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## Social Economy as Antidote to Criminal Economy: How Social Cooperation is Reclaiming Commons in the Context of Campania's Environmental Conflicts

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# SOCIAL ECONOMY AS ANTIDOTE TO CRIMINAL ECONOMY

## How social cooperation is reclaiming commons in the context of Campania's environmental conflicts

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**ABSTRACT:** This article contributes to ongoing debates on how bottom-up social cooperation can halt and reverse processes of environmental and human degradation, dispossession and impoverishment, by proposing a synchronization of resistance and of commoning practices. The article moves from the empirical case of social and ecological conflicts currently unfolding in the so-called Land of Fires, an area in Southern Italy infamous for the socio-environmental impacts of two decades of waste disposal, mismanagement and contamination. Within this context, a coalition of grassroots movements is struggling to resist livelihoods degradation through an alliance with anti-Mafia social cooperatives. We provide an in-depth analysis of emerging social and economic networks that connect the strategies of grassroots movements for environmental justice with the work of social cooperatives that reclaim lands and assets confiscated to Mafia. The interests of environmental activists meet the interests of social cooperatives at the crossroad of territory reclamation with the spheres of social and economic production and reproduction. Framing the case as a cultural and physical re-appropriation of territory, we provide an analysis of strategies and limits for a symbolic and practical project of social re-appropriation of the commons (De Angelis 2012).

**KEYWORDS:** Commons, Organized Crime, Social Cooperatives, Social Movements, Socio-environmental Conflicts

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## 1. Introduction

In the current European conjuncture of uneven economic recession, top-down directives for public spending reviews and attempts to restart growth, we witness frequent clashes between the priorities of local communities and those supported by international and national political economic institutions. Increasingly, groups of people in different contexts, while counteracting processes of exclusion and degradation, are also organizing themselves to regain control on local resources and to revive popular participation in the political process (Martinez-Alier 2002; Anguelovski 2013). On these premises, this article contributes to ongoing debates on how bottom-up social cooperation can halt and reverse processes of environmental and human degradation, dispossession and impoverishment. By focusing on the cooperation and the mutual strengthening of resistance practices and social economies in a contest of environmental conflict, we provide an analysis of strategies and limits for a symbolic and practical project of social re-appropriation of the commons.

Rebuilding connections within communities and between people and environments is a grassroots work that echoes the writings of Gregory Bateson, from whom we learn that "everything is connected". Bateson invites us to look at the patterns that connect because "what can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a thing" (Bateson 1972). In this paper, we investigate the connections developed within local communities facing social exclusion and widespread contamination. We focus on networking and partnerships that trigger cultural changes and nurture emancipatory patterns, both on social and individual level. Through these connections, local communities seek to organize and resist processes of contamination, dispossession and impoverishment, and to free themselves from Mafia rule, developing a sense of belonging to "the patterns that connect" (Bateson 1972). The coordination between grassroots environmental movements and social cooperatives, we argue, is putting the basis for a social recreation and re-appropriation of the commons, that is, a bottom-up cultural and political reorientation of the ownership and management of resources through shared acts of making-in-common (De Angelis 2012).

The communities we engage with live in the so-called Land of Fires, an area in Southern Italy infamous for the power wielded by organized crime and for the socio-environmental impacts of waste disposal and mismanagement. In this context, we provide an in-depth description and analysis of emerging social economies networks, involving cooperatives who work land confiscated to Mafia, environmental activists, citizens associations and private actors. In an attempt to decolonize their imaginary both from Mafia values and from economic imperialism, they try to integrate individual and

community wellbeing in novel socio economic structures, to reconnect people with land, agriculture with welfare, environmental struggle with social justice, ethic with economy. In doing so they seem to adopt Bateson's *wider perspective* through acts that radically change both the material reality and the ways they understand this reality and themselves within it. The joining of resistance to inequalities and self-organization of social reproduction through practices of commoning that we discuss is a promising path for enhancing the democratic participation in the making of our present and future societies. The task is to turn the challenges we are facing in opportunities for novel socio-environmental arrangements to emerge. The experience of Campania's activists points to a way that can inspire similar struggles in other contexts.

## **2. Methodology**

We conducted an ethnographic study of the grassroots environmental movements and of the social cooperatives in Campania between February and May 2014. The methods used for collecting data are individual semi-structured interviews, oral histories, participant observation and documents reviews. We collected twenty interviews to activists involved in environmental struggles and ten interviews to members of social cooperatives. The interviews were transcribed and coded in order to detect common themes and meaning-making processes. We refer to several documents from press, official sources (trials and police investigations, government projects and reports), institutional bodies (national statistic institutes) and unofficial documents (grassroots movements' reports).

## **3. Commons Movements and Social Movements**

Nowadays, we witness a renovated interest for the study and the practice of commons (Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Bollier 2014; Shaw 2014). The "language of the commons" is gaining momentum again as an emergent array of "commons movements" in urban, rural and digital settings around the world is producing, re-appropriating or recreating commons. In terms of the targeted resources and organizational practices, these emergent commons have multiple and varied declinations, such as indigenous' and peasants' collective management of forests and agricultural lands; urban guerrilla gardening; occupations of empty public buildings for social revitalization and so on.

