



Urban Regeneration, Forests and Socio-Environmental Conflicts: The Case of Prati di Caprara in Bologna, Italy

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Abstract

In the framework of contemporary neoliberal urban transformations, the role of nature and forests has been emphasized with regard to urban environmental and climate change issues. Whereas since the late 1990s urban political ecology has critically explored urban transformations, their spatial, political asymmetries and contestation, little attention has been paid on the concept of urban regeneration and its practices in relation to forests and renaturalized areas. Therefore, the strategic nature of urban forests in socio-political terms still needs to be explored in-depth. By critically linking urban political ecology with urban regeneration policies, this paper analyzes the emergence of socio-environmental conflicts in relation to the redevelopment process of the Prati di Caprara forest in Bologna (Italy). The paper analyzes roles, interests and visions of institutions and private actors, policies and



claims of social groups within the rising socio-environmental conflict. The paper relies on an ethnographic approach, embedded in urban social movements, enabling an in-depth analysis of practices and power relations. Despite the role of capital accumulation strategies in influencing urban regeneration policies, the results show how a socio-environmental movement was able to repoliticize and shape the agenda through its progressive empowerment and its transformative power. By advancing urban political ecology of forests, our analysis shows how forests and renaturalized areas emerge as strategic socio-natures for the empowerment of urban communities and for the emergence of movements who struggle for socio-environmental justice and alternative futures.

Keywords

Urban regeneration; political ecology; socio-environmental conflicts; urban forests; Prati di Caprara

Introduction

In the contemporary context of society-environment relations, the last decades have been characterized by the political, economic and discursive hegemony of sustainable development and global governance frameworks. Even though the sustainable development discourse acknowledges the impact of human societies on the environment and related complex issues, a critical reflection on controversial neoliberal political-economic processes, embedded in the sustainability framework, still needs to be advanced.

In this context, since the 1990s and especially since the 2000s environmental governance mechanisms and visions have deeply affected urban landscapes and their transformations, showing relevant controversies. Despite these processes and the role played by urban green areas and forests to mitigate climate and environmental changes have been debated by urban planners, a critical reflection on the strategic socio-political nature of forests needs further exploration (Ostrom, 1998; Anders Sandberg, Bardekjian and Butt, 2015). Indeed, research on urban regeneration processes often lacks a critical analysis on their political nature, power asymmetries and conflicting interests between actors and groups involved in governance processes. Whereas on the one hand forests and green spaces play a relevant role to mitigate urban pollution and heating, on the other hand they are also strategic in terms of urban investments, commodification and global capital interests (Heynen, Perkins and Roy, 2006).

This paper aims to explore these dynamics by offering a theoretical contribution that links the political ecology approach with urban regeneration policies and the conflicting reconfiguration processes of urban forests by exploring politics, practices and power issues. Over the last two decades, a contribution on

politics, social practices and power relations embedded in society-environment interactions has been provided by political ecology which critically analyzes the socio-political and conflicting nature of environmental transformations (Bryant, 1991; Robbins, 2004). By focusing on urban spaces, urban political ecology advances a critical analysis of the production of urban spaces, notably social power dynamics, inequalities, movements and conflicts (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2006; Heynen, 2014). Despite this approach has provided a critical contribution to deconstruct urban spaces and their conflictual relations, the role of urban regeneration policies in relation to forests and their strategic nature as socio-environmental spaces should be explored more in-depth.

By advancing the political ecology of urban forests, this paper analyzes the progressive emergence of a socio-environmental conflict in relation to the Prati di Caprara urban forest in Bologna (Italy). Prati di Caprara is a vast former military area, abandoned for decades, located in the western part of Bologna; since the end of the 1970s a renaturalization process has led to the progressive rise of a forest. Over the last decade institutional and socio-political processes related to the governance and regeneration of Prati di Caprara have led to conflicting socio-environmental dynamics. The paper critically analyzes the socio-environmental conflict between different actors and groups and explores conflicting visions, interests, discourses and power asymmetries in relation to the process. With regard to the methodology, data were collected through a qualitative ethnographic approach embedded in the urban socio-environmental movement together with the analysis of institutional policy documents and discourse.

The next section of the paper provides a theoretical overview on urban regeneration, the political ecology approach within urban studies and in relation to socio-environmental conflicts, and conflicting urban renaturalization processes. The following section focuses on the methodology, describing the Prati di Caprara forest and its regeneration policies. We then explore the progressive rising and the evolution of the socio-environmental conflict, focusing on the role played by distinct actors. Finally, the discussion and conclusions critically reflect on the repoliticization and the role played by urban movements in shaping the regeneration policies agenda and advance the political ecology of urban forests by reflecting on their strategic nature for the empowerment of communities and for the rise of urban movements fighting for socio-environmental justice.

Urban Regeneration Processes and the Urban Political Ecology Approach: Towards the Socio-Environmental Conflict

Urban spaces are complex socio-natural units which represent the product of historical processes of urbanization and could be considered the most appropriate example of massive nature appropriation, space production and socio-environmental transformation (Castells, 1972). The concept of urban regeneration finds its roots in the evolution of global political and economic processes of neoliberalization which have shaped urban spaces reconfigurations over the last

three decades (Roberts and Sykes, 2017). Indeed, whereas after the 1950s urban development was characterized by centralized state policies through top-down decision-making planning and massive public funds, since the 1980s public-private partnerships, private actors and their governance procedures have significantly influenced urban development politics (Harvey, 1985; Brenner, 1998).

