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# **The Urban Political Ecology of Post-industrial Scottish Towns: Examining Greengairs and Ravenscraig**

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## **The Urban Political Ecology of Post-industrial Scottish Towns: Examining Greengairs and Ravenscraig**

*Abstract:* Urban ecological politics is both shaped by moments of concerted action and by more silent perceptions and responses. Instead of only being evident in situations of organised protest, the politics of urban ecology is also manifested, in material and symbolic terms, in the daily life of the residents. The fragmentation of urban political ecology turns out to be an important element in the affirmation of post-political forms of urban governance. Those issues were the object of fieldwork research carried out in Greengairs and Ravenscraig, two towns in North Lanarkshire, near Glasgow, with the goal of unravelling the understanding and the coping mechanisms of environmentally deprived residents. The towns are permeated by a widespread, often dissimulated, political ecology that is nonetheless always present. Empirical results demonstrate that a more comprehensive handling of the political ecology of the urban is crucial in order to halt the sources of marginalisation and ecological degradation.

Key words: urban political ecology, environmental justice, North Lanarkshire, Greengairs, Ravenscraig, landfill, steel industry.

### **Introduction**

An early Friday afternoon in the King Lud pub, in North Lanarkshire, near Glasgow, is probably not the easiest or most orthodox of the places to conduct academic research on urban ecology. The aged, dusky environment of the pub had only a handful of male customers, either retired or unemployed, involved in discussions about football or the life of someone in the community. With the help of the friendly barman (warned in advance about the purpose of our visits) and after some brief introductions amid the noise, it was not difficult to find people willing to take part in interviews and answer questions about the town during the operation and after the closure of the Ravenscraig steel industry (located only a stone's throw from the pub). Mixed feelings, lively memories and a clear sense of uneasiness become quickly apparent from their comments and facial expressions. From time to time, the person being interviewed shouts to those in other tables to get confirmation of his opinion or reinforcement of any stronger impression about the past or the present. Similar encounters took place in the coffee shops of public libraries, church vestries and community halls, as well as in private homes and meeting places around the towns impacted by steel mill. In a second area of study, 13 miles to the north, communities suffering from the operation of the Greengairs landfill site were also approached and invited to reflect upon the importance of local environmental issues.

The main purpose of the investigation was to examine how urban environmental change is perceived and what role it plays in the formation of social identity, interpersonal relations and political demands. Early work on the political ecology of the urban used to focus primarily on large-scale, acute forms of inequality and discrimination of deprived communities living in disadvantaged areas with insidious impacting activities, while more recent publications have emphasised the 'ordinariness' of ecological politics and also the

subtle manifestation of inequalities and disputes. Nonetheless, there is still a gap in terms of connecting these two spheres of interaction that form a dynamic, dialectical totality. The city needs to be properly understood as the result of interdependent socio-natural connections that are intricate, “chaotic, often unpredictable, radically contingent, historically and geographically variable, risky, patterned in endlessly complex ways” (Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012, p.1972). The integrality of the urban was a crucial analytical category for this study, given that the landscape of North Lanarkshire has been transformed by many decades of heavy industrial production, metropolitan expansion and, more recently, the transition to a post-industrial economy. Being a heavily urbanised area with significant differences in terms of class, ethnicity and levels of income, local ecological features were intensely politicised and became a central element of disputes around urban development.

The discussion is based on fieldwork conducted in 2010-2011. The two localities were selected because Ravenscraig and Greengairs are both associated with notorious processes of environmental injustice and the mishandling of negative environmental impacts. The task at hand was to critically reconceptualise the interconnections between ecology, politics and the urban further than the more obvious link between environmental hazards and affected groups. The study concentrated on locations with prominent politicised ecological issues in order to also uncover the not so evident politics that emerge out of the more indirect contact with ecological matters. An expanded ontology of politicised urban ecologies requires a dedicated focus on the interpenetrations between everyday life and wider scales of interaction that produce unfair urban spatialities (‘Author A’, 2012a). Together with a concern for the more evident urban ecological conflicts and the denunciation of urban inequalities, attention was paid to the manifold barriers that systematically prevent the proper understanding and, consequently, the resolution of politicised urban ecology problems. The starting point was that urban environmental politics could not be reduced to the moments of concentrated action, such as active protests and government consultations, but it is also manifested in silent forms of collaboration, discontent and even scepticism.

Opinions and perceptions were captured through 35 semi-structured interviews and five focus groups with residents and former residents selected from an array of professional and personal backgrounds that represented distinct views on community life and urban issues. Respondents were initially approached and then invited to take part in the research according to four criteria: 1) socioeconomic sector and/or professional experience; 2) duration of residence in the study areas; 3) proximity of the residence to the landfill or steel industry sites; 4) involvement in community organisations and/or activities. A set of open-ended questions were used in the interviews in order to encourage the participants to shape their own narratives and their understanding of problems and demands in terms of environmental restoration and conservation. Interview transcripts were coded and analysed against topics/criteria that emerged from the interviews themselves. In addition, various group activities were attended during the research, such as community hall meetings and celebrations, events and meetings organised by the local authority and protest marchers and campaigns.