In the classical formulation provided by Elinor Ostrom (1990), commons are defined as a paradigm of governance and resource management. The term referred to the norms, rules and institutions that enable the shared management of common pool resources (CPR). The work of Ostrom, and of the group of researchers she coordinated, was a reaction to the belief, widely held until the 1980s, that CPRs could only be managed by the State or the market through private property. CPRs scholars instead showed that groups of resource users at the local level could jointly create institutions to sustainably manage those resources over long periods. Advancing the work of Ostrom, further studies around commons have pointed out the influence of exogenous political economic factors on the ways CPRs are managed (Peluso 1992; García-López 2013). Shifting the gaze from the conditions that ensure the sustainability of the common pooled resource to the actual social practice that turns resources into commons, other practitioners and researchers prefer to talk about commoning as a verb rather than a noun, to highlight the emergent processes of shared stewardship about things that a community possess or manage in common (Linebaugh 2010; Helfrich and Bollier 2012)

Our interpretation of commons relies on the work of Massimo De Angelis, particularly on his analysis of the relations between social movements and commons movements (De Angelis 2010, 2012). For De Angelis the need to think about the current relevance of the commons comes from their potential for reconfiguring social relations and for articulating new social systems of production in common. In his definition, commons are the manifestation of a social force that addresses “the various needs of reproduction of different communities by mobilising the natural and creative resources at their disposal or that they are able to identify and reclaim from other social forces” (De Angelis 2012, p.4). As a social force, acts of commoning are forms of collective self-help solutions to the problems of social reproduction faced by communities. The social forces implementing commons always organize vis-à-vis external social forces that constantly threaten to co-opt their efforts. The possibilities for the flourishing of acts of commoning are based on the achievements of previous struggles or rely on the creation of new self-organized spaces, in a constant bargaining with systemic forces (such as the State and Capital) that attempt to absorb their subversive charge. In order to resist dispossession, co-optation and enclosure, the commons movements need social movements. While there is an inherent connection between commons and social movements (they both presuppose one another to a certain extent), they also have different sequences and act at different levels. Social movements move from a *clash* with other social forces, in order to resist the dispossession of rights and to achieve some form of redistribution. Commons movements instead act on the basis of the available

possibilities (what De Angelis calls available *deals*) to foster the self-organization and collective management of resources. A process that aims to transform the balance of systemic forces, therefore, “must seek ways to couple social movement and commons, to *synchronize* their respective sequences, to make more clearly the subjects of movements commoners and make commoners protestors” (De Angelis 2012, p.18).

In this light, we advance an interpretation of the collaboration between social cooperatives and grassroots environmental movements as an attempt to synchronize commoning practices with strategies of political pressure. The enhancement of self-organization brought forward by the social cooperatives strengthens the organizational base of grassroots movements and their ability to promote real changes. On the other hand, the work of grassroots movements attempts to challenge the power imbalances, to increase the democratic space and to enlarge the condition of possibilities for the flourishing of commoning practices. In addition, social movements stimulate cooperatives to remain constantly vigilant and reflective on the risk of co-optation. In the case we analyse, their joint actions are emerging in a context of conflict. Far from being a limiting factor, the ruptures created by conflicts represent openings towards radically different paradigms of managing and organizing life in common. How the social forces of commoning and social movements in Campania have emerged, and which kind of conflict they are facing, is described and explained in the next sections.

#### **4. The Land of Fires and the criminal economy**

Our research field is located in the Northern part of Campania region in Southern Italy and corresponds to the area labelled by local activists, and recently mainstreamed by Italian media<sup>1</sup> and politicians<sup>2</sup>, as the “Land of Fires”. The area comprises the provinces of Naples and Caserta, a large and complex urban/rural system that is the most densely populated area in Italy while having the lowest GDP pro-capita (ISTAT 2014). The presence of rooted criminal organizations (the so-called *Camorra*) had historically a great impact on the regional economic and socio-environmental changes. *Camorra* groups are armed organizations whose main will is to maintain power positionalities through a complex interplay of territorial control, service provision, political patronage,

<sup>1</sup> All Italian major newspapers have recently picked up the term in their reports on Campania socio-environmental situation (e.g. cfr. La Repubblica, Corriere della Sera and Il Mattino from January to March 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The law drafted in February 2014 as a government response to the social mobilizations of Campania people, has been labelled by politicians and media the “Land of Fires law”.

violence and the spreading of specific cultural values (Santino 1995). Their aim is the maximization of profits through a predatory economic behaviour, pursued even at the cost of social legitimacy. Moreover, criminal capitals circulate constantly between legal and illegal realms of economy, supporting processes of accumulation coherent with the imperatives of global capital (Arlacchi 1979). Indeed, in its contemporary manifestations, criminal economy can be seen as an extension or an extreme form of capitalist accumulation, providing legal companies and the State with the channels, the instruments and the territorial control suitable for boosting economic performances, for cutting costs and for creating social unrest.

During the last two decades, two intertwined, multi-scale processes have had a remarkable influence on the socio-environmental and economic systems of this area, leading to the transformation of *Campania Felix*<sup>3</sup> into Land of Fires. The first process is the implementation of the regional urban waste cycle, supervised and managed by a special government agency and carried out by private firms, operating under the legal framework of the "urban waste emergency". In a non-transparent and controversial way, the government agency assigned to a partnership of private companies the task of dealing with all the urban waste daily produced in Campania. The private firms opted for an industrial plan based on two waste-to-energy plants and seven waste processing facilities. Within the framework of the emergency, the companies were granted complete freedom to decide on the location of the infrastructures according to their needs, thus avoiding negotiations with the local communities and environmental impact assessments. The factual realization of the plan entailed the dispossession of municipal land, the deployment of "technological fixes" for dealing with waste and the financialization of waste as the guarantee of revenues for the banks loaning the money to the companies. When the garbage was flooding Naples and other municipalities of Campania, causing an eco-social catastrophe with worldwide media coverage, the government agency used its powers to impose the opening of landfills and storage sites in rural areas already jeopardized by previous pollution, causing social unrest.