Critical urban studies highlight the social dimension of these processes by emphasizing how urban privatization mechanisms furthered marginalization, leading to the rise of new inequalities and injustice (Harvey, 1985; Swyngedouw, 1996). Driven by global capital interests since the late 1980s, the progressive commodification of urban spaces influenced ideas and policies of urban governments. Weakened by the neoliberal turn, public actors were forced to meet private capital flows in order to promote the regeneration of former industrial areas (Harvey, 1996; Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2006). Therefore, the privatization and commodification of urban spaces, occurred since the 1980s, have significantly reduced the bargaining power of public administrations, making marginalized communities more vulnerable, benefiting private investors and global capital, and reconfiguring marginalized suburbs as spaces of consumption (Rossi and Vanolo, 2010).

Urban regeneration policies give specific value to governance mechanisms which become a strategic pillar by replacing centralized planning and by emphasizing the role of public-private partnerships and of civil society together with a reduction of state control (Vicari Haddock and Moulaert, 2009; Jones and Evans, 2013). Moreover, the notion of social sustainability applied to urban redevelopment highlights the importance of citizens empowerment within these processes. Indeed, the buzzwords subsidiarity, participation, social inclusion and bottom-up involvement become central in urban regeneration policy-making and public discourses. However, the evidence from different urban transformation projects shows that this mechanism is applied just to legitimize and endorse those policies already in the agenda (Rossi and Vanolo, 2010; Heynen, 2014; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). As argued by Rossi (2017), the economic and real estate crisis of 2008 redefined urban redevelopment processes as drivers of economic growth and speculation by providing new legitimacy and strategies to urban regeneration policies. In this context, over the last decade, specific portions of urbanscapes such as former industrial, military or abandoned sites located in semi-central and periurban areas, have become strategic in terms of value upgrading for capital investments (Roberts and Sykes, 2017). The planned regeneration policies for these areas led to different examples of socio-political tensions between the interests and visions of global capital investors and institutions, and those of local urban communities (Harvey, 2013).

Urban political ecology represents a key approach to critically deconstruct these processes in relation to the rise of socio-environmental conflicts. Over the last three decades, geographers, sociologists and political economists among others, have contributed to develop urban political ecology in order to critically analyze

urbanscapes reconfigurations (Smith, 1984; Harvey, 1996; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, 2006). The conceptual and epistemological tradition is rooted in the neo-Marxist thought advanced by Harvey (1985; 1996), together with the concepts of the production of nature (Smith, 1984), metabolism and socio-natures (Smith, 1984; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, 2006). Political ecology is strategically nurtured not only by academic theoretical thought but also by knowledge, experiences and practices of communities and activists at different scales (Robbins, 2004; Perreault, Bridge and McCarthy, 2015). According to urban political ecologists, the urbanscape is defined as a complex hybrid socio-natural construction characterized by contradictions, tensions and conflicts (Swyngedouw, 1996; Castree, 2008; Heynen, 2014). Urbanscapes are not natural, neither neutral, but the result of complex socio-political, spatial and environmental processes.

By reflecting on these processes, Smith (1984) advanced the notion of the production of nature by emphasizing the conceptualisation of urbanscapes as socio-natures since they emerge as products of complex historical socio-ecological process where society and nature are deeply interrelated. Since the 1990s, with the aim of deeply conceptualizing socio-nature relations, the notion of metabolism (Marx, 1976) has become central in political ecology debates (Gandy, 2004). According to Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw (2006), the concept of metabolism is defined as a socio-natural process of circulation and transformation which integrates resources, physical materials and labour, social organization and power dynamics, producing the interrelation of territorialization, de-territorialization and re-territorialization (see also Swyngedouw, 1996). Therefore, the concept enables a critical reflection and analysis of urban transformations as socio-natural processes at multiple scales (Brenner, 2001). Emphasizing the political nature of urban transformations, Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003) state that these processes are oriented by powerful actors to the production of specific urban environments which may reflect uneven social relations, power dynamics and marginalization. These urbanscapes may lead to struggles and protests by marginalized social actors to balance power relations and fight for urban justice.

Therefore, since the interplays between urban political ecology and regeneration policies have not been deeply analyzed in the literature, it is strategic to put them into dialogue, in particular by considering that urban regeneration processes play a key and conflicting role in the contemporary neoliberalization of urban space at the global scale (Proto, Zinzani and Frixia, 2019). According to the urban political ecology perspective, it is relevant to reflect on actors and groups who take advantage from urban regeneration projects as well as on those who have to experience socio-economic and environmental issues such as the privatization of public spaces, the reduction of public services and nature degradation (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2011; Heynen, 2014). As a matter of fact, power structures and relations shape urban transformations, and in particular their social dimension, leading to the rise of urban inequalities, dynamics of empowerment and

disempowerment, and therefore to conflicts (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2006; Heynen, 2014; Perreault, Bridge and McCarthy, 2015).

By thinking of forests, green and abandoned spaces in urban spaces through an urban political ecology approach, they emerge as complex products of socio-natural interactions characterized by historical and political processes as well as by biophysical circulation and dynamics (Karlsson, 2016; Foster and Anders Sandberg, 2017). Over the last decades, these spaces have experienced significant processes of renaturalization worldwide, reconfiguring urban environments by providing different examples of wild forests due to preserved habitat, flora, fauna and specific bio-physical and ecologic processes. Alker et al. (2000) define these spaces brownfields and highlight their former industrial or military nature together with potential soil contamination due to hazardous waste. Kowarik and Langer (2005) and Kowarik (2013) highlight that renaturalization processes lead to very diverse bio-physical and ecological benefits in comparison to green areas and parks developed in urban spaces. By reflecting on their socio-cultural dimension, Dettmar (2005), Foster and Anders Sandberg (2014), Zinzani (2019) and Zinzani and Proto (2020) argue that abandoned areas covered by urban forest could strengthen socio-environmental relations of neighbouring communities.

