

INTRODUCTION



This work fits into the record of recent years in multiple ways. First, its methodology was influenced in its early stages by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made access to the field difficult due to restrictions on travel and, more broadly, interpersonal contacts. Second, some of the observed dynamics of decarbonization, which initially seemed to follow marked trajectories, such as the closure of the Portovesme coal-fired power plant, were challenged by the sudden need for the strategic reorganization of European – and particularly Italian – energy supplies, which became apparent in the spring of 2022. Third, in March 2024, as I was writing and trying to give book form to my ethnographic materials, a new President of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia was elected who, accepting the demands of movements against the expropriation of farmland in many areas of Sardinia, including the one studied here, decided to block the process of vast land concessions to private companies for the construction of extensive wind and photovoltaic parks, postponing them until an institutional mapping of ‘expendable’ areas has been completed. Finally, the ‘tractor’ protests that emerged in the winter of 2024 in many European countries, pitting the (often conflicting) interests of small and large agricultural producers against the European Commission’s promoted Green Deal decarbonization policies, raise central political issues such as the labour/environment opposition in Brussels, explicitly linking them to political relations with the land and the politicization of the new domains.

Joining in this issue, this book aims to examine cases of emancipatory and ‘sovereignist’¹ opposition to European transitional policies, approaching the topic through an ethnographic perspective focusing on a circumscribed case study, a village in the proper sense of the term, that of Carloforte, on a small island, in the Sardinian Sulcis sub-region. It focuses on certain related forms of resistance and the expansion of the sphere of the political that they imply.

What are the motivations of the resisters? What are the practices, horizons of meaning, and alternative strategies of those who oppose? Through the Sardinian case study, I contribute to shedding light on the question, fitting into a broad anthropological debate that seeks answers to these questions, which are crucial to our future.

Unlike the ‘reasons for no’ described by Dalla Porta (2008) in an earlier round of protests, many of the contemporary forms of opposition to the European Green Deal and related European Commission policies – which partly includes the case described by this book – do not clearly propose emancipatory and structured alternatives geared toward a productive paradigm shift. Rather, they seem to be seeking adaptations to the existing paradigm, trying to control or resist as far as possible in ways that recall sovereignist or nostalgic logic though without fully embodying or implementing it.

My approach here is prompted by a desire to understand if and how processes of subjectification are enacted within the mostly unstructured instances of opposition to the major energy plans affecting Sardinia. I examine them by focusing on identity constructs related to territorial sovereignty, public participation and the (consequent) redefinition of the political sphere. For this reason, the ethnographic centre here is a small island, San Pietro, in which the symbolic capital mobilized to oppose the plans in question is organized on an ethnicist construct.

In this way, the book addresses industrial crises, environmental issues, and local attitudes toward energy transitions. Actually, it is hard to understand whether the ecological transition really represents a horizon of possible change for communities, or whether it is experienced as the imposition of development models from outside that could be interpreted as a failure from the local community’s point of view.

The book tackles local attitudes and opposition to energy transitions, in contexts of industrial and environmental crisis. It takes Sulcis, a Sardinian ex-mining sub-region, as a case study. Sardinia is today witnessing a massive grassroots protest against ‘wind energy speculation’² and the transitions promoted by the EU Green Deal. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I examine and describe Sulcis, which is at the core of this protest. Here, the deep and destructive relationship between the crisis of heavy industries, social upheaval and threats to fragile ecosystems is particularly evident. Researching this case study thus enabled me to retrace emerging socio-cultural configurations embedded in a global dynamic of de-industrialization.

As well as allowing us to study a Mediterranean phenomenon, the Sulcis case study offers further value: here the energy transitions taking place involve a whole industrial system of carbon-dependent and coal-fired steel processing (in the Portovesme area), which is the target of a

large national plan (supported by *RePowerEU* agenda) for its conversion into a large, regional-scale platform for onshore and offshore wind farms. This cutting-edge process, of regional reconversion through EU-supported transition policies, has not been academically documented to date. But our societies are witnessing the rise of a variety of grassroots opposition to EU-designed transitions.

Sulcis today is undergoing a profound industrial, social, environmental and energetic crisis. It has experienced the cultural dynamics of dispossession, these days called ‘green colonialism’ or ‘energy colonialism’ by the local press and some NGOs. Here, it is proving difficult to convert the ENEL³ coal-fired thermo-electric plant in Portovesme, and unemployment has led to the area having the highest levels of poverty in Italy⁴ and in Europe. The energy transition envisaged for this area by the Italian government involves a very large offshore wind farm just off the nearby Sulcitan island of San Pietro, which is strongly contested by the island’s population on the grounds that this scheme follows an ‘energy speculation’ logic.

