

*Environmental Activism, Corruption and Local Responses to EU Enlargement:
Case Studies from Eastern and Western Europe¹*

Davide Torsello
(University of Bergamo, Italy)
davide.torsello@unibg.it

This article addresses the transformation of environmental activism in relation to EU policies. It is argued that new environmentalism stems from several tensions in the economic, social and political spheres. The discussion draws on case studies from Eastern and Western Europe to address the ways in which environmental activism has been inspired by the ideological, programmatic and policy objectives of the EU enlargement.

Key words: Environmental activism, corruption, Eastern and Western Europe

Scholars who have studied the transformation of environmental activism in recent years, although they take different perspectives, agree on one point: it is increasingly difficult to characterise green movements nowadays (Dobson 1990; Norton 1991; Milton 1996; Mol 2000). Some approaches focused on how these movements shifted towards becoming main political actors, others saw a binary distinction between those movements that lost their ecological character to become increasingly institutionalised (Gerlach 1991; Milton 1993) and the movements which have taken radical positions, and have been labelled as ‘eco-terrorists’.

New environmentalism stems from several tensions in the economic, social and political spheres. One is the tension between the local nature of these movements, their ties with the social and ecological environments of the region in which they evolve, and the global arena in which they interact with transnational institutions, such as the EU and other environmental groups. The second tension has to do with the challenges facing the sovereignty (in policy making and development plans) of the state under the influences of neoliberal capitalism and global governance (Pardo and Prato 2010). The third concerns the above mentioned tendency of the movements to seek more direct political intervention and at the same time to have to deal with decreasing mobilisation from below. The fourth is the need to maintain the appeal of the ecological discourse in a context of increasing politicisation of their actions. The fifth, in the European case, is the sharp differences between Eastern and Western European concepts of

¹ This article draws on the argument that I have developed in my volume, *The New Environmentalism. Corruption and Civil Society in the Enlarged EU*, in publication with Ashgate Publishers, 2011.

mobilisation, ecological awareness, institutionalisation and political participation. All these tensions are, to different extents, present in new environmentalism.

New environmentalism has been inspired by the ideological, programmatic and policy objectives of the EU enlargement. The five ethnographic case studies I have recently analyzed are all examples of to what extent the project of a well-connected and cooperative EU can become stained by the emergence of a number of economic and political bottlenecks. These bottlenecks are not simply ‘unintended consequences’ or effects of NIMBY (Not in my backyard) protests, as some analysts have hastily declared. They constitute the prices that each member state, and within them each regional government, has to pay for the realisation of the idea of an efficiently enlarged European community. The gap between East and West, manifest from these case studies, is increasingly evident in the modalities in which the projects of infrastructural development are being planned, implemented and managed. However, the differences between East and West are not only in the ‘cultural’ perspectives on the assessment of environmental hazard. These differences can be interpreted from two perspectives: the top-down and the bottom-up approach. In the top-down approach, EU enlargement policies and EU-funded development projects, although built on the common notion of a well-connected Europe, still work along very different institutional and economic tracks. When local government institutions are plagued by widespread corruption, clientelistic practices, a high prevalence of personalised and informal strategies and the transposition of public and private interests, political bottlenecks can make the Enlargement project a highly costly one. Similarly, in the economic sphere, the aggressive intrusion of (mainly Western European) corporate business investments in Eastern Europe have tended to preclude the positive results of environmental protests not only because of their strong influential power over local political decisions, but also due to the hard-to-die development rhetoric.

In my current research I take a new perspective to the anthropological study of environmental activism in Europe by looking at the impact of corruption in EU-funded development projects. I analyze forms and contexts of environmentalism drawing on an ethnographic and comparative approach based on case studies in Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The case studies are drawn from projects of transport development (TEN-T) and waste management. The projects share the common point of bringing a potentially harmful impact on the environment which evidently collides with the legal prescriptions under which they were

planned. I argue that protection of the environment constitutes the ideological basis on which civil society is built at local and trans-local levels. However, on the long run it is corruption that is the key issue which contextualizes the protest in all the case studies, although with notable differences. Corruption becomes a crucial discourse when the configurations of power emerging from the interplay between the local, national, and transnational (EU) levels increasingly alienate citizens from political participation, decision making and even resistance.

In order to deal with the complex interplay of these levels I find it necessary to bring together three major theoretical frameworks with which anthropology has been engaging in the last three decades: environmentalism, civil society and corruption. Environmentalism is tackled by focusing on the social and political aspects of the opposition movements originating from the need to denounce development projects with a high potential of environmental damage. Civil society is product of local, national and transnational forms of environmental activism. Departing from the historical conditions that have rendered problematic the analytical use of the notion of civil society in contexts as different as Italy and Central Eastern Europe, this research traces a significant link between the EU enlargement project and the strengthening of civic participation from below. Civil society, in its local and trans-local manifestations, is the response to blindness of the structural development projects to problems that arise from their implementation at local level in the range of environmental sustainability, transparency of governments and business integrity.