The second process is the illegal dumping and burning of hazardous waste in unsuitable landfills and in rural areas accomplished by a complex network of entrepreneurs, state officials, industry managers, landowners and organized crime groups. Since the early nineties, million tons of hazardous waste travelled to Campania through networks provided by stakeholders, often belonging to organized crime, whose main role was to connect industry managers willing to cut the costs of correct waste disposal procedures

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<sup>3</sup> Ancient Romans used to call the region *Campania Felix* (Happy Campania), to indicate the mild climate and the fertility of the soil. Cfr. The famous sentence "Hinc felix illa Campania est" of *Pliny The Elder*, a well-known naturalist lived in the 1st century AD.

with the routes and the places where their waste could be accommodated at lower costs in illegal ways (Massari and Monzini 2004; Legambiente 2007; Iacuzzi 2008; Pecorella et al. 2013). Corruption of public officials, political protection and patronage, and the lack of credible deterrents by the State, have made this business one of the main revenues for criminal groups and allowed legal as well as illegal businesses to socialize the costs of production while privatizing the profits.

These two processes have complex interrelations that blur the demarcation between legal and illegal practices of waste management. The common factor that best exemplifies their functioning is the profit-driven logic of what has been termed, following Harvey (2003), accumulation by contamination: the process whereby the capitalist system socializes costs through successful costs-shifting strategies, which degrades the means of existence and bodies of specific groups in order to find new possibilities for capital valorization (Demaria and D'Alisa 2013). The dimension of the *bios*, of life, becomes thus embedded into market mechanisms, even though unaccounted, turning life itself into an accumulation strategy. In Campania, the arrangements required to carry out this process implied an unequal distribution of power, which manifested itself in the shrinking of the democratic space of negotiation on environmental management issues and in the loss of the fundamental rights to health, to safety and to self-determination for the local communities (D'Alisa, Walter M., Burgalassi D. and Healy H. 2010; Armiero and D'Alisa 2012).

The socio-environmental impacts of these intertwined processes have slowly shown their magnitude. According to surveys of the Campania Regional Agency for Environmental Protection, there are today 2551 contaminated sites in all of Campania, with the majority of them clustered in the area between Naples and Caserta. The pollutants found are mostly coming from urban and industrial waste incorrectly disposed (ARPAC 2008). Several scientific studies connect the higher rates of cancer diseases among the population of this area to the presence of pollutants from waste (Senior and Mazza 2004; Comba et al. 2006; Fazzo et al. 2008; Martuzzi et al. 2009).

The stigma attached to the people and to the land, reverberates on the agricultural sector. Local agriculture, already impoverished by the economic crisis and by the deregulation of imports, suffers the exclusion from consumers' choice for the fear of contamination. Many small-scale, family owned farms are on the brink of failure, even when they can certify their products as contaminants-free. Finally, the decline of the local agricultural production system weakens further the control of local residents on their territory and resources (ISMEA-Unioncamere 2014).



## **5. Campania's Grassroots Movements: from resistance to re-appropriation**

Alongside the continuous “waste emergency” and the illegal dumping of noxious waste, a complex constellation of grassroots movements emerged on the toxic fields of Campania. Local committees of concerned citizens organized campaigns against the localization of landfills and incinerators on their territories and took a clear stand against the illegal dumping. They rarely called themselves environmentalists: personal reasons linking health concerns with the loss of control over the environment acted as mobilizers, more than any supposed will to “protect the nature” (Armiero 2008).

The sensuous perceptions of environmental changes unsettled the experience of everyday life and foregrounded the work of continuous, collective self-formation by active citizens that begun investigating the causes and the effects of waste flows disrupting rural and urban environments. Local committees produced autonomous forms of environmental knowledge through the merging of sensuous perceptions and scientific expertise (Armiero 2014). The influence of unequal power relations at work in the rearranging of the landscape became the focus of activists. This led to the politicization of the processes linking biophysical change, spatial restructuring, technological and scientific discourses, governance methods and waste flows. From the specific issue of waste and contamination, the scope of the grassroots movements grew to embrace the dimensions of local economies and public participation in the making of cities, fostering the emergence of a grassroots environmental politics focused on building new relations between territories and communities, through both self-organization and political lobbying.

The social mobilization in Campania has been striking for its heterogeneity: the mobilizations have cut through the social fabric involving people from economically deprived areas, middle class and scientific community on the same side of the conflict. Strong divides also crossed the movements: on the strategies to adopt, on the degree of cooperation to maintain with public institutions, on the priorities to address. However, what began as a form of engagement by disconnected local movements, evolved into a recognizable regional coalition that linked with other national and international movements in a common struggle for environmental and social justice.