The article is organised as follows: after this introduction, there is a review of the academic literature which suggests the importance of a more integral account of urban political ecology. The concrete experience of the two towns in the periphery of Glasgow is

then discussed and the empirical results indicate that the political ecology of the urban remains a central, although sometimes not easily recognised, element of the life in the studied communities. Finally, the concluding part consolidates the main findings and lessons learned.

### **Revisiting Urban Political Ecology**

As emphasised by authors such as Keil (2003), the liberation from oppression and poverty today goes mainly through the lives in urban areas and through the socio-natural metabolism that forms the urban. The urban needs to be considered as a process of socio-ecological change and urbanisation seen as the driving-force behind many environmental issues and the field where those problems are experienced more acutely (Heynen et al., 2006). For those reasons, urban political ecology (UPE) – the theoretical and investigative effort to explain socio-natural phenomena mediated by power disputes and that are part of the production of urban spaces – represents a step forward in relation to traditional scholarly work dedicated to social justice (when it ignores the ecological dimension of fairness), to environmental management (typically associated with notions of sustainability, efficiency and bureaucratised regulation) and to wider, less specific ecological politics (that offers only insufficient attention to urban questions). UPE's subject matter is the inescapable interplay between ecology and politics in the sense that urban ecology is inherently political while politics is necessarily ecological. The sub-discipline has helped to remove the artificial boundaries between the personal, social and physical elements of the city, as well as the contested basis of the access and allocation of resources and socio-spatial opportunities (Keil, 2005). Work on UPE excavates power relations that weave the “interwoven knots of social process, material metabolism and spatial form” (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003, p.906) that together account for the production of uneven landscapes within the broader dynamics of capitalist urbanisation (Holified, 2009).

Especially since the 1990s, UPE has been a response to the shortcomings of prevailing urban environmental perspectives (Swyngedouw, 2009) as it deals with “the integration of urban space and nature through related historical contexts” (Heynen, 2006, p.501). A main achievement was certainly the realisation that urban ecological problems play a key role in intricate relations of production, reproduction and social exclusion (‘Author A’, 2012b). Particularly in large metropolitan areas, urban expansion is characterised by ‘less visible’ zones or neighbourhoods inhabited by low-income communities with lower quality of life and limited socioeconomic prospects. Sacrifice areas in and around the city produce sacrificed people who, because of their political weaknesses – the ‘invisible people’ of these ‘invisible areas’ – are forced to put up with high impact activities, such as landfill waste, industries, dams and roads. It has been demonstrated that calls for justice cannot be only about redistributive action (i.e. removing the inequitable distribution of environmental goods and bads that especially affect low-income, disadvantaged communities), but are also related to the recognition of the diversity of the participants in community experiences and their meaningful participation in decision-making (Bullard and Johnson, 2000; Horowitz, 2012; Schlosberg, 2004). Theories of environmental justice have had to move beyond the distributional to emphasise the role of process, procedure and recognition in underlying the production of unequal outcomes (Fraser, 1997), at the same time that politico-ecological research increasingly addressed issues of environmental regulation, social exclusion and the

lived experiences of groups and individuals (Benford, 2005; Buckingham-Hatfield et al, 2005; Holland, 2008). Environmental deprivation was as well redefined to encompass elements of structural racism and the intersections between race and class and many other connected forms of discrimination (Pulido, 2000).

As the city was accepted as a socioecological metabolism – often described as hybrid or ‘cyborg’, rejecting any unnaturalness of the urban (Zimmer, 2010) – there has been growing appreciation among UPE scholars of the shared agency between society and the rest of nature, which contrasts with conventional interpretation of historic-geographical agency exclusively pertaining to the social realm. UPE is particularly concerned with the reworking of ‘human-non-human assemblages’ involved in the formation of socioenvironmental inequalities and in the possibility of political transformation (Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012). Various authors have examined the contested meaning of the nonhuman in urban areas and the indissociability between ecological change and sociopolitical reactions. For instance, Nygren and Rikoon (2008) make clear the importance of recognising the active role that nature plays in shaping socionatural relations, while Cumbers et al. (2010) criticise the tendency to locate agency almost exclusively in the action of capital and the state apparatus, relegating other political forces to a subordinate, passive position. A political ecology perspective is, thus, against the productivist and consumerist city that negates the individual its social role and in that process denies nature its role in political history. Wrongly conceptualised as emptied agency, it is easier to hide the diffuse resistance offered by grassroots organisations, individuals and urban nature at large. Agency is, therefore, an invaluable entry point into the contested management of the urban and, in particular, into the unequal, unfair interconnections between social groups and the rest of nature shaped by capitalist pressures and its internal contradictions (Holifield, 2009).