The ethnographic part of my research analyses five case studies: the Považská Bystrica highway, in Slovakia; Vienna-Brno highway; M0 Budapest ring road; TAV fast railway in the Susa Valley, Northwestern Italy; illegal shipments of waste from Western to Eastern Europe. The ethnographic data of this book contribute mainly to build an innovative, bottom-up approach. The new environmentalism benefits from a polyfunctional set of strategies devised by the different types of movements, both in their practices and in their discourses. This research demonstrates that the two fields (practices and discourses) cannot be looked at separately, they constitute a meaningful continuum that finds shape in the changing spatial and temporal conditions of the lives of these movements. Eastern European environmentalism is revitalised by the negative impacts of the EU enlargement policies. This stands alone as a demonstration that a genuinely local civil society can originate from globalising and homogenising trends. However, the novelty of the Eastern European environmentalism lies in the ways in which political discourses

intermingle with environmental practices. The space to consolidation of corruption, lack of transparency and 'lower' quality of governance, being enlarged by the political and economic factors mentioned above, strongly influence the perception of the utility and harm of the development projects. As soon as these projects manifested their devastating potential, not only of an environmental but also of a political, economic and moral entity, the civic movements tried to inform the local public of the whole range of possible damage.

The crucial issue is that corruption in state and local governments has provided legitimacy to the environmentalist discourses, helping them to remain closer to the people through the use of a common language. This tendency is unique in the Eastern European cases (and partially for Italy) for three reasons. First, the new civil society has assumed, as expected, different tones in these countries compared to Western Europe. This is due to the conditions under which civil society emerged during the last years of socialism: as an anti-political movement, and yet not definitively separate from the state, in symbiosis with which it often continued to exist. Second, corruption is present and widely exposed to the public by the media in these countries. This is not to argue that Eastern European countries are more corrupt than Western European ones, as the Italian case eloquently proves. It infers that when generalised 'corruption talk' becomes a social norm, than this can be used as a powerful discursive tool to communicate the harm that may be caused by these environmentally, politically and socially intrusive projects. Third, Eastern European environmental movements are characterised by a high degree of dualism between formal and informal practices. This aspect could be seen as a liability rather than an asset. However, I believe that I have provided enough empirical evidence to show that by seeking a balance between formal and informal practices, the environmental movements have contrasted that excessive institutionalisation and de-mobilisation which has been lamented in their Western European counterparts. Corruption is very much part of this attempt to bridge formal and informal strategies, since discourses on corruption are built mostly informally (Slovak and Hungarian cases). When, as in the case of waste import, corruption becomes a formally communicated issue, the perceived effectiveness (by the environmental movements) of this communication decreases. Instead, as can be seen in the Czech and Italian cases, using the language of corruption remains a fruitful way of transmitting to local inhabitants the risks, allegations and informal aspects of local politics.

Corruption is not only about discourses, it is a practice, as emerged from all the case studies. I have been concerned to show how the discursive use of corruption can become one of the ‘hands’ through which environmentalism operates, under particular conditions of global institutional transformation. Investigating the practices that underlie the emergence of corruption in the TEN-T transport projects as well as in the waste imports from Western to Eastern Europe, would have required a different methodological and theoretical angle that this book cannot provide.

The final point is on the use of the idea of civil society. I agree on the problematic use of this notion, both on epistemic and on heuristic bases. I am aware of the uneasiness of social scientists, and among them notably anthropologists, to parallel civil society in Western with Eastern European social contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1996; Gellner 1994; Hann and Dunn 1996). I also accept the stance that in order to deal with an alleged ‘re-vitalisation’ of civil society in Eastern Europe, attention needs to be paid to the historical trajectories underlying this phenomenon from the late 1980s onwards. I have continued to use the notion of civil society mainly because this was communicated to me by the interviewed activists. In my empirical data civic movements were defined emically as ‘civil society’ by the actors themselves. I have never attempted to impose such a ‘Western-centred’ notion on them. What can be inferred from the analysis of these case studies is that civil society in Eastern European contexts has been strengthened by the EU enlargement process. This is a different kind of civil society compared to the one described by Gramsci, Tocqueville and Hegel (see for instance Keane 1998). There are many differences: the changing role of the state, the influence of the socialist experience, the global conditions of governance, the influence of neo-liberalism, changing perceptions of social justice, legitimacy and the public good. Nonetheless, it still makes sense to deal with civil society in the peculiar conditions of the post-socialist and EU enlargement experiences. This notion is undermined or exalted (according to the cases) by discourses on corruption and by the alternation of formal and informal practices. Hence, through its analytical use it is possible to test the validity of the idea that changing historical (and geographical) conditions permanently affect the relationship between state and society.

References

- Comaroff, J.L. and Comaroff J. (1999). *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Dobson, A. (1990). *Green Political Thought*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Gellner, E. (1994). *The Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*. Allen Lane: Penguin Press.
- Gerlach, L. (1991). 'Global thinking, local acting: movements to save the planet', *Evaluation Review*, 15 (1): 120-48.
- Hann, C.M and Dunn, E. (eds) (1996). *Civil Society. Challenging Western Models*. London: Routledge.
- Keane, J. (1998). *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Milton, K. (ed.) (1993). *Environmentalism: the View from Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
- Milton, K. (1996). *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory. Exploring the Role of Anthropology in the Environmental Discourse*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Mol, A.P.J. (2000). 'Globalization and environment: between apocalypse-blindness and ecological modernization', in G. Spargaaren, A.P.J. Mol and F.H. Buttel (eds.) *Environment and Global Modernity*. London: Sage, pp. 121-50.
- Norton, B.G. (1991). *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pardo, I. and Prato, G. (2010). 'Introduction: disconnected governance and the crisis of legitimacy', in Pardo, I. and Prato, G. (eds) *Citizenship and the Legitimacy of Governance. Anthropology in the Mediterranean Region*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 1-24.