Indeed, over the last decades different and heterogeneous examples of renaturalization of abandoned urban spaces, and related social and community contestation in relation to urban regeneration policies, have emerged across Europe. Kowarik and Langer (2005) analyze the Sudgelande park in Berlin, where a railway site abandoned since the 1950s has been reconfigured by a renaturalization process. After a complex and contested negotiation process with local institutions, today this space is characterized by forests, small meadows and former warehouses which host artistic and cultural organizations that contribute to the promotion and the protection of the park. With regard to the Italian context, Tola (2019) explores the Ex-Snia lake area in Rome where, at the beginning of the 1990s, excavations related to the regeneration of a former industrial space enabled the rise of a lake, due to aquifer waters, and a consequent complex renaturalization process. Since then socio-environmental movements and associations have struggled for the preservation of the Ex-Snia lake and for its institutionalization as a protected natural area. The former military space of Piazza d'Armi in Milan is a similar example of socio-environmental conflict between global capital interests oriented towards commercial and residential redevelopment processes and those of neighbouring communities struggling for the preservation and collective management of the renaturalized area. Differently, the urban forest of Lecce in southern Italy, which grew in a former mining site, is an example of preservation and governance led by the local community and associations. In fact, the forest is managed today by the local WWF that contributes to its valorization as a significant example of socio-nature integrating urban historical development and renaturalization dynamics. These different contexts enable us to understand the

strategic and conflictual nature of these spaces, in terms of preservation and valorization against speculation and privatization.

In the framework of the political ecology of urban forests, Heynen, Perkins and Roy (2006) argue that urban green spaces and forests are often located in strategic urban areas in terms of economic value, for instance close to city-centres, fair hubs or waterfronts, and therefore they are threatened by land commodification dynamics. Anders Sandberg et al. (2015) state that the contemporary neoliberalization of urbanscapes is influencing negatively the governance of urban green areas and in particular their cultural and natural value as urban commons. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct the politics and the socio-ecologic processes which enable the definition of urban forests as complex socio-natures (Heynen, Perkins and Roy, 2006). For instance, the debate and the decision around the creation and valorization of urban green spaces, or rather the construction of residential areas or shopping malls, as European case-studies show, have a deep political dimension, including diverse visions, interests and power balances (Farro and GunceDemirhisar, 2014; Anders Sandberg et al., 2015; Swyngedouw, 2018; Zinzani, 2019; Zinzani and Proto, 2020). However, over the last two decades urban regeneration has been deeply depoliticized by presenting different urban projects as natural and inclusive for all, while reducing spaces for democratic debate and disagreement (Swyngedouw, 2011; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Despite the narrative of inclusive and participatory governance, this condition leads to the rise of conflicting dynamics between institutions and their promotion of urban policies on the one hand, and urban communities and their vision on the other.

Socio-environmental conflicts are central in political ecology debates since they demonstrate that territorial and environmental transformation processes are not merely ecological but deeply political and characterized by power relations (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Robbins, 2004). Moreover, the activism and struggles of different socio-environmental movements emphasize how complex socio-ecological processes are often naturalized and depoliticized by powerful actors in order to preserve the dominant socio-economic order (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Ernstson and Swyngedouw, 2019). In opposition to other approaches exploring environmental issues, political ecology analyzes socio-environmental conflicts as processes of contestation, disagreement and emancipation towards more just, inclusive and equal environments (Galtung, 1990; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Le Billon 2015; Leonardi, 2017; Torre, 2017). With regard to urban spaces, Swyngedouw (2018) states that socio-environmental conflicts represent a strategic opportunity to bring back depoliticized urban planning policies in the realm of the political debate¹. Questionable participatory and inclusive urban policies supported

¹ Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) and Swyngedouw (2018) among others, have contributed to discuss and advance the concept of the Political in the framework of post-politics theory. The authors define the Political as heterogeneous spaces of dissent and arenas of radical disagreement oriented towards the repoliticization and the democratization of political processes.

by neoliberal urban governments enable the development of relevant political spaces where visions for alternative urban governance might rise.

Prati di Caprara Forest in Bologna: The Urban Regeneration Process

The urban forest of Prati di Caprara in Bologna and the political and environmental debate around its regeneration processes represent a key case-study. On the one hand to highlight the political nature of renaturalized areas and urban forests as socio-natures, product of metabolic socio-environmental relations characterized by transcalar conflicting interests and dynamics. On the other to explore how contested urban regeneration policies enable urban community empowerment and the rise of a socio-environmental movement. With regard to the methodology, data were collected through policy documents analysis and an ethnographic approach; ethnography represents a key method to critically analyze socio-environmental conflicts and more in general social transformation processes in relation to urban policies.



Figure 1: GIS elaboration of a Google Earth TM satellite image that represents the Prati di Caprara urban forest area in the north-western part of Bologna (source: authors).

