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From conflicting justifications to place-based resistance. The struggles against the expansion of the Malpensa airport (1970-2012)

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Abstract:

Through an analysis of the 40-year history of conflicts triggered by the repeated attempts to expand the Malpensa airport (Italy), this paper seeks to show the heuristic strength of using the concept of *modes of valuation of the environment* to discuss the transformations that the environmental critique has undergone in the European context since the 1970s. I argue that the trajectory of transformations – from conflicting justifications to place-based resistance – witnessed by the environmental critique in this specific case is in fact quite similar to the dynamics of many other conflicts over large infrastructural projects in Europe. In the first section I briefly introduce the pragmatic sociology inspired concept of *modes of valuation*. In the second section I provide an analysis of the struggles against the Malpensa airport expansions from 1970 to 2012, wherein I distinguish three phases that I discuss in terms of the transformations that can be observed from the perspective of the modes of valuation of the environment that actors mobilise to fight the airport's growth. In the final section I discuss some hypotheses concerning the more general socio-political dynamics beyond the transformations of environmental critique.

Keywords:

Environmentalism, valuation, pragmatic sociology, Italy, place attachment, critique, environmental conflicts

This paper aims to contribute a reflection on the transformations that the environmental critique has undergone in the European context since the 1970s. I employ the concept of *environmental critique* to point to a form of contestation of the socio-economic order oriented toward producing a specific change in society: the change of the place of Nature in the political community (Latour 1993; 2004). I argue that one key issue for environmental critique is that of how *experience*, and in particular the *experience of the environment*, can contribute to the critical power of reason applied to environmental problems.

The relevance of this issue for the environmental critique is made clear once we consider that this critique fundamentally asks for the political recognition of a plurality of “languages of valuation of the environment” (Martinez-Alier 2008) or “environmental values”¹.

Such recognition raises the sociological question of what kind of experience of the environment can *legitimately* be considered as relevant in collective discussions about defining the value and importance of the environment. There is a difference between challenging the dominant definitions of the worth of the environment – without putting into question the first-order question of what counts as a legitimate “mode of valuation” – and questioning such a definition of legitimacy. In making this distinction, it is possible to better appreciate the challenges raised by those expressions of the environmental critique that claim recognition for the legitimacy of what I refer to here as the “emplaced” experience of the value of an environment.

Through an analysis of the 40-year history of conflicts triggered by the repeated attempts to expand the Malpensa airport in the territory of the Regional Natural Park of the Ticino River’s Valley (Italy), I seek to show the heuristic strength of using the concept of *modes of valuation of the environment* to understand the way in which environmental critique has changed over time. Even if contextual elements are at play in the Malpensa case, I argue that the trajectory of transformations witnessed by the environmental critique in this specific situation is in fact quite similar to the dynamics of many other conflicts over large infrastructural projects in Europe more generally.

The article unfolds as follows. In the first section I briefly introduce the concept of *modes of valuation* and its relevance for understanding critique and social change. This concept is inspired by the sociology of “regimes of engagement” (ROE) developed by Laurent Thévenot, on the basis of the pragmatic sociology of critique he elaborated together with Luc

¹ “Environmental values” are intended here as the plurality of ways in which the environment can matter to people and their communities (O’Neill, Holland and Light 2008).

Boltanski during the 1980s. In partial disagreement with an understanding of pragmatic sociology as limited in its capacity to explain long-term trends², I argue that pragmatic tools can be usefully mobilized to support an analysis of the transformations of critique over time. In the second section I provide an analysis of the mobilisations against the Malpensa airport expansions that have taken place over the course of more than 40 years, wherein I distinguish three phases of mobilisation corresponding to three different plans of airport expansion. I discuss these three phases in terms of the transformations of the environmental critique that can be observed from the perspective of the modes of valuation of the environment that actors mobilise – in their discourses and their practices – while contesting the airport expansion plans. Here, I focus primarily on the most recent wave of protests and especially on the role played by “emplaced modes of valuation” in the activities of a grass-roots movement that united against the airport expansion in order to preserve a green area known as the Gaggio heath. In the final section I discuss some hypotheses concerning the more general socio-political dynamics beyond the transformations of environmental critique and argue for a reassessment of the contribution pragmatic sociology can provide to understanding long-term trends of social change.

1. Environmental critique, justifications and modes of valuation

In discussing the transformations of the environmental critique in the Malpensa case, I mobilize an analytical frame based on French pragmatic sociology³. According to this approach, critique is related to the exercise of peoples’ ordinary capacities for evaluative judgments (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). Consequently, political critique relies on individuals’ ordinary capacities for evaluating situations and claims based on the plurality of evaluative criteria that can be mobilised for this purpose. Therefore, when dealing with critique and social change, my emphasis is on the different kinds of critical capacities people can rely on and how they are exercised, while at the same time taking into account the situational, historical, and material constraints that might inhibit the emergence and the expression of these capacities.

² It is the critique formulated by Delanty (2011).

³ A general discussion of French pragmatic sociology is beyond the scope of this article. Various contributions provide a detailed analysis of this sociological tradition, its origin and developments: see in particular Bénatouïl (1999), Dodier (1993), Wagner (1999) and the special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* edited by Blokker (2011).

More precisely I am interested in the analysis of those *modes of valuation* that social actors mobilize in order to politicize an issue. In the work that I am currently developing with Gildas Renou⁴, we use this concept to point to a variety of cultural forms and “figurations” that people can resort to in order to share a judgment concerning what matters, what is worthy or worthwhile, what is valuable, and what counts in a given situation, in order to be able to convene on a shared understanding about the proper way to “engage with” the situation (Thévenot 2001, 2006, 2007). Valuation points here to the process of identification by an agent of what should count as valuable, so as to orient action in a given situation, while evaluation points to the assessment of the situation according to this criterion, by means of convenient and appropriated “tests of reality” (Lamont 2012)⁵.

The choice to speak of “modes of valuation”, and not simply of valuations, is explained by the interest in the comparison of distinguishable ways of valuing (and evaluating) that co-exist and that can account for the difficulties observable in actual processes of valuation, both at the individual and the collective level. This is perhaps analogous to the concept of “logics” that Annemarie Mol invokes, which she argues serves to “distil a ‘pure’ form out of mixed events” (Mol 2008: 10). This sacrifice of the faithfulness to the experience of action as a flow, however, is necessary in order to be able to identify recurrent frictions and tensions, or “cracks” (Hansen 2016), observable across a variety of situations (over time and space) in which valuations occur.

The concept of modes of valuation is inspired by the pragmatic sociology of Laurent Thévenot and the framework that he calls “regimes of engagement” (ROE).⁶ The ROE approach enlarges the original pragmatic focus on publicly justifiable definitions of value - the “orders of worth” that Boltanski and Thévenot elaborate in their collaborative work *De la justification*⁷ - in order to account for a wider variety of culturally shared definitions of the

⁴ See Centemeri and Renou (2015). This collaboration takes place in the frame of an ongoing research program funded by the French ANR (SYMBIOS - Social Movements For The Transition Towards A Frugal Society, ANR-14-CE03-0005-01), and directed by Gildas Renou (University of Strasbourg).

⁵ Tests of reality are performed by actors through specific objects, instruments or procedures expressly conceived or formatted in order to assess a certain form of the valuable.

