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SUSTAINABILITY AND URBAN DEMOCRACY: CONTRADICTIONS AND HOPES EMERGING FROM NEW FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

RESUMEN

Como consecuencia de los cambios profundos y rápidos de la vida urbana, la democracia y la economía que caracterizan la ciudad neoliberal, los movimientos medioambientales han perdido progresivamente su credibilidad y capacidad de actuar como motor de cambio. Al mismo tiempo, grupos heterogéneos de ciudadanos han imaginado y experimentado con formas nuevas de acción colectiva para contrarrestar desarrollos urbanísticos irregulares e insostenibles. Sin embargo, su potencial para producir una alternativa importante a la producción insostenible del espacio urbano sigue siendo un tema controversial. Este artículo consi-

dera las posibilidades transformadoras de estas formas emergentes de acción colectiva ambiental. Teniendo en cuenta que las geografías de acción colectiva y sus ideas respecto al cambio no son inmutables, el artículo utiliza teorías deluzianas para comparar algunos casos de movilización, que tienen como objetivo la afirmación de los derechos de los ciudadanos, con la justicia ambiental, y para entender sus características comunes emergentes, así como sus fortalezas y debilidades. Aunque el potencial transformador de estos experimentos es sumamente vulnerable a los imperativos, acontecimientos y manipulación *hic et nunc*, radica en el

hecho que son autónomos, y que sirven como incubadoras de alternativas al imaginario idílico de la ciudad sostenible neoliberal armónica así como originadores de narrativos y experiencias nuevas de sostenibilidad urbana como una producción dialéctica y controvertida.

ABSTRACT

With the profound and rapid changes of urban life, democracy and the economy characterizing the neoliberal city, environmental movements have progressively lost their credibility and capacity to act as a force of change. At the same time, heterogeneous groups of citizens have imagined and experimented with new forms of collective action to counter uneven and unsustainable urban developments. However, their potential to produce a substantial alternative to the neoliberal unsustainable production of urban space remains a contested issue. This paper debates the transformative potentials of these emerging forms

of environmental collective action. Considering that the geographies of collective action and their ideas of change are not immutable, the paper uses Deleuzian theories to compare some cases of mobilization aimed at affirming citizens' rights to environmental justice, and map their emerging common features, strengths and weaknesses. Although extremely vulnerable to the hic et nunc imperatives, events and manipulation, the transformative potential of these experiments lies in them being autonomous, acting as incubators of alternatives to the idyllic imaginary of the harmonic sustainable neoliberal city and generators of new circulating narratives and

experiences of urban sustainability as a dialectical and contested production.

KEYWORDS: URBAN DEMOCRACY; COLLECTIVE ACTION; TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL; MICRO-NARRATIVES

1. INTRODUCTION

Is still urban democracy a relevant aspect in the production of urban space in the sustainable neoliberal city? Is still sustainability a transformative concept? Can emerging collective actions counter uneven and unsustainable urban developments? This paper deals with this topics by exploring strengths and weaknesses of new, emerging forms of collective action aimed at affirming citizens' rights to environmental justice. It is divided in three sections. The first one focuses on the crisis of urban democracy and the neoliberalisation of sustainable politics. The second section uses the Deleuze and Guattari philosophy to understand what could be defined as transformative potential

in emerging forms of mobilization aimed at affirming citizens' rights to environmental justice. The third section highlights the relevance of micro-narrative as beginning for the emergence of alternative worlds.

2. THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN THE SUSTAINABLE NEOLIBERAL CITY

Until few years ago, words such as insurgence, activism, participation, active citizenships, urban movements acted as a mobilizing metaphors in discourses and practices on a more sustainable urban development. They reflected the utopian tension towards the construction of a good city and society (Friedmann, 2011; Sandercock, 1997) based on a democratic practice enabling citizens

to get control on decision-making processes and fight against socio-environmental injustices. Nowadays these words are empty signifiers which mirror the crisis of urban democracy. Activism or participation are increasingly equated to a social software designed to control dissent, avoid conflicts and construct consensus to support unsteady public institutions in restructuring city politics so that they can respond better to the needs of capital (Purcell, 2001).

