



Dispatch

Infrastructures of Harm, Communities of Knowledge and Environmental Justice

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Marco Armiero on Bodies, Narratives and Commoning in the Wasteocene

Just a couple of months before he joined a panel with Divya Gupta in the "Infrastructures of Harm, Communities of Knowledge & Environmental Justice" panel,¹ Marco Armiero was asked in a webinar why he insisted on narratives and storytelling as central in his ideas about the *Wasteocene* (the homonymous book was released in 2021 as part of the Cambridge Elements series). As an avid Marxist, and Senior Editor of the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, his answer did not surprise the audience. His words were instead reassuring and filled the online environment with hope and revolutionary energy as they confirmed that a career path asking questions about narratives, nature and justice was not an irrelevant one. He conveyed that seizing the narratives is as important as seizing the means of production.

But how to even start with such a Herculean task when narratives, mainly toxic ones, seem so ephemeral and so ubiquitous? Armiero's work is a great inspiration for understanding such narratives as both material and discursive, as fleshed out in his presentation in the "Landscapes of Injustice, Landscapes of Repair" series, organized by the Human Rights Institute at Binghamton and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. There, he continued dismantling, brick after brick, narratives whose purpose is to naturalize environmental injustice, convince us that the poor choose to be poor and that those living in a polluted community are responsible for its toxicity. Extending

¹ <https://binghamton.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=a6daeb1f-2aeb-4134-9427-afdb01000dcf>

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and exemplifying notions of “communing” as answers to these challenges, dozens of participants in the webinar were also able to hear, through Divya Gupta’s intervention, about interspecies dynamics between human and forests, and local governance in South Asian rural communities.

As he spoke first on the panel, we would like to start this piece by exploring Armiero’s intervention, whose aim was to present the Wasteocene and to share practices of sabotaging it through commoning. Without any other anticipatory information about the structure and further content of the talk, some participants might have been surprised by Armiero’s decision to start introducing his work on waste as a narrator/patient suffering from COVID-19. Reading pages from his diary when he suffered from the illness, almost lethal in his case, Armiero reminded us that “the age of waste is never impersonal.”

Explaining the relationships between his own body, COVID-19, and waste in light of the Wasteocene, Armiero observed that waste has to do not only with dumpsters or toxic sites, but also with wasted bodies and communities, and the ubiquitous presence of these wasting relations in the very air we breathe.² The Wasteocene’s frame is a challenge to the narratives of the Anthropocene that seems to indicate that a homogenous “mankind” has had equal impact on planetary alterations. Armiero seems to suggest that the golden spike of the Wasteocene is the body,³ as the site of our positionality in the world – whether in a hospital in Stockholm, or a resident near e-waste sites in Ghana – that relates to specific socio-ecological relationships and deals with power inequalities that can derive from class, gender, race, and other humanly-decided differences among us.

In the Wasteocene, bodies tell the story of planetary toxicity, so in Part Two of the presentation, Armiero introduced the listener to the practices of “body-telling, or the stratigraphy of the organic scale.” This metaphor, playing as it does on how digging the earth is a practice for finding information or resources used both by scientists and extractive industries, reminds us of the “proletarian lung” that Stacy Alaimo recalls in *Bodily Natures* (2010). With the term, she invites us to think about the relation between bodies of workers and absorption of toxic substances in industrial factories: “proletarian lung[s]” testify to the penetrating physiological effects of class (and racial) oppression, demonstrating that the biological and the social cannot be considered separate spheres” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 28). Similarly, Armiero is asking us to think about the layers of history we could find in the bodies of factory workers, farmers, miners, waste-pickers, communities and people ravaged by war, or other groups whose bodies are also being mined by capitalism through its practice of

² To understand this, it is also relevant to approach Nancy Tuana’s concept of *viscous porosity*, in the way she reflects on how burning plastic becomes part of the flesh of the impoverished people living near polluting factories (Tuana 2008, p. 198-199)

³ *Golden spike* is a term used in geology for those markers that signal the beginning of a new geological period. It is a colloquial form for Global Stratigraphic Sections and Points (GSSP).

forcing the most marginal into labor, filled with toxicants,⁴ that sicken the body and leave it to be discarded.