Since February 2018 field-research has been characterized by an embedded approach in the context of urban social groups of Bologna through active participation to assemblies, focus groups, meetings as well as to demonstrations and rallies organized by the *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, the first social group

that started to claim the need to preserve the Prati di Caprara forest. Moreover, participatory excursions and observations in the forest were organized in order to raise awareness on the socio-environmental value of the area. This approach, embedded in Bologna's urban activism, was strategic to explore, understand and analyze social implications at the neighbourhood scale in-depth. Semi-structured interviews, formal and informal conversations and exchanges were conducted with members and representatives of urban groups and associations as well as with members of the neighbourhood community. These were conducted also with experts and academics such as urban planners, natural and social scientists as well as former local politicians and consultants. Furthermore, data and information on urban regeneration policies, and related institutional procedures, strategies and visions, were collected through semi-structured interviews and formal meetings with members of the City council and political parties. Ethnographic research was integrated with the analysis of institutional policy documents, local newspapers, media and discourses with the aim to critically analyze the political nature of urban regeneration policies.



Figure 2: GIS elaboration of a Google Earth TM satellite image that represents Prati di Caprara urban forest area and its eastern and western parts (source: authors).

Prati di Caprara covers a former military site of 47 hectares located in the north-western part of Bologna, less than one kilometer from the city center, in *Porto-Saragozza* district. The district, *quartiere*, is inhabited by middle and

middle/low classes, mostly from Bologna, with a presence of migrants, mostly from North Africa, Romania and Albania, settled over the last few decades (Comune di Bologna 2007; 2016). The Prati di Caprara military site has been progressively abandoned since the end of the 1970s in the context of the Italian reduction and abandonment of military areas.

Over the last few decades the area has been characterized by a renaturalization process which enabled the progressive rise of an urban forest that includes several species of deciduous trees typical of the Po valley region (Northern Italy) such as poplar, robinia and fraxinus. The renaturalization process also implied the presence of fauna, notably the nest of different species of birds (Trentanovi et al., 2017). Therefore, Prati di Caprara urban forest represents today a unique example of urban rewilded area due to its hybrid socio-ecologic processes and its two sections: the western one measures 18 hectares and includes small forests, meadows and former military buildings, while the eastern one of 27 hectares is almost entirely covered by the forest (Comune di Bologna, 2016). It represents a strategic socio-ecologic site for climate mitigation, because for decades the north-western part of Bologna has been characterized by pollution, low air quality and ecologic issues due to high population density, infrastructures such as roads and bypasses and traffic jam.

For decades, the valorization and reconfiguration of the area have been part of the local political debate, different ideas were discussed, but no formal initiative, or effective policy, has been concretely formalized. Therefore, over the last twenty years Prati di Caprara has been considered by the City council an area affected by natural degradation due to the presence of abandoned wastes, military contamination and soil pollution. Despite discussing for years military decontamination, the City council has never conducted it. During the same years, Prati di Caprara has been partly inhabited by informal settlements of Roma and Romanian citizens who built informal camps in the forest. While part of these people found a job in the black market, others are involved with the illegal storage and trade of iron, as stated by members of the district council. Despite several operations of forced eviction carried out by the police, different settlements still characterize portions of the forest. Since 2015 there have been institutional discussions between INVIMIT Sgr, the company owner of the Prati di Caprara area, and the City council; the future of the forest, in terms of visions and projects, has been outlined.

In the framework of post-industrial and urban reconfiguration processes, since 2016 Prati di Caprara has been included in an urban regeneration policy plan promoted by the City council, ruled by the centre-leftist *Partito Democratico*, with the aim to redevelop urban former military and industrial areas. The plan, entitled Piano Operativo Comunale (POC) for the regeneration of urban state heritage, was formalized on April 6th 2016 and promoted in the following months (Comune di Bologna, 2016). POC focuses on the regeneration of different abandoned areas in Bologna and, among them, it highlights the area of Prati di Caprara by proposing a

significant urban redevelopment process. The project aims to face the environmental and social degradation of the area through the development of a new urban district featured by commercial and residential buildings (Comune di Bologna, 2018). According to the policy documents, this project seriously threatens the existence of the forest. Since 2017 the urban regeneration process of Prati di Caprara has progressively emerged in the Bologna's political debate on urban transformations. Conflicting visions and interests on the process between institutions and a variety of private and social actors, associations and communities led to the progressive rising of conflicting socio-environmental dynamics.

In order to analyze the progressive evolution towards the socio-environmental conflict of Prati di Caprara, it is important to identify actors, interests and visions within the urban regeneration process. Invimit Sgr, a state enterprise of the Ministry of the Economy and Finance, and the City council of Bologna are the key institutional actors. Whereas Prati di Caprara is formally a state property since it was a military area, over the last few years the management has been entrusted to Invimit Sgr with the aim of finding interested investors to valorize the area under the overall mission of reducing national public debt. On the same time, through the issue and the formalization of POC, the City council aimed at identifying investors for the regeneration of the Prati di Caprara area and the development of a new urban district. Three private actors were identified due to their interest: Bologna Football Club, led by the Canadian businessman Joe Saputo; SECI enterprise of the multinational Maccaferri Group; and ECE, a German real estate company, leader in the construction of shopping malls (Comune di Bologna, 2016). Due to the involvement of these actors in the renovation of the municipal stadium of Bologna Football Club, the City council decided to entrust them the reconfiguration of Prati di Caprara area through real estate investments as a compensation strategy. With regard to capital investment perspectives, ECE expressed its interest in the reconfiguration of the western part of Prati di Caprara through the realization of a fashion shopping mall. SECI / Maccaferri aimed at the eastern part through the construction of commercial and residential buildings. It is important to highlight that the project and the connections between private actors, the mayor and some members of the *Partito Democratico* were not presented and discussed in detail to members of opposition parties within the City council, neither publicly spread to the civil society. There were only few articles in local newspapers.