Rather than embedding a sense of a transformative practice enabling social change, these words materialize the profound restructuring of the parameter of democracy necessary to produce the city under neoliberalism. And in fact,

neoliberalism is not only an economic project but also a political one (Wacquant, 2012). As a market-driven urbanity, the neoliberal city needs urban politics which free the space from a constraining idea of public interest and common good in order to transform it into a creative and competitive environment suitable to accommodate capitalist operations rather than the needs of its inhabitants. At this purpose the politics producing the neoliberal city are rethought as a collective product emerging through creative and consensual collaborative governance processes. These last have to involve public institutions, which are required to act as enablers of social mobilization and facilitators of market interests; a homogenous civil society which is expected behaving and acting in a collaborative perspective; and private actors expressing a wide set of interests. At the same time, possible unwanted side effects linked to the need to boost creativity and continuous innovation are controlled and thus accustomed to the needs of capital through an excess of managerialism (Olson, 1971). This last is implemented by means of a capillary disciplining system including guidelines, policies and selective incentives that channel creativity in specific streams of action.

The consequences of these changes on the democratic production of urban space and the consolidated forms of citizens' mobilization and organization of collective actions have been enormous. The consensual orientation of governance processes has acted as a

powerful means of control of dissent: the search for agreed and shared policies, strategies or actions has justified the silencing of dissenting voices or their co-optation through incentives to co-operate. Besides this, consensual governance processes have replaced the rich diversity of different and alternative ways of production of the urban space (such as insurgent or participatory practices) with a mono-dimensional logic of social interaction.

As a result, the incorporation of any kind of activism into an amorphous civil society has flattened the differences characterizing diverse ideas of social and environmental change, confounded volunteerism with an opportunity of work, and weakened concretely the credibility and ability of environmental and urban movements to intervene on issues concerning economic, social, and cultural inequalities (Mater, 2013). Collective actions, which do not fit into the governance model are seen as primitive forms of social mobilization unable to understand the necessity of actualization of the sustainable globalizing imaginary of the neoliberal and the politics of economic growth that it deserves. Thus, these actions are relegated to occupy the space of exception to good norms and rules of democratic interaction and consequently forced to give up with a puerile activism or change by following the current feelings of what a good social interaction is and the right way to manage it.

Contemporarily, the new role of local governments as collective actor and enabler of social mobilization has dispossessed activists

from their commitment to the construction of counter-hegemonic spaces of political action and interrupted the relationships between the construction of socio-spatial urban configurations and urban democracy. It has moved the responsibilities of social and environmental injustices from who govern to specific and contextual forms of governance and government accountability. The recent shift from collaboration to coproduction of governance processes seems to strengthen an impressive process of appropriation of contentious spaces. Coproduction marks a neat shift in the role of citizens, urban movements and NGOs. Form being organizers of alternative practices of urban production they become providers of social services. Parallel, through a set of regulations and other tools of govern, activism and social practices are substituted in the everyday life with individualistic forms of direct or virtual participation in the implementation of already decided urban policies and specific actions of urban transformation.

Thus, we live in a paradoxical situation. Local and sovralocal governments are currently both controllers of social order and social mobilizers. Governments and business speak the language of social movements, which help them to address ethical concerns and simultaneously insulate themselves from critique (Blair, 2013). As Mayer argues (2013: 12), "the appropriation of movement principles such as self-management, self-realization and all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity has become not only easily feasible, but a generative force in

today's neoliberalizing cities". As result, the appropriation of social movement buzzword by any kind of actors has made difficult to share alternative vocabularies unequivocally (Mayer, 2013). The production of urban space through consensual governance processes makes acceptable the unjust effects of privatization and deregulation such as social polarization and the radical urbanization of ecological dynamics at different scales. Social and environmental injustice are transformed into reforms necessary to sustain urban sustainability, competitiveness and creativity. Distrust in public institutions and NGOs, anger and discontent spread among citizens which increasingly consider participating in urban politics a pointless activity. Rather than helping cities to face crucial problems of social and environmental injustice, urban democracy is considered as tokenism (Monno and Khakee, 2012) and a means to devolve back the burden of crisis to citizens and communities.