Exposing these suffering bodies offers another blow to an Anthropocene narrativized as a neutral, scientifically clean, series of events. Instead, Armiero's invitation is to see the murky and uneasy impurities of making a Wasteocene, to "reveal, not to hide." Together with the device of the Wasteocene, frameworks like the Capitalocene or Plantationocene, among many other "-cenes," offer various escape routes and continue provoking and *un-disciplining*. Yet, unlike these other neologisms, the Wasteocene does not try to convey temporality as much as relationality; it focuses instead on how places and communities become polluted, who benefits from this, who suffers, and ultimately, how we understand cleanness and toxicity.⁵

In "The Magic Mirror, or How to Make the Wasteocene Visible," the third part of his talk, Armiero enumerated several striking instances of toxic environmental disasters that illustrate how extractive practices sicken and kill human and nonhumans, causing people cancer or destroying entire river ecosystems, just to mention two examples. This is the logic of the Wasteocene, which operates thanks to toxic narratives put in place to make waste invisible, as toxicity "poisons our stories and imaginations." These "narrative infrastructures" help to silence and normalize the violent transformations of places and communities into wasted and intoxicated landscapes. But, how to undermine this state of narrative ruination?

Undoubtedly thinking about Donna Haraway or Ana Tsing's works, in the last part of his talk, Armiero reflected on widely known tropes such as the possibility of life on the edges of capitalism and the inescapability of toxicity. He moved on to consider these as too comfortable narratives that seem to eschew the harm done to specific communities who are (knowingly) deprived of clean water or air in pursuit of profit. As he states, "purity does not exist, but toxicity does" and, we must add, it is generally located in zones deemed expendable, that are too-easily sacrificed.

Nonetheless, Armiero does not dwell in pessimism, quite the opposite. The most fascinating part of his talk (and book) comes precisely in his proposals for dismantling the Wasteocene's logics and infrastructures through acts of "communing." Armiero proposes in the fourth part of his talk that it is not from the ruins, but from revolutions, that we can find "salvation." To achieve this transition would entail the transformation of "relationships of exploitation and consumption" into gardens "made up of relationships of reproduction and care."

⁴ We use toxicants instead of toxins following Max Liboiron's observation that toxicants refer to "industrially produced chemicals," whereas toxins are the "the poisons produced by animals and plants [that] act at the cellular level" (2021, p. 94).

⁵ An important work addressing the relation between cleanliness and toxicity from a Black feminist perspective is carried out by Françoise Vergès in her paper "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender" (2019).

His talk ended with some practical examples of what these gardens would look like. From communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina who came together to decommission a chemical factory, to creating a theater production in Catalunya to resist toxic narratives, many of these gardens flourish in the mobilization of communities who reject victimization, transforming what has been discarded, “and putting [it] back to work.” These concrete examples of resistance become the “insurgent archives” necessary for sabotaging the Wasteocene.

This was the story Armiero wove for us during his presentation: departing from his own ailing body, he discussed the material toxicity infiltrating specific bodies and ecosystems and concluded with a discussion of bodies brought together to dismantle toxic infrastructure through communing. He left us encouraged to continue creating and working with these powerful assemblages of resistance.

Governance in Forest Communities, with Divya Gupta

In a presentation full of bright images and spectacular scenery, Divya Gupta opened the second part of the event by sharing her fieldwork experiences in the mountainous area of South Asia (India and Nepal), where she studies community work in environmental management. Referring to Elinor Ostrom’s commoning work, as had Armiero in his intervention, Gupta explored the role of collective action in natural resource management. She drew on case studies from India and Nepal to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities of collective action in natural resource governance. In her view, collective action involving community and external partners can be an effective approach to natural resource governance, especially in contexts where individual actors are unable to achieve sustainable outcomes on their own. Collective action and collaboration among individuals, communities, and organizations are crucial for achieving expansive goals of conservation. However, contributions made by individual actors, irrespective of how small they are, can have an efficacious effect on the environment and amplify efforts towards conservation. Gupta looked at these different forms of collective action, including community-based natural resource management, and indicated the importance of social capital and trust in facilitating successful collective responses. She also discussed the challenges and barriers to collective action, including but not limited to power dynamics, exclusionary practices, and the influence of external actors such as the state and NGOs. Gupta further stressed the importance of recognizing and addressing these challenges to build more equitable and sustainable natural resource governance systems.

