

Energy Transition and Climate Change in the Contemporary Urban Era. A Sociological Point of View

Original

Energy Transition and Climate Change in the Contemporary Urban Era. A Sociological Point of View / Crivello, Silvia. - In: FUORI LUOGO. - ISSN 2532-750X. - 17:4(2023), pp. 39-48.

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2985319 since: 2024-03-18T10:43:34Z

Publisher:

Federico II University Press

Published

DOI:

Terms of use:

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

Publisher copyright

(Article begins on next page)

Special Issue Future of Smart Cities

FUORI LUOGO

Rivista di Sociologia
del Territorio, Turismo, Tecnologia

Guest Editors

Monica Bernardi

Luca Bottini



Direttore Fabio Corbisiero
Caporedattore Carmine Urciuoli

ANNO VI – Volume 17 – Numero 4 – Ottobre 2023
FedOA – Federico II University Press
ISSN (online) 2723 – 9608 – ISSN (print) 2532 – 750X

Special Issue Future of Smart Cities

FUORI LUOGO

Rivista di Sociologia
del Territorio, Turismo, Tecnologia

Guest editors

Monica Bernardi

Luca Bottini



Direttore: Fabio Corbisiero
Caporedattore: Carmine Urciuoli

ANNO VI – Volume 17 – Numero 4 – Ottobre 2023
FedOA – Federico II University Press
ISSN (online) 2723 – 9608 – ISSN (print) 2532 – 750X



Questo numero di Fuori Luogo è realizzato con il contributo
del Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale dell'Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Sommario

9. Editorial

Smart cities: how to unclog the untamed urbanization

Fabio Corbisiero

13. Introduction

Monica Bernardi, Luca Bottini

Contributi

19. Beyond "Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities": Reflections on Strategies and Governance Models

Monica Bernardi, Alberica Aquili

39. Energy transition and climate change in the contemporary urban era. A sociological point of view

Silvia Crivello

49. Climate change and social inequalities: the gap between climate solutions & environmental justice

Alessandra Terenzi

63. The Contradictions of Platform Urbanism: the Role of Corporate Property Managers in the Vacation Rental Market of Milan

Veronica Conte, Guido Anselmi

75. The promotion of sustainability policy in the urban context: the role of industrial companies

Giulia Mura, Francesco Aleotti, Davide Diamantin

89. The future of smart cities and the role of neighborhoods in influencing sustainable behaviors:

A general overview

Luca Bottini

99. Investigating urban inequalities in a climate crisis scenario: the contribution of Big Data to environmental justice studies

Alessandra Landi, Tommaso Rimondi

SEZIONI A 3T - LETTURE A 3T

119. Francesca Bria, *Evgeny Morozov, Ripensare la Smart City*, Codice Edizioni, 2018

Francesco Calicchia

121. Maurizio Carta, *Città aumentate. Dieci gesti-barriera per il futuro*, Il Margine, 2021

Antonella Berritto

123. Giulia Agrosi (a cura di), *La Smart City e la Città Comoda. Una Nuova realtà futurista "smartiana"*, Mimesis, 2022

Maria Camilla Fraudatario

INCONTRO FUORI LUOGO

129. Smart Cities, Green Urban Growth and Sustainable Development: a Socio-Cybernetic

Reading in conversation with Mark Deakin

Senzio Sergio D'Agata

SEZIONE FUORI LUOGO

139. Certifying Credibility: Trajectory of Sub-Saharan asylum seekers in Italy

Ismail Oubad, Khalid Mouna

155. "If it happens again I'm leaving": suggestions for risk communication from a field study of communities in Basilicata, Italy

Rocco Scolozzi

171. Aree interne tra deagrarizzazione e riagrarizzazione: giovani agricoltori e meccanismi di ritorno all' "osso" in Centro Sardegna

Francesca Uleri, Benedetto Meloni, Alessandra Piccoli, Susanne Elsen

DIRETTORE/EDITOR IN CHIEF

Fabio Corbisiero (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

✉ direttore@fuoriluogo.info

CAPOREDATTORE/ EDITORIAL MANAGER

Carmine Urciuoli

✉ caporedattore@fuoriluogo.info

COMITATO SCIENTIFICO/SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Fabio Amato (Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale), Enrica Amato (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Francesco Antonelli (Università degli Studi Roma Tre), Biagio Aragona (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Elisabetta Bellotti (University of Manchester), Erika Bernacchi (Università degli Studi di Firenze), Kath Browne (UCD - University College Dublin), Amalia Caputo (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Letizia Carrera (Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro), Gilda Catalano (Università della Calabria), Matteo Colleoni (Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca), Linda De Feo (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Paola de Salvo (University of Perugia), Abdelhadi El Halhouli (Université Sultan Moulay Slimane – Beni Mellal – Maroc), Fiammetta Fanizza (University of Foggia), Domenica Farinella (Università degli Studi di Messina), Mariano Longo (Università del Salento), Fabiola Mancinelli (Universitat de Barcelona), Luca Marano (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Mara Maretti (Università degli Studi di Chieti Gabriele d'Annunzio), Giuseppe Masullo (Università degli Studi di Salerno), Pietro Maturi (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Antonio Maturò (Università di Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum), Claudio Milano (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), Khalid Mouna (Université Moulay Ismail – Mèknes – Maroc), Pierluigi Musarò (Università di Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum), Katherine O'Donnell (UCD - University College of Dublin), Giustina Orientale Caputo (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II), Gaia Peruzzi (Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza), Jason Pine (State University of New York), José Ignacio Pichardo Galán (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Tullio Romita (Università della Calabria), Emanuele Rossi (Università degli Studi Roma Tre), Elisabetta Ruspini (Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca), Sarah Siciliano (Università del Salento), Annamaria Vitale (Università della Calabria), Anna Maria Zaccaria