The inhabitants of the small island of San Pietro rhetorically distance themselves from the industrial crisis and pollution of Sulcis by strategically claiming their strong ethnic specificity, due to their history as a Genoese settlement since 1739, as we will see. This issue has itself been very little studied to date. But, above all, this small island is today at the heart of the large, regional-scale protest against the ‘invasion of wind farms’ as *The Times* labelled the current Sardinian mobilization.⁵

Already, the rise of phenomena such as the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France (Ravelli, Siméant-Germanos, Bonin, Liochon 2024) has shown the public and the scientific world the urgent need to examine the link between ecological transition and the grassroots resistance it engenders, along with demands for socio-economic justice and energy democracy. As McDermott Hughes (2021) argues, popular protests against injustice in energy transitions and against large-scale renewable plants will prolong carbon pollution and deepen the climate crisis. The political and identitarian character⁶ of such opposition challenges anthropology and other social sciences to elucidate a phenomenon that affects countries in Europe and elsewhere, hybridizing with socio-political mechanisms often classified as populist or anti-elitist, or creating conflict between labour and the environment (Apostoli Cappello 2024b: 100).

Energy transitions, particularly where they involve the installation of major wind and photovoltaic plants, combine these conflicts by interweaving them into a battle that ends up being organized according to different imaginaries regarding the productive landscape. Emancipatory battles and sovereignty merge in often confused ways, combining anachronism, resistance, demands for democracy, and shared management of material

and immaterial resources in new ways. Recent ethnographic works such as Checker's (2020) clearly show how this 'green' dynamic of reproducing injustice affects not only industrial but also urban reconversions.

Many important works have now supplied the anthropological community with dense ethnographies describing the relationship of communities, mostly rural, which are in different ways adapting to or resisting large wind farms that have already been installed: in the Mediterranean area, for example, McDermott Hughes (2021) and Franquesa (2018) in Spain, and Argenti and Knight (2015) in Greece. Howe and Boyer (2015) and Zanotelli (2016, 2024) describe similar processes in Mexico, another area scientifically familiar and dear to the author.

Here, however, I examine the ethnography of a community in the process of discussing the – very real – possibility of massive offshore wind farms rising up off 'its' coast. I then describe a process in the making, made up of negotiations taking place on multiple planes, intricate paths of divergent economic interests, trying to delve into the 'terrifying complexity of the particular', to use a Geertzian expression.

In the small insular community I focus on here – that of Carloforte – the people debating and positioning themselves with respect to the prospect of future wind power occupy a context, the Sardinian 'land-based' one, in which, over the last few years, a strong cycle of mostly rural opposition to the very numerous macro renewable energy plant projects has made it to the front pages of Sardinian and national newspapers, forcing the issue to the top of the political agenda of all candidates in the most recent regional elections (2024).

In Sulcis, the energy transitions underway involve an entire carbon-dependent, coal-fired, steel-processing industrial system, which is the subject of a vast national plan (supported by the *RePowerEU* agenda) for conversion into a large, regional-scale platform for onshore and offshore wind farms.

The EU's climate change mitigation and adaptation policies – and in particular its decarbonization agenda to reach net zero by 2050, at the heart of the EU's Green Deal – faces many challenges, including local opposition and the emergence of populist and anti-science discourses. Positioning itself ethnographically in a place in deep industrial, social, and environmental crisis, my research aimed to examine the identity factors that are hindering or contributing to processes of transition to truly more sustainable resource extraction, exploitation, and management organizations, going beyond (Hager and Haddad 2015) any simplistic explanations based on NIMBYism or top-down reductivist normative models.

In the following pages I explore the cultural and symbolic factors typical of areas at high risk of depopulation and unemployment, focusing primarily on the cultural, symbolic, and cognitive factors affecting island contexts.

Environmental anthropology and political anthropology approaches from different traditions (Heatherington 2010; Lai 2020; Bachis 2017) have produced work in recent years that helps us today to frame Sardinia at the centre of analyses on the energy transition (Meloni 2021; Cossu 2022). Research on the human–environment relationship has a history rooted in Sardinian anthropology, beginning with the work of the anthropologist Giulio Angioni (Da Re 2015; Bachis and Pusceddu 2015).

The Sardinian case I examine here acquires the prominence of a broader phenomenon when read from the angle of the contemporary anthropological debate on extractivism and neo-extractivism. This viewpoint allows one to observe the reasons for local resistance to the so-called ‘ecological transitions’ promoted by the European Green Deal.

In trying to understand the reasons for local resistance to European policies perceived as extractive, it is also possible – and this is the aim of this ethnography – to get a sense of what is being proposed by local experiments in reappropriating energy resources, situating the Sardinian case in a broader pool of research on energy citizenship in southern Italy (Alliegro 2020; Benadusi et al. 2021a; Benadusi et al. 2021b) and the Mediterranean more generally (Argenti and Knight 2015; Franquesa 2018; McDermott Hughes 2021).

With this book I wish to show a process of re-semantization stemming from cases of dispossession that have also affected language and the political imagination, by restoring cultural meaning through a politicization of some cultural elements, such as the tuna. At the same time, de-semantization, a semantic change regarding many categories (such