⁶ I opted for the concept of “mode” in order to address valuation trying not to separate issues of language and representation and issues touching upon what we can define as an ontological dimension. See on this point Latour (2013) and its concept of mode of existence.

⁷ Boltanski and Thévenot detect six different expressions of the common good in our society, from which six “orders of worth” derive: market competition, industrial efficiency, fame, civic solidarity, domestic trust and inspiration. As historically-defined conceptual constructions, « orders of worth » evolve over time with the emergence of new legitimate justifications. Examples are the network-based worth theorized by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) or the « green worth » discussed by Lafaye and

valuable that can orient people's judgments about what is worth doing in a given situation. In other words, according to Thévenot, there are other definitions of the valuable we should pay attention to beyond those most public and conventional ones, based on broadly culturally shared understandings of the good resting, for example, on the accomplishment of a plan of action (the "normal action" in Thévenot's terms), or on the familiarity with one's everyday surroundings, which contributes to basic material and affective sustenance (Breviglieri 2012). The communication of what counts as valuable can then be more or less dependent from the mobilisation of propositional language, the same being truth for evaluation.

As pointed out by Genard (2011:5), one of the most interesting contributions of Thévenot's ROE approach to the sociological debate is to conceive forms of action (and consequently the modes of valuing) as not predetermined once and for all, but rather as dependent on historically and ontogenetically elaborated "cognitive architectures" on the one hand, and as being supported by corporeal aptitudes and mediated by material arrangements on the other. According to Genard, this brings Thévenot to highlight the sociological relevance of forms of "infra-propositional" coordination in which the living body in its relationship to the environment is experienced and used as a site of sensory appreciation. Contrary to the Bourdieusian idea of *habitus* as carried unchanged between different settings, this corporeal appreciation is always assumed as a potentially troublesome process in which the emergence of an obstacle triggers a certain degree of consciousness (not necessarily reflexive) of the potential discrepancy between what is occurring and what could occur or ought to occur⁸. As argued by Hansen (2016:132): "Thévenot (...) arrives at an extremely generic definition of critique as doubt relating to some kind of sacrifice which can take numerous forms from the most public and explicit ones described in *On Justification* to more subtle and less explicit ones such as irony, gestures, indecisiveness and groping". Reframing Hansen's remarks in terms of valuation, I would say that, according to Thévenot, critique potentially arises whenever the sacrifice of a mode of valuation, whether publicly justifiable or not, is judged as undue in a given situation. Political critique properly speaking takes roots in this ordinary sense of critique and raises doubts on the appropriateness of the modes of valuation informing modes of governing, denouncing them as unjust or, more broadly, oppressive. But how do

Thévenot (1993). These legitimate definitions of the worth are the result of the specific political, material and intellectual history of Western European societies (Wagner 1994).

⁸ For an analysis of Bourdieu's approach to practical reason from a pragmatic perspective see Renou (2010).

people succeed in making their critical voice *publicly* relevant – that is, relevant to others “in general”?

The ROE approach, in continuity with the idea of justifiable action, rests on an idea of *publicness* as a specific quality of action and of the modes of valuation that guide it. The public form of action has been socio-historically conceived and operationalized, in Western society, through a variety of cognitive artefacts, disciplining devices and technologies to support the construction of both the public sphere and the individual.

In order to be *publicly legitimate*, a mode of valuation must rest on a universally legitimate underlying good, meaning that this good must potentially benefit humanity as a whole. This beneficial link must be proven on the basis of a specific form of knowledge: modern scientific knowledge. The experience of value relevant for this mode of valuation must be formalised in such a way that reason, as conceived since the Enlightenment, can critically reflect upon it. This implies that this experience of value must be independently valid beyond the specific context of its occurrence.

For the purpose of the present argument, I will limit myself to pointing out that in order to be publicly legitimate, a mode of valuation does not require a direct, sensorial, in-context experience of the good whose achievement accounts for the value experience: this value experience must be proven in a way that can stand up to critical scrutiny, backed up by experience duly formalised in terms of “objective” experience⁹. Moreover, the key operation that has to be performed in order to assess the publicly-qualified value is that of establishing equivalence across different situations; this requires the devising of tools and techniques of *commensuration*. In this sense, commensuration can be considered as a social process (Espeland and Stevens 1998) since it materialises in socio-technical “investments in forms” (Thévenot 1984) meant to ensure the formatting of things that are different (in the personal experience that one has of them) into things that can be represented as the same (in value). The investments in forms needed to stabilize publicly legitimate modes of valuation require the highest degree of temporal and spatial validity in the formatting of knowledge (universal validity) and they require substantial material transformations, accounting for the persistent material impact of these investments and their limited opportunities for reversibility (Thévenot 2009).

⁹ For an analysis of the contribution pragmatic sociology can provide to the understanding of objectivity see Centemeri (2012). For a broader discussion of objectivity and public decision-making see the volume edited by Castro Caldas and Neves (2012).

A mode of valuation based on “emplaced experience” is diametrically opposed to this former publicly justifiable mode of valuation¹⁰. By emplaced experience we refer to a form of knowledge and appreciation that takes place primarily at the aesthetic level, understood as the level of perception and corporeal sensibility¹¹. A mode of valuation is emplaced when it rests on the sensory perception of goods related to a direct experience of places and people caught in ecological-based processes of human life “becoming” (Ingold 2000). The key evaluative operation here is not that of establishing equivalence, but rather of appreciating a personally felt proximity to a personally felt good. At work here is a form of appreciation that can be communicated to others but in forms that cannot be generalized, in the sense that they can be neither depersonalized nor decontextualized.

The ROE literature emphasizes the variety of modes of emplaced valuation people routinely deploy, but which are generally glossed over within the social sciences. When they haven’t been seen as the source of various dangers or impediments to the expression of “modern values”, these modes of emplaced valuation have been considered as “tacit” or “practical” and are automatically disregarded as a potential source of critique¹².

Between these two polarized modes of valuation, accounting for situations of “radical incommensurability” (Centemeri 2015), there are a wide variety of modes of local valuation. In modes of local valuation the relevant value experience is not meant to be universally valid but neither entirely dependent from the sensuous, personally experienced body-environment nexus. Local modes of valuation can rest on the creation of a local space of equivalence or on references for valuing that emerge from a community of experience. A form of “bounded” generalization is at work here, bounded to some contextual conditions whose experience is necessary to evaluate, and that has no ambition do be universally sharable and publicly legitimate.

¹⁰ As discussed by Sarah Pink (2009: 27), the emergent “paradigm of emplacement” points to “the revision of the notion of embodiment to account for the situatedness of the knowing body as in biological progress as part of a total environment”. The origins of this approach lie in the “phenomenology of place and space” developed by authors such as the philosopher Edward Casey, the geographer Doreen Massey and the anthropologist Tim Ingold. I argue that through the ROE framework, it is possible to articulate this phenomenological account of the experience of the environment with a sociological theory of action.

¹¹ This mode of valuation could be defined as “esthetic” but two reasons justify the choice for “emplaced valuation”: the more explicit link to the material conditions of valuation and the more direct connection with the critical and political potential of this mode of valuation.

¹² For exceptions see De Certeau (1990), Lefebvre (1968).