In addition to the planned redevelopment project, the City council, ruled by the *Partito Democratico*, decided to include the construction of a school and the realization of a public park. This initiative emerged as a strategic move to legitimize the entire redevelopment process and show the social commitment of the municipality to the civil society. Reflecting on political-economic relations between multinational actors and public institutions, it is important to highlight how these actors were able to impose a vision and shape the agenda of the City council both in terms of real estate development plan and in the promotion of a

political narrative. Indeed, the issue of POC in 2016 was combined with a powerful public discourse developed around the need for the city to invest and reconfigure abandoned areas, in contrast to *ex-novo* urbanization, with the aim to promote sustainable urban development and green growth for the future of young generations.

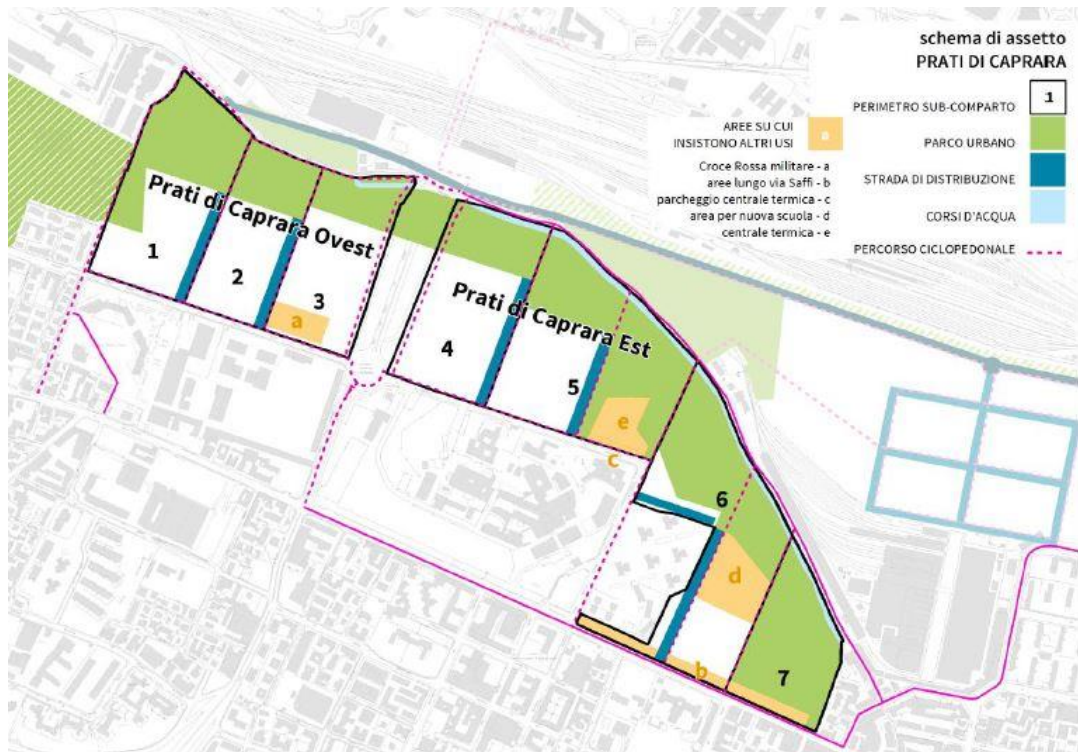


Figure 3: A representation of POC urban project for the redevelopment of Prati di Caprara; in green the planned park, in white planned commercial and residential buildings, in blue planned streets.

It is important to highlight that POC implementation would have implied the destruction of the vast majority of the urban forest through the realization of a new park of 20 hectares. In order to legitimize the plan and justify the planned destruction of the forest, the narrative of the municipality relied on the argument that Prati di Caprara required an environmental and military decontamination process to be available for the public. Formal institutions emphasized its environmental and social degradation by highlighting soils pollution due to potential military leftovers and related risks, as well as the waste left by Roma and Romanian communities. However, pilot decontamination tests challenged the public narrative since military leftovers and soils pollution were not found. The

City council also stated that the new park of 20 hectares would have replaced the ecologic function of pollution mitigation of the forest. Actually, in 2016 the City council did not even acknowledge the existence of an urban forest, defining Prati di Caprara as an abandoned and contaminated area covered by wild vegetation and waste. In contrast, few years before the mayor had argued that an existing forest would have been totally preserved for young and future generations to promote urban sustainability.

The Rise of the Socio-Environmental Conflict

Despite the POC appearing in local media since 2017, the regeneration of Prati di Caprara has not represented a key topic in the city's political debate. In contrast, members of the neighbourhood community who live around Prati di Caprara, aware of the POC issue, started to question the project and ask details on its implementation to the City council. Citizens and members of the neighbourhood associations of the *Porto-Saragozza* district started to question the effective need of new commercial and residential buildings in the area because of the presence of many existing shops and supermarkets already, as well as because of pollution and traffic jam issues. Since 2017 members of the associations have met through different informal assemblies and have created a committee, the comitato *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, with the aim to strengthen their position and controvert the POC. *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* claimed the strategic importance of preserving the Prati di Caprara urban forest as an historical, social and environmental heritage of Bologna. Firstly, the committee emphasized the role of the forest for urban heating mitigation, developing a counter-narrative based on health safety against urban pollution and environmental degradation. Secondly, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* claimed the Prati di Caprara forest as a urban common, highlighting its state property, against processes of privatization and real estate speculation. Thirdly, the committee argued that POC could not be taken for granted and claimed the need to discuss the project through a participatory approach. In this initial phase *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* did not underline the political nature of the committee and neither the effective political dimension of Prati di Caprara regeneration process.