Another significant contribution of UPE scholars has been the movement away from ‘spectacular’ forms of injustice and deprivation into more ordinary practices of individuals and organisations (Hobson, 2006; Milbourne, 2012; Robinson, 2006). Socioecological injustices have this more pedestrian character and significantly impact on the capability of marginalised urban communities to live their lives (Whitehead, 2009). Not only are the physical and material dimensions of injustice important, but also the daily representation and discourse about nature contribute to the formation of unjust urban environments (Millington, 2013). The significance, as well as the ambiguity, of ‘everyday life’ for the comprehension of the changes and contradictions of capitalist society was famously established by Lefebvre in the years immediately after the Second World War. For Lefebvre (1991), the alienation caused by capitalism is not purely economic, but it is as well present in the inability to grasp and to think the ‘other’. The proletariat is then left in an ambivalent condition: crushed under the weight of physical exploitation and ideological deception and experiencing an incessant, everyday “contact with the real and with nature through work”. The result is that the proletariat is endowed with “a sense of reality which other social groups lose in so far as they become detached from practical creative activities” (Lefebvre, 1991, p.143). Loftus (2012) adds that the critique of everyday activities is part, from a politico-ecological perspective, of the dismantling of the false boundaries between the social and natural that pervades capitalist modernity (and post-modernity). Following Marx and Gramsci, Loftus argues that the

negligence of nature's role in history is an element of the rampant forms of alienation and the containment of the possibilities of radical insurgence by subaltern groups.

As can be seen from the above, UPE has already travelled a long way, from the denunciation of environmental injustices and the 'discovery' of the political in urban ecologies to the recognition of the socionatural basis of historical agency and the centrality of everyday life. Nonetheless, there is still work to be done in order to more competently connect the moments when the politicisation of the environment affects the community as a whole and with the more prosaic, silent forms of perceiving, suffering and reacting to the consequences of environmental change and management. UPE has so far dealt with the urban injustices, the neoliberal city and many aspects of unfairness and exclusion, but it is necessary to unveil, in more systematic ways, the politics of urban socionature wherever and whenever it exists. The main reason is that the depoliticisation of urban environmental issues, as denounced by Swyngedouw (2009), also derives from the unfortunate dissociation – by politicians and decision-makers, as well as most academics – between large-scale, dramatic forms of environmental injustice and the more quotidian, intermittent processes of hardship.

The small, microscale manifestation of politicised urban environments are not simply the residue of macro, intense political clashes, but both spheres interact and potentialise each other. Crucially, political struggles not only emerge from the process of everyday struggle, but daily interactions contain, in a different scale and with correspondent emphasis, comparable mechanisms of contestation. To a large extent, the heated moments of protest are the result of the long lag of silence, during which ideas and opinions are gestated and the germ of new protests is formed. In other words, the radicality of the most visible forms of reaction is immanent in the subtle, apparently unimportant feelings of the everyday life. The politics of urban ecology is not always evident or explicitly recognised, but it is nonetheless present and vividly sensed through the myriad of direct and indirect relations that shape urban socionatures. Equally, the everyday pain and anxiety caused by persistent mechanisms of socioecological degradation end up feeding the criticism that can later erupt through marches, protests and campaigns.

It is interesting that, although Lefebvre (1991, p.97) recognises the dialectics between different levels of interaction, he claims that everyday life "must be defined as a totality" *per se* because "it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human – and every human being – a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the real". That argument was pushed even further when de Certeau (discussed in Goonewardena, 2008) celebrates everyday life as the realm of 'resistance' *par excellence*, not as an attempt to change the structure of the world but more in terms of becoming a creative consumer. Whereas the everyday dimension needs full consideration, it cannot happen at the expense of the other important mechanisms of political disputes and class-based politics. What actually exists is a widespread 'sense' of the politicisation of urban ecology located in the connections between personal, household and communities in the city at large and also in its articulation with national and international spheres of interaction. The ability to perceive and react to environmental injustices happens through the dialectical convergence of such multiscale manifestations of urban political ecologies. As pointed out by Lukács (1971, p.10), concrete totality is "the category that governs reality". What's more, the failure to acknowledge this more integral politicisation of

urban lives and socrionatural relations can represent an important barrier for the removal of ecological degradation and environmental injustices.

