda the issue of environmental health, that is of the health damages caused by industrial production, inside and outside plants. Underlying it, there was a social critique of the capitalistic exploitation with its hidden costs and an interpretation of social inequalities in terms of class struggle. A crucial point in DM agenda was the following: in order to make socially visible the negative consequences of the industrial society a democratization of knowledge production about health was needed. This "democratization" meant having affected people (workers and inhabitants) directly involved in producing scientific knowledge on health, considering their subjective experience as relevant for objective knowledge.

The call for a wide mobilization for the production of knowledge about dioxin damages found little answer among Seveso population. As we said, the contamination was framed

by DM inside a broader critique of capitalism: in this sense, Seveso people were asked to join the pre-existing cause of workers and class struggle, considered as a unifying struggle. The environmental damage in Seveso was a crime of the capitalism showing how capitalism was destroying as well environment, intended as public goods and natural resources. No room was left to the uncertainties concerning the damages to be expected: they were assumed for sure to be catastrophic. Seveso people were clearly victims, having lost everything and even their health. No place was allowed to hope and to doubts concerning the consequences to be expected and to more local and even personal definitions of the problems at stake in this disaster situation. Activists were as unable as public authorities to understand what Seveso people cared for in responding to dioxin crisis.

For a large majority of Seveso people, the priority in responding to the crisis was to maintain as far as possible, given the scientific uncertainties on the damage, their previous way of living. They wanted to fight to save what was possible to save of their personal and collective life. They wanted to stay in Seveso, not to leave, because of the attachment to this place, attachment to people but as well to the environment. Leftist activists were unable to take into account this dimension of attachment to the place of dwelling and the importance of it in assuring the person with the capacity to engage in a mobilization or in a critique. It was difficult for them to understand that the kind of loss suffered by Seveso people – a specific loss, that of the place of dwelling - was affecting them in a way that deeply eroded their capacities to act in public and to engage in a cause.[6]

Public authorities denied local people and their representatives any voice in the process of recovery. Social movements as well was denying legitimacy to local people concerns for what was considered as their "small world". This caused the grassroots movement to radicalize its protest. In order to be heard in the public space, the dioxin damage as damage to the place of dwelling was framed as a damage to a specific culture, with specific values. This culture and values were seen as defying the community of Seveso, as an homogenous entity to be preserved. It is important to highlight that this grassroots mobilisation progressively became to support this idea of a community to be defended

[6] As remarked by Joan Stavo-Debauge (2012) : « To be a victim, it is to be a patient before being an agent (…) to ask those who have not any more forces to participate can be counterproductive, even cruel ».

on the basis of its cultural specificity.[7] However in the beginning what people were trying to have recognized was "simply" a specific loss they had experienced and a specific risk they were fearing, affecting them profoundly in something they valued: their attachments to their place of dwelling.

The interpretation of the dioxin damage as a cultural threat to the community and its cultural values progressively emerged as a "vicious" way to have specific forms of valuing the environment and the damage suffered, based on familiarity, heard in the public space. This way to frame the disaster has prompted a recovery process based on the individualization of the controversial implications of the contamination, the ones jeopardizing communitarian cohesion, in particular long-term dioxin health effects.

The way the Swiss multinational Roche managed compensations to victims also contributed to downsize dioxin health damages to the level of personal problems. The compensation issue was dealt with instruments of private settlement, like individual contracts passed between victims having suffered material losses and the multinational company, with no public discussion concerning how to compensate the negative consequences of the disaster to be expected for the future.

Different definitions of the environmental damage were thus confronting each other in the public space. What is specific to this case is the fact that public authorities didn't pay any attention to the need to reconcile these very diverse ways to define the environmental damage. Nor activists of social movements were capable to include Seveso people concerns in their protest: they tried to have Seveso people on their side on struggles that were already defined or they used their frustration to support a communitarian claim. This lack of a stable frame for public deliberation and this lack of inclusion of Seveso people concerns in more general causes help to understand the radicalization of the movements mobilised in Seveso.