COMITATO DI REDAZIONE/EDITORIAL BOARD

Rosanna Cataldo (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

✉ rosanna.cataldo@fuoriluogo.info

Monica Gilli (Università degli Studi di Torino)

✉ monica.gilli@fuoriluogo.info

Ilaria Marotta (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

✉ ilaria.marotta@fuoriluogo.info

Salvatore Monaco (Libera Università di Bolzano - Freie Universität Bozen)

✉ salvatore.monaco@fuoriluogo.info

Santina Musolino (Università degli Studi Roma Tre)

✉ santina.musolino@fuoriluogo.info

Francesco Santelli (Università degli Studi di Trieste)

✉ francesco.santelli@fuoriluogo.info

Redazione di Fuori Luogo

✉ redazione@fuoriluogo.info

tel. +39-081-2535883

English text editor: Pietro Maturi

Copertina a cura di Fabio Improta. Elaborazione su foto di delfi de la Rua da Unsplash

EDITORE



FedOA - Federico II University Press
Centro di Ateneo per le Biblioteche "Roberto Pettorino"
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

Responsabilità editoriale

Fedoa adotta e promuove specifiche linee guida in tema di responsabilità editoriale, e segue le COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 59 del 20 dicembre 2016.

Direttore responsabile: Carmine Urciuoli

ISSN 2723-9608 (pubblicazione on line)

ISSN 2532-750X (pubblicazione cartacea)

Articles

In evaluating the proposed works, the journal follows a peer review procedure. The articles are proposed for evaluation by two anonymous referees, once removed any element that could identify the author.

Propose an article. The journal uses a submission system (open journal) to manage new proposals on the site. www.serena.unina.it/index.php/fuoriluogo

Rights and permissions. For each contribution accepted for publication on "Fuori Luogo", the authors must return to the editorial staff a letter of authorization, completed and signed. Failure to return the letter affects the publication of the article.

The policies on the reuse of articles can be consulted on www.serena.unina.it/index.php/fuoriluogo

Fuori Luogo is one of the open access journals published under the SHARE Interuniversity Convention.

Fuori Luogo is included in the ANVUR list of Area 14 scientific journals, class A for the sociological sectors 14/C3 (Political and Legal Phenomena) and 14/D1 (Economic, Labor, Environmental and Territorial Processes)

Fuori Luogo is indexed in: DOAJ Directory of Open Access Journals - ACNP Catalogue code n. PT03461557

- Index Copernicus International ID 67296.

The journal is part of CRIS Coordinamento Riviste Italiane di Sociologia.

Fuori Luogo is included in the LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) network of the Public Knowledge Project (PKP PLN)

The contents are published under a Creative Commons 4.0 license.

Energy transition and climate change in the contemporary urban era. A sociological point of view²

Introduction

It is a general consensus that the story of the development of human societies is a story of the transitions from one energy production system to another (Magnani *et al.*, 2022).

The political issue of energy transition, and more in general, the concept of sustainability, emerged terribly after the 1970s energy-environmental crises, but these topics spread during the 1990s and the early 2000s, in a scenario characterized worldwide by a growing globalization and, for many countries, by a tendentially stable economic growth. Therefore, it was relatively easy to imagine sustainable development as compatible with economic growth and with forms of mitigation of the injustices generated by the neoliberal capitalist system. In the current scenario, reflection on energy transition and on sustainability can not ignore a severe recession of the economies of the Northern world, started at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, that is laying bare the problems of the capitalist system, indicating the unsustainability of the current development model and the need for a system change (Pellizzoni, 2021).

The quick succession of crises which have recently hit modern societies, and the world at large – financial, economic, austerity, refugee and migration, climate, COVID-19 – has exposed, more than ever, the social, economic, political and ecological vulnerability of consumer capitalist societies and the inability of current societies to move beyond their established ‘politics of unsustainability’ (Bluhdorn, 2022).

Ecological problems are, of course, nothing new but were part of all human history and they sometimes have led to the collapse of a particular society (Diamond, 2005). However, currently, global societies are increasingly confronted with potential disastrous crises on a global scale, and mitigation measures, until now, have not proven effective (Gorg, 2022).

The last report of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) (2022), the main accredited actor at the international level for the study of the climate change problem, estimated that the average temperature of the Earth’s surface has increased in the last century by 0.74°C, as a consequence of the augmented concentration of greenhouse gases. Greenhouse gases are the result of human activity, mainly fossil fuels and deforestation³. Beyond the thermal variation, the discourse on temperature easily evokes catastrophic scenarios connected to the reduction of glaciers, the rise in the level of oceans and seas, the expansion of subtropical deserts and the innumerable consequences on human life (Davis, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2013a).