2. SUSTAINABILITY OR NEW REGIMES OF INJUSTICE?

Sustainability, intended as an integrative process among economy, society and environment is slowly entered in the neoliberal city. Although in the Nineties it was welcomed by governments, social and environmental movements as a political success and a notion that could translate decades of environmental struggles into more democratic and ecological urban politics, nowadays it is seen as a problematic concept.

And in fact, it has become one of the pillars of the neoliberal model of urban development. Instead of generating co-creative partnership with nature and revitalizing urban democracy, its use in environmental and urban politics has contributed to favor processes of planetary urbanization (Brenner, 2014), ecological modernization, deepen social polarization and the crisis of democracy, and depoliticize the environmental discourse. For supporters of sustainability, the incorporation and manipulation of this concept in neoliberal visions on urban development has been facilitated by its ambiguity which has favored the systematic prevarication of economic interests on issues concerning social and environmental justice. In order to reduce its fuzziness, new conceptualizations of sustainability have been proposed which stress the relevance of urban democracy, social and environmental justice, wealth redistribution, stronger nature-society ties, and agonistic form of democracy. However, these new conceptualizations leave again an uncomfortable gap between theory and practice. Focusing on the ends rather than social and political means for achieving sustainability, they fail to translate theoretical ideas into effective strategies to manage a more just transition towards urban sustainability (Lowhon, Murphy, 2011).

In contrast, radical critics argue that sustainability is used as opium for masses (Swyngedouw, 2013). The search for integration among economy, society and environment should be seen as a means preventing citizens from recognizing crucial

problems of social and environmental justice and imagining alternatives challenging the neoliberal processes of production of cities (Swyngedouw, 2010). It is only by thinking about the socio-ecological metabolism of the city that the environmental urban democracy could be revitalized. This will take "us beyond the impotent confines of a sustainability discourse that leaves the existing combined and uneven, but decidedly urbanized, socio-ecological dynamics fundamentally intact, and charts new politicized avenues for producing a new common urbanity" (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2014).

However, if sustainability does no longer represent a transformative concept, alternative socio-ecological urban development imaginaries are still well far from being developed (Whitehead, 2012). On the one hand, the possibilities of developing radical alternative imaginations of urban socio-environmental and socio-natural arrangements in the neoliberal city are constrained by the deficit of democracy characterizing it (Swyngedouw, 2010; Béal, 2012.) On the other hand, the environmentalism is dead, at least as we have known it in the last two centuries, and it is in need to re-envision its values, strategies and goals. Environmental NGOs have lost their credibility by participating to governance processes. Environmental concerns are easily substituted by sustainable politics based on ecological modernization. The process of planetary urbanization (Brenner, 2014) has made the ecological approach characterizing environmental movements obsolete.

In a “post-nature” world environmental movements have to redefine the meaning of nature. Can emerging forms of collective action produce alternatives to sustainability?

3. EMERGING FORMS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: EXPLORING THEIR TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

Despite this discouraging background, citizens continue to protest or experimenting and inventing new social practices in the interstices of the neoliberal city to claim their rights to environmental justice or protect the environment. However, the transformative potential of such experiments remains a contested or underexplored issue. In fact, emerging forms of collective action cannot be easily assimilated to well-established models of action of a civil society or classified as urban movements. They cannot be framed in particular ideologies. As a result, on the one hand, they are reported as actions unable to construct credible counter-hegemonic urban development projects. As such, they are considered ephemeral, irrational irruptions in the public scene and deemed to be seen as marginally contributing to a meaningful innovation of urban democracy and reconfiguration of urban space. On the other hand, these mobilizations are celebrated as revolutionary and transformative.