The conflicting dynamics between *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* and the City council emerged when the committee formally claimed an inclusive participatory process involving the community and experts. However, this initiative was denied by the City council without providing convincing motivations; therefore the committee self-organized a participatory process, entitled *Parteci Prati*, involving around one hundred members of the neighbourhood community and different experts such as architects, urban planners, sociologists, geographers and natural scientists (Parteci Prati, 2018). The process produced three counter-projects based on the urban forest preservation, the creation of public spaces for leisure and relax, and the idea of community based management for part of the area. Moreover, through several initiatives and demonstrations organized to spread

awareness about the forest and the POC vision, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* managed to progressively build up a network with other social and environmental associations oriented towards an alternative vision of urban transformations. The request to the City council to organize a public debate on the output of *Parteci Prati* was also not taken into account and no formal response was provided.

In spring 2018 the POC implementation officially started: two hectares of Prati di Caprara were transferred from INVIMIT Sgr to the City council to enable the construction project of the school. In few days, private companies selected by institutional authorities proceeded with the removal of the forest in order to check soils and analyze potential contamination. The initiative was deeply contested by *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, social and environmental associations and residents. Demonstrations, rallies and other initiatives to raise awareness on the destruction of the forest were organized both in Prati di Caprara and in the city centre.

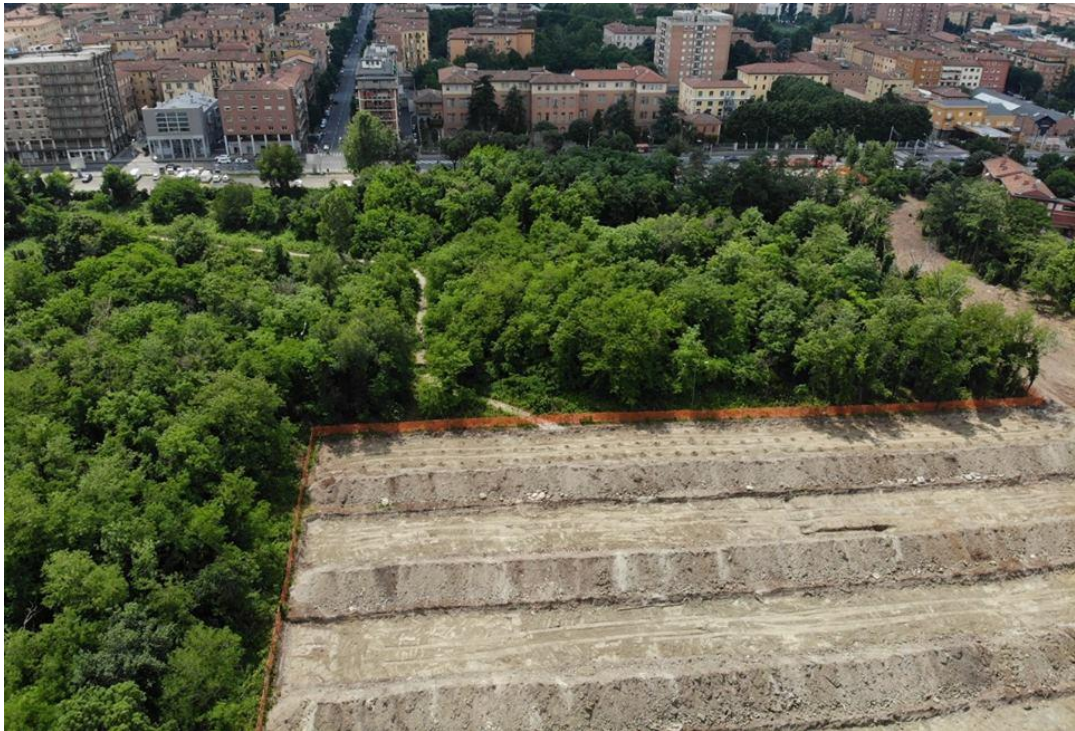


Figure 4: A picture that represents the removal of two hectares of forest for the construction of the school in 2018 (source: *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*).

The destruction of part of the forest, together with news and rumours on local newspapers about the commercial-residential development and the construction of the shopping mall, led to the emergence of a socio-environmental conflict between local institutions and their private partners on the one hand, and the network of social and environmental associations on the other. *Rigenerazione*

No Speculazione and the network argued the political nature of the Prati di Caprara regeneration project highlighting privatization processes, real estate speculative nature and non transparent relations between the ruling party and private actors; moreover, they strengthened their narrative by claiming the right to an alternative vision of urban futures characterized by social and climate justice. In few months, the network of associations, together with heterogeneous critical support from the civil society, shifted into a socio-environmental movement oriented towards the struggle for grassroots democracy and environmentalism as well as towards the radical reconfiguration of POC.



Figure 5: A demonstration organized by *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* in the deforested area. The sign states “Here there was a forest, 1970-2018” (source: *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*).

The movement was consolidated through the institutional support of *Coalizione Civica*, a leftist local party, part of the Bologna city council, which was strategic for its empowerment and the related role in negotiations. They were committed to strengthen the institutional debate on POC contradictions by focusing on significant environmental, economic and political issues. Since spring 2018 the support of *Coalizione Civica* has enabled *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* to design an institutional petition, named *Istruttoria Pubblica*, aimed at organizing a public and participatory debate in the City council to inquire and question the POC. Meanwhile, the increased public support to the socio-environmental movement led by *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, together with relevant land use and urban planning legislative issues highlighted by experts and lawyers, led to an initial strategic renegotiation of POC: the shopping mall project in the western part of Prati di Caprara was abandoned, the compensation strategy and the partnership

between the City council, ECE and SECI Maccaferri was renegotiated and the project development significantly downsized. The socio-environmental movement considered this renegotiation of POC an important step and a demonstration of social power within the conflict. However, the narrative of the City council was still inspired by the idea of urban sustainable development, regeneration of abandoned contaminated land and new green areas for neighbouring communities.