Throughout the recent history, we can identify two main periods of popular environmentalism in Campania. The first wave of mobilization runs from 2000 to 2011: eleven years of “waste wars” during which the State’s plans for dealing with urban trash encountered the steady opposition of local communities. Throughout these conflicts, the involvement of organized crime in the waste business emerged as a systemic issue, especially in the light of investigators reports and of trials to *Camorra* affiliates,

politicians and entrepreneurs. These findings became then widespread thanks to activists' independent reports. The second wave runs from 2012 until today, representing a shift of Campania grassroots movements from the fight against toxics to the physical and symbolic re-appropriation of territories, extending at the same time the political agenda and the areas of intervention.

Between 2000 and 2011, thousands of people from the poor neighbourhoods of Naples and from the municipalities of the plain felt threatened and dispossessed by the waste policies implemented under the emergency regime. The most proactive among them built up local coordination units through the organizational form of "grassroots committees", opposing what they perceived as an authoritarian governance of waste not concerned with environmental and human safety. In at least 37 localities, grassroots committees directly confronted the government plans (Festa 2012). The committees aroused in this period grew around the local perceptions of past and present urban degradation and land dispossession, and they had a prominent defensive stance. With the increase of repression and the proliferation of front lines of the conflict, activists implemented trans-local coordination efforts between local committees, drawing a geography of mutual support and concerted efforts. The government's waste policies were contested on the basis of alternative waste cycles projects formulated by the movements through knowledge exchanges and affiliations with international networks (like Zero Waste Alliance). The elaboration of alternatives, focused on reduction, recycling and redesigning of materials, became the most powerful critical instrument for contesting the top-down waste policies based on incineration and commodification of waste. New narratives concerning the local history of pollution and health impairments were produced through the investigation of past and present contaminating activities and by collecting personal histories of sickness. With the involvement of experts in disagreement with the government's technicians, movements politicized the uncertainties and the biases of scientific knowledge, thus valorising the historical perceptions of environmental change experienced by lay people. The physical repression deployed by the State crushed the resistance most of the times, imposing the companies' plan through the force of police batons. Besides violence, the delegitimization of activists was built and reinforced through discursive formations drawn from a repository of enduring stereotypes (Petrillo 2009, Festa 2012), based on the characterization of Southern Italian people as 'primitive', 'Mafia associates' and 'uncivil'. National media reports and political statements dismissed any alternative proposal of environmental management and blamed Campania people's lifestyle as the main cause of their cancer diseases. The paradox of this way of dealing with social unrest has been that organized

crime and corrupted officials continued, in the heat of the events, with their practice of illegal dumping of toxic waste.

The second wave of mobilizations runs from 2012 until today. With the official end of the “emergency regime” in 2009, the national and regional institutions settled the management of urban waste within a fragile cycle that incorporated the environmental injustices imposed by force in previous years. Moreover, the legacy of the emergency are between 6 and 7 million tons of trash packed into waste blocks and amassed in “temporary” storage sites located amidst the cultivated fields of several municipalities in the provinces of Naples and Caserta. Despite numerous arrests and seizures of companies involved in the illicit traffic of toxic waste, illegal disposal practices have continued and the grassroots movements remained alert. The physical repression experienced by people contributed to the outflow of mass participation, but the core groups of activists kept on organizing campaigns and monitoring the environmental conditions.

In the most recent years, we identify three main coalitions of Campania’s local committees that came to the forefront in terms of coordinating inputs, nurturing actions, formulating proposals and receiving institutional recognition. These coalitions differ from each other for member’s class belonging, geographical location and political attitude. *Cittadini Campani* (Campania’s Citizens) groups mostly people from the richer neighbourhoods of Naples and from the city’s middle-class. With strong belief in science and rational argumentation, their main path of intervention is the institutional lobbying and the attempt at influencing government decisions through democratic means. *Rete Commons* (Commons Network) is a coalition that embrace the several popular movements emerged in the northern part of Naples and the core group of activists also belong to the social centre *Insurgencia*, located in Chiaiano (the theatre of a long battle between activists and the State), that has a radical leftist and anti-capitalist agenda. *Rete Commons* has produced probably the most penetrating critiques of the connections between capitalist mode of production, waste colonization in Campania and the role of organized crime. They also work on several social and agricultural projects. *Coordinamento Comitati Fuochi* (Coordination body of Committees against Fires) is the most recent and bigger coalition organized by activists. It groups more than one hundred local committees from the municipalities of the plain. It involves many ordinary citizens with no previous direct political experience, scientists, farmers, associations, and it has strong ties with the Church. It was able to organize several marches in recent years to urge government action against contamination, where thousands of people took part. At the same time, it is a highly differentiated coalition, with several ongoing socio-ecological projects addressing education, agriculture, grassroots map-

ping, popular epidemiology, the formulation of alternative local development paths and political lobbying.

These three coalitions have been at the forefront of the current resurgence of Campania's grassroots eco-politics. We locate in their cooperation a shift compared to the past mobilizations in terms of the political scope, and we argue that their current coordinated projects signal a shift in terms of eco-political performances. In the fall of 2013, they created a common regional coalition with the name of *Fiume in Piena* (Raging River) that formulated a shared platform to frame the problems and to advance the alternatives. Despite their divergences, the coalition constructed a single document that tackled the multifaceted mechanisms of the socio-ecological exploitation. The most important point of this document is the request of real democracy, considered as the base for addressing all the other inequities concerning urban waste management, toxic waste disposal, special laws, health prevention, agricultural sector and public participation in the decisions on how to allocate and manage common resources.

Thanks to the work of the coalition, the Land of fires was imposed to the national political agenda. However, government institutions involved only marginally the activists in the drafting of potential countermeasures, failing to implement the first request of the movements: direct involvement and consultation in every step. The channels opened with State institutions represent a field of the struggle on which the coalition is still actively pursuing its shared agenda.