Worries concerning the state of the environment are leading us towards a new so-called “carbon control” logic (Redclift, 2009; While, 2010), or rather a society that aims to limit energy consumption, to improve the use of cleaner forms of energy, to reduce emissions greenhouse gases (Bell, 2011; Hannigan, 2014; Spaargaren, 2003; Voss *et al.*, 2006). Degrowth scholarship and activism call for and give a vision of this change, a “post-growth” ad “post-development” world, two umbrella terms that critique the centrality of economic growth and, more generally, the economy in contemporary societies, and embrace alternatives more ecologically sustainable ad socially just (Chertkovskaya, 2022).

This paper investigates the role that urban sociology can have in answering the energy problem in relation to climate change as one of the challenges perceived as most pressing for contempo-

1 Silvia Crivello, Turin Politecnico, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), silvia.crivello@polito.it, ORCID: 0000-0003-1555-8536.

2 Received: 17/02/2023. Revised: 11/07/2023. Accepted: 23/10/2023. Published: 30/10/2023.

3 IPCC reports indicate that in next years the average temperatures of the earth will still rise: they estimate that the increase of grades compared to current values could be from 1.1 to 6.4 °C.

rary cities on a worldwide level. The aim is the promotion of critical approaches and innovative practices to protect the environment in relation also to problems as social justice.

The article is structured in three main parts: the first paragraph introduces the problem of the energy transition and frames it within the strategies of contemporary societies; it reflects on the urgency to pursue more environmentally attentive societies – compared to the current ones – and on the importance to reflect on the transposition of the concept of energy transition at the scale of the city. The second paragraph reflects on the relationship between energy transition, economic crisis of the cities and energy justice in relation to the scenarios of sustainability and climate-energy change. Finally, the concluding remarks underline how urban sociology, through conceptual and methodological tools, can help to understand the phenomenon of the energy transition and contribute to identifying possible solutions.

1. Theme and literature

The capitalist economy is inherently based on the principle of growth, that it exploits limited resources. This logic of profitability inevitably implies the instrumentalization and abuse of nature; the belief in the mastery of nature was, and still is, an important part of the cultural dimensions of the making of capitalist societies (Gorg, 2022). The mastery of nature lies behind the acceptance of limitless economic growth and technical progress as the only way to respond to the crises caused by economic growth itself⁴.

The current environmental crises, from the climate crisis up to the loss of biodiversity and other ecological and societal crises dimensions worldwide, indicate a deep-rooted crisis of societal development as a whole, including its beliefs in science and culture, a crisis of civilization which requires a critical rethinking of history, society and nature (Gorg, 2022). Some authors diagnose a crisis of civilization in which societal and environmental issues are inextricably interlinked (Lang & Mokrani, 2013; Kothari *et al.*, 2019).

In the face of the deepening social and ecological crises, which call for an encompassing social-ecological transformation of the capitalist mode of production and living (see Brand & Wissen, 2017, 2021), it is pivotal to theorize the interdependencies between societal and environmental issues, to rethink capitalist development and to elaborate on the emancipatory dimension of this challenge (Grog, 2022). The construction of a society more attentive to change climate requires, in fact, far-reaching changes that involve very different fields (Beck, 1986; Agusti & Maretti, 2012;): it means for instance, changes in behavior and habits, from culture to food, from transportation to social justice (Chatterton, 2013; Osti, 2012). From this point of view, for example, Raymond Murphy discusses how social practices involve the integration between three elements (materials, meanings and competences) into performances: social practices are, of course, involved in their physical context – which is changing because of global warming – but they also impact the environment because materiality is an indispensable element of which socialness is made (Murphy, 2021). Another relevant aspect, at the heart of this reflection, is the urban dimension of the problem; in the energy transition the role of urban centers appears crucial and the urban scale is, progressively, chosen as the site to experiment with innovative solutions to tackle the climate crisis (Bulkeley & Castan Broto, 2013; Pellizzoni, 2021)⁵.

It is widely recognized, both by urban experts and international institutions, that the twenty-first century is the urban century: since 2007 the majority of the population of the world lives in cities

4 Even after decades in which an awareness of these crises has slowly risen, the idea of mastery of nature is still effective and deeply rooted in the quest for technological solutions and economic innovations expressed, for example, by approaches of ecological modernization (see for example: Asafu-Adjaye & Mahadevan, 2013; Hajer, 1995).

5 The New Urban Agenda of the United Nations (2017) recognized the crucial role of cities in tackling global issues such as climate change. Specifically, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) directly refer to 'sustainable cities and communities' in Goal 11: 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.

and, as stated by the United Nations, between 2009 and 2050, the population of urban areas will grow from 3.4 to 6.3 billion, absorbing most of the increase of the world's population (UN 2010). The growing strategic importance of urban space concerning both the problem's definition and its solutions isn't certainly new in the current economic scenario. Since the last century, cities have been the spaces of the biggest changes due to the conditions imposed by globalization and neo-liberalization. Cities have been forced to become more entrepreneurial and more competitive in attracting – or retaining – mobile capital and in diverting resources from social welfare to economic development (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1997; Peck & Tickell, 2002). With the so-called «new urban policy» (Cox, 1993), cities started to be involved in the global competition to attract investments, moving from a broad concern for the management of public goods (including the environment) to an ever more pressing alarm for economic competitiveness, often with negative consequences for the environment. The rule of the market is basically incompatible with the principles of equality and the capitalist economy isn't oriented towards social needs but driven by the imperatives of growth and profitability (Gorg, 2022).