Recently, Mayer and Boudreau (2012) have argued that in order to understand the novelty of the contemporary movements we need to interpret their evolution. Collective action is not immutable: mechanisms of mobilization,

modalities of organization, goals and transformative potentials continuously change in space and time (Castells, 1979). Mayer and Boudreau (2012) recognize at least three waves of urban movements since the sixties, and show their progressive fragmentation, loss of social commitment and capacity to challenge oppressive forms of state and city. By embracing the myth of a collaborative civil society several social or environmental movements and NGOs have attuned their ideas to the neoliberal agendas through their participation to governance processes. Others have changed themselves into no-profit organizations capable to get funds to deliver projects or act as advisors to local government. Thus, in several cases, social and environmental NGOs have lost their legitimation as a critical voice proposing alternatives to the status quo.

The current wave of urban activism is highly heterogeneous. Due to processes of privatization, gentrification and uneven transformation of the neoliberal city into a space of life for a new creative generation, urban activism is played out by different aggregates of citizens such as anarchist groups, artists, middle class people which wants to preserve their quality of life, or support a specific environmental changes, marginalized and excluded. Some common features seem to characterize this new wave of activism. Besides its heterogeneity, it is characterized by the use of differentiated forms of action, invention of unconventional forms of protest and mechanisms of aggregation, hybrid relationships with public

institutions. Furthermore, being deprived from ideologies, topics and places for struggle, current forms of urban activism develop on specific issues. Trying to understand the scale at which new forms of collective action develop could be problematic. As an increasing amount of studies has shown that focusing on the urban dimension of activism instead of on communities and neighborhood, small places can be misleading in catching the emergence of new movements and unconventional transformative collective actions. Analogously, trying to catch the transformative potential of this new wave of activism through a specific way of conceiving the world is not only almost impossible but risks obscuring emerging political projects for radicalizing democracy and repoliticizing the environmental discourse. For example, some authors currently draw on concepts such as social innovation or “multitude” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Drawing on these premises, in this paper I explore the transformative potentials of emerging forms of collective action by abandoning well-established interpretative frameworks and scale of inquiry. From my point of view, we need to explore the transformative potential of emerging forms of collective action through what Deleuze defines lines of flight. The Deleuzian philosophy is not normative. It describes the ontology of the social and its dynamics. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the social can be understood as a rizome: as a set of lines comparable to the roots of plants. In the social, some lines are “molar”, dominant and oppressive, others,

are molecular innovative and revolutionary. Among these lines, the lines of flights are escapes, movements away from something but, at the same time materials which can constitute new identities and unconventional social connections (Patton, 2000). Lines of flights are *relative deterritorialisation*: they are movements de-structuring the status quo but without reoccupying it with a new dominant and disciplining view of the world. Thus, if the molar lines striate, discipline the social space, the lines of flight smooth it, thus opening new avenues for a different social coexistence. Instead of being in a dichotomic interrelationship, molecular and molar lines are inseparable and in constant interplay. The kind of interplay between them defines a specific configuration of democracy and power.

Thus, to catch the transformative potential of new forms of collective actions I look for lines of flight, movements away from the neoliberal sustainable urbanity. At this purpose I focus on the following parameters of analysis:

- Organization of collective action
Typologies of activism and relationships with other collective actions)
- Forms of action (protests, performativity...
Interaction with public institutions (degree of self-determination and autonomy of collective action...)
- Focus and openness to conflicting perspectives on environmental change
- Approach to sustainable urban transformation

These represent some crucial fields characterizing the change of the current wave of activism. Furthermore, they compose a framework of analysis to compare heterogeneous forms of activism and identify their similarities and differences.