In the following section, I mobilize this framework for the analysis of the Malpensa case¹³. This analysis relies, on the one hand, upon the description of the modes of valuation of the environment that have been mobilized in the discursive constructions supporting the critique of plans to expand the airport. On the other hand, I pay attention to how modes of valuation have been working at the level of the production and functioning of the “sensitizing devices” supporting and facilitating people’s participation and commitment to the political struggle against the airport’s growth¹⁴. The analysis of the modes of valuation of the environment mobilized by critical actors, and their transformation over time, is coupled with the analysis of the modes of valuation of the environment mobilized in the logics and practices of governmental actors. In fact, as mentioned earlier, these governmental logics and practices at once constrain the expression of critique and are at the same time challenged by it.

2. Modes of valuation of the environment in the opposition to the Malpensa airport’s expansion (1970-2012)

The Malpensa airport is situated approximately 50km northwest of the city of Milan, the regional capital of Lombardy. Managed by S.e.a., a joint stock company controlled by the Municipality of Milan, it occupies a surface area of 1.220 hectares at the border between the regions of Lombardy and Piedmont. With two terminals, two runways and a dedicated cargo terminal, in 2015 Malpensa handled the second largest volume of airport passenger traffic in Italy (more than 18 million passengers) and was ranked first in the country in terms of freight transport volume¹⁵.

¹³ The discussion of the Malpensa case is based on the research that I have conducted in 2010-2012 in the frame of the research program “Choice beyond incommensurability” funded by the Portuguese research agency FCT (FCOMP-01-0124-FEDER-009234). The historical reconstruction rests on the data I collected in official documents (including technical reports), materials produced by the mobilized groups (including web contents), and press articles, complemented with ten interviews to activists, political actors and experts. Previous academic and non-academic works of synthesis on the Malpensa case have been particularly helpful, especially for the reconstruction of the earliest phases. See Balducci (1988), Pizzi (2000), Di Palma and Paviotti (2008).

¹⁴ “Sensitizing devices” are defined as the ensemble of material supports, dispositions, framing activities that activists deploy in order to arouse affective reactions that predispose those who experience them to commit to a cause (Traïni 2009). This perspective implies to take seriously into account the role of emotions as a relevant dimension of mobilizations.

¹⁵ Official data from ENAC:

http://www.enac.gov.it/repository/ContentManagement/information/N1171036406/Dati_di_traffico_2015_160404.pdf.

The airport site stretches over the territory of the Lombardy Regional Park of the Ticino River's Valley, created in 1974 as the first Regional Park in Italy¹⁶. The park was conceived as combining a zone of natural reserve (the river, the banks and the ledges) and a zone allowing the development of agriculture and other economic activities with low environmental impact. The idea behind this structure was to guarantee a harmonious transition from the natural reserve to the rest of the regional territory.

A plurality of public modes of environmental valuation can be seen in this project, supported since 1967 by the local branch of the environmental NGO "Italia Nostra"¹⁷ and the municipalities of the Ticino Valley: a still loosely equipped "green" or ecological worth (Lafaye and Thévenot 1993) stressing the importance of the ecological preservation of the fluvial ecosystem (especially the quality of water); a "domestic" worth in terms of traditional landscape and cultural heritage; and a civic worth that valorizes the park in terms of citizens equal access opportunity to public goods (healthy environment, leisure, etc.).

Simultaneously, in 1970, S.e.a. submitted its first plans for the expansion of Malpensa airport, known as the "Big Malpensa" plan, to be considered for approval by national authorities.

One may wonder how it is that such hardly compatible projects were developed in parallel, having in mind the same territory. In fact, in a relative reciprocal ignorance, civil society actors in both cases carried forward these conflicting projects and were both able to find institutional support.

Through an initiative led by a group of local businessmen, the Malpensa airport was established in 1948 on the site where, five years prior, German military forces had built a concrete runway. The airport was initially entirely financed by private funds, suggesting that local economic actors felt a need to compensate for the absence of adequate state support, coordination and planning in the post-war reconstruction efforts. This origin also points to the peculiar entrepreneurial-political local alliance behind the creation of the airport, with local governmental actors supporting local private initiatives as the expression of a much-needed modern technocratic élite (Brenna 2003).

This situation explains the modes of valuation initially mobilized to justify the need for the expansion of the airport. In fact, they are mainly based on the need to achieve the objective to

¹⁶ Regions in Italy exist as politico-administrative entities since 1970, when the first regional elections were held.

¹⁷ Created in 1955, in Rome, "Italia Nostra" is an environmentalist organization concerned primarily with the preservation of the cultural Italian heritage (including landscape). It is the expression of the concern of the intellectual and bourgeois élite for the disastrous impacts of the industrial "boom" on the Italian territory.

respond to the expected increase in air traffic and to consolidate S.e.a. as a major business player in the rising civil aviation field. Public justifications for the project were made in terms of its market-industrial value (supporting export activities) and also in terms of renown: such a modern infrastructure would reintegrate Milan into the international network of the trend-setting business cities.

The “Big Malpensa” plan, approved in 1972, contemplated the creation of a third runway in addition to the already existing two that were built by S.e.a. in the 1960s. This expansion directly threatened the historic hamlets of Tornavento and Case Nuove. The project was presented to the authorities without any preliminary study concerning the environmental, health or socio-economic impacts. The only objectively supported reason to expand the airport was the forecasts that 1980 would see nearly 14 million passengers pass through the Milan airports.

In 1972, once informed by S.e.a. of the “Big Malpensa” plan’s approval, the municipalities more directly impacted by the expansion (Somma Lombardo, Ferno and Lonate Pozzolo) together with the administrative province of Varese asked the Council of State to revoke the concession. Their critical position was backed up by a large coalition of mobilized civil society actors, including trade unions, political parties, local inhabitants, social movements and environmental NGOs. This composite coalition organized public demonstrations and assemblies, publicizing the critique through the production of publications and other media contents, succeeding in creating a diffuse and “popular” mobilization. Its popular character is evidenced by the active role that local parishes played in supporting the opposition.

This was the beginning of what would come to be a decades-long conflict between S.e.a. and the local communities, and which continues into the present day. For the purposes of my argument, I will now turn to a discussion of this long story of conflicts, distinguishing three phases, each of them marked by specific transformations touching the environmental critique and the modes of governing the territory.

2.1. From the mobilization against the “Big Malpensa” to the compromise of the “reasonable” expansion (1972-1987)

The variety of actors mobilized against the “Big Malpensa” plan can account for the variety of justifications and modes of valuation of the environment supporting their critique. In spite of this diversity, the opposition to the expansion was solidly grounded on a shared civic argument: the denunciation of the lack of participation in the decision-making process. As

with other similar cases of protest in contemporary Europe and North America, civic critique in the Malpensa case was based on the “right to participate” (Feldman 1977).

Two different understandings of the environment were mobilized in this frame. On the one hand, the environment was viewed as the natural environment of the Ticino River, “the blue river” as the people of the valley referred to it – that is, a recognized natural and cultural heritage site to be preserved. On the other hand, the environment was conceived as the place where local communities had been organizing their activities in such a way as to produce a certain quality of life: the local textile factories were still creating job opportunities and strong social ties still provided a relatively animated community life. It was necessary to “fight for our health, our work and our sleep” against the “Attila in the heath”, the big airport destroying the peaceful life of local communities¹⁸. This was a question of environment, too: here, it was the environment of everyday life and work to which basic rights were attached, such as the right to health, as social movements emphasized during this period in their struggles for the right to healthy working conditions.