Final remarks

The case of Seveso is a sort of extreme situation in which the potential incompatibility of valuations of the environment as a civic cause (in terms of being related to issues of justice and inequalities) and the environment valued as a place of dwelling is particularly sharp. I argue that in fact these tensions are always present in struggles

[7] This shift towards a frame of dioxin as a « cultural threat » was actively supported and promoted by a catholic movement (Comunione e Liberazioni) particularly active in the region of Seveso.

involving the environment. My interest is then in understanding how these tensions are overcome and how forms of valuing the environment as nature can find a way to be reconciled with forms of valuing the environment as place of dwelling. Always relying on my experience of research in Seveso, I would say that in order to understand how this articulation is possible it is necessary to observe in details how activists, movements and associations work to the construction of the environmental cause. It is necessary to take into account actors biographies and to examine capacities that persons who are directly engaged in the cause have to exercise in order to assure the mediation between forms of valuation and their translations into the public space.

In my research on Seveso, I have observed how some activists having experienced this failure of the mobilisation for environmental health in the 70's have after that undertaken a radical revision of their way to intend the mobilisation for the environment, trying to include forms of familiar valuation in their own practice of activism. In order to address in the 90's what they defined as the "removal" of the accident of Seveso and its consequences from the local public space, they started various local projects meant to directly "take care" of the environment of Seveso, with apparently no intent of critique and without addressing directly the dioxin issue. These projects are manly based on assuring the maintenance of green spaces in the city, through the work of volunteers. Through promoting the creation of a local environmentalist association, they involved local youngest activists in their activities and they finally came to work together on a project, called "The bridge of memory", meant to address the issue of the memory of the disaster, as essential part of a process of reparation of the environmental damage suffered.

This project has brought to the creation of a memory pathway in the "Oak Wood", the 42-hectare plot of forest in the urban center of Seveso that was artificially created over the most contaminated area. The "Seveso Bridge of Memory" project was developed in 1999-2000 by these activists as a way to oppose what seemed to be a sort of collective pressure to erase the disaster's memory, starting from the normalization of the uses of the Oak Wood. Activists then asked local town councils to finance the creation of an archive of the disaster as well as a "memory footpath" in the Oak Wood complete with displays telling the accident's story through texts and photos.

Given the aim of defining a commonly shared memory of the event, the texts and photos were written and chosen by these activists together with an oversight committee

composed of 10 people from Seveso. These people were considered representative of the different walks of life of the local community and uninvolved in politics or public institutions at the time of the accident. Once the displays were created, they were presented to the larger community of Seveso for further opinions and suggestions.

The process that led to the opening of the "memory footpath" in 2004 showed how these activists succeeded in involve the inhabitants of Seveso in a collective process dealing with how to frame the heritage of the disaster. This process of "memory building" has made it evident that even today it is rather difficult to speak publicly about dioxin health effects and compensation for the damage suffered. In the words of one of the committee members: "The memory we are writing here must be a discreet memory, respectful of personal suffering. In this process, we must try to avoid reopening old wounds, avoid forcing people to confront painful or sorrowful things they want to forget". Still this "discreet memory" is today the starting point for the promotion of a green culture in the management of the town. But this discreet memory implies as well not to question anymore the issue of the health effects of the contamination, confined to the condition of personal troubles and scientific object of investigation (since epidemiological studies still continue).

As I said, Seveso is a sort of extreme situation in which the work of articulating the experience of the affected inhabitants to the construction of a political cause on environmental damage denunciation and reparation failed. In other situation the "uneasy alchemy" (using the concept developed by Barbara Allen on her research on environmental justice in the Louisiana Cancer Alley, 2003) between inhabitants, activists, experts and politicians succeeds in creating a common frame of valuation that is the basis for a common engagement for health and the environment. In order to understand how this uneasy alchemy is possible research is needed in order to understand how certain scientists, experts and activists can play the role of "mediator" and "translator" assuring not simply an activity of networking but the acknowledgment and inclusion of a plurality of forms of valuation in the construction of a public denunciation.[8] This kind of mediation and translation can not be delegated to technical objects or formalized rules. They imply a specific engagement with people and places

[8] See on this point the research done by Paul Jobin on various cases of struggles for justice and environmental health, from the Minamata case (Jobin 2006) to to the most recent case of Anshun in Taiwan (Jobin, forthcoming).

and a sort of practical versatility, that is, a capacity to be able to compose with plural engagements, which is a very demanding request for the person.

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