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Politicising the Atmospheres of Urban Environmental Changes

Lucilla BARCHETTA¹

Abstract. Building on field research conducted during my Ph.D., which focused on urban natures and - in particular - post-industrial, riverside Turin (Italy), the presentation discusses urban political ecology and atmosphere literature, considered as two different, yet potentially complementary, fields of research. I will examine how an atmospheric-based critique of processes of decay can determine an interpretation of the dynamics of environmental degradation and - more broadly speaking - of urban environmental changes. I will conclude by offering some reflections on the extent to which the political ecology of atmospheres has helped me to formulate a different language, through which to capture the tenacious effects of processes of decay and territorial stigma.

Keywords. Atmospheres, Environmental Change, Temporality, UPE, Urban Natures

Background

Turin, for centuries the kingdom of the Royal House of Savoy, is a city in the north-west of Italy. During the twentieth century, the city was known as the archetypal Italian 'one-company town', and viewed as the representation of the 'Other Italy': the symbol of Italian productivity, forced to manage massive flows of internal migration, especially from the southern part of the Italian peninsula. The aftermaths of industrialisation became visible through the intensification of social distress, environmental deterioration and conflict, which exposed the negative implications associated with the collapse of the 'car empire.' Since the 1980s and 1990s, Turin's post-industrial transformation has gradually developed. Municipal rehabilitation initiatives were put in place, which aimed to recolour the greyness and demolish the ugliness of long-term decay, for example through the enhancement of streets, housing and public spaces.

Urban transformations have partly foregrounded the focus on natural environments, viewed as a means to recover from the ghosts of the industrial past. This period was perceived as a 'golden era,' in which to fast track the urban regeneration agenda and bring the city's position out into the global arena of territorial competitiveness. The chronological contrast between before ('ugly atmosphere') and after ('happy atmosphere') emphasised the idea of a political momentum that circulated across the city. However, with the financial crisis of the late 2000s, the initial enthusiasm progressively waned. Indeed, Turin's transition to the post-industrial age has been fraught with contradictions and paradoxes. Over the last decade in particular, the city's kaleidoscope of social realities frequently clashed with the representation of a city capable of changing its own destiny by endorsing a neoliberal rationality of urban growth. Devoured by the financial crisis and debts (partially as a consequence of the

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2006 Winter Olympic Games), suffocated by air pollution and betrayed by the major political changes that have traversed the city's government after the rise of the Five Star Movement (an Italian populist party), Turin has been at the heart of my Ph.D. research. The aim of the latter has been to capture the major changes in city life and environments, in order to build a political reading of the atmospheres of decay that seem to envelop the city. In particular, Turin's interstitial spaces along its water-courses, and the beings that grow in the midst of these, were the protagonists of my Ph.D. research, which questions urban environmental changes through the prism of metropolitan temporalities. My research has followed a comparative case study design, consisting of an in-depth analysis of two riverbank spaces that are located in Turin. I have used a combination of qualitative research techniques for the collection and analysis of data, primarily walking ethnography and interviews.

Degrado as a Social and Historical-Affective Atmosphere

In the Italian context, the term *degrado* stands for neglect and exhaustion, and is an antonym of decorum. The latter has its roots in the Renaissance theory of architecture, and refers to the main ideas about an organised and beautiful urban setting. Throughout the country, the word *degrado* is usually adopted in discussions about 'urban decorum', a theme that nowadays has gained new value and importance within the context of security culture (Pitch, 2013). In fact, it is in the name of security and urban decorum that local mayors have imposed a set of policies to regulate behaviour in public space, primarily via the application of municipal ordinances, which have been conceptualised precisely as 'measures against *degrado*.' Understood as the direct opposite of a humanist ideal (i.e. decorum), *degrado* therefore extends to include the social, political and moral issues that are provoked by the landscape transformations of living environments. Indeed, *degrado* has developed as an ecological imaginary and discursive framework of the Italian contemporary landscape, which associates structured neglect and environmental dilapidation with political corruption and moral-social decay (Barchetta, 2020). The question of *degrado* has shown what appears to be a distinct ability to convey a broad variety of issues regarding urban life: the securitisation of urban spaces as a consequence of the 'preventive turn' in the government of urban security; the diverse imaginaries of Italian ruins; the difficulties of post-industrial cities to put a new future into being; the processes of decay and ruination that are affecting global environments in the face of climate change and the spread of planetary environmental risks, wastes and toxins, and social exclusion.