As workers had to fight against pollutants poisoning their work environments, so too did the citizens of the region fight against the pollutants that airplanes were dispersing on the ground and soil as well as against the noise pollution that came along with air traffic¹⁹. The citizens’ defense of a certain quality of the everyday living environment, considered as a basic requirement for health, was partially built on the importance attributed to modes of emplaced valuation of the environment, as a way to denounce the limits of the “objective rationality” in decisions over life and labour. More generally, objective rationality was denounced by social movements of the time as a capitalistic rationality of profit and power maximisation. The issue at stake went beyond simply denouncing the various forms of pollution that the airport created: it was, rather, a broader call for rehabilitating the person and her experience as a fundamental actor in defining the relevant knowledge for public decision-making.

Emplaced modes of valuation were thus integrated in the civic struggle for the defense of the right to healthy everyday living and working conditions, but they were also communicated in terms of the risk of dispersion and uprooting of the local “small communities”. These

¹⁸ “Fight for our health, our work and our sleep” is the slogan of the leaflet calling for the big demonstration organized the 9th of July 1972. “Attila in the heath” is the title of a press article published on the newspaper “Il Giorno”, January 1972.

¹⁹ Since the 1960s, physicians (mainly interested in prevention), scientific researchers, and auto-organized groups of industrial workers started to create programs for the participatory monitoring of the health impacts of industrial pollutions, inside and outside factories, especially in the North of Italy. These experiences merged into a movement, called “Medicina Democratica”. On the role played by industrial workers in Italian environmental struggles see Barca (2012).

arguments were easily contested by S.e.a. as the expression of an irrational attachment to tradition and a refusal of progress. Underlying the conflict of justifications was a deeper conflict over opposing “socio-technical imaginaries” (Jasanoff and Kim 2013) concerning progress and the future of Lombardy.

Faced with the energy crisis of 1974 and the delay of the central government in making funds available for the airport expansion, S.e.a. decided to revise the “Big Malpensa” project, dropping the idea to build a third runway. It is at this point that the newly elected regional government decided to intervene: this young institution became engaged in attempts to govern the consequences of the somewhat chaotic postwar territorial development plans, including the airport plan of expansion.

In 1979, the Region created the “Committee for the Malpensa Problems”, in which Regional council members, the president of the Authority for the Ticino Park, and the mayors of the municipalities that were to be affected by the expansion had to work together in order to “verify and evaluate the consequences of the alternative plans of expansion”.

Nevertheless, this tool of decision-making support, which was successful in ensuring the participation of institutional actors, was not transformed into a permanent structure inside the Region, remaining an ad-hoc and temporary solution to the impasses of the negotiations between S.e.a. and the local municipalities. As a result, nobody was appointed to lead the task of verifying the actual production of “alternative plans” that municipalities eventually deemed unnecessary for reaching an agreement with S.e.a.. This agreement was not based on the formalized comparison of alternative options (including the no-airport option that was never considered); rather, it was the result of the convergence toward a consensual yet still relatively vague idea of the reasonable and controlled expansion of Malpensa.

The new plan of expansion elaborated by S.e.a., called “Malpensa 2000”, was approved by the Lombardy region in 1986 and a certain number of constraints to the expansion were explicitly formulated: for example, the volume of air traffic expansion should be limited to 12 million passengers per year. The conditions imposed by the Region included the systematic and complete monitoring of environmental impacts of the expansion and the definition of the “Malpensa Area Plan” that would ensure a coherent planning of the various infrastructures needed to connect the airport with the city of Milan.

Meanwhile, grassroots movements were still contesting the decision, while municipalities, trade unions and political parties supported the economically beneficial idea of the reasonable and controlled expansion within the territory.

The “public compromise” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) between the economic justification for expansion and the need to limit its socio-ecological impacts was, however, fragile, since no formalized impact assessments were actually implemented following the project’s approval. Moreover, the economic benefits to be expected from the airport activities progressively gained importance as a reason to support the expansion, at the expense of marginalizing the status of requests to limit the socio-environmental impacts. The cause of this unbalance is that, beginning the 1980s, the Malpensa area was facing a serious economic crisis due to progressive deindustrialization. The territory between Malpensa and Milan (the so called “Alto Milanese”) was eventually included in the list of beneficiaries of the Objective 2 European structural funds, to support socio-economic reconversions. As remarked by Tosi and Vitale (2011: 7) the airport expansion was one of many uncoordinated initiatives that local institutional actors embraced to overcome the crisis, without succeeding in defining a new coherent economic identity for the area.

Europe was meant to become an important actor in the Malpensa story, especially by way of the Directives and treatises through which the European environmental policy has been progressively shaped. In particular, in 1985 the European Directive 85/337/EEC introduced the legal obligation of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure for all projects (included airports) deemed to have significant impacts on the environment. Due to the specific conditions of the transposition of this directive into the Italian system, the project “Malpensa 2000” was not submitted to a formal EIA procedure, creating a situation of contestable legality²⁰. But it was the inclusion of “Malpensa 2000” in the list of “priority projects” of the Trans-European Networks- Transport (TEN-T) that would trigger a new conflict and further social mobilizations²¹.

2.2. The opposition to “Malpensa 2000” and the rising of ecological expertise (1993-2008)

The end of the 1980’s marked a period of profound political and economic change in Italy and throughout the world. In 1992, the management of S.e.a., together with political representatives of the Varese Province, were involved in the judicial investigation known as

²⁰ However, S.e.a. realized an environmental impact study on a voluntary basis, including a “Green plan” detailing a series of environmental compensations. At the time, no serious exam in terms of ecosystems and flora and fauna compositions was done. Compensations were mainly monetary transfers to the Authority of the Ticino Park for activities of reforestation.

²¹ The Trans-European Networks (Transport, Energy, Telecommunication) are the strategic infrastructures whose realization is considered as crucial to improve market circulation and socio-economic cohesion in the European Union.

“Mani Pulite” (Clean Hands) that eventually contributed to the collapse of the political system that had governed post-war Italy (the so-called “First Republic”) and to the worsening of what was already a situation of economic crisis²². The “Malpensa Area Plan” turned out to be a network of bribery and corruption.

The construction works of “Malpensa 2000” stopped and did not recommence until 1994. In the interim, Italy had signed the Maastricht Treaty and entered the “Second Republic”, which set new majoritarian electoral rules at the national and local levels of government. The Milanese media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the brand new political party “Forza Italia”, was now the Italian Prime Minister, supported by a coalition of right-wing parties. Among them was the young separatist political party “Lega Nord”, whose strongholds included the province of Varese. One of the main electoral arguments of the Lega Nord party, the fifth most voted party in the 1994 national elections, was the denunciation of the progressive detachment of politics from its territorial bases accounting for a neglected “Northern Question”²³. The political parties having run Italy since 1945 had literally vanished.

An analysis of the huge political and economic transformations that occurred in Italy during this period is beyond the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that some aspects of these transformations are relevant for the analysis of the environmental critique presented here.