Urban activities are responsible for 80% of carbon dioxide emissions produced globally each year and for 75% of the energy consumed due to the concentration of population (UNEP, 2017)⁶; urban centers are the places that have the greatest influence on global pollution.

In addition to constituting the main polluting spaces, cities represent also the main victims of climate change, exposed to «natural» disasters such as floods, hurricanes, energy blackouts, etc. (Davis, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2013a). Not surprisingly, the debate on the so-called “urban resilience” is receiving a particular emphasis in terms of analyzing (and promoting) the ability of cities to recover and to adapt in front of disasters and massive environmental, economic, social pressures (cf. Newman *et al.*, 2009; Pike *et al.*, 2010; Simmie & Martin, 2010; Vale & Campanella, 2005).

Cities are seen as the contexts where to experiment with new technologies related to energy, water, mobility, etc. thanks to the concentration of people, goods, and information (Hodson & Marvin, 2009) and relevant as spaces for the governance of climate and energy change: in an era of globalization and of intense competition between places, cities represent the new spaces of the relationship between national governments and their territories, within multi-scalar governance (Brenner, 2004).

At the same time, cities are also active places for the contestation of the current globalization and the mobilization promoting sustainability. Social movements against climate change and supporting environmental justice (such as the Indignados, the Occupy Movement and the Friday for Future Movement) are typically urban phenomena (Rossi & Vanolo, 2012; Hannigan, 2014; Asara, 2016; Kaufer & Lein, 2020). Energized by these crises, social movements have promoted post-growth (Latouche, 2006), degrowth (Kallis, 2018), post-capitalism (Mason, 2015), environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2007) and other notions for a more ambitious reframing of the ecological issue and as new concepts for a transformation of modern societies beyond their logic of exploitation and inequality.

Mainly for these reasons a new «low/post-carbon» political rationality based on accountability towards the environment seems to emerge and grow but what this means about urban policies is still an open question (Blowers, 1997; Hajer, 1995; Spaargaren, 2000).

2. Some results concerning the relation between energy transition and sociology

The transition to cleaner forms of energy doesn't include technological configurations only. Energy systems are, in fact, socio-technical systems (Miller *et al.*, 2013) which involve not only infra-

6 UN Environmental Annual Report 2017 : <https://www.unep.org/resources/un-environment-annual-report-2017>

structure, machines, mechanisms and devices, but also a much more multifaceted complex of features as, for example, companies, consumers, relationships, politics, science, etc.

Analyzing energy changes through the lens of the socio-technical systems allows to see important aspects neglected in many analytical approaches. This lens shows how social processes stimulate and manage energy transformations; changes in energy technologies, in turn, reshape social practices, values, relationships, models of business, forms of work, ways of thinking and living (Miller *et al.*, 2013; Crivello, 2015).

Sociology can offer a wide range of tools to understand the different geometries of power and strategic interests underlying the creation of coalitions of interests, economic rationalities, urban development strategies in a scenario of global crisis.

This perspective relies, for example, to the recent debates on urban metabolism and on the so-called «urban political ecology», aimed at overcoming the hypothetical ontological division between nature and society (the myth that cities are places «where the nature stops», Hinchcliffe, 1999) and to highlight the role of capitalist processes in the reproduction of the environmental problem (Cook & Swyngedouw 2012; Henderson, 2009).

From a theoretical point of view, developing conceptual tools allow us to understand a series of heterogeneous quantitative and qualitative processes (human and non-human), dynamic, interconnected and constantly negotiated and renegotiated between social forces. These processes assemble and re-assemble human and non-human subjects in changeable and unpredictable urban forms: material elements, such as water or oil, are transformed under the action of capital and labor guided by capitalism and surplus extraction (Cook & Swyngedouw, 2012; Gandy, 2004). Understanding such mechanisms requires knowledge and sensitivity close to sociology, but pushes also sociology to confront and hybridize with the strictly «technical» and «engineering» knowledge, essential to understanding the nature and the mechanisms of ecological processes typical of the urban metabolism theory (cf. Padovan *et al.*, 2011; Pellizzoni, 2011).

A sociological analysis of the discourse on energy transition and global change can offer critical perspectives for broadening the interpretative horizon and for questioning «conventional knowledge» that usually limits understanding and intervention; sociology traditionally does not contribute to the quantitative approach of these models, while it addresses the most qualitative aspects. It's relevant to remember that, since the models about the resources' limits outlined in the 1972 well-known Club of Rome report, the scientific debate, strongly focused on quantitative models, has evolved. These models design future scenarios and, even if they raise inevitable doubts and perplexity among various scholars (Castel & Henderson, 2003; Hulme & Mahoney, 2010; Schiermeier, 2010), they are useful tools for monitoring and reflecting on the evolutionary dynamics of society.