Building an atmospheric-based critique of *degrado* through the 'political ecology of atmospheres' has thus entailed, above all, moving across different and conflicting, spatial and temporal scales. In order to investigate the geographies of decay of Turin's post-industrial riverside, I have used this concept to denote the socio-political entanglements with the sensory and biophysical realms that characterise urban natures as an ensemble of concrete forms, which range from the intra-level of the body to a variety of open spaces. By foregrounding temporality, I have also shown that it is possible to understand *degrado* not only as a socially constructed concept; at the same time, it can be defined as a time-specific, ontological dimension that is produced by a friction between the processes of planetary urbanisation and local singularities, which emerges in the form of a poorly defined atmosphere. The intellectual collaboration between UPE and the field of atmosphere studies has thus offered an opportunity to examine these divergent spatialities and temporalities without reproducing the dichotomy between denigration vs. romanticisation of decay, or that between decay vs. progress.

Interrupted Mobilities

Kazig et al. remind us that “mobility is the sine qua non condition of the atmosphere” (2017, 10). In the same vein, Pink and Sumartojo observe that “we might see atmospheres as being constituted, at least in part, through the movement [...] of tangible and intangible materialities.” They add that “movement enables people to label atmospheres, making them momentarily tangible” (2018, 75). It is important to stress that the advantages of the walking method include not only the possibility of entering the research field site and developing research from the bottom up; it also strongly supports an atmospheric approach to a site, as motion offers great potential for engaging with the material and political qualities of sensory encounters. However, as Mimi Sheller (2018) argues, movement is influenced and interrupted by a wide range of social vulnerabilities: personal, bodily vulnerabilities; biased policing; citizens’ exclusion from the legal entitlement to freedom of movement, and the exclusion from exercising freedom of movement, including the ability of women, POC and LGBTQ people to move freely in public. Over the course of my Ph.D. field research, I have experienced these ‘interruptions’ in relation to my own privilege of mobility, which has allowed me to reflect on the implications of being a white, female researcher walking in open spaces of riverside Turin that have experienced neglect and degradation.

Turin has been the base of my professional career and life for ten years. In this sense, doing ethnography at home and preparing to write a monograph has offered new perspectives on a city I assumed I partly already knew. The choice of case studies was in part influenced by my knowledge of the city, and by direct and indirect memories of the places. I didn’t go anywhere that was distinctively ‘elsewhere,’ but I became acquainted with the sites of observation, in a way by walking, and to some extent also by chance.

The stigma strongly impacted on the visitors’ rather low use of the riverside spaces, albeit in different ways. The common perception that both the edges of the Stura and the ruins of the former zoo are unsafe zones to a certain extent impacted on my sensual disposition towards the environments of my research. Auto-ethnographic solo walks became a means of exploring how the shaping of space influenced personal feelings of unease, which blocked me in my attempts to enter places I had never visited. Also, solo walks made me increasingly aware of the emotional labour of gaining and maintaining access to the field, and how this process influenced my perception of negative atmospheric qualities. Emotional reflexivity is important for qualitative research, especially when doing qualitative research on atmospheres of decay. Every walk therefore helped me to prepare for the next walk, and to outline my future ethnographic observations, which in turn helped me to gain self-confidence inwards, and build trust outwards.