In order to mark a clear discontinuity from the past, and very much in line with the neoliberal agenda (Harvey 2005), all major Italian political parties at this time proffered international competitiveness and a generalized support for private initiatives – through privatization and deregulation – over state control as new leading justifications for governmental action whose sole objective became economic growth. One of the consequences of this new way of governing, understood as being “oriented to the objective” (Thévenot 2009), was to exclude considerations of the relations between economic growth and justice from open political debate. In this sense, issues of social and environmental justice are then subordinated to a specific form of objectivity centered on economic growth, which implicitly assumes that all

²² In February 1992, the discovery of a minor case of bribery in Milan triggered a broad judiciary investigation, which rapidly led to unveil a widespread system of corruption involving all major actors of the Italian economic and political system. The scandal exacerbated a situation of economic instability that eventually brought to recession.

²³ The opposition between the “productive” and “virtuous” North and Rome, “big thief” (*Roma ladrona*), wasting taxpayers money to assist the “lazy” unproductive South turned out to be an element of strong identification for the Northern electorate. For an analysis of the Lega Nord party see Biorcio (2010).

modes of valuation can be, and should be, expressed in monetary terms. This introduces a huge transformation of the conditions under which a mode of valuation is deemed legitimate, and it has major consequences for the plurality of modes of valuing the environment.

In Italy, as in many other countries, a relatively easy way to ensure (short-term) economic growth has been land and real estate speculation, together with the investments in mega-projects and mega-events (Berdini 2010; Bonora 2012). The expansion of the Malpensa airport exemplifies such a strategy.

During the first Berlusconi government (1994-1995), Italy asked to include “Malpensa 2000” into the list of the priority projects of the European TEN-T. “Malpensa 2000” was presented by the Italian government as a potential “European gateway”, an international “hub”²⁴ for Southern Europe. However, Malpensa was far from having the conditions to operate as a hub: as previously discussed, the approved “Malpensa 2000” plan limited the airport’s expansion to the “reasonable” level of up to 12 million passengers per year, far below the threshold of passengers that would qualify it as an efficient hub.

The government’s demand to include Malpensa in the TEN-T was related mainly to the need to finance the already approved construction works, quite a controversial move considering that Italy already had a major hub in the airport of Roma-Fiumicino. Among the supporters of Malpensa was now the very Lombardy Region that was initially supposed to guarantee a reasonable and controlled expansion. For the recently elected Lombardy governor, Roberto Formigoni – one of the leaders of the Forza Italia party – and supported by a right-wing political coalition including the Lega Nord party, “Malpensa 2000” was for Lombardy, and for Italy, a strategic goal not to be missed²⁵.

This judgment was expressed relying exclusively on a prospective study on the potential economic returns of the investments in infrastructure proposed by the Malpensa 2000 plan. But the expansion project was not subjected to any serious comparative scrutiny, neither in terms of the socio-environmental impacts nor the economic potential of alternative project proposals.

With regard to the present argument, this situation is notable in terms of both the draconian reduction of modes of valuation operated by the Region in justifying its official position on

²⁴ A “hub” is, for an airline, the airport that functions as operational basis and where all flights are routed through to get people transferred to their final destinations according to a hub and spoke model, which is alternative to the point-to-point model.

²⁵ For an analysis of the transformation of the Lombardy government in the Second Republic and the role of Roberto Formigoni who has been governor without interruption from 1995 to 2013 see Giorgi and Polizzi (2015).

the Malpensa case and the generalised lack of formalised instruments of evaluation supporting its justification. Environmental values were considered by default compensable, without any serious evaluation of the feasibility and the effectiveness of compensations²⁶.

A similar reduction was to be mobilized by the government of the new Prime Minister Romano Prodi, leader of the coalition of left-wing parties that succeeded Berlusconi in the elections of May 1996, who confirmed the judgment on “Malpensa 2000” as a strategic infrastructure.

The expansion of the Malpensa airport into a hub gained governmental support as the expression of a higher interest, justifying the sacrifice of other valuable goods such as environmental goods. The higher interest at stake was to “modernize Italy”, while helping its economic growth, especially in the North, as requested by the Lega Nord party in its fight against the central powers based in Rome.

This notion of the higher interest, however, rested mainly on a largely shared vision of the political elite according to which Italian infrastructural underdevelopment was the reason driving economic difficulties in the country. The urgency to modernize through investing in infrastructure thus became an unquestionable priority of left-wing and right-wing governments alike, both of which were engaged in finding an effective way to boost a languishing economic growth. In the Malpensa case, as in other cases of contested infrastructural projects in Italy, this led to a simplification of the procedures for approval and relegated local populations to the background of decision-making processes, something that only exacerbated the conflict over expansion even further²⁷.

During the negotiations for the inclusion of “Malpensa 2000” into the TEN-T, a “Committee of coordination for the revision and control of the ‘Malpensa 2000’ project” was created at the initiative of national environmental NGOs, together with the Green Party. The Committee sent an ultimately unsuccessful petition to the European Parliament to ask for a formal EIA on

²⁶ It is important to consider that the Region is not a homogenous actor. My analysis is focused on the official position expressed by the Regional government that sometimes can clash with advices provided by technical departments internal to the Regional administration.

²⁷ For a discussion of the “ideology” of big infrastructures in Italy, see the articles published in the journal “Il Mulino” in the special section “Ideologia e prassi delle grandi opere”, vol. 1, 2006 especially the article by Berta and Manghi. The Law 443/2001, known as “Law objective”, for the realization of strategic infrastructural projects for the period 2002-2013, was approved during the second Berlusconi’s government and epitomizes the approach to big infrastructures in terms of projects subtracted by law to public participation in the decision-making process.

the Malpensa project. However, in the meantime there were various special areas of conservation created in the Ticino Park under the “Habitats” Directive (92/43/EEC)²⁸. The final agreement on the inclusion of “Malpensa 2000” in the TEN-T was reached in June 1996 and the inauguration of the new airport was fixed for the end of 1998, while the local opposition was growing stronger. Various actors, institutional and otherwise, were involved: the Authority for the Ticino Park, together with the municipalities of the Piedmont side of the river (excluded by the negotiations up to this point), national environmental NGOs, and grassroots movements (federated as UNICOMAL in Lombardy and COVEST in Piedmont). This opposition was able to eventually find a governmental interlocutor in the form of Green party leader Edo Ronchi, who had been appointed the new Minister of the Environment in Prodi’s first government. After consultations with the mobilized groups, Ronchi decided in June 1998 to submit the “Malpensa 2000” project to a formal EIA, considered a radical change in the face of the original plan of expansion.

This decision caused turmoil inside the government, but finally gave hope to the local opposition. A series of public assemblies were organized in order to inform inhabitants on the EIA procedures. Experts in the EIA procedure were invited to hold a series of public meetings meant to share relevant knowledge with local inhabitants so that they could understand the procedure and thus be able to meaningfully participate in the process.

The EIA procedure became the central focus of the mobilization. This implied that people who mobilized against the airport progressively became aware of the value of the environment expressed according to an ecological definition of its worth, which in comparison to previous mobilizations during the 1970s, was now more precisely framed in terms of biodiversity.