Avoiding the excessively relativistic and constructivist positions, and the haze of the actual reality of the problem too, sociology can reflect on the different rationalities and perspectives grounding these scenarios (i.e. on the diverse epistemologies of global change). For example, the link between energy consumption and the imaginary of the «ecological disaster» is often missing in the technical debate. Many reflections outline the risk of a possible apocalyptic future marked by ecological disaster, a future often described in many recent sci-fi films (e.g. *The Day After Tomorrow*). This suggestive and troubling imaginary often seems to support the search for solutions to emergencies (e.g. urban technologies able to counteract the rise of the oceans), without questioning the economic model and the lifestyles they are producing. Shifting attention to the analysis of the environmental impacts of production to consumption practices would be a relevant contribution (see for example the works by Carolan, 2004; Spaargaren & van Vliet, 2000). In social studies, the assumption is that disasters are never entirely «natural» but the destruction's extent depends on the socio-environmental characteristics of the city affected by the disaster. Murphy (2004), for example, investigated the case of the well-known «natural» disaster in New Orleans, underlying that it was not «natural» that the disaster mainly affected the black population, who lived in dilapidated neighborhoods and who was unable, without a private car, to

avoid the hurricane (cf. Allen, 2013; Campanella, 2006; Keil, 2007; Peck, 2006). Tragedies aren't indiscriminately «global» and their impacts are strongly local and socially differentiated.

Then, the catastrophe doesn't seem to be "natural", but strongly "social" related. The differentiated impacts of climate change can reinforce already existing social and economic inequalities and create new vulnerabilities. Also, the COVID-19 virus has reflected social inequalities, with the less privileged groups both more exposed to it and more affected by it.

How can sociology contribute to a reflection on energy justice? Starting from the social justice's debate, it is possible to develop some interpretative strategies for an energy justice's agenda. This process would assume equal access to energy sources, fair distribution of costs, benefits and risks, and unanimous participation in choosing whether, where and which energy systems to build (Miller, 2012), with reference to both production and consumption, from the local scale to the global one (on the issues of environmental injustice on a global urban scale see, for example, Osti, 2013); according to some scholars (O'Rourke & Connolly, 2003), distribution, use and impacts of energy production are largely unequal, as political and economic benefits.

A crucial topic is "who" has the right to choose. Citizens and communities often have different perspectives compared to industries and policymakers about how, where, if, and when to build energy systems. In addition, conceptual frameworks often operate favoring the ideas and values of certain groups, marginalizing the perspectives of those who are at the bottom of the social ladder and, for example, they do not have adequate cognitive, cultural and economic resources to respond.

Energy systems often create inequalities in the distribution of damages and benefits too. As already highlighted in many environmental justice's debates, dangerous pollutants are often concentrated in places where live groups with little political power live, while the strongest energy consumers often live without exposing themselves to environmental contamination (on issues of environmental conflicts see Bobbio, 2011; Pellizzoni, 2011). The growing anxiety about the increasing cost of resources, gas security, and oil supplies (Newman *et al.*, 2009) can justify and legitimize the state of power and control's extension (Swyngedouw, 2007). Over time, this process can help to create or reinforce unequal distributions of power and well-being in industrial societies. This leads to important questions: who will control the access to renewable energy in the 21st century? Who will benefit from the new energy systems? Who will lose? And whose life and livelihoods will be at risk?

3. Conclusions and limitations of the research

Certainly, as it has been argued in this article, energy transition and global climate change are recognized today as the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century. The promotion of an ecological transition, in this sense, implies composite and multi-faceted processes, socio-technical changes and considerable changes in fields of investigation of sociology as habits, behaviors, uses and lifestyles. Issues concerning the energy transition towards lower environmental impacts have, in the last decades, acquired wide importance within the academic and political debates (Chatterton, 2013; While *et al.*, 2010; While & Whitehead, 2013). The reflection on the energy issue and climate change is characterized by a variety of possible epistemologies, scientific approaches and methodological tools; therefore, difficulties of dialogue between different voices are common.

If ecological and energy problems constitute a stark reality – and a multitude of scientific approaches are aimed at quantification and understanding the complex mechanisms of ecological and anthropic systems (cf. Mol & Spaargaren, 2000) – from a strictly sociological point of view it is possible to highlight the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the positions and arguments brought up by experts, politicians, activists etc. (Hoffman, 2011; Nisbet, 2009).

For instance, there is still a large discussion about the quantification of the problem: alarmist positions are opposed to more optimistic ones, and for social scientists (and non-experts of ecology and, more in general, for people without a specific and technical knowledge), it is very difficult to have a clear opinion in front of the data technicality.

This paper doesn't want to support unconditionally constructivist positions in the sociological vision of the problem but, on the contrary, it tries to stimulate a dialogue between sociology and 'technical' knowledge.

More specifically, in the scientific debate, two expressions assume particular importance: the first refers to the idea of a "low-carbon" transition (Hodson & Marvin, 2012). In a nutshell, the goal of this transition is the promotion – for example through technological innovations or market economic instruments – of structures and forms of social and industrial organization with a lower energy and environmental impact. Programs to promote renewable sources or tools such as the mechanisms of tradable emission permits belong to this group.

