

Paolo Giardullo

Non è aria. Cittadini e politiche contro l'inquinamento atmosferico [It is not air. Citizens and policies against atmospheric pollution], Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018, pp. 184

Dario Minervini *Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II*

“Non è aria” is an Italian saying that, more or less, means that it is not the right time or that you do not need something in that specific moment. In the case of the book, this title is a pun on the literally “is not air” referring to atmospheric pollution.

Paolo Giardullo adopts a hybrid perspective. He mixes theoretical sensitivities from the Environmental Sociology with STS, in order to deal with this thin (as air) and heavy (as the polluted rain) object of inquiry. The book is organized in three chapters in which the author take stock of 1) the theoretical and analytical proposal, that is the hybrid conceptualization above mentioned, 2) the governance and the policies facing atmospheric pollution, 3) the multiple socio-material interconnections that perform (and are performed by) the assemblage including cars, places, containers and coal.

Because of the theoretical hybridity of the framework, it can be said both that the book is not original in itself, neither that it can be considered something yet established in the current sociological literature. A general issue framed according to the Environmental Sociology debate, a sort of long-standing novelty in the Italian academia, is here endorsed by the references to the classics of STS studies. In particular, the main theoretical arguments summoned from STS are those developed by the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) scholars. The first theoretical section (Chapter 1) unfolds from Bruno Latour’s pivotal contribution in challenging the sociological effort to retrace the interplay of the human agency whit that one emerging from materiality to by John Urry’s social “on the move” approach. The latter was one of the scholars that directly addressed, from a pragmatic point of view, the issue of the climate change (Urry 2011). This reference is very closely connected with the main argument of the book we are discussing here. Indeed, the point the book addresses is how the “high carbon lives” perform, and are performed by, practices that are not merely the consequence of individual preferences but “ingrained” in everyday life of contemporary times. Air pollution is “ingrained” as well, as a complex configuration participating to (and tied to) a wider socio-material assemblage that Giardullo depicts through his analytical effort.

The analysis of governance arrangements and policies (Chapter 2) envisioned to face atmospheric pollution is the way to shed light on Ecological Modernization “from inside”. Here Environmental Sociology provides both a descriptive tool to sketch the multilevel governance of sustainability

policies and a prescriptive reformist model to foster the eco-transition. Giardullo tries to balance this ambivalence managing the intrinsic normativity of the Ecological Modernization, looking at how norms, institutions, technologies and markets are intertwined in structuring the solutions to the ecological crisis.

Such an extended unit of analysis consists of an “assembled” scenario that includes, of course, those “guilty” people polluting the air by using their cars for the mobility of everyday life. What the environmental policies try to frame and address as bad behaviors or a lack of awareness, is represented in the book as something more complex and distributed within a bundle of practices consistent with auto-mobility system. Cars and auto-mobility are one of three analytical focuses scrutinized in the book; the other two are the logistics (mainly road transport) and heating systems (Chapter 3). These different fields are investigated through their specificities, trying to consider the situatedness of the socio-material practices investigated. In this regard, this book seems to be too slender. Indeed, the empirical strategy does not include those thick descriptions featuring accounts stemming from the ANT, consistently with its ethnographic sensitivity. The reconstruction of the social practices, cultures, skills and materialities, in the manner the Lancaster school use to investigate these issues, could have been useful, as well (Shove, Pantzar, Watson 2012). On contrary, connections between automobility, logistics, heating and air pollution seems to be presented at (too?) high degree of abstraction.

Despite this, the book provides interesting insights in the three fields above mentioned, and the line of reasoning leads to clarify the general frame in which the *ontological politics* (Mol 1999) of the air pollution is performed. For example, how the moralities intertwined with the connections enacting the mundane ways we use to move, transport, and heat are diversified and often contradictory is displayed. Security, practicably, viability, (economic) saving, cleaning: all these values are negotiated ad composed through a steady work of maintenance.

The actors that we look at as “guilty” because polluters, experience the conflicting moralities of the ordinary social practices in everyday life, sharing a responsibility that cannot be retraced as punctual but that emerges as dispersed and distributed. Of course, this point could be questioned by those social scientists endorsing a “critical critique” posture of research. From this standing point, the lack of an analytical attribution of responsibilities would be considered the main weakness of this study. STS teach us that, unfortunately, this sort of dilution/distribution of responsibilities is the result of an effective articulation of the air pollution socio-material assemblage, more than the critical weakness of Paolo Giardullo. In other terms, air pollution emerges – and is performed – as a “strong” phenomenon because of the solidity of the complex web of synergies and interactions between heterogeneous elements and because of the effectiveness in the enrollment of humans and non-humans.

From a pragmatic point of view, power is not (only) a matter of good or bad intentions or behaviors, neither it is directly sloping from unfair/un-sustainable norms and policies. It is something that works making solid in time and space a hybrid configuration of actors and practices. So how to foster a critic to such an issue (the atmospheric pollution), even if from a non-normative standing? On this point, studies adopting pragmatic perspectives will lead to open new questions, more than stating answers and responses. Giardullo invites us to insist on the work of deconstructing the self-prophecy and the automatism of prescriptive framing facing pollution through technological determinism.

Maybe we can be a little more ambitious in retracing how the epistemological distance from the dramatic consequences of the environmental crisis plays a fundamental role in undermining the enactment of alternative assemblages. People, organizations, institutions, socio-material arrangements are differently tied to the very destructive dynamics of climate change, very often learning and experiencing the “bright side” of the environmental crisis. So, there are actors who are more or less close to environmental problems, as well as there are different rates of complexities featuring these problems (Carolan 2004).

Air pollution is a matter of practice indeed, but not so immediately close in epistemological terms (meaning also in practical perception) to those that enact the air pollution itself. So how people claim to fight it and, at the same time, why they cannot detach themselves from this socio-material configuration seems to be another worthy research path to follow, after this Giardullo insightful book.

References

- Carolan, M. (2004) *Ontological Politics: Mapping a Complex Environmental Problem*, in “Environmental Values”, 13(4), pp. 497-522.
- Mol, A. (1999) *Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions*, in “The Sociological Review”, 47(1), pp. 74-89.
- Shove, E., Pantzar, M. and Watson, M. (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How It Changes*, Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- Urry, J. (2011) *Climate Change and Society*, Cambridge, Polity.

* * *