While engaging with the socio-ecological inequality inscribed in urban and rural environments, activists in Campania dealt with the material and conceptual reconstruction of the spatial relations of their places. According to Latin American political ecologists Escobar (2008) and Leff (2012), an effective grassroots political strategy has to entail the re-appropriation of knowledge and space through the reinvention of cultural identities and through the reshaping of territories. The connection of symbolic, material and structural dimensions (Turco 1998) is assumed as a distinctive element of the processes of place based development enhancing community resilience and self-organization (Magnaghi 2010). In Campania the experience of conflict is producing a bottom-up culture of socio-ecological relationships linked with practices of commoning that open up possibilities for a transformative politics. These grassroots critical spatial practices influence the eco-social nexus by framing, acting and organizing alternative representations of reality and alternative ways of providing goods, services and safety. Our findings bring evidence of how the strategies recently deployed by the movements combine physical rearrangements of the urban-rural relations with the articulation of new imaginaries. The struggle against toxics revealed to the activists the interconnect-edness of waste colonization with the loss of community control on their environ-

ments. The exclusion of community supervision and involvement in the forms of local and regional economic development had left to private multi-national companies backed by the government and to criminal groups a space to exploit ruthlessly the land according to the rules of exchange values over use values. Through formulating a notion of *territory* that signifies the interdependence of communities' wellbeing with the care of their surroundings, Campania activists are today performing practices of re-appropriation of knowledge and space aimed at improving self-organization while developing an anti-Mafia culture critical with the effects of capitalist economy.

The mapping of territories enacted by activists is one of these strategies. Using simple technological devices and internet platforms, activists had begun monitoring the environmental conditions of their places already ten years ago. The main reason to produce autonomous maps was the need to make visible the degradation of land in the face of the denials of the central government. From the "visualization of the bads" to the "perception of the goods", the step has been a political one. Activists reformulated their practice of mapping by including in their searches also all those elements that they considered as common resources and means of identification, often finding "beauty" surrounded by degradation: *"Recover the beauty means to reappropriate space, territory, liveability for all, and if the liveability and the rediscovery of beauty becomes the cultural heritage of all of us, then we have valorised everything."* (Interview to L.I., Coordinamento Comitati Fuochi). This shift signals a reworking of the representations of space and subjectivities: besides and connected to the resistance against unwanted land-use, activists feel they have to intervene in their environments to reclaim them for community use.

The partnership between grassroots movements' coalitions and farmers' associations is another of the strategies deployed, closely related to the first. This cooperation attempts to provide both an alternative food provision chain and a territorial control against further exploitation. Besides the creation of networks with already existing local small farms, groups of activists begun taking care of small portions of private or public lands formerly left abandoned, to turn them into cultivated fields. This practice is flourishing, drawing knowledge and means of identification from the rooted local agricultural tradition. Sticking to their land, refusing to go away, activists are working today on a deeper level compared to the previous years of mobilizations. The aim is to recuperate local agricultural knowledge and to merge it with the social movements' objective of constructing strong multi-scalar networks of cooperatives, inspired by similar examples like the *community-supported agriculture* (Grasseni 2014). Farmers are joining the activists into consortia that self-certify the safety of their products. The certification procedure is grounded in personal relations of trust built between move-

ments and ordinary citizens. Moreover, as emerged in interviews, activists believe that by rooting social cooperatives on their territories these can function as “dams” against further dispossession and contamination. To re-appropriate lands for common use works by creating protective bastions as in a “war of position” with top-down attempts at restructuring spaces in unequal ways, nurturing a participatory political project aimed at the preservation and recreation of the commons. In the words of L.I.: *“The future is in the commons. The future is in a new, widespread culture of care of the commons. I mean people have to understand that without the respect, protection and care for the commons, the primary good is destroyed. If this way of thinking does not increase, there is not future for the community, no future for the principles of socialization and sharing of being a community. So, it is important to put in motion many mechanisms that serve to promote the spreading of the culture of the beauty of the commons”*. Very interesting among these mechanisms is the experience of the NCO consortium that we analyse in the following section.

## 6. NCO – Social Economy Network

The NCO (*Nuova Cooperazione Organizzata* – New Cooperation Organized) is a consortium, founded in 2012, involving five so-called ‘social cooperatives’<sup>4</sup> that share common interests, principles, and the same vision of their community<sup>5</sup>. The consortium ironically takes the acronym of the *Nuova Camorra Organizzata* (New Organized Camorra known as NCO), a powerful Mafia organization founded in the late 1970s by Raffaele Cutolo to renew the old rural Camorra and create a real business organization. The vision of the consortium contends that it is necessary to organize people and to build networks for joining forces in order to fight against the Mafia while also struggling against the prejudices referred to disadvantaged people. The cooperatives begun to collaborate together within the Christmas initiative “Let’s give Camorra a gift”<sup>6</sup>, a joint selling including the products of several cooperatives, associations and private

<sup>4</sup> In Italy the law 381/91 recognises the social cooperatives as private non-profit enterprises finalised “at the human promotion and social integration of citizens”. Social cooperatives produce social services (type A) and manage different kinds of activities providing work integration of disadvantaged people (type B). They are the most common type of social enterprise in Italy. It is an important economic actor constantly growing and increasingly playing a key role within the national economy (Andreaus et al. 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Formally, only 4 cooperatives join the consortium (Al di là dei sogni, Eureka, Agropoli, Millepiedi), but in our analysis we also include the cooperative Resistenza whose adhesion procedure is relatively advanced.