5. DAVID AGAINST GOLIATH: ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

In this section I tell the stories of two collective actions which have developed in two different areas of the Apulia Region (southern Italy) in relation to the sustainable production of energy. The stories are based on documents and other materials collected through participant observation and informal interviews to stakeholders and are interpreted using the framework of analysis described above. A short description of the context precedes the two stories.

5.1 TARANTO: THE WORKING OR DYING CONFLICT

Taranto is a city of about 200.000 inhabitants by the Jonio Sea in Southern Italy (Apulia). It is and one of the last, largest and most polluted and polluting industrial European cities and is well-known in Italy as the city of the working or dying conflict. In the Sixties a steel plant, which is the second largest in Europe, was constructed in this city by means of the "Intervento Straordinario nel Mezzogiorno" in order to create an industrial growth poles bridging the development gap between northern and southern Italian regions. Initially owned by the Italsider

group, a state-holding industry, the steel plant was yielded by the State to a private group, ILVA in the mid Nineties because of the rise of globalization and the crisis of the steel sector. Since the Seventies, the city has lived a continuous social, economic and environmental decline despite the laicization of new industrial activities such as the ENI refinery. The planned development that the growth pole was expected to trigger has never occurred and the local economy is still dependent on the steel production. The city has experienced continuous cuts of jobs which decreased from the 22.000 in the seventies to 13.0000 in 2012. Everything in the city has been contaminated by the uncontrolled pollution produced by the steel plant. In 1997 the entire Province of Taranto was declared at risk of environmental crisis by the National Government and in an urgent need of an environmental plan which has never been carried out.

National and local governments have never seriously dealt with Taranto environmental crisis because of the huge social costs resulting from its transformation into a post-industrial and sustainable city and a local context oppressed by patronage. After the Italsider privatization, the urban development of the city has been a private space of negotiation, between national and local politicians and professional and the steel plant owner. Nevertheless, different local governments have tried to reinterpret the industrial dependent development path of Taranto through strategic planning in order to transform it into a competitive and

sustainable one. In 2000, an urban strategic plan, which has never been implemented, proposed to associate to a cleaner steel production the development of the Taranto transshipment port, a terminal container constructed at the end of the nineties. The metropolitan strategic plan (which includes 27 out of the 28 municipalities of Taranto Province) repropose in 2007 the same strategy even though complemented by the promotion of local tourism. Once again, although inspired by sustainability, this strategic plan ignored the causes of the environmental crisis of the city and the provincial area.

The European Union has sanctioned the Italian Government for letting ILVA polluting the local environment. In 2011 a legal action was initiated against the owner of ILVA and local politicians, professionals, public administrators as responsible for an increasingly evident environmental disaster. Nowadays the future of the steel plant is uncertain for both the crisis of the steel production and this plant almost impossible transformation into a sustainable one. Since the environmental restoration of the polluted areas will require years and years and an enormous amount of funds currently unavailable, in the absence of an alternative vision on the development of the city, the only feasible solution seems to be continuing with a steel production using the Best Available Technologies available so to reduce and control the pollution that this plant produces everyday.

5.1.1 THE COMMITTEE AGAINST THE REGASIFICATION PLANT

Despite the death of local ecosystems, the increasing air, water and soil pollution, and a growing rate of cancer deaths, until 2007 Taranto had been a silent city. Citizens only protested to oppose any proposal concerning the restructuring or the closure of ILVA. In 2005 a research (unpublished) concerning perception of environmental risks in the city revealed that for Taranto citizens the risk of dying for a car accident was much more higher than that of dying for cancer or irreversibly damaging local ecosystems. In Taranto the industrial steel production means “occupational disadvantage” and thus fear of unemployment and poverty consequent to the steel plant closure.