Beyond the specific destination and duration of the pedestrian experience, performed alone or in small groups, the “felt mobility” (Kazig et al., 2017, 17) has been at the centre of my analysis, especially when conducting fieldwork in rather lonesome areas (during certain times of the day or in particular seasons), or in areas perceived as masculine spaces because men – rather than women – would congregate in these areas. Discourses and imaginaries of decay aim to secure particular types of public spaces by reproducing securitised, conservative and masculine imaginations of public order, which threaten the playful potentialities of public space through a gendering of urban exploration. Indeed, the walker can be a problematic figure of mobility in contemporary qualitative research and in walking methodologies, if this figure doesn’t question the very grounds of any axes of difference (race, gender, class, sexuality, ability) and the resulting power relations. Exploring the atmospheres of decay through

the political ecology of atmospheres has provided a unique opportunity to reflect on the politics of knowledge production, particularly in relation to the social organisation of difference both in my fieldwork experience and in the everyday understanding of urban landscapes.

Searching for the Vocabularies of Atmospheric Life

The appropriateness of the walking method for an atmospheric-based critique of processes of decay primarily relates to the possibility of multiplying social, material, political and sensorial encounters, and accordingly, the possibility of expanding the registers for understanding urban processes. Indeed, I claim kinship with Pink and Sumartojo, especially when they argue - drawing on Tolia-Kelly (2006) - that “any understanding of atmospheres must be empirically grounded in the categories by which people might understand their experiences as atmospheric in their own terms” (2018, 4). Hence, the analytic work on atmosphere consists of multiple processes of translation from and to different linguistic registers, which include the words used by ordinary people, experts and politicians, as well as those of the researcher. The emphasis on the significance of listening to, and telling, stories is at the heart of this approach. The “atmospherisation” (Thibaud, 2014, 7) of *degrado* is reproduced and sustained by the - sometimes random and unintended - correspondences between meaning-making processes, the eruption of moods, the movement of beings and materials, the circulation of substances, the mobility of discourses and the formation of collective feelings. Atmospherisation can shape the ways and contexts in which people feel and use the flow of time, though this doesn’t have to hide the fact that atmospheres can be experienced and negotiated in radically different ways. Searching for a vocabulary of atmospheric life that includes a possibly infinite number of atmospheric experiences, thus highlights the frictions that arise between discourses of *degrado*, considered as dominant temporal narratives, and the embodied and shared experience of degradation. The ways in which subjects relate to collective feelings can be varied. There is, indeed, a difference in the way environmental change is lived and felt. There is also a difference, however, in the way the temporality of environmental change is understood.

Metropolitan Temporalities

Looking at the past of urban-riverine relationships has allowed me to demonstrate that the issue of *degrado* in metropolitan natures is linked to the specific ways in which cultures of nature have evolved in relation to the development of the city’s socio-economic complexity, governance systems and conservation frameworks. This has confirmed my hypothesis of riverside Turin as a mosaic-like, fragmented and uneven type of landscape, framed by non-linear processes of development. It has also enabled me to explore the “social life” of open space designs and plans: how long it takes for plans to leave the drawing board, and what happens as they move closer to realisation or are revised, disrupted and even derailed altogether (Bissell, 2016). Plans, beyond specialised fields of practice and expertise, work behind the scenes, and they do so in an ordinary and everyday context. The unpredictable combination of ideas, actors and governance arrangements, along with the problems caused by delays and incomplete designs and planning, challenge the idea of riverside Turin’s socio-ecological temporality as a timeline of progressive steps, which become visible through the mixture of planned and unplanned natures, on the one hand, and never attempted and half-finished interventions, on the other. As a consequence, *degrado* is the result of a cumulative process that extends across a thick temporal field. Such infrastructural and administrative temporalities of environmental change interact with the histories of trees, plants, animals and other beings, such as rivers. The latter’s “time-making

projects” (Tsing, 2015, 21) are never the result of mechanistic programs; they are indeterminate and condense pasts, presents and futures. In this sense, the political ecology of atmospheres has proven to be helpful for an investigation into the social and biophysical temporalities that shape urban environmental changes. Riverine ecologies are shaped and framed by non-linear processes of development. The impossibility to reduce biophysical times to the rational, social times of the city is one of the sources of the conflict over the temporal regimes of metropolitan change. From this perspective, *degrado* denotes a time-space of crisis that flattens difference and renders time linear, cyclical and homogeneous, by erasing the historical processes that have produced environmental change. However, these processes are already there or in the process of being constituted.

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