Gupta also talked about the reality of forest rights in what she referred to as “the post-rights recognition phase,” the period after India passed the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006. The Forest Rights Act 2006 is an Act of the parliament that extends to the whole of India except the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The FRA recognizes and vests forest rights and occupation in forest

land for forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes (and other traditional forest dwellers) who have been residing in the forest for generations but whose rights had not been previously recorded. While the FRA is important legislation that aims to provide legal recognition and protection to the forest rights of indigenous and traditional forest-dwelling communities, its implementation has been uneven and inadequate in many parts of India. This means the full potential of the FRA to empower forest-dependent communities has not been achieved, a challenge that is especially evident in the gap between the recognition of forest rights on paper and their implementation in practice. A major challenge in the implementation of the FRA has been the lack of awareness and understanding of the law among forest-dwelling communities, government officials, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, government officials have often been reluctant to recognize and accord forest rights in communities, citing concerns over the impact on forest conservation and the potential loss of revenue from forest resources. Consequently, the process of filing claims for recognition of forest rights has been slow and cumbersome, with many claims being rejected or not processed in a timely manner. In other cases, forest-dwelling communities have also faced resistance and violence not only from forest officials but also from non-state actors and other vested interests who seek to control and exploit forest resources. The challenges of implementing the FRA demonstrate the challenges and opportunities for collective action: for example, forest-dwelling communities might benefit from the assistance of external actors to file claims, however, there may be conflicting interests both within such communities and amongst potential outside partners about forest uses and who can exercise them.

Gupta stressed the importance of effective implementation mechanisms, including the need for adequate resources, technical expertise, and political will. Most importantly, there is a need for greater awareness-raising and capacity-building among forest-dependent communities to ensure that they can exercise their rights effectively. She further stressed that continued advocacy, awareness-raising, and capacity-building efforts are needed to ensure that the forest rights of indigenous and traditional forest-dwelling communities are fully recognized and protected.

To illustrate this point, she offered a case study of the experiences of the Lavari community in India, who were facing displacement due to a proposed conservation project but mobilized to assert their rights under the FRA and other laws and were successful in resisting the project and securing their livelihoods and cultural rights. She talked about the agency and resilience of the Lavari community in resisting displacement and asserting their rights, describing how the community used a range of strategies, including legal advocacy, protest demonstrations, and media outreach to raise awareness of their situation and mobilize support from civil society organizations and the wider public.

Gupta also discussed collective action for sustainable rural livelihoods in reference to a case study of Korchi Mahagransabha,⁶ through which she demonstrated the experiences of a collective of marginalized rural communities in India in promoting sustainable livelihoods through collective action. The Mahagransabha has used a range of strategies, including collective farming, community forestry, and social mobilization, to enhance the livelihoods and well-being of its members, mobilizing them to work collectively, leveraging their shared resources and knowledge to enhance their livelihoods and reduce their vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks.

Emphasizing how important their successful navigation of social and institutional factors has been in shaping successful collective action for sustainable rural livelihoods, Gupta discussed how the Mahagransabha have navigated complex power dynamics, built trust and solidarity among members, and negotiated with external actors such as government agencies and NGOs to achieve members' goals. She presented impressive evidence, including from her own field research, to show how collective action is more powerful than we can imagine. She helped us understand how, historically speaking, communities have been most able to fight back successfully when they are self-organized. We were also struck by her insight that, in the context of contemporary reforms, communities have begun to need the assistance from officials and others who are experienced in bureaucracy to help them negotiate new obstacles to advancing their rights and the rights of the forests they safeguard.

At the end of her presentation, Gupta left the audience with an interesting question: "What is the world that you imagine for yourself... and are you ready to fight for it?" She expressed her immense gratitude to all the members of communities with whom she has worked, who she said not only opened their homes but also their hearts and shared their stories. Like Armiero, she emphasized the importance of what she continues to learn from community-driven actions, rather than any expertise she might bring.