The recognition of the more integral mechanisms of urban ecological politics – the persistent and insidious ‘sense’ of political ecology around socrionatural questions differently manifested in time, space and depth – has profound methodological, epistemological and interpretative repercussions. It is not enough, either, to call for a reflexion upon the intricacy of civil society (Leonard, 2012), micropolitics within communities (Truelove, 2011) and the initiative of environmental NGOs (Neumann, 2005), but minimise the many ways that the environment constitutes, and is shaped by, the identity, the demands and the struggle of urban groups. In particular, a critical approach should reject a focus on localisms that ignore larger economic, political and cultural processes, as much as a treatment of the city as undifferentiated, homogenous spaces (Braun, 2005). Work on UPE needs to sustain the connection between scales, spaces and moments that together form the wider ‘political ecology’ of urban areas. Scholars of urban political ecology are therefore encouraged to undertake an examination of the city as a living entity whose intrinsic politics unfolds in different scales and dimensions, as it is discussed in the following pages.

### **The Political Ecologies of Two Scottish Towns**

Informed by the foregoing discussion, this section will demonstrate how the contemporary reality of environmentally marginalised communities is constituted by a pervasive, often silent, sense of political ecology. Socioecological disputes and environmental management issues in the region have been clearly influenced by the long trajectory of mining, industrial production and the more recent transition to a post-industrial economy. Since the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Glasgow metropolitan area, which includes North Lanarkshire, has undergone a period of economic decline and population stagnation (Pacione, 2009). North Lanarkshire, more specifically, is now one of most deprived local authorities in Scotland and this condition has steadily deteriorated in terms of employment deprivation and other social and environmental indicators (Scottish Government, 2009). As in many other British regions, those disadvantaged by urban development are more likely to live in areas impacted by the effects of economic re-structuring, deindustrialisation and defective public policies (Pacione, 2004). Despite all those macro-scale processes, the politicised basis of urban socioecological issues transcends the more obvious susceptibility of marginalised social groups to chemical hazards or precarious public services to become a central element of the daily life and of multiple types of reaction.

The first town to be examined, Greengairs, has a notorious history of socrionatural exploitation and sociospatial marginalisation. Greengairs actually typifies the grievances and failures of environmental management and the mitigation of socioecological impacts in Scotland (Dunion, 2003). The settlement experienced a significant rate of economic development due to coal mining and quarrying activities during Glasgow’s booming industrial production in Victorian times. The village is still surrounded by a number of pit mines, including Scotland’s biggest opencast coalmine (an activity associated with severe socioecological impacts such as degradation of ecosystems, water and air pollution, land subsistence, vibration and noise). The mineral-rich land was ripped open to make way for



open-site mining and, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the gaping holes were plugged with rubbish from all over Scotland. A former opencast working to the south of the town was converted in 1990 into the largest landfill site in Europe, which has since then been commonly dubbed in the media as ‘the dustbin of Europe’. The landfill site covers 300 hectares and is able to receive 600,000 tonnes of waste every year (only around half of the void has been reclaimed so far and the site will be operational until 2038, according to ENTEC, 2009). Social deprivation may have preceded the establishment of the landfill, but both disproportionate siting and postsiting market dynamics have played a role in increasing hardship in the area (Richardson et al., 2010). A senior citizen declared in one of our interviews that the decision to open the landfill site “it was like a train running through the village” and that, since then, the life in Greengairs has been marked by a succession of clashes and bargains between the residents, the landfill site operators and the various layers of government (18/05/2010).

The tension between residents and landfill operators reached boiling point in 1998 when the community discovered toxic PCBs from England being dumped in Greengairs because such dangerous waste could not be disposed of in England because of stricter environmental standards and higher treatment costs south of the Scottish border (Dunion, 2003). After persistent protests, supported by the NGO Friends of the Earth-Scotland (FoE), and under intense media coverage, the operators commissioned a consultancy work and agreed with new terms ruled by the environment regulator SEPA. Greengairs attracted additional attention in 2002 when the First Minister of Scotland, Jack McConnell, used the term ‘environmental justice’ for the first time in a keynote speech. Following a visit to Greengairs, Mr McConnell stated that:

“The gap between the haves and have-nots is not just an economic issue; improving quality of life demands environmental justice too. At the moment there is a real injustice in that people who suffer the most from a poor environment are those least able to fight back.”  
(McConnell, 2002)

However, despite the personal involvement of the head of the Scottish Executive, in 2004 the residents saw in horror the approval of a new plan for additional landfill operations to the south of the village. Maria Donovan, chair of Greengairs’ Community Council then declared:

“We’ve been dumped on again. It is now exactly two years since the First Minister visited our village. We thought that his visit would signal the beginning of the end for the suffering our community has had to endure as a result of dumping and open-casting. But two years have passed and the misery still continues.” (FoE, 2004)

The fact that the First Minister was able to appropriate the language of environmental justice for the betterment of his government’s socioecological credentials, while the local communities continued to suffer from environmentally degrading projects, tells volumes about the substance of conventional policy-making. Mr McConnell invoked the symbolism of the environmental justice movement to try to appease – in a highly apolitical, piecemeal way

– the anger of residents desperately struggling to have their complaints heard. Intriguingly, there are some similarities here with the shift of FoE priorities from environmental justice to climate change in the years that followed the approval of the last landfill site. The change of NGO focus was explained by one of its members as necessary “because it was very difficult to sustain environmental justice as a campaign slogan for the organisation” (interview, 26/04/10). It suggests a hesitation of both politicians and NGO activists to relate the quotidian dimensions of the politicised urban ecology with the wider, structural forms of socioecological exploitation.

