

IS THERE AN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE URBAN NORTH? LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLES OVER GARBAGE AND INCINERATORS IN CAMPANIA, ITALY

MARCO ARMIERO*: Giacomo D'Alisa

ICTA.

“I curse all of you for what you are doing to our land! You and your children must be cursed forever!”

A woman is repeating these words, while leaving the battleground to the police, defeated. A scene as that could have occurred in many parts of the world; she might be an indigenous woman fighting against a dam in India or an oil factory in Nigeria. We could picture the scene imagining to hear the woman speaking in some exotic language, dressed with appropriate ethnic clothes and, of course, surrounded at least by some remains of the “land” she is trying to defend. And no radical academic would ever find anything strange in that picture; actually, the language employed by that woman, the curse and the land, would seem perfectly appropriate.

But the fact is that the woman is from Naples, Italy; she is not dressing anything ethnic – more probably something cheap from a nearby mall and a faraway sweatshop in China - and the land she talks (actually yells) about is anything but the remains of a lost paradise, rather it looks like a peripheral neighborhood covered by low-priced housings and poor roads. She is neither an African-American woman in the racialized U.S. and, probably, she does not even fit in a strict Marxist framework of class oppression (more likely she owns one of the apartments in the ugly buildings surrounding the battlefield). Who is that woman, where she comes from and how academics understand her language might be considered the basic questions of our paper.

In more general terms, this paper deals with the narratives about environmental struggles, aiming to unpacking the South/North dichotomy and shifting from a “geographical” framework to a political one. It is not our intention to deny the relevance of the experiences and knowledges coming from the Global South; rather, we believe that, as Boaventura De Sousa Santos puts it, looking at the epistemologies of the South we should change the very approach to knowledge and the hierarchical vision of it. In other words, considering the “otherness” of the South seriously implies to challenge the very categories and narratives through which we understand the world through binary oppositions: modern/primitive, scientific/emotional, political/pre-political, natural/cultural.

Indeed it is much easier to speak of indigenous knowledge and “other” ways of looking at nature when the object of our research is culturally and geographically far away from the Western imperial capitalism and its science, assuming, of course, that such a center is somewhere in a geographical place and not ubiquitous in our understating and making of the world . Actually, in those peripheries the borders between nature and culture are porous and narratives of communities and their special relationships to nature become a standard; how much those are projections of a Western/North vision of the South is in itself a matter of debate.

However, what about the North? Why should the sentimental attachment of a woman to her neighborhood in the outskirts of Naples look less authentic than that of a peasant in the global South? Can urban dwellers be bearers of “other” knowledges, even if they are

completely immersed in the Western cultures? How can we acknowledge the otherness in our own backyard?

Our thesis is that ecological conflicts are producers of communities and knowledges. Instead of reinforcing the narrative about “natural” communities living in a space of radically otherness and oppressed by global villains, we would like to explore the interstitial South, mixed with the North and its science and contradictions.

Our case-study is the struggle over landfills and incinerators in Campania, Italy, in the last twenty years. Using a collection of interviews we have gathered, we will analyze the rising of a collective knowledge and the making of communities through the very experience of resistance. In particular, we will analyze the relationships connecting the new environmental justice activism and the history of political mobilization, that is, the mobilization/re-invention of a tradition of resistance.