In such a silent urban context, Taranto Sociale, a group of few environmentalists, had repeatedly denounced for a decade the increasing pollution of local ecosystems produced by the steel plant. However, before 2007, this group had not been able to transform its activism into an urban environmental movement. In 2006, together with others environmental NGOs Taranto Sociale set up the Committee against the Regasification Plant to oppose the Regional Government decision to strengthen its new regional sustainable energy policy also through the localization of a regasification plant in Taranto in a site next to ILVA and the ENI refinery. Since the Regional Government ignored the Committee protests, this precarious association of environmentalists

decided to submit its argumentations to the participatory phase of the compulsory environmental impact assessment national procedure to which the project of the regasification plant had been subjected. Instead of looking for best practices, and be involved in discourses on the sustainable energy production, the Committee together with researchers and professionals started producing knowledge. Besides focusing on the environment, the Committee put a particular attention on risks for human health and on the cumulative effect of new and existing impacts. These two focuses orienting the construction of a civic scientific evidence changed the story of the Committee. Through studies and survey which the Committee produced, the city discovered the relationships between the pollution produced by the steel plant and the increasingly rate of cancer death. Taranto inhabitants discover that their territory was so contaminated by dioxin that any sheep leaving in a radius of ten kilometers around the still plant had to be killed in order to protect human health. The city also discover that any explosion occurring in the regasification plant would risk triggering a domino effect which would have destroyed a large part of the city and impeded citizens to escape from it.

A year later the Committee became an urban movement. 10.000 people participate to a march organized to claim their right to a healthy life. The Committee against the regasification plant was transformed into the Committee for Taranto, an open and

changing alliance among NGOs, citizens, experts politicians and people committed to fight for environmental justice and change the economic development of the city. Since then, the Committee for Taranto has always adopted a critical approach towards national and local governments decisions concerning the city and steel plant future and refused any kind of compromise with them. As a result, the project of the regasification plant was dismissed. The Committee for Taranto has broken the silence on the environmental disaster in Taranto, shown the causes producing the working or dying conflict and constructed collectively a new story of the city. In fact, Taranto is currently divided among supporters of ecological modernization, a civil society trying to find a sustainable mediation between the industrial production and the health of ecosystems and human beings, and supporters of a radical change. Such a fragmentation in the homogenizing industrial narrative of the city has revitalized the idea of urban development as contentious space. The Committee for Taranto continues to construct knowledge showing the unjust socio-ecological relationships shaping Taranto development.

5.2 MELENDUGNO: TRANS ADRIATIC SUSTAINABILITY AND THE SEAL

Melendugno is one of the small towns by the Adriatic sea in the Salento, a socially and environmentally sensible sub-region of the Apulia Region. It is part of an urban landscape characterized by a network of small rural towns connected by a strong local identity, an

interdependent economy and a magnificent coastal zone. In 2011, Melendugno discovered that the National Government had signed an agreement with the multinational enterprise TAP (Trans Adriatic Pipeline) to build a pipeline which would have to transport natural gas from Azerbaijan to Italy. Initially this small town Municipal Government did not oppose to the project. But when environmentalists showed the places in which the pipeline would be realized, Melendugno citizens, environmentalists and its Municipal government decided to set up the NO-TAP Committee in order to stop the pipeline project which had already been subjected to the environmental impact assessment (EIA) national procedure. The submarine pipeline would have to go through Melndugno territory, thus insulating it from the other small municipalities, and destroyed San Foca, a beautiful historical and natural coastal area where, sometimes, seals appear. Furthermore, the pipeline would have compromised the touristic local economy. As usual, the committee protests were ignored or rejected by both the National and Regional Governments. Since Melendugno and the Salento are already sustainable places, the National and Regional Governments maintained that the pipeline had to be realized because Italy needs further sources of natural gas; natural gas is clean and contribute to sustainable development; the pipeline does not impact the environment and the impacts produced during the construction phase can be easily mitigated. Against these argumentation