The result was the increasing frustration of the communities around the Greengairs landfill, especially because of persistent barriers to have their demands properly considered. There was growing dissatisfaction with what was seen as meaningless public consultations related to planning applications or the granting of environmental licences. As summarised in an interview with a community leader, “planners and politicians normally are the representatives of developers, not just in Scotland but globally” (17/05/10). In that regard, what some environmental justice theorists describe as the need to improve procedural justice (see Schlosberg, 2007) is not sufficient in the face of systematic, class-based mechanisms that produce highly unequal social landscapes. More than procedural changes, the foundation of fairer urban ecologies requires a radical reorientation of decision-making that effectively prevent the injustices committed in the present and deal with the legacies from the past.

As important as those intense, evident moments of politicisation is the more subtle, personal dimension of political ecology. In a cloudy spring day (11/05/11), with the assistance of the local Church of Scotland priest, it was possible to organise a focus group with eight residents in the annex of the Greengairs church and reflect upon their life, as well as the reactions to their collective socio-natural problems. Some of those presents were directly involved in the fight against the approval of the landfill site and expressed a clear disappointment with the recurrent disregard for their demands and complaints. Despite successive mitigation measures and various concessions to the community (e.g. it was mentioned investments of £2.2 million in sport and other facilities made by the landfill operator and the Scottish government), the group articulated a strong resentment with possible health risks. More importantly, the discussion revealed that in parallel, and dialectically connected, with the more visible disputes about the actual meaning of a politicised ecology and the practical repercussions for the community, there is the daily, more silent forms of anger and the necessary adjustments in the face of the perennial threats posed by the landfill. It was mentioned how the proximity with the waste discharge plant forced them to change how they wash and dry clothes, pay more attention to the places where children could play and try to ignore the vision and the smells coming from the landfill. There is also a constant uneasiness with the negative image of Greengairs perceived by the general public in Glasgow. One participant in the focus group affirmed that “people know us only for the wrong reasons, there is sometimes a stigma against Greengairs as if we were second-class citizens”. There were also references to internal divisions and intergenerational frictions affecting the community ability to react. Although some stated that “the best thing that we have here in the village is the people in the village”, there was condemnation of the apparent lack of interest and engagement of the younger generations, and also the newcomers, in the controversies related to the landfill site.

However, the criticism expressed by some elderly persons seemed slightly misplaced and contradicted by the strong views expressed by middle age and youngsters. After the opening of the new sports centre in Greengairs (18/06/2011) – which was one of the most recent compensatory measures offered to the local community – it was possible to record further opinions in a similar focus group. The landfill was again described as a main source of risks and associated with various threats that concur to magnify problems related to poor health, and lack of housing and recreation in the town. While some participants pondered that the landfill “had to go somewhere” and that its operators have learned to reduce the impacts on the community, serious concerns were voiced about the unknown impacts and the constant fear of cancer. There was also annoyance with the depreciation of the value of local properties and the difficulty to sell off houses in the area because of the presence of the landfill. A 44 years-old man affirmed that “if I was an outsider, I would certainly not buy a home here”. It was mentioned great frustration with the responsible local authority (North Lanarkshire Council) that, instead of addressing residents’ concerns, keeps transferring people (on social benefits) to the town, which reinforces the image of Greengairs as a “sacrifice area” and a destination for “the more desperate”. In the end, most manifested an uncomfortable pragmatism or embarrassing resignation towards an overall condition of uncertainty and potential harms.

Such traumatic experience did not prevent the submission of a new development proposal for a waste incinerator and energy plan to be built in the Drumshangie open cast works (near the landfill site). The project was announced as a 250 million investment that could process 300,000 tonnes of waste per year (the total annual production in Scotland is around 20 million tonnes). The planning application was submitted in 2008 and was followed by a public consultation that received more than a thousand objections – 51 from a group led by Mrs Maria Donovan alone – on grounds of health, transport and environmental impacts. The proposal was also rejected by the Greengairs Community Council and by the national organisations Communities against Toxics Scotland (CATsScotland) and Green Alternatives to Incineration in Scotland (GAINS). The residents of Greengairs not only uttered their opposition, but tried to propose other technical alternatives, such as a community recycling initiative and reuse facilities. Despite all that, the developer (Covanta, which claims on their website to be the world’s largest provider of energy from waste) was granted planning permission in May 2009 (under the number 08/01023).