Forms of Commoning and Being when Teaching in Environmental Practices: A Q&A with the Audience

Perhaps the main point of contact between the two presentations was how they allowed the audience to think about the different pathways that acts of commoning can take. An enthusiastic audience pointed out the overlaps in their analyses and the important differences between their ideas, which led to a rich discussion during the last hour in which sources, advice, and experiences were shared between participants and speakers.

⁶ Korchi Mahagransabha is a group of gram sabhas (village governing bodies) in the Korchi Taluka of Gadchiroli District in Maharashtra State in India.

Rejecting pessimistic narratives of “the tragedy of the commons,” Armiero described how he draws on ideas about the power of the commons and collective action from the works of Elinor Ostrom, a thinker who is also important to Gupta’s work. He also emphasized the importance of Massimo De Angelis and Silvia Federici, among other Marxist theorists who remain key to his thinking. Rejecting the reification of the commons, “not as things, but as infrastructure,” is a standpoint from which Armiero also considered the potential of infrastructures for repairing global communities damaged by toxic narratives. This generated a far-reaching discussion focused on knowledge production and legitimation, and power.

Contributing to the conversation, Vanessa Farr invoked Staci K. Haines’ work on the politics of trauma to consider how elites not only create poverty but control and craft the narratives about “why some people are poor.” Hanna Musiol, moderator of the panel, addressed the issue of interdisciplinarity and purity in academia by asking panelists to comment on how their work navigates between the strictly environmental and humanistic disciplines, and why this is relevant for pedagogical and community-oriented projects. Recalling Armiero’s works on *Toxic Bios* and *Occupy Climate Change* along with Gupta’s Earth Justice classes, the question invited both panelists to reflect on education beyond the classroom and collaborating with others, as a response to the knowledge factory that neoliberal universities have become.⁷

For Armiero, while there seems to be a push for connecting environment and society and human rights in environmental justice frameworks, there is still much work ahead to make this interdisciplinary approach more prevalent in academia. We need to continue to push back against old structures in the work we do, “undisciplining” our fields and letting the connections and intersections inherent in communing, infrastructures, and unbounded toxicity appear. The intrinsic entanglement of environmental and social struggles is also demonstrated in the figures of leaders such as Chico Mendes (Evans, n.d.) and Berta Cáceres,⁸ among many others whose lives were dedicated to defending the rights of people and nature. Regarding pedagogy, evoking the ideas of Paolo Freire, Armiero shared how important it has been for him to both try and fail, together with his students, to think about a revolutionary ontology based on true humility instead of methodologies. Also, there are personal investments one must take into account to practice “undisciplining,” as it takes being naked and vulnerable to decolonize our minds. He summed up these efforts as follows: “the only pedagogy that matters is a revolutionary one that is free. I, together with the students, we try to free ourselves, but maybe we need to be the first.”

When asked about how the speakers synthesize work from different disciplines, Gupta responded that it is always an ongoing process. Because she is passionate about the work she does, she is constantly engaging in

⁷ *Toxic Bios* (<http://www.toxicbios.eu/#/intro>); *Occupy Climate Change* (<https://occupyclimatechange.net>)

⁸ <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/berta-caceres/>

conversations and interactions with like-minded people and through these conversations and interactions, she gains ideas and inspirations. She stressed that “since I am a social person and a social animal, I thrive and survive literally on these interactions”; it has always been “a way for me to realistically synthesize the different worlds to make sense of reality.” Engaging with new literature and staying on top of new publications also helps her to synthesize work from other disciplines.

She also spoke of the learning that comes from teaching courses around her research interests, and the energy, excitement, and passion she gains from teaching. Much like Armiero, “curiosity is probably at the core of [her] pedagogy,” allowing her to navigate the differences between the technical courses that she teaches and her immersive research based in community engagement, which includes her commitment to inviting community members into the classroom setting to share their perspectives and lived experiences with students. Concerning biases, Gupta, who teaches a mostly white student body about issues in the Global South, describes the work she does to support students to examine their biases and go “beyond the affect and the emotion” of what they are learning. She is also interested in how justice or equity issues can extend a student’s existing awareness of what is wrong, while challenging attitudes of white saviorism so that students become humbler in the learning process and leave with tools to bring about changes for good.