The *Istruttoria Pubblica* of November 2018, which involved 36 social and environmental associations, representatives of local institutions, experts and other individuals, represented a key step of the socio-environmental conflict. Several contributions critically explored and deconstructed urban planning, socio-economic and environmental issues related to the Prati di Caprara regeneration project, as well as the contradictory narrative of the City council. This initiative significantly strengthened the socio-environmental movement in terms of bargaining power and negotiations with institutions and contributed to raise awareness on the conflicting regeneration process. Moreover, the *Istruttoria Pubblica* was important for the socio-environmental movement in terms of social empowerment and for the possibility to create a new grassroots political space inspired by the concepts of social, environmental and climate justice. The *Istruttoria Pubblica* and the conflicting debate entailed a rift in the *Partito Democratico* between a group available to renegotiate the POC, while the other oriented towards the idea of keep going with the plan (Comune di Bologna, 2018). This institutional political weakness was perceived by the movement as a rebalancing of power relations and bargaining power within the socio-environmental conflict. Furthermore, local media highlighted the unexpected massive civil society participation to the *Istruttoria Pubblica* and the success of this initiative to bring back grassroots urban socio-environmental debate, repoliticizing urban politics. After two weeks of complex institutional negotiations, the City council publicly announced a reconfiguration of POC due to claims of the Prati di Caprara socio-environmental movement: soils decontamination test exclusively in the area already deforested, the reduction of the commercial and residential development, and the increase of the park area from 20 to 30 hectares. Moreover, the City council promised the organization of an inclusive participatory process guided by urban planning experts in order to redevelop the project (Comune di Bologna, 2018).

However, ambiguities persist in the new version of POC. On the one hand, the new project, together with a redefined public discourse, aimed at meeting partially the claims of the movement in order to regain civil society consensus. On the other it kept the idea of the urban forest redevelopment, thus its partial deforestation. Against this, the socio-environmental movement led by *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* highlighted the need to keep and strengthen their struggle. It is important to emphasize that the *Istruttoria Pubblica* was a key initiative to strengthen a collective critical urban vision which empowered the heterogeneous socio-environmental movement as well as relations between members of Prati di Caprara neighbouring communities and the city civil society.

In light of the recent evolution of the socio-environmental conflict, the participatory process on POC reconfiguration, promised by the municipality in late November 2018, was not formally promoted and no initiative was taken despite claims of the movement. In spring 2019 a representative of INVIMIT Sgr, highlighted the strategic and urgent need of its redevelopment via private real estate projects such as cinema multiplex and malls, as emerged in local newspapers. Equally, INVIMIT Sgr neglected the socio-environmental conflict and the partial reconsideration of the project by the City council. The mayor of Bologna replied to INVIMIT arguing the urgent need to transfer the property of Prati di Caprara from the state to the municipality. Moreover, the City council opposed INVIMIT Sgr statement by emphasizing the need to recognize the environmental value of the area. Therefore, the position of the mayor appeared controversial since on the one hand met claims and the vision of the socio-environmental movement, while on the other somehow still defended redevelopment plans. However, this move appears strategic for the City council in order to regain consensus among citizens and highlight the political distance from INVIMIT, led by representatives of the far right party *Lega*.

Until the end of 2019 no formal or informal statement about the future of Prati di Caprara regeneration process has emerged. At the beginning of 2020 representatives of the City council stated that POC will expire at the end of the year, due to its validity of five years, and therefore they are expecting detailed updates from INVIMIT on the project. The state enterprise did not reply to the statement but just announced the need to secure Prati di Caprara through the support of a private security service in order to stop informal access to the forest and the settlement of new informal camps. Therefore, the current context seems uncertain, as well as the vision of institutions for the next future. In parallel, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, supported by other associations of the socio-environmental movement, organized in December 2019 a public meeting in the city centre to strengthen public awareness on renaturalized urban areas, their privatization processes and movements struggling for their preservation in Italy. Members of associations and movements of Piazza d'Armi urban forest from Milano, Lago Ex-Snia Roma, Ex-FIAT Belfiore forest area, and Lecce urban forest, among others, were invited in Bologna with the aim of debating regeneration policies and related issues, and specifically of sharing visions, practices and experiences of resistance. Furthermore, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* is currently organizing a new participatory laboratory aimed at developing ideas and projects of community forest management and presenting a detailed grassroots regeneration plan to the City council.



Figure 6: A demonstration of the socio-environmental movement in Piazza Maggiore in front of the building of the City Council, March 2019 (source: authors).