The possibility European norms now provided to formally prove the ecological value of the Malpensa area, together with the expertise showing the link between airport activities, pollution and health impacts, were seized by mobilized actors as a crucial resource to support their opposition.

The opposition to the expansion was now justified both in terms of a right to health and the ecological value of the environment. In both cases, scientific and technical knowledge were crucial, while the emphasis on the everyday personal experiences of the environment as a

²⁸ The “Habitats Directive” (Directive 92/43/EEC), with the “Birds Directive” (Directive 79/409/EEC modified by Directive 2009/147/EC), led to the creation of the European Network of protected sites “Natura 2000”.

source of knowledge and value was partially put aside. In this case, the personal experience of the environment was valuable only if it could be related to a provable health problem or environmental damage. The environment existed as source of risks and as an ecological good. The “small communities” of the 1970s have all but disappeared together with their lifestyles and their romantic evocation of the “blue river”, replaced now by informed citizens mobilized to prove health and environmental damages. The grassroots groups progressively built internal competencies for dealing with environmental and legal issues, producing data, inviting experts to contribute, organizing conferences and debates. They became animated by the civic motivation to enrich the public discussion and fight against what was perceived as the capture of public institutions by private interests. In other words, they engaged in an “inquiry” so as to objectify the “troubles” caused by the airport activities (Dewey 1927). The opposition also organized a series of demonstrations at the airport as well as sit-ins that blocked its access. The sensitizing devices were meant to provoke a moral outrage for what were felt to be a series of repeated institutional betrayals. On 25 October 1998, the day of the official opening of Malpensa, 3,000 people showed up to demonstrate against it. In a second demonstration organized on 14 March 1999, the participants numbered nearly 10,000. Later that summer, in a show of the diffuse sense of exasperation that had spread throughout the local citizenry, groups of citizens occupied the Ticino bridges, defining themselves as “strongholds” (*presidi*) against the airport expansion.

In fact, to give an idea of the impact of the airport expansion, in 1998 Malpensa was still registering traffic of 5.5 million passengers per year (more than 73 thousand flight movements) while only a year later, in 1999, the passenger volume reached the threshold of 17 million (more than 220 thousand flight movements). The impacts that the inhabitants denounced were numerous: traffic congestion, pollution and, most notably, noise.

In November 1999 the Minister Edo Ronchi closed the EIA procedure with a negative evaluation, requesting a suspension of any further expansion of air traffic at the Malpensa airport. In defiance of Ronchi’s evaluation and request, the Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema, reaffirming the strategic role of this infrastructure, issued a special decree (DPCM 13 December 1999) that in fact did allow for further expansion but also provided the rapid implementation of compensation and mitigation measures. These included the displacement of the hamlet of Case Nuove (540 families), the regular monitoring of the quality of water and air, the evaluation of the damages to the surrounding forests and the gathering of epidemiological data. However, since then no regular monitoring has been implemented.

In May 2000, eight thousand people demonstrated against the “illegality and abuse” of the airport, but in November, when a new demonstration was organized, citizens’ participation had started to decrease significantly.

UNICOMAL and COVEST continued their activities of gathering data and convening expertise on the airport damages in an attempt to influence the decision-making process, but without success. In doing this, however, they progressively lost contact with the local population. They continued to rely on “sensitizing devices” based on the mobilization of scientific knowledge to unveil hidden damages, or else on the denunciation of the illegality of the airport expansion. Yet they turned out to be less and less effective in contrasting the widespread resignation and distrust against the possibility to influence public decision-making through public participation.

So too did the authority for the Ticino Park denounce the lack of institutional monitoring of the environmental impacts of the airport expansion, which was all the more problematic if we consider that, as part of the Man and Biosphere program, UNESCO, in 2002, included the Park of the Ticino Valley in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. Granting the park this status of reserve did not, however, imply any special or binding obligations for Italian institutions in their treatment of the area.

As airport traffic at Malpensa continued to increase, reaching 23.7 million passengers in 2007, S.e.a. began developing a new “Master Plan” to expand the airport with a third runway. As with the previous “Big Malpensa” plan in the early 1970s, this new plan once again proposed that the third runway be constructed in the direction of the hamlet of Tornavento. This would trigger a third phase of mobilizations against the Malpensa airport.

2.3. The place-based resistance against the third runway (2008-2014)

In 2008 S.e.a. announced plans for a new 330 hectare expansion of the airport, including the construction of a third runway, a new terminal, and the expansion of the “Cargo City”, the area equipped for storing goods and hosting commercial facilities²⁹. The third runway was justified as a solution to reduce the noise impact through a better distribution of take-off and landing routes, and, at the same time, as a way to cope with the hoped for increase in passenger volume due to the mega-event of Expo 2015 in Milan.

²⁹ Concerning the project of Cargo City, it is important to stress that S.e.a. has a business expansion strategy based not only on airport business, but also on real estate investments (Beria and Scholz 2010, 72).

In 2010 the S.e.a. master plan was approved by ENAC³⁰ and submitted for an environmental impact assessment. The EIA study presented by S.e.a. now included specific sections devoted to landscape and biodiversity analysis. Nevertheless, these sections had to be complemented with additional documentations, given the lack of details concerning environmental compensations, which were largely left unspecified in the study. Moreover, areas that were designed for compensating the expansion of the 1990s were now presented again as possible areas in which to implement new compensations.

A large variety of actors – including the Authority for the Ticino Park, environmental NGOs, local groups, individual citizens, municipalities, and the Piedmont and Lombardy Regions – sent, in total, 2,600 negative remarks on the S.e.a. document to the Ministry of the Environment during the course of the EIA procedure³¹.

It was a huge success in terms of public participation and amassing additional evidence of the process of “technical alphabetization” of local movements that occurred during these years of struggle³².

Crucial to this success has been the action of a new grassroots movement: the “Viva via Gaggio” group (Hurrah for Gaggio Road, VVG). This group introduced new sensitizing devices specifically designed to stress the importance of emplaced modes of valuing the environment.

Firstly, the group is named for a small country road, called the Gaggio road, which links the town of Lonate Pozzolo to the hamlet of Tornavento, where the new expansion of the airport was proposed. This road passes through a green area, known locally as the Gaggio heath. Heaths are specific ecosystems that are included in the list of valuable ecosystems according to the Habitat Directive, and they are especially rare in Mediterranean climates. Nevertheless, the Gaggio heath is not officially a protected area³³.

The Gaggio road has been known locally as a place for walking, jogging, biking, enjoying nature and relaxing. This was true until the creation of the VVG group, which has progressively transformed the Gaggio road not simply into a symbol of struggle but into a

³⁰ ENAC is the Italian regulation agency for air transport, which is in charge of the evaluation of Italian airports’ master plans.

³¹ In 2014 S.e.a. decided to withdraw the plan of expansion, mainly for budgetary reasons.

³² This process of technical alphabetization has been observed in other cases of conflicts against big infrastructures: see Caruso (2010) and Pellizzoni (2011).

³³ In 2011 the Authority for the Ticino Park started the procedure to include the Gaggio heath in the Natura 2000 network. As explained by the Authority, this decision is directly related to the activity of valorization of the Gaggio road undertaken by the VVG group.

concrete place of resistance against the expansion. In the 40-year history of attempts to expand the Malpensa airport, this is the first time that the environment under threat is clearly identified with a specific place whose main value is the local attachments to it.