The audience showed particular interest in waste as a material category, focusing on discarded objects and how some people revalue and use them, including, as waste-pickers do, as a source of livelihood. Armiero said that the focus of his work is the making of wasted people, and warned that Wasteocene logics can also feed off narratives around the value of recycling by ignoring questions around who really benefits from this recycling, and who controls it? On this issue, he observed that it is possible to work with waste and yet be free from wasting relations, considering, for example, artist Vik Muniz,⁹ whose project with waste-pickers in Brazil and use of discarded materials in his artworks have made him internationally renowned. Additionally, a member of the audience asked about the “acceptable risk” principles that are used in the US to mediate contamination issues. Again, Armiero answered that we must question who decides, who creates laws and knowledge around the problem. Likewise, he stressed the role played by communities in continuing to organize to gain the material conditions to ensure better, more inclusive decision-making.

The discussion then moved to the challenges of undertaking demanding field work, and the panelists were asked to share some strategies for how to take care of ourselves and make academic social justice practices sustainable. Gupta spoke of how her experience in the field during the pandemic led to a heightened sense of “nervousness and anxiety.” Hearing the stories of the tragedies and struggles of people she works with in her research sites leaves

⁹ <https://vikmuniz.net/news/vik-muniz-talk-at-magazzino-art-gallery>

her in sadness. Ultimately, as much as she tries to empathize with the people and the communities in which she works, she has to face the limitations of what she might be able to contribute, and her own mobility versus the often intractable nature of local environmental problems and the struggle for social justice. To overcome the frustration and depression this leads to, she has built an empathetic personal and academic support system. She also discussed the challenges attached, during the pandemic, to transitioning to remote, online field work, which was challenging because neither she nor her research partners had any experience of this modality. She is working on a methods paper about the steps she and her partners took to remain compassionately connected during this time.

Sharing with Gupta similar considerations regarding the affective investments necessary for this kind of work, Armiero acknowledged the significance of sabotaging mainstream academia, while reconsidering what it means to be a researcher. He thanked his carers, and spoke of how important it was for him to receive the prayers, healing rituals, and other demonstrations of care from people he works with when he was ill. He spoke of how he experiences an almost daily fear of failure in his academic work, and of his concern about not disappointing the communities he works with. He concluded: "I always say that I am not there to save anyone, but to be saved, because without the struggle we would be just another stupid academic."

Another member of the audience praised the beautiful and empathic way in which the Wasteocene was presented, and, readdressing the fears of dismissal in academia, asked what kind of challenges the presenters have endured due to taking a stance that opposes the cold and neutral scientific work that this industry of knowledge demands. Armiero recognized that he has indeed been dismissed and criticized as biased but continues to think with feminist intellectuals about how the personal is political, and in this case, academic. He invited us to consider Sandra Harding's concept of Strong Objectivity to reflect on how better science does not necessarily come from neutrality. His tenured position and a supportive community protect him, but he must continue reclaiming the self, social engagement, and social justice ethics in the conduct of his research.

After almost two hours of conversation ranging from the personal to the professional, from toxic dumps to forests, and from commoning to communities, these two speakers embodied how to humbly approach environmental practices and pedagogy. Their talks provided not only inspiration for moving forward amid the intense and urgent demands of doing environmental work, but also created a space where the audience could obtain firsthand advice from two scholars whose work differs in nature but coincides in the interests of working in communities that include human and more-than-human actors. Some of the more valuable messages provided to the audience were the consideration of the very material dimensions of the narratives we work with, whether these are toxic ones that try to silence environmental

injustice, or notions of governability that can either undermine or support regional ecosystems.

Moreover, the focus on the body also resonated quite powerfully throughout the session as in order to maintain the work we do it is necessary to conscientiously practice self-care and create, maintain and rely on networks of care and solidarity. To think about the body is to consider our positionality in determined contexts, thus allowing us to reflect on the responsibility and ethics of the researchers with the world and themselves. This balance is utterly necessary to make academic and activist work sustainable. By reclaiming the body and narratives as infrastructures from which we can practice caring and commoning, this panel offered moving examples of how to dismantle the landscapes of injustice and continue working towards much needed communities of repair.

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