From the Socio-Environmental Conflict to the Political Ecology of Urban Forests: Discussion and Conclusion

The evidence emerged from the case study of the Prati di Caprara forest provides a significant contribution by advancing a critical reflection on the linkages between urban regeneration policies and political ecology. By focusing on urban regeneration policies, this contribution provides a better understanding of how the rising of a socio-environmental movement enables the power of questioning, and then reconfiguring, institutional policies promoted by public authorities according to a top-down approach (Vicari Haddock and Moulaert, 2009; Jones and Evans, 2013). This approach has been characterized by the rhetoric of participation and inclusion, whilst influenced by private actors. In parallel, in the framework of the recent conceptualization of the political ecology of urban forests (Heynen, Perkins and Roy, 2006; Anders Sandberg, Bardekjian and Butt, 2015; Foster and Anders Sandberg, 2017; Zinzani, 2019), this case-study shows how former renaturalized abandoned industrial and military sites within urban spaces emerge as strategic areas where multiscalar interests and investment strategies of the global capital converge through processes of real estate speculation and capital accumulation. By shedding light on relations between urban regeneration and political ecology, the evidence shows how the rise of a socio-environmental movement and the

progressive evolution of the conflict deeply repoliticize urban regeneration policies. Individuals and members of communities marginalized by neoliberal policies gathered together to strengthen their claims such as the need of exploring novel and alternative practices of urban environment grassroots participatory governance oriented towards the interests of communities. This process is deeply political and in conflict with the narrative advanced by institutional authorities oriented towards the promotion of inclusive, democratic and participatory urban regeneration policies.

The case of Prati di Caprara shows that *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* emerged as a committee deeply rooted in the urban social environment of the *Porto-Saragozza* district and characterized by the commitment and the ability of critically analyzing urban regeneration policies and their weaknesses. Moreover, over the last few years the committee has demonstrated the capacity to carry out research, involve scientists and experts and produce knowledge aimed at raising awareness on the role of Prati di Caprara urban forest in social-environmental terms. The strategy of questioning and critically analyzing top-down institutional policies adopted by *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, together with grassroots social and political emancipation, is important for the empowerment of socio-environmental movements. By advancing the reflection on urban movements (Harvey, 2013; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Torre, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2018), over the last two years *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* has been able to create, through the inclusion and the participation of different associations, groups and individuals, an urban socio-environmental movement emphasizing the role and the preservation of urban forests for environmental justice against real estate speculation and privatization. This process of emancipation and empowerment was possible through the organization of scientific and cultural events, several demonstrations and rallies, and the ability to develop a network of associations and groups with shared discourses, visions and practices. A grassroots political space oriented towards social, environmental justice and alternative urban futures.

Over the last year the Prati di Caprara socio-environmental movement has progressively gained the bargaining power of shaping institutional policies. The evolution of the socio-environmental conflict, its actors, power relations, interests and visions, showed the great effort and the success of the socio-environmental movement in terms of bargaining power. As a matter of fact, the Prati di Caprara movement gained the power of questioning urban policies, reconfiguring public discourse and shaping the reconfiguration of the regeneration processes. It achieved so first thanks to the ability of gaining public support to claim the organization of the *Istruttoria Pubblica* and formally discuss the regeneration of the Prati di Caprara urban forest with the City council at the institutional level. Secondly by redefining public discourse, as showed by the City council now emphasizing the existence of an urban forest and the need of its preservation, both facts denied for years in the past. Thirdly, through the reconfiguration of POC, increasing the area covered by the forest, this being considered by the City council and the private

actors involved as an unquestionable milestone previously. This conflicting process can be therefore defined not just as emancipatory but also transformative in relation to urban politics (see Harvey 2013; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Le Billon, 2015; Torre, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2018).

The analysis of the Prati di Caprara socio-environmental conflict contributes also to strengthen the emerging political ecology of urban forests (Heynen, Perkins and Roy, 2006; Anders Sandberg, Bardekjian and Butt, 2015; Karlsson, 2016). It emphasizes the strategic role of renaturalized urban areas in socio-ecologic terms as complex hybrid socio-natures produced by interconnected metabolic bio-physical and historical-political dynamics, in particular former military sites. Moreover, it highlights the controversial and conflicting nature of their regeneration processes, often oriented towards privatization, commodification and real estate and commercial development. The case of the Prati di Caprara forest echoes therefore other recent Italian examples of urban renaturalization, such as Lago Ex-Snia in Roma and Piazza d'Armi area in Milano, explored in the first paragraph (Tola, 2019).

Usually located in strategic portions of urban spaces, these areas are considered by public institutional actors and global capital as abandoned, free spaces for accumulation and speculation, attracting national and multinational investments. However, urban renaturalized areas and the struggle for their valorization and preservation as socio-natures demonstrate their strategic role for urban civil society emancipation and the emergence of movements. The recent public meeting on Italian urban renaturalized areas, organized by *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* in Bologna, was strategic to advance and strengthen claims, discourses and visions on their protection and valorization as examples of socio-natures. Furthermore, during the event of Bologna, the network made of different Italian committees, groups and associations significantly strengthened the idea of establishing a national socio-environmental movement aimed at creating awareness and preserving urban renaturalized spaces.

Within the progressive neoliberalization of urban spaces through processes of spaces regeneration and commodification, urban civil society demonstrates its ability and power, through socio-environmental conflicts, to repoliticize urban environmental policies and related transformations. Urban renaturalized areas, and specifically Prati di Caprara, emerge as strategic socio-natures for the spreading of socio-environmental awareness, social emancipation and the production of political spaces towards social, environmental and climate justice, and more just and democratic urban spaces, as argued by Fosters and Anders Sandberg (2017), Tola (2019) and Zinzani (2019) among others. Building on this awareness, the urban political ecology approach and the political ecology of forests have today the possibility to progressively contribute to support and strengthen the struggles of socio-environmental movements for the valorization of urban forests and urban justice.



Figure 7: The Prati di Caprara forest in late summer 2019. On the right, in Prati di Caprara eastern part, the 2 hectares of forest removed in spring 2018 to enable the construction of the school. In this area, over the last two years a renaturalization process is enabling the growth of new vegetation since the school construction project is currently stopped.

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