The VVG group originated through the initiatives of Roberto V., an employee at the municipality of Lonate Pozzolo. Roberto is in his thirties and has no prior history of being engaged with political parties or other activist causes. When S.e.a. made their new plan to expand the airport public, he was surprised by the lack of reactions in Lonate, especially considering that one of the consequences of the expansion would have been the displacement of a population of its inhabitants.

To wake up people from their “civic coma”, he started to record a series of videos that he called “Small talk in the Gaggio road,” which he posted on the web platform YouTube. In each episode, Roberto interviewed a different expert (in economics, ecology, history, law, philosophy, etc.) on the pros and cons of the airport expansion, while walking together in the Gaggio Road. The success of the videos brought to the creation of a web-blog, in February 2010, through which the group VVG started to take shape, with a series of meetings held initially at Roberto’s house.

Those who are active in VVG are mainly young residents of the area who, like Roberto, have had little prior experience with political engagement in political parties or social movements; but they are members of environmental NGOs, often with specific expertise in environmental related issues (environmental lawyer, ecologist, environmental philosopher), some of them having direct memories of their participation, as children, in the demonstrations against the airport during the 1970s and 1980s.

Their first action as a group was, in a quite traditional fashion, a petition against the third runway; it was soon followed by a report sent to the UNESCO to denounce the environmental damages caused by the airport activities on the Ticino area.

The Internet and especially social networks are key instruments of their communication strategy, included the communication with political actors (in particular through Twitter)³⁴.

Their blog is organized in sections in which scientific documents and legal documents to inform people on the issues of environmental damages are complemented with pictures of the abandoned hamlet of Case Nuove, videos of the Gaggio Road, open discussions. In particular,

³⁴ I cannot develop on this point but I wanted to highlight the role played by web activities in the life of this group. The observation of their use of the blog and of social networks shows how the “virtual space” can become a space of communication where emplaced modes of valuation can be shared through sharing a variety of contents allowing for the emplaced experience to be communicated. For a pragmatic analysis of the Web 2.0 and its political consequences see Auray (2009).

one section, called “brushwood”, is concerned with the exploration of the biodiversity richness of the Gaggio heath. Biodiversity is explored and explained through pictures taken in the heath, with captions that are both scientifically accurate, still always with a personal tone, sharing the feelings experienced while being in the heath. This initiative later evolved into a scientific study of the biodiversity value of the Gaggio heath, launched in collaboration with a University research centre.

The VVG group is not active exclusively on the Web. To “wake up” people from the “civic coma” the group organizes strolls and promenades in the Gaggio road, starting with the event called “The Spring of Gaggio road” the 21st of March 2010. It is announced as a “stroll for information and of attachment to the Gaggio Road”.

In fact, the group presents the Gaggio road as if it were a person: the road has feelings, an identity, a past; the road is “one of the family”, “a relative that we need to protect”. The reference to indigenous cultures is mobilised to prove the universality of this experience of attachment.

According to the VVG group, the previous struggles against the airport tended to overshadow the reality of the environment as a place of everyday life, and to turn it into a passive victim, the lifeless scene where damages occur. This is considered as a victory for the planners of the airport expansion project. For this reason, the group does not organize any demonstrations at the airport site; instead, it organizes its activities just outside the airport fence in order to show evidence of a lived and loved environment against all odds.

People are invited to “come and meet the Gaggio road” and to “stay close as much as possible to our loved one (*il nostro caro*) who is threatened”, where the “loved one” is the road and its environment. As it is the case with a close friend or a “loved one”, the “true” value of the Gaggio road is considered as deriving from the establishment of an intimate bond or connection with the road as a specific place. Emplaced modes of valuation are considered as fundamental to judge the “true” value of the Gaggio heath; this experience of value is deeply personal but, at the same time, common to all those people who feel a special connection to it. Still, this value experience introduces, potentially, a condition of radical incommensurability, since it does not allow for the establishment of a detached form of equivalence (Centemeri 2015).

For the VVG activists, this special connection is something that any individual can cultivate, provided that she takes care of the road, through spending time there, enjoying its company, respecting it. This attachment to a place has little to do with the links established between place and identity as proffered by the Lega Nord party. This party, promoting itself as “close

to the territory” but supporting the Malpensa expansion, is denounced by the VVG group for being invested in a vision of territory as a resource to be exploited and of community as exclusively based on a supposedly shared cultural identity with no grounding in common practices of caring for the environment.

The “Gaggio community” is, on the contrary, conceived as in constant evolution. The VVG group organizes a variety of activities to bring new people to “meet” the Gaggio road: for example, at a three day summer camp (“Campogaggio”) held on the road, or in a series of happenings (poetry reading, classical music concerts). The main purpose is not to denounce the consequences of the third runway – even if, in every event, there is a moment during which organizers inform attendees about the proposed airport expansion and the reasons to mobilize against it.

These activities are conceived primarily as moments of conviviality, propitious to a certain personal and collective experience of the place. People are invited to be not simply users or visitors of the Gaggio road; rather, they are encouraged to create a personal and affective bond to this place. Prior to the demand of mobilizing against the airport, people are offered the opportunity to develop a specific “place awareness” (Magnaghi, 2010), an *emplaced experience* of the value of the place.

These activities run in parallel with other initiatives, commonly undertaken by grassroots movements when contesting big infrastructures and meant to publicly display the value of an environment. The category of “local heritage” (a form of public domestic worth) is frequently mobilized for this purpose, together with value understood in terms of biodiversity. The successful organization of a day of events in the Gaggio road on 27 May 2012, together with the FAI³⁵ and in the presence of its honorary president, is the consecration of the Gaggio road as part of the Lombardy heritage.

However, the vision supported by the VVG group is not limited to protecting the Gaggio road as heritage. The importance attributed to emplaced modes of valuation inspires a critique against the model of development and of society that the airport represents: a society that ignores its ecological bases and that brings people to detach themselves from their environments. What the VVG group conceives as the “real” challenge is to bring people to believe in the possibility of an alternative socio-economic model of development for the territory, based on activities that are not just respectful of the environment but that are

³⁵ The FAI (the equivalent of the English National Trust) is a Milan-based, not-for-profit trust created in 1975 with the purpose to support the preservation of the Italian cultural and natural heritage.

connected to the specific history and ecology of the place. Through recovering this connection, VVG members expect that the territory thus conceptualized will progressively emerge as a reality, and one that is incompatible with and stands against the reality of the airport's expansion. Beyond mere justifications, the relevance attributed to emplaced modes of valuing the environment brings to the fore resistance and conflicting ontologies.

3. On the transformations of environmental critique

The Malpensa case has many similarities with other cases of contested big infrastructure projects in Europe, even if the struggle against the Milanese airport expansion has remained somewhat isolated and, especially in the last phase, preeminently local.

Since 2010, a European movement against “unnecessary imposed mega projects” has begun to unfold. The struggles against the airport of Notre Dame des Landes in France (Kempf 2014), against a mining project in Rosia Montana in Romania (Velicu and Kaika 2015), and the high speed rail project Turin-Lyon in Italy (Caruso 2010, Della Porta and Piazza 2008), have become iconic cases of a new emerging *radical environmental critique*.