The second expression refers to the idea of a society not only «low-carbon», but more radically «post-carbon» (Heinberg, 2004; Lerch, 2007). In this case, (and similarly to other social science concepts that use the prefix «post»), the idea is to reverse the perspectives of socio-technical progress, wondering about possible radically different societies, able to free themselves from the use of fossil fuels. The reflections on degrowth made by Latouche (2006), or critical theories carried out by post-development scholars (see, for example, Sidaway, 2007) belong to this second group. According to these authors, the debate on sustainable development and on low-carbon transition has taken on extremely modest tones and conservative objectives: the main goal seems to be the search for minimal adaptations to our socio-technical-economic system that they allow to avoid ecological disaster. In this sense, the search for sustainability becomes comparable to a sort of "ecological modernization" process (Hajer, 1995; Mol, 2003; Spaargaren, 2000; 2011) aimed at finding technological and technical-managerial solutions to make more efficient the system but without really questioning it (a sort of "greenwashing" operation, to use the words of the young activist Greta Thunberg). Differently, authors such as Daniel Lerch (2007) propose to cancel definitively the use of fossil fuels. Lerch's solution consists of a reorganization of cities to self-contain flows of materials, energy and waste through the recovery of local knowledge and austere lifestyles, focused on the principles of recycling and energy saving. Even more radically, authors close to post-development debates doubt about the assumptions of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism (Escobar, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2013b).

In proposing a reflection on the role of sociology in this framework, this article focused specifically on aspects of the problem closely related to the issues and theories developed within urban sociology and urban studies.

In particular, the energy-environmental issue developed reflecting on its eminently urban dimension, on the socio-cultural scenario affected by the economic global crisis, the multiplicity of possible epistemologies that can be employed in the construction and interpretation of the problem, on the possible developments of a reflection on socio-energetic justice. It is precisely in this sense that sociology can offer its contribution: problematizing the question and highlighting the complex relationships between social facts and environmental ones, between space and politics, and between knowledge production and critical knowledge.

Developing such approaches does not imply abandoning the sociological theoretical tools to face complex technical and ecological issues, but it rather supposes the construction of an interdisciplinary dialogue that intersects sociological analysis with "expert" engineering and economic knowledge, as evidenced by urban metabolism approaches and urban political ecology approaches.

As discussed in this article, to understand the complex challenges of the energy-environmental issue is of primary importance trying to overcome the use of simplistic conceptual categories, for example, based on the contrast between «nature» and «society» or on the adoption of strictly constructionist visions of the phenomena.

In this difficult path, the goal is not only the promotion of critical approaches but, more pragmatically, to construct critical sociology aimed to understand and learn from those social forces

that already exist and that are building innovative practices in defense of the environment and of social justice.

In pandemic and post-pandemic times, it is the task of critical scholars to continue analyzing those initiatives through a critical lens, not only to show their contradictions but also to imagine opportunities and innovative frameworks that would allow for a progressive urban socio-environmental transformation that does not leave anybody behind; this brief reflection should not be considered as a real research agenda proposal, rather than an invitation to build an Italian debate on the theme.

References

- Agustoni, A., & Maretti, M. (2012). Energy and Social Change: An Introduction. *International Review of Sociology*, 22(3), 391-404. DOI:10.1080/03906701.2012.730820.
- Allen, B.L. (2013). Neighborhood as «Green Laboratory»: A critique of actor network theory and allied NGO strategies in postdisaster New Orleans. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 1, 3-26. DOI: 10.1423/73572.
- Asara, V. (2016). The indignados as a socio-environmental movement: framing the crisis and democracy, *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 26(6), 527-542. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.172>.
- Asafu-Adjaye J., & Mahadevan R. (2013). Implications of CO2 reduction policies for a high carbon emitting economy. *Energy economics*, 38, 32-41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eneco.2013.03.004>.
- Beck, U. (1986). *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Modern*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp; trad. it. *La società del rischio. Verso una seconda modernità*. Roma: Carocci, 2000.
- Bell, M.M. (2011). *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*. London: Sage.
- Blowers, A. (1997). Environmental Policy: Ecological Modernisation or the Risk Society? *Urban Studies*, 34(5-6), 845-872. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43083671>.
- Blühdorn, I. (2022). Sustainability: buying time for consumer capitalism. In L., Pellizzoni, L., Emanuele, V., Asara (Eds.) (2022): *Handbook of Critical Environmental Politics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 141-155.
- Bobbio, L. (2011). Conflitti territoriali: sei interpretazioni. *TeMA, Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment*, 4(4), 79-88.
- Brand, U., & Wissen, M. (2017). The imperial mode of living. In C., Spash (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Ecologica/ Economics*, London, Routledge, 152-161.
- Brenner, N. (2004). *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bulkeley H., & Castán Broto V. (2013). Government by experiment? Global cities and the governing of climate change. *Transactions of the institute of British geographers*, 38(3), 361-375. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24582453>
- Campanella, T.J. (2006). Urban Resilience and the Recovery of New Orleans. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 72(2), 141-146. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360608976734>.
- Carolan, M.S. (2004). Ecological Modernization Theory: What About Consumption? *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal*, 17(3), 247-260. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0894120490270294>.
- Castles, I., & Henderson D. (2003). The IPCC Emission Scenarios: An Economic-Statistical Critique. *Energy & Environment*, 14(2), 159-185. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43734556>.
- Chatterton, P. (2013). Towards an Agenda for Post-Carbon Cities: Lessons from Lilac, The UK's First Ecological, Affordable Cohousing Community. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(5), 1654-674. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12009>
- Chertkovskaya E. (2022). Degrowth Energy politics and energy transition. In Pellizzoni L., Leonardi E., & Asara V. (Eds.), *Critical Environmental Politics*, London: Elgar, 116-128.
- Cook, I., & Swyngedouw E. (2012). Cities, Social Cohesion and the Environment: Towards a Future Research Agenda. *Urban Studies*, 49(9), 1959-1979. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/004209801244488>.
- Cox, K.R. (1993). The Local and the Global in the New Urban Politics: A Critical View. *Environment and Planning D*, 11(4), 433-448. DOI:10.1068/d110433.
- Crivello, S. (2015). Le città nella transizione energetica: per una sociologia delle post-carbon cities. *Rassegna italiana di sociologia*, 56(2), 289-314. DOI: 10.1423/80886.
- Davis M. (2010). Who Will Build the Ark? *New Left Review*, 61, 29-46.
- Diamond, J. (2005). *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or survive*. London: Penguin.
- Escobar, A. (2010). Postconstructivist Political Ecologies. In M., Redclift & G., Woodgate (Eds.), *International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, Cheltenham: Elgar, 91-105.
- Gandy, M. (2004). Rethinking Urban Metabolism: Water, Space and the Modern City. *City*, 8, 363-379. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360481042000313509>.
- Gorg, C. (2022). Critical theory: praxis and emancipation beyond the mastery of nature. In Pellizzoni, L., Leonardi, E., & Asara, V. (Eds.), *Critical Environmental Politics*. London: Elgar, 23-39.
- Hajer, M.A. (1995). *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hannigan, J. (2014). *Environmental Sociology*. London: Routledge.