<sup>6</sup> The name ironically refers to the popular Neapolitan expression “fare un pacco” (give a package/gift) that means to cheat.

companies that denounced racketeering or that were involved in the fight against criminal organizations. After this success, some cooperatives decided to commercialize their products together under the umbrella brand NCO to increase consumer awareness and improve visibility. Progressively, the strategic alliances among cooperatives reached organizational and productive assets, developing common log frame and working plan that facilitated knowledge exchanges and that affected the partnering organizations' performances. Considering only the four cooperatives formally members of the consortium, they develop a total turnover of approximately € 2,500,000 and employ about sixty people. Furthermore, there are several seasonal contracts and voluntary workers, for instance one of the NCO cooperative employs about thirty seasonal workers for three months a year in order to manage the educational farm.

Each cooperative arises in the 2000s thanks to the effort of a strongly motivated small group of people attempting to develop innovative experiences of community welfare and social inclusion of disadvantaged people (prisoners, former drug addicts, the mentally, psychologically and physically disabled on so on). *"A red thread running through all the cooperatives is our support to the Democratic Psychiatry and specifically the "Basaglian revolution" as a prism to look at the mental illness<sup>7</sup>. The Basaglian reconfiguration of psychiatry as a mean for the well-being of the entire society is the paradigm that frame our work. We take as a starting point the potential of people who are deemed mentally ill or psychologically/socially different, rather than focusing on their limitations"* (Interview to S.P., Coop. Al di là dei sogni).

This attitude prevents coops from moving on a merely medical therapy terrain, fostering a more comprehensive social rehabilitation and empowering role. The care is based in the integration of disadvantaged people into the social, economic, ecological and community framework. In other words, the fundamental rights of citizenship are assumed also as the most significant determinants of social health. This "care-for-the community", or community welfare, is not simply performed on individual problems, but it has intrinsic effects on the entire local community, since it aims to address the social causes of the disorder: *"the fight against the Mafia culture as well as the fight against social and environmental injustice, are the natural consequence of seeking the community wellbeing"* (Interview to P.L., Coop. Millepiedi).

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<sup>7</sup> The Democratic Psychiatry Movement in 1978 also led to the so-called 'Basaglia Law' (Law180) that established a gradual shutting down of psychiatric hospitals and assigned prevention, care and rehabilitation in mental health to new community-based services. An important feature of this reform was the shift from a national health service toward a decentralized system based on local health districts. However its implementation is still in progress and the reorganization differs strongly from region to region.

The legislation of Campania region's health services has supported the social cooperatives development by allowing them to manage health, social and educational services and other activities (agricultural, industrial, commercial and service) aimed at helping vulnerable persons, thanks to special agreement with the local Department of Mental Health that define personalized care programs with specific budgets. These innovative collaborations, establishing a co-management of health services, present a great challenge (for both social cooperatives and public authorities), but they are able to produce very positive impacts for users and for local communities, and they represent cost effectiveness and budget savings measures respect to public spending (Hassink et al. 2007; Sempik et al. 2010). Towards the end of the decade, the NCO began to link agricultural practices and care services and to implement different *green care* activities, including elements of healthcare, social rehabilitation, education or employment opportunities for various vulnerable groups. The choice to practice agriculture combines the strong potential of agricultural activities to involve and integrate "problematic people" (Di Iacovo et al. 2006), with the objective to promote community well-being: *"for us agriculture is a tool to create social relations and improve community awareness about environmental problems"* (Interview to C.C., Coop. Resistenza).

The cooperatives cultivate lands confiscated to Mafia. These lands were granted by the State through a free loan, according to the law 109/96 on the social reuse of the property confiscated to the criminal organization. This law establishes the allocation of assets and illicit profits to those (associations, cooperatives, municipalities, provinces and regions) that are able to return them to the citizens, through services, job, promotional activities and social work. It allows cooperatives to have important symbolic value in the fight against Mafia culture. Indeed, at the beginning nobody wanted to cultivate the Mafia lands. *"This land were seized in 1991, confiscated by the State in 94 and transferred to the Municipality in '98. We made an application to have them only in 2005, whereas before no one had ever noticed their existence"* (Interview to S.M., Coop. Al di là dei sogni). However, it has also a very important material value: it represents an innovative way to unlock a strong constraint on access to land (and other productive assets) by young people.

Above all, cultivating these lands has great symbolic and material importance in the practice of commoning supported by the cooperatives: *"We don't consider this as our land, but we claim that people have a common right to use it"* (Interview to C.C., Coop. Resistenza). *"We made this confiscated good available for anyone, for every association or individual who wants to contribute to the community life"* (Interview to S.P., Coop. Al di là dei sogni).