At the time of our fieldwork, despite the bitter disappointment and some last minute mobilisation against the incinerator, the construction was scheduled to start in 2013 with completion expected in 2017. Discontentment was acute in the Greengairs community, especially because other areas were succeeding in blocking the construction of waste incinerators. In the nearby location of Coatbridge there were also protests and marches (one was attended during the fieldtrip on 18/06/11) and another scheme, granted on appeal in May 2011, was then being challenged by North Lanarkshire Council itself. In South Lanarkshire, the application for another incinerator in Dovesdale received 24,000 objections and was then withdrawn when the proponent Scotgen failed to answer questions raised by the environment agency (SEPA). It seemed that Greengairs continued to be considered one of the least desirable and more vulnerable areas in the region, where the worst development projects can

be located and with communities that are so politically weak that their protest – informed by the daily connection with the landfill – really doesn't matter.

More significantly, though, the politico-ecology in the Greengairs area has been translated into a general atmosphere of disquiet, which is directly and indirectly produced by the presence of the landfill site. Among the locals there is a feeling of constant disregard, by public and private agents alike, for the lives of those negatively impacted by the landfill. Even if and when the official discourse makes reference to environmental politics, the actual experience is one of clear 'postpolitical' trends produced by the separation between macro and micro components of socioecological degradation. Such fragmentation of ecological politics produces a political void that effectively annuls calls for the recognition of the basic rights of groups and ecosystems. As observed by Swyngedouw (2009), the postpolitical city closely derives from the particular staging of environmental problems and crafting of management techniques according to foreign, hegemonic politico-economic priorities.

A similar disconnection between small-scale impacts and large-scale development policies was also conspicuous in relation to the operation and closure of the large steel manufacturing in Ravenscraig. Motherwell, where Ravenscraig is located, had historically been the steel production capital of Scotland and was even nicknamed 'Steelopolis'. With the discovery of ironstone in North Lanarkshire, the region had become one of the main steel production areas in the United Kingdom since the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. At its peak, Ravenscraig steelworks used to have one of the longest continuous casting, hot rolling, steel production facilities in the world. Yet, variations in the ownership and functioning of Ravenscraig reflected national party politics and major changes in government strategies. In the post-World War II period, the Labour Government nationalised the Scottish iron and steel companies through the Iron and Steel Act 1949. However, the second Churchill government returned the companies to the private sector and it was then nationalised again by the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1967. Operation was eventually closed in 1992 by Prime Minister John Major, after years of neoliberal attack on the state utilities by Margaret Thatcher. The end of steel production caused the loss of 770 jobs, with another 10,000 job losses indirectly linked to the closure.

If job losses and transformations in the local society left a palpable sense of nostalgia about the end of the heavy industry, post-industrial Ravenscraig became one of the largest brownfield sites in Europe with more than 500 hectares in size. The future of the area became the object of fierce public debate and eventually it was decided to undertake a regeneration plan over a 30 years period. The project was launched in 2006 with a total budget of £ 1.2 billion aimed to accommodate 3,500 homes, a new town centre, a railway station, business and retail space, leisure and sports facilities, schools and hotels (BBC, 2006). Despite promises from central government, most of the investment in the regeneration of Ravenscraig has been made by the local council through the TIF (tax increment financing) scheme whereby city councils can borrow against their future business. Only a new regional sports centre, the new Motherwell College building and 800 houses have been built until 2011 (phase two of the regeneration started in early 2012, as well as a dual carriageway was agreed by mid-2012). Moreover, those plans have been controversial as local business groups expressed concern about further job losses and a likely depreciation of existing shopping facilities. The projects have also attracted constant controversy due to various delays caused

by new government regulation and cash problems with the funding agency Scottish Enterprise (BBC, 2004).

On the one hand, those in charge of the renewal of Ravenscraig claimed that:

Its redevelopment “is about creating a new community. [At the present] there is no community there and it has been very difficult for us to contact people and deal with the locals. (...) But we have tried to communicate and engage with the local people. I’m trying to establish a new community and not to satisfy the demands of the current, between brackets, community.” (interview with a Capella Group manager, 26/04/10)

On the other hand, the sort of urban renewal adopted for Ravenscraig betrays a highly technocratic restoration strategy based, essentially, on real estate opportunities due to the proximity with Glasgow. The promise to create a regional development hub has mainly produced new pockets of prosperity and dormitory neighbourhoods within degraded, sometimes derelict, urban spaces. The area has been transformed into a mosaic of new middle-class housing developments build inside derelict zones. All that corresponds to the contradictory forces of reurbanisation and counter-urbanisation that have operated in the Glasgow metropolitan area for many decades (Lever, 1993).