- Harvey, D. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell; trad. it. *La crisi della modernità*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1989.
- Heinberg, R. (2004). *Powerdown. Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*. San Francisco: New Society Publisher.
- Henderson, G. (2009). Marxist political economy and the environment. In N., Castree, D., Demeritt, D., Liverman & B., Rhoads (Eds.), *A Companion to Environmental Geography*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 266-293.
- Hinchcliffe, S. (1999). Cities and nature. Intimate strangers. In J., Allen & M., Pryke, (Eds.), *Unsettling Cities*. London: Routledge, 137-80.
- Hodson, M., & Marvin, S. (2009). Urban Ecological Security: A New Urban Paradigm. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33(1), 193-215. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00832.x>.
- Hodson, M., & Marvin, S. (2012). Mediating Low-Carbon Urban Transitions? Forms of Organization, Knowledge and Action. *European Planning Studies*, 20(3), 421-439. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2012.651804>.
- Hoffman, A.J. (2011). Talking Past Each Other? Cultural Framing of Skeptical and Convinced Logics in the Climate Change Debate. *Organization & Environment*, 24(1), 3-33. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27068723>.
- Hulme, M., & Mahoney M. (2010). Climate Change: What Do We know About the IPCC? *Progress in Physical Geography*, 34(5), 705-718. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309133310373719>.
- IPCC (2022). *Summary for policymakers*. <https://edoc.unibas.ch/91322/>; <https://edoc.unibas.ch/91322/>
- Jessop, B. (1997). The Entrepreneurial City: Re-Imagining Localities, Redesigning Economic Governance, or Restructuring Capital. In N., Jewson & S., MacGregor (Eds.), *Transforming Cities: Contested Governance and New Spatial Divisions*, London Routledge, 28-41.
- Kallis, G. (2018). *Degrowth*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing.
- Kaufer R., & Lein P. (2020). Anarchist resistance in the German Hambach forest: Analysing climate justice. *Anarchist Studies*, 28(1), 60-83. DOI: [DOI:10.3898/AS.28.1.03](https://doi.org/10.3898/AS.28.1.03).
- Keil, R. (2007). Sustaining Modernity, Modernizing Nature. In R., Krueger & D., Gibbs (Eds.), *The Sustainable Development Paradigm. Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe*, New York: Guilford Press, 41-65.
- Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F., & Acosta, A. (Eds.) (2019). *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, Chennai: Tulika.
- Lang, M., Mokrani, D. (Eds) (2013). *Beyond Development. Alternative Visions from Latin America*. Amsterdam: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Latouche, S. (2006). *Le pari de la décroissance*. Paris : Fayard; trad. it. *La scommessa della decrescita*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007.
- Lerch, D. (2007). *Post Carbon Cities: Planning for Energy and Climate Uncertainty*. Post Carbon Institute, Sebastopol; trad. it. *Post Carbon Cities. Come affrontare l'incertezza energetica e climatica*; <http://www.indipendenzaenergetica.it>.
- Magnani, N., Minervini, D., & Scotti, I. (2022). Energy politics and energy transition. In L., Pellizzoni, E., Leonardi & V., Asara (Eds.), *Critical Environmental Politics*. London: Elgar, 245-256.
- Mason, P. (2015). *Postcapitalism. A guide to our future*. London: Allen Lane.
- Miller, C.A. (2012) Energy justice: Ensuring Human Dignity in the Postcarbon Future. *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 5, 46-59.
- Miller, C.A., Iles, A., & Jones C.F. (2013). The Social Dimensions of Energy Transitions. *Science as Culture*, 22(2), 135-148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2013.786989>.
- Mol, A.P.J. (2003). *Globalization and Environmental Reform: The Ecological Modernization of the Global Economy*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Mol, A.P.J., & Spaargaren G. (2000). Ecological Modernisation Theory in Debate: A Review. *Environmental Politics*, 9(1), 17-49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010008414511>.
- Murphy, R. (2004). Disaster or Sustainability: The Dance of Human Agents with Nature's Actants. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 41(3), 249-266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-618X.2004.tb00778.x>.
- Murphy, R. (2021). *The Fossil-fuelled Climate Crisis: Foresight Or Discounting Danger?*. Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Newman, P., Beatley, T., & Boyer H. (2009). *Resilient Cities. Responding to Peak Oil and Climate Change*. Washington: Island Press.
- Nisbet, M.C. (2009). Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 51(2), 12-23. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/ENVT.51.2.12-23>.
- O'Rourke, D., & Connolly S. (2003). Just Oil? The Distribution of Environmental and Social Impacts of Oil Production and Consumption. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 28, 587-617. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.28.050302.105617>.
- Osti, G. (2012). Frames, Organisations, and Practices as Social Components of Energy. *International Review of Sociology*, 22(3), 412-428. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2012.730821>.
- Osti, G. (2013). Sostenibilità urbana. In S. Vicari Haddock (Ed.), *Questioni urbane*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 67-91.
- Padovan, D., Alietti, A., & Arrobio O. (2011). *Le opportunità discorsive dell'expertise nel conflitto sul Tav in Val di Susa*. In L., Pellizzoni (Ed.), *Conflitti ambientali. Esperti, politica, istituzioni nelle controversie ecologiche*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 235-258.
- Peck, J. (2006). Liberating the City: Between New York and New Orleans. *Urban Geography*, 27(8), 681-713. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.27.8.68>.
- Peck, J., & Tickell A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode*, 34(3), 380-404. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00247>
- Pellizzoni, L. (2011). La politica dei fatti. In L., Pellizzoni (Ed.), *Conflitti ambientali. Esperti, politica, istituzioni nelle controversie ecologiche*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 7-38.
- Pellizzoni, L. (2021). Nature, limits and form-of-life. *Environmental Politics*, 30(1-2), 81-99.
- Pike, A., Dawley, S., & Tomaney J. (2010). *Resilience, Adaptation and Adaptability*. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 3, 59-70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsq001>.