The cooperatives assume agriculture as the focus of a new approach to build fairer and healthier relationship with the environment at different dimensions: physically, mentally, spiritually and politically, engaged as they are in practices of Food Activism. As emerged from interviews, the aim of NCO coops is not only to break the mechanisms of the criminal economy, but also "to challenge the agro-industrial food system and its exploitation of people and resources" (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013). In those areas marked by unemployment and by irregular and exploited work, especially in the agricultural sector, they promote fair and horizontal work relations, including marginalized people. They practice mostly organic agriculture, minimizing and recycling the farm waste making compost as fertilizer. The cooperatives also try to regenerate and use local seeds and plants, sometimes in cooperation with a regional research institute, becoming both users and custodians of biodiversity in connection with local knowledge and farming communities in a way that preserves these resources as commons. This *land use* involves a cognitive and cultural re-orientation that assumes a non-purely instrumental relationship with environmental and territorial resources, with labour force and with consumers. This agricultural value is not only measured in economic terms but also in social value provided *for and with the community*. *"Our strategies are always built from the community perspective, for example, we fought to get local agricultural certified production systems, as certifications to assure food safety and quality involving the whole area and not our individual farms or the consortium"* (Interview to F.E., Coop. Agropoli).

Over the time, the NCO cooperatives have reached closer relations with local communities. In some cases, these relationships are formalized with the official participation in local committees or associations that fight against Mafia culture, such as the Don Pepe Diana committee (an association nurturing the legacy of a famous anti-Mafia priest killed by Camorra in 1994). These formal or informal links, at local and national level, have been very relevant in supporting cooperatives in hard times, when, for instance, they suffered intimidations and damages by Camorra. Their projects have faced many problems, particularly in the start-up for the rehabilitation of managed assets, due to the lack of funds and the difficulty in getting loans from banks, with the consequent unavailability of technical equipment. In addition, at the beginning, the cooperatives did not have agricultural technical knowledge and experience. Practicing organic farming has been a major challenge, as the area lacks the specialized advisory services as well as a supply chain capable of transforming organic products.

Despite the difficulties, NCO cooperatives achieved many results, producing positive externalities for the local community through innovative actions in different areas, such as the rehabilitation of several disadvantaged people, in the creation of jobs, the

requalification of derelict properties and land, the promotion of organic agriculture and the prevention of illegal waste disposal in rural areas. Very relevant is also the work carried out by NCO cooperatives to spread the anti-Mafia culture, to raise citizen awareness and to support a collective cultural shift necessary in the construction of commons. They try to raise awareness and engage citizens both in the care of collective resources and in the fight against crime. To this end, they organize projects with schools, volunteer work camps and other public events. However our field observation reveals that their more effective "awareness strategy" lies in the daily work and in the whole-hearted commitment of the coops together with their ability to build relationships with the local community, cooperating jointly and effectively with several stakeholders: public (such as Municipalities, health services, etc.), private (farmers, local entrepreneurs, etc.) and citizens associations.

There are also ongoing attempts to institutionalize the NCO network through the ambitious project of "*RES – Rete Economia Sociale*" (Social Economy Network). The project, founded with € 889.200 by the *Fondazione con il Sud* (a bank foundation), involves a network of 31 public and private organizations with the main objective to promote and implement social economy sector chains (food, tourism and social communication) through the use of property confiscated to the mafia in eight Municipalities of Caserta province. The project is still in the start-up phase that results extremely slow and complex due to numerous actors involved.

The revolutionary challenges outlined are still in progress, and leave room for debate. Specifically we would like to point out some critical limits/risks inherent in these processes. The NCO cooperatives are small-scale economic entities not very competitive, their current challenge is to gain economic self-sufficiency on the market, while actually their main source of income are the public contributions received from health care for their rehabilitation activities. These public revenues are problematic because they are not continuous, and too often the payments are delayed. A critical key point is how to be economically sustainable without distorting the project in the face of capitalist economy, considering that they provide *community value* and services, some of which are not accounted and/or not accountable through market indicators. A related problem is how to get out of a niche maintaining full adherence to ethical principles and to the vision of community wellbeing. Indeed, the change of the institutional setting requires the growth and consolidation of these experiences. However, cooperatives are often confronted with a trade-off between ethics and market and in addition there is a risk of being turned into a subsidiary welfare designed by the State to deflect its responsibilities. There is also a risk that capitalist production systems encloses these experiences, and tries to exploit their symbolic power, reducing the subversive poten-

tial of subjectivities engaged in activism or using them as an escape valve of a general system that remains unchanged. As the famous article of Porter and Kramer suggests creating "sharing value" is also a way to reinvent and revitalize capitalism (Porter and Kramer 2011), but without questioning its dynamics and injustices, in fact "*addressing social concerns in a company's business practices is not counter-intuitive to profit but instead can contribute to profit maximization*" (Scanlan 2013).

This is why we see the cooperation with grassroots movements' coalition as a potential strategy to keep high internal and external awareness and to exercise continuous political pressure in order to change the broader economic and institutional arrangements. Resistance to inequalities, informed by a wide and multi-scalar critique of the status quo, and coupled with material organization of social reproduction, is a promising path for improving self-determination of communities, but not without risks.

## 7. Highlights

The interests of NCO cooperatives met the interests of grassroots movements' coalitions at the crossroad of territory reclamation with the spheres of social and economic production and reproduction. Formal and informal ties between the actors facilitate the connection between cooperatives and movements. For instance, some grassroots committees establish the locale of their meetings in the cooperatives, or cooperatives members are themselves part of committees. In addition, the grassroots movements consider the NCO cooperatives as a concrete step toward "*the realization of another model of development against the Mafia-State, for asserting new spaces of democracy, building new institutions of the commons and reclaiming control on our territories*" (Interview to E.G., Rete Commons).