The announcement of a billionaire restoration budget and the mobilisation of construction companies contrast with threats to human health and urban ecosystems due to contamination by heavy metals. A major source of anxiety has been the supposedly contamination of land after four decades of industrial activity in Ravenscraig. Worries have been systematically raised, such as in July 2007, when an investigation by the local newspaper Wishaw Press revealed that plans for the new sports complex could be halted due to land contamination. Nonetheless, council officials and private developers have claimed that the land has been properly decontaminated and make reference to various technical reports. NHS Lanarkshire stated there is not an unusually high cancer rate in this area, including cases of cancer and lymphoma (Wishaw Press, 2011). Despite such reassurances from North Lanarkshire Council and other public agencies that the Ravenscraig land is completely safe and that the cancer rates are not unusually high in the area, many residents remain unconvinced. For many years those living near the brownfield site have raised concerns over health and safety. As affirmed by a local resident:

“There was asbestos, arsenic, lots of muck in there from the steelworks. It’s a real health and safety risk for everyone around here and everyone working on the site if it hasn’t been properly cleared. In my opinion they shouldn’t be building or doing anything there until someone can definitely prove that the site is fully decontaminated and so far I’ve not been able to find anyone who can.” (Motherwell Times, 2007)

As much as in Greengairs, the perception of the politico-economic trends coalesces, in multiple and unpredictable ways, with memories and reactions. Both the impacts of the original steel operation and the unpleasant landscape following its closure stirred protests and criticism. The politicised urban environment around Ravenscraig goes beyond simply disputes around material evidences of pollution, but it is as much related to an uncomfortable

sense of fear, risk and, ultimately, abandonment from authorities and the rest of society (who, incidentally, benefited substantially from industrial production in Ravenscraig and continues to send waste to Greengairs). There is great apprehension about the uncertain legacy of the heavy industry in Ravenscraig, as claimed in the King Lud pub:

“I have a big concern about the contamination of the land, oil, rubbish, the contaminated ground. This is now a very undesirable area to live, most people are on benefit until they die, lots of drinking and depression. (...) Very bad, aye, aye... there are no prospects for us here.” (17/06/11)

The feeling of loss and confusion remains even with those who managed to secure university education and better paid jobs, as in our visit and walk around the Ravenscraig site in June 2011 with a school teacher and former steel worker:

“Things look very strange now, don’t seem right. Ravenscraig should be here. The right thing would be to have Ravenscraig still here (...) [Nonetheless] It does not surprise me that it took too long to build [houses] in this area, there is so much rubbish in the ground (...). All the impurities filtered in the soil; I know people who walk their dogs in the morning here and feel the sense of contamination. People are really suspicious of cancer related to pollution.” (15/06/11)

The overall context of environmental injustices in North Lanarkshire has been further reinforced by the persistence of unemployment and low salaries. If the traditional labour communities in the county have been left behind in the more recent expansion of the services and leisure economy in Scotland (NLC, 2011), job losses and destitution among the less skilled workers have perversely led to an easier acceptance of poor household conditions and higher levels of environmental risks. In that sense, the fact that a significant proportion of the low-income residents often live on social benefits for many years is certainly not unrelated to their limited ability to react against socio-natural impacts and the deteriorated quality of the local environment. Several offices of the Citizen Advice Bureau – a charity that aims to help “people to resolve their problem” [see more at <http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk>] – were contacted during this research (i.e. in Motherwell and Bellshill around Ravenscraig, as well as in Airdrie near Greengairs) to inform our understanding of the vulnerable condition of large contingents of the local population. Constant indebtedness is a major problem and it seems to be getting worse because of the lack of professional opportunities and even the consumerist style of modern life; the result is an increase in deprivation in the region, despite the support offered by government agencies (17/05/2011, Citizen Advice Bureau manager). As mentioned by a retired teacher in relation to past and present dilemmas, “when times are hard, there is no future” (11/05/11), which was corroborated by a Bellshill resident when observed that “we are in the beginning of a new phase of poverty [after the 2008 financial crisis]” (29/06/11).