Redclift, M. (2009). The Environment and Carbon Dependence. Landscapes of Sustainability and Materiality. *Current Sociology*, 57(3), 369-388. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392108101588>.

Rossi, U., & Vanolo A. (2012). *Urban Political Geographies. A Global Perspective*. London: Sage.

Schiermeier, Q. (2010). IPCC flooded by Criticism. *Nature*, 463, 596-597. DOI: 10.1038/463596a.

Schlosberg, D. (2007). *Defining Environmental Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1177/0309132507077405.

Sidaway, J.D. (2007). Spaces of Post-Development, Progress. *Human Geography*, 31(3), 345-361.

Simmie, J., & Martin R. (2010). The Economic Resilience of Regions: Towards an Evolutionary Approach. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 3, 27-43. DOI:10.1093/cjres/rsp029.

Spaargaren, G. (2000). Ecological Modernization Theory and Domestic Consumption. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 2(4), 323-335. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/714038564>.

Spaargaren, G. (2003). Sustainable Consumption: A Theoretical and Environmental Policy Perspective. *Society & Natural Resources*, 16(8), 687-701. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920309192>.

Spaargaren, G. (2011). Theories of Practices: Agency, Technology, and Culture: Exploring the Relevance of Practice Theories for the Governance of Sustainable Consumption Practices in the New World-Order. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(3), 813-822. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.03.010>.

Spaargaren, G., & van Vliet, B. (2000). Lifestyles, Consumption and the Environment: The Ecological Modernization of Domestic Consumption, *Environmental Politics*, 9(1), 50-76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010008414512>.

Swyngedouw, E. (2007). Impossible Sustainability and the Postpolitical Condition. In R. Krueger & D. Gibbs (Eds.), *The Sustainable Development Paradox. Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe*. New York: Guilford Press, 13-40.

Swyngedouw, E. (2013a). Apocalypse Now! Fear and Doomsday Pleasures. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 24(1), 9-18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2012.759252>.

Swyngedouw, E. (2013b). The Non-Political Politics of Climate Change. *ACME*, 12(1), 1-8. DOI: <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/948>.

UN – United Nations (2010). *World Urbanization Prospects, the 2009 Revision: Highlights*, New York United Nations.

UNEP – United Nation Environmental Programme (2017). *UN Environmental Annual Report 2017*. UN Environment.

Vale, L.J., & Campanella T.J. (2005). *The Resilient City. How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Voss, J.P., Bauknecht, D., & Kemp R. (Eds.) (2006). *Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

While, A., Jonas, A., & Gibbs D. (2010). From Sustainable Development to Carbon Control: Eco-State Restructuring and the Politics of Urban and Regional Development. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35(1), 76-93. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40647289>.

While, A., & Whitehead, M. (2013). Cities, urbanisation and climate change. *Urban Studies*, 50(7), 1325-1331. DOI: 10.1177/0042098013480963.