Eco-social policies, the eco-social-system, and the case of wind turbine mobilizations in Villore, Italy

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The concept of eco-social policies has emerged in the 1990s but has been increasingly used since 2010 in line with the growing attention towards the environment. In parallel, various definitions have been offered regarding what eco-social policies encompasses and various examples have been characterized by the eco-social label. At present, eco-social measures are commonly regarded as policies adopting "an approach that simultaneously addresses social and environmental goals and brings about benefits in both dimensions" (Carmi 2016). Though having the meritorious purpose to stress the compatibility between ecological goals and social concerns, this broad definition — we argue in this paper — also carries the risk of being too encompassing, ending up incorporating most environmental policies as they typically also identify the policy's social benefits. What is more, if we use stated intentions of having both environmental and social benefits as the basis of classifying an eco-social policy, the risk of applying the term to a much greater number of policies increases due to climate change's very high political salience. Thus, policies that may have previously only had stated social benefits are more likely to highlight event tangential environmental benefits in order to attract a wider level of support. Beyond the problem of being too encompassing and therefore analytically weak, the concept of eco-social policies glosses over the problem that (eco-social) policies can often incorporate both ecological and social benefits and costs. At the local level, for example, concrete projects, such as wind and solar farms which provide clean energy and employment opportunities are often met with resistance by the local population and even rejected by local political institutions on both social and environmental grounds. Major theoretical and methodological criticalities emerge when opposing coalitions – both defining themselves as ecologists and bringing forward contrasting arguments that can both easily fit the definition of eco-social – confront each other, opening a cleavage in the field of environmentalism. Given these various challenges, should we conclude that opposing policy solutions are both eco-social? Or should we re-think the concept to redefine what constitutes an eco-social policy?

Following the second line of enquiry we adopt the new "eco-social-system" approach developed by Nulman (forthcoming) by applying it to plans for installing a wind farm in Villore in Tuscany, Italy, focusing on the mobilizations for and against wind turbines. The "eco-social-system" approach is used to assess the strength of the 'eco-socialness' of a proposed policy, helping distinguish them from policies that are presented as such, but might, for example, be forms of greenwashing. The concept

proposes an ecosystem of eco-social subjects in which eco-social policies is accompanied by eco-social movements, eco-social political parties, eco-social states, and eco-social publics. We argue that to counteract some of the conceptual problems discussed above, a policy is eco-social if it fits closely to these other eco-social dimensions. For example, they should be campaigned for by eco-social movements, promoted by eco-social parties, adopted in eco-social states, and/or approved of strongly by eco-social publics. We take the case study of the competing mobilizations in Villore to highlight both problems with the current conceptualization and a first step in utilizing the method proposed by the "eco-social-system" formulation.

Bibliography:

Carmi, Diletta (2016) 'Implementing eco-social policies: Barriers and opportunities. A preliminary comparative analysis', UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2016-12, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva.

Nulman, Eugene (forthcoming) 'Problematizing the Eco-Social from a Social Movements Perspective', paper accepted for presentation at ECPR General Conference 2023, Charles University.