If Lefebvre (1991) was correct in observing that the liberation of the workers necessarily depends on their daily contact with work (in order to understand their subordinate condition and acquire class consciousness), the combination of unemployment and

socioecological deprivation only makes the removal of ingrained forms of sociospatial injustice much more difficult. At the same time, however, the communities of North Lanarkshire directly affected by urban environmental degradation have also demonstrated a peculiar capacity to interpret and to make sense of their own condition. The widespread environmental injustices present in the two towns needs be seen in a dialectical relation with the ability of the community to campaign, to get concessions from developers, to attract attention from politicians and, more fundamentally, to remain in the area (despite all the problems). By putting together interviews and notes from many visits to the area, it became clear the complex, at times explicit and often more subtle, consideration of environmental risks and inequalities. Disparities among the local population seemed to be due to spatial (those closer to the impacted areas tend to be more vocal), generational (elderly groups tend to relate cases of cancer and respiratory diseases) and phenomenological (those living longer in the locations are more concerned than newcomers) differences, but it is precisely in these nuanced forms of awareness and discourses that exists the possibility of collective learning and potentially reacting against an unfair environmental reality. In effect, the studied communities show uneven, although undoubtedly passionate, reactions to environmental injustices intermingled with the uncomfortable sentiment of living in the socioecological margins of the large metropolis.

The consequence is that, specifically in relation to the contingents of unemployed workers in North Lanarkshire, Lenin was probably wrong when affirmed that “those who own nothing but do not labour” as incapable of changing society (in Hobsbawm, 2007, p.180), given that political agency is not simply a concerted reaction to specific problems, but it is the accumulation of past experiences and the contested affirmation of identity that can erupt in unexpected forms of contestation and of the liveable spatiality of the city. As put by a Greengairs resident:

“We know, we are not stupid... what are the chances that we are going to close a landfill? Next to none! Now they are going to throw more and more money and get the incinerator approved. So, we work with them [mangers of the landfill] trying to come up with proposals to try and protect ourselves. We call for an increase in the rate of recycling; we have tried to agree proposals via development plans for the local area and fortunately some [of the proposals] have been approved.” (17/05/10)

The local communities have systematically superimposed any reference to the landfill site and the legacy of the steel industry with more pedestrian, patchy articulations of ecological politics in their immediate life activities. Concerns about the impact of those activities stay silent most of the time, but it can certainly emerge when people are invited to reflect upon their quotidian tasks. The main barrier for a fair resolution of socioenvironmental problems has obviously been the highly asymmetric political game that constantly punishes the locals. Furthermore, society and the rest of nature share together the faculty to react against degrading and exploitative trends (Luke, 1990). Agency is dialectically realised as part of the political affirmation of group identity and the reaction against unfair trends by urban groups, as much as by adjustments of more-than-human processes to ‘cope’ with the physical and chemical changes caused by socioeconomic activities. For instance, the

oscillation of the water table in Greengairs and the alteration local biodiversity in Ravenscraig are unmistakable proofs of the historic-geographical agency of nature affecting economic processes and political disputes.

### **Conclusions: In Search of an ‘Integral’ Urban Political Ecology**

The above case studies demonstrated that the politics of urban ecologies is an integral phenomenon shaped both by moments of concerted action or social upheaval and by the more silent perceptions of socionatural conditions and everyday lives of communities in environmentally deprived areas. Urban political ecology, both as a field of scholarly work and the inspiration of protest and action, needs to continuously and creatively embrace the ontological connections between dispersed and concentrated manifestations of urban politics. In the case of the current discussion, the politico-ecological problems of the North Lanarkshire towns were predicated upon the long trajectory of industrial and post-industrial expansion that continuously reproduces mechanisms of ecological disturbance and forge new arenas of confrontation. Especially in a context with such sharp inequalities between old and new residents, low and high income families, and privileged and deprived locales, the urban ecology is highly politicised, but this politicisation happens in multiple directions and through the totality of interactions, memories and prefigurations.

The growth of large areas of material, organisational and psychological deprivation in the city is the result a constant reaffirmation of a certain urban rationality predicated upon people (and also nature) being supposedly deprived of political agency. But even when agency was apparently worn down through long-lasting processes of marginalisation, control and alienation, the marginalised groups retain the ability to react to the most serious forms of the double exploitation of society and the rest of nature. Instead of only being evident in situations of acute confrontation and organised protest, urban political ecology is widely pervasive, in symbolic and material forms, across social groups and their interdependencies with the rest of socionature. Even when not directly connected with campaigns or mobilisations, residents express their subtle discernment of their dissatisfactory ecological conditions. In different ways, the local communities expressed a clear uneasiness and ability to react against what is seen as a situation fraught with risks and uncertainties.

Finally, during our research, we could not avoid a symbolic association between the multiple avenues of reaction mentioned by the locals and the name of the pub mentioned above: King Lud is probably a reference to a pre-Roman sovereign, but it nonetheless also reminds us of Luddism, the machine-breaking movement among the British working class in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century... That is, the very pub where many former steel workers gather to remember the past and think about the present is, indirectly, a reminder of the long history of class struggle against exploitation and poor quality of life in many parts of Scotland. What really exists is a widespread ‘political ecology’ that is fuelled by the perceived unfairness of policies and sociospatial trends. It is only by fully understanding the complexity of urban ecological politics that it may be possible to improve the effectiveness of responses and secure higher levels of environmental justice.



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