the NO-TAP Committee argued that the pipeline generates several environmental risks, destroys the local environment and economy, and, above all, the rural network of small town thus transforming this territory in an urban and industrialized area. In 2013 the NO-TAP Committee involved experts and researchers to submit a scientific report to the EIA procedure in order to stop the project or prompt the National and local governments to change the pipeline localization. In a couple of years, the NO-TAP sentiment has spread not only in the Salento but also in the Apulia Region. As a result, in Salento many municipal governments have joined the Committee. However, the Regional Government has assumed an ambiguous position: on the one hand it prompt citizens to participate in EIA, on the other, it has not yet assumed a clear position. Due the rise of a capillary NO-TAP feeling, in summer 2014 the TAP started sponsored local municipalities to support their summer religious, cultural and recreational activities. Its logos appeared everywhere in the town which had accepted to be subsidized by TAP. A wave of indignation invaded the Apulia Region and the Salento: it was clear that such a territory was at risks of being transformed into a space of capitalist accumulation, into a open-air market. A rap song was written telling how TAP would have desired to buy people and the places in which they live. It resonated in the Region for almost the entire summer. If at the beginning, the NO-TAP Committee and local populations were primarily afraid of losing their economy and beautiful costal zone,

during the TAP sponsorship campaign they understand that their land is a not negotiable place and that in it sits their culture (Escobar, 2001). As a result of the song and citizens' indignation, the TAP gave up to sponsor anybody. Nowadays, the EIA procedure is ongoing but many people believe that the project will be carried out.

6. DISCUSSING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF EMERGING COLLECTIVE ACTIONS

Although local, the Taranto and Melendugno stories represent emerging ways of practicing collective action under neoliberalism. They describe the ambiguity and the social and environmental inadequacy of pre-defined sustainable solutions to local environmental problems; the ambivalence of local governments towards democracy, and the difficult search for effective collective actions aimed at affirming social and economic justice. Although in the two stories the transformative potential differs substantially in terms of motivations, strategies and actions, ways of self-organization and interaction with public institutions (see Table1), we can clearly discern in them some similar lines of flight.

Rather than be characterized by a well-defined leadership and a stable organizational structure, the two collective actions are adaptive, multipolar organizations with a changing motivational core. Sometimes such a core can be an individual citizen, in other cases it could be a group with its own

identity. Thus, the organizational changes, the movement internal composition and cohesion, focus and strength and typologies of actions change depending on particular spatial and temporal configuration of power and events. The two committees in Taranto and Melendugno are both characterized by a strong autonomy. The interaction between citizens, movements and public institutions is not determined by dominant inside/outside and inclusion/exclusion dualistic

logics. Here, autonomy, the decision of insulating the movement from the state or local governments, from economic coalitions or the civil society or acting with them is a cultural approach, the expression of an emergent critical thinking rather than a result of a balance between means and end or an ideological standpoint. Thus, practicing democracy and the adoption of a critical and dialectical relation among actors are insparable.

	<i>Taranto</i>	<i>Melendugno</i>
Organization of collective action	Experts, associations, citizens	Local governments, experts, associations, citizens
Interaction with public institutions (degree of self-determination and autonomy of collective action...)	Autonomy	Alliance
Forms of action (protests, performativity, art...)	Protests, civic science, everyday information	Meetings, civic science performative action contestations
Focus and openness to conflicting perspectives on environmental change	Environmental restoration as a base for an healthy urban life Environmental justice	Preserving palces as base for the survival of small towns
Approach to sustainability	Sustainability as a problem The city as social ecological product shaped by a specific metabolism	Sustainability as a problem Ecological conservation and social justice vs clean energy

TABLE 1. Analyzing the transformative potential of emerging collective actions: Taranto and Melendugno

Sustainability is not part of the two stories. It is a discourse distant and abstract which does not belong to local communities. Sustainability is far from the real everyday intricacy among economy, society and environment. Instead of speaking about sustainability, there is a strong commitment to the reappropriation of urban space as common ground, a coming back to places, their materiality and presence in the human life. However, in these stories the reappropriation of a place has nothing to do with its physical occupation: it is a process of learning of the relevance of social action in cities which are more and more often described and individually perceived and experienced as *markets à abiter*; a mental and cultural revitalization of city as public, not negotiable space of life; a search for forgotten relationships connecting natural and urban life in the short and long run. This commitment to places produces a politics based on everyday small achievements opposing to what Sassen (2014) defines the subterranean trends of expulsion and a radical shift from the remediation approach characterizing the production of the neoliberal sustainable city.

The transformative potential of these experiments lies in them being autonomous, incubators of alternatives to the idyllic imaginary of the harmonic sustainable neoliberal city and generators of new circulating micro-narratives and experiences of urban sustainability as a dialectical and contested production. By re-placing ambiguous discourses and myths on urban sustainability with a sense place making these

collective actions are *beginnings* (Arendt, 1958) for the emergence of a new culture of a more just socio-environmental change. In fact, they create new circulating micro-narratives embedding the experience of urban democracy and development as inseparable and a common although contested terrain which are able to transform, even though imperceptibly, the imagery of the sustainable neoliberal city into a search for different, less unjust, modes of existence. In contrast to counter-narratives which embody a particular form of resistance to a dominant vision of the world, micro-narratives of conflict speak about the difficulty of constructing a public and common story. They tell the dialectical interplay between values in the everyday people's lives. Paraphrasing Ganz (2011: 289) it could be said that a micro-narrative do not talk *about* values since it embodies and communicates the interplay among those values and our shared experience of it. For this reason, micro-narratives can spur people "to engage with others; motivate one another to act, to take risks, explore possibilities to face the challenges we must face. Its circulation in the everyday can rouse a sense of urgency, hope, solidarity, and the belief that individuals, acting in concert, can make a difference. In this sense, micro-narrative can be considered material memories on production of a city as an ever-contentious space of life. In this sense they can be considered an attempt, although feeble, to radicalize democracy and repoliticize the environmental discourse.

As such micro-narratives are vital

infrastructures of socio-environmental justice since they fracture and challenge the well-established power geometries. They change the logic and rules of play underlying the production of the neoliberal city by reenacting some basic elements of a sense of coexistence as a reciprocal interdependence, a sense of infeasible right to socio-ecological justice and to a democratic life as a precarious achievement to be protected. This is a different route to the dominant search for a *hinc et nunc* alternative world: it is the search for an emergent property from an increasing entropy. The strength of this emerging route sits in it being a set of *beginnings of the history*. At the same time, emerging collective actions are extremely vulnerable: they are unable to offer solutions to people's needs and denied rights in the short run, and their organization is too adaptive to become a stable reference point for a future alternative vision of the world.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Catching the transformative potential of the complex matrix of emerging experiments characterizing the current wave of activism is not easy because of the profound restructuring of values and parameters shaping urban democracy, the delegitimation and cooptation of social and environmental movements and manipulation and appropriation of their buzzwords. Thus, whether current activism is able to challenge the sustainable neoliberal production of the city or not remains a contested issue. Existing interpretative framework needs

to be adapted or substituted by new ways to think about what is transformative. This paper has explored the transformative potential of emerging forms of collective action using Deleuzian concept of lines of flight. It concludes by suggesting that we should consider transformative the attitude of a collective action to be *a new beginning of the history* characterized by a critical and autonomous thinking which act as incubator of alternatives to the idyllic imaginary of the harmonic sustainable neoliberal city and generator of new circulating micro-narratives and experiences of urban sustainability as a dialectical and contested production. Although not based on a clear alternative and unable to immediately solve people problems, emergent practices of activism can represent the germ for challenging the monologic sustainable and competitive urban model. These experiments and their micro-narratives are vital infrastructures of socio-environmental justice since they fracture and challenge the neoliberal power geometries.

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