While the Malpensa case is not one of these paradigmatic examples of environmental struggle, in this paper I have sought to show a significant discontinuity between past and current forms of mobilization, which can be seen in some of the propositions of the VVG group discussed above. This demonstrates that, beyond the more politicized cases, a more diffuse and generalized transformation of environmental critique is taking place.

If we define environmental critique in terms of a form of contestation of the socio-economic order that aims at producing the change of the place of Nature in the political community, this change has been historically envisaged in two main directions. First of all, it has been conceived as an incremental change, through the institution of the environmental sphere as complementary to the economic and political spheres. As I showed in the Malpensa case, the progressive institutionalisation of a “green order of worth”, with a preeminent role played in this process by European institutions, has contributed to the emergence of new instruments and new vocabularies to argue for the ecological value of the environment. These institutional evolutions have provided environmental activists with new tools to support the cause of the environment, while requiring a considerable learning process and a strong alliance with expertise.

The idea of an environmental sphere that crosses and overlaps with an economic and a political sphere inspires the “three pillars” model of sustainable development, epitomized in

the Malpensa case by the project of “reasonable” expansion of the airport. However, the public compromise that results from the combination of conflicting legitimate orders of worth has been shown to be particularly fragile, especially when confronted by the transformations of the mode of governing during the 1990s towards the neoliberal model.

Under conditions of contraction of public expenditure and increased global competition, a form of lexicographic ordering of legitimate orders of worth based around the goal of the predominance of economic growth progressively takes shape. It is in this process that losses in environmental values come to be seen as systematically compensable, in monetary or ecological terms, and thus assume the possibility of a generalised commensurability.

In the case of Malpensa, the repeated experience of public authorities’ indifference to the negative environmental impacts of the airport expansion activities progressively devolved into a diffuse sense of fatalism among the local population. The VVG group sees itself as the antidote to this malaise in its attempts to promote a different understanding of environmental critique.

In fact, since the 1970s, a different kind of environmental critique is detectable that radically challenges the separation between political, economic and ecological spheres, through reclaiming the constitutive interdependency of these dimensions in social life. In the earliest phase of the Malpensa case during the 1970s, this critique is formulated in terms of denouncing the various forms of exploitation upon which the capitalist system rests. Critique is also waged against the absolute primacy attributed to a narrow understanding of scientific knowledge as the only form of relevant knowledge for public decision-making. This radical critique, expressed in the mobilisation of social movements supporting the struggles of industrial workers, fostered alliances among local communities who had mobilized against the airport expansion plans, and who were attached to their local mode of production and socio-economic organisation, thus accounting for the significant popular participation in the first phase of the conflict.

Today, in Malpensa as elsewhere, this radical environmental critique is no longer expressed exclusively in terms of class struggle. Rather, it is increasingly expressed in terms of a “politics of place perspective” (Harcourt and Escobar 2005; Harcourt 2014), according to which “experiences in place” – and, I would add, especially emplaced experiences of the value of the environment – are of fundamental importance in thinking and practicing a truly sustainable ecological organisation of social life.

In my discussion of the VVG groups' actions, I have stressed the importance the group's attributes to the "emplaced experience" of the environment as the source of modes of valuing that are considered of fundamental importance to understand its "true" value.

The importance attributed to the emplaced experience as source of the value of the environment is common to many of the emblematic struggles against big infrastructures I mentioned above. The physical occupation of the spaces under threat, the importance of conviviality, of sharing everyday activities (from cooking to growing vegetables) are ways to prove that these spaces are, in fact, lived and loved places.

To stress the importance of the emplaced experience of the environment is not just a strategy these groups mobilize in order to reanimate public participation through appealing to emotional arguments. Rather, emplaced modes of valuing are shared in communities of practice, and they are conceived as a powerful, inexhaustible source of radical critique against the restricted and oppressive definitions of what should count as legitimately valuable according to the neo-liberal mode of governing. The generalized commensurability of values sought after through the spreading of market valuation to all life realms stands in stark contrast to emplaced value experiences, which are a primary resource for arguing for radical incommensurability.

As we have seen in the Malpensa case, beginning in the 1990s, what characterizes the newly emerging modes of governing is the predominance attributed to the convergence of economic utility together with market competition as the more legitimate modes of valuation in all aspects of social life.

The progressive impoverishment of the public understanding of the common good and the exhausting, never-ending debate over data and modes of quantification to which politics is progressively reduced have led to a rediscovery of everyday life practices and the places in which they occur as a fundamental political *locus* for exploring and "prefiguring" alternative socio-ecological organisations³⁶.

From a question of value pluralism, radical ecological critique thus exhibits a progressive shift towards questions of ontological "multiplicity", to signal the coexistence of modes of valuation of the environment that rest on not quite fully equivalent languages and materialities (Blok 2013). Besides protest, the issue at stake here is to materialize an alternative and to materially produce a "crack" in the socio-ecological order (Bresnihan and Byrne 2014).

³⁶ On the concept of "prefiguration" and "prefigurative politics" see Yates (2015).

However, as I pointed out in the case of the VVG group, it is important to distinguish the community of practice as envisioned by these activists – and based on taking care of a specific environment – from the community in which a stated identity, disconnected from practices, gives title to claims for a special connection to a given place, as in the case of the Lega Nord activists. The form of commonality at stake in this instance is neither that of a “community” identified in terms of territorial, social or ethnic characteristics, nor that of an abstract “public”. An analysis based on the modes of valuation that are mobilised makes this difference clear.

As many examples have shown (Harcourt 2014), to claim legitimacy for emplaced modes of valuation is not necessarily related to reactionary propositions, even if these modes of valuation can be considered as non-specifically modern. In the European context, for example, anti-modern forces have historically politicized place attachment through a vocabulary of natural order legitimizing inequalities (Charbonnier 2015). Emplaced modes of valuation, however, are not inherently reactionary: whether they support emancipatory projects or, on the contrary, reactionary visions, it depends on how they are concretely combined with public and local modes of valuation, in a “social imaginary” of the desirable society people want to live in³⁷.

An analysis of ecological critique and its transformations from the perspective of modes of valuation of the environment is, in this respect, particularly fruitful for understanding different forms of place-based politics and of political imaginaries, emerging in different cultural and political contexts, as response to the neoliberal mode of governing oriented to the objective of economic growth.

To conclude, I would like to stress the contribution that pragmatic approaches can provide to the understanding of critique and of its transformations over time and space. In particular, I argue that pragmatic tools can be usefully mobilized to support an analysis of the transformations of modernity and critique that pays attention to the socio-historical context in which human life takes place.

As pointed out by Wagner (2001:24), such an approach can support an understanding of capitalism and its dynamics “neither naturalized nor conflated with modernity”. In fact, how to think the relationship between modernity and capitalism is one of the main challenges that

³⁷ According to Taylor (2004: 92) “social imaginary” can be defined as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”.

critique, and especially environmental critique, must now face. In this respect, it is important to rely on analytical tools – such as regimes of engagement, orders of worth, modes of valuation, and evaluative repertoires – that, in their attentiveness to the variety of human capacities to judge, evaluate and coordinate and to their contextual conditions of emergence and possibility, can help in unravelling the intricate nexus existing between these two hegemonic social configurations.

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