As evident from the interviews, the action of NCO cooperatives and environmental activists is rooted in a common vision: they share a paradigm shift. By acknowledging that they belong to the same *pattern that connects*, they propose a transition from the *logic of exploitation* to the *logic of care*, exploring socio-economic and ecological systems in relation to social equity. They reject the view of nature as a resource to dominate, to control and to exploit according to a profit-driven logic that belongs both to Mafia culture and to the capitalist system. Instead, they propose a new ethic of economic, ecological and social relations, based on social cooperation and on the recognition of the interdependence of society and nature. Their engagements with a transformative politics do not originate primarily from utopias, neither from critical theories of social change or environmentalism, but rather from lived experiences of struggle,

environmental change, social exclusion, contamination and Mafia rule. *"We share the same health risks; we are victims of the same social injustices. This creates a common ground, increasing the partnership between citizens, social movements and cooperatives"* (Interview to F.E., Coop. Millepiedi).

NCO cooperatives and grassroots movements matured through time a critical consciousness, making connections with the social, economic and ecological contradictions in society. By searching for solutions moving from different paths, they realized these were not particular accidents but structural problems. They joined forces through what Paulo Freire calls praxis: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1970). This paved the way for an increasing politicization of their common struggles, questioning the existing power relationships making them passive objects. NCO cooperatives' members and environmental activists are both engaged in a process of community empowerment. They reclaim real democracy and the right to self-organize, aspiring to develop a *proximity democracy* that would allow communities to participate directly in how local resources and services are planned and delivered. Moreover, they tend to assume a more proactive role in the management of common property resources through collective actions, based on the available spaces of manoeuvre granted by past achievements (the *deals* on Mafia's assets social reuse, the health budget available for agricultural projects, and so on) . These collective actions take place in the social networks involving cooperatives, associations, individuals and public actors, acting at local, regional or national level. Alliances built by the actors are more or less mutable and they include a broad spectrum of issues and aims, such as knowledge exchanges (to foster the social economy), alliances for influencing the institutional arrangements, mapping of resources, provision of services, community events and social valorisation of traditional ties with the land. The connection with other environmental conflicts and with other experiences of social economies signals the interdependence and the multi-scalar dimension of the activists' project. These networking processes enhance the reproduction of "ethical social capital" and anti-Mafia culture, opposing the negative social capital produced by the networks through which is nourished the power of organized crime (Cayli et al. 2010).

NCO cooperatives and environmental movements promote in more or less explicit way mutually reinforcing activities for a cultural and physical re-appropriation of territory (Escobar 2008), by connecting symbolic, material and structural dimensions (Turco 1998). *"For us it was clear that the first thing to do was and is a cultural change. We need to involve the community with the aim to reverse the criminal values. The Camorra is first of all a cultural operation based on three elements: individualism, indifference, suspicion. You can try to counteract it pointing on common goods and investments for*

*community wellbeing*" (Interview to F.E., Coop. Agropoli). These groups are engaged in a real process of revitalization and co-production of *place*, according to the vision of territory as a set of relationships, a relational space, instead of a mere physical space or geographical area (Dematteis 1985).

*"This land belongs to the community; it is available for anyone who wants to cultivate it. Our goal is to revitalize the area, to create social relations. This has become a real and symbolic space for sharing, learning, and democratic participation, a platform to discuss the problems of eco-Mafia and to propose common solutions"* (Interview to C.C., Coop. Resistenza).

The alliance between these groups aspires to define and share a new local community's self-narration, together with the implementation of new practices of commoning and the settlement of an ethical, cultural and institutional framework. These processes create a robust basis for a *place awareness* (Magnagni 2010) able to promote an innovative local path of territorial development grounded on the care of commons and on the autonomous self-organization of communities. *"All our activities aim to demonstrate that together we can do it: we can promote the transition from criminal economy to social/ecological economy"* (Interview to S.P., Coop. Al di là dei sogni).

## 8. Conclusions

In this paper, we described and analysed how networks of activists belonging to grassroots movements and social cooperatives are increasing community-control over territory through social cooperation. We showed how, within the context of Campania's environmental conflicts, loosely connected grassroots mobilizations have passed from an initial struggle focused on resistance against unwanted land-uses to a proactive engagement with the making of spatial relations. By producing autonomous knowledge and by engaging in the practical re-appropriation of their territories, the coalition of movements emerging from the waste conflicts, works today on several levels: from pedagogical and agricultural projects, to the mapping of places, to constant political pressure towards local, regional and national institutions. On the other hand, we provided a description of the social cooperatives' work on lands confiscated to Mafia, highlighting their role in nurturing social economies that increase self-organization with novel resources management schemes while also promoting a cultural shift in the relations between communities and environments. Increasingly, these two experiences of social cooperation in Campania are collaborating in the production of a bottom up politics aiming to re-appropriate territory for the benefit of local communities against the

arbitrary practices of mobsters, corporations and the State. Their coordination is for us an instance of the *synchronization* between movements and commons that De Angelis identifies as the path for the transformation of the balance between systemic forces. In this light, acts of commoning represent the active collective engagement in producing shared forms of resource management: they not only create community, but they also create the commons out of a struggle to increase the self-organization of social reproduction. How much space of manoeuvre will have the practices of commoning also depends on the outcome of negotiations and conflicts with State institutions and other powerful actors. While the creation of a *commons society* is still far beyond the horizon, the strategies we presented could inspire groups of activists in different contexts to reclaim their own environments through the coupling of self-organization of social reproduction and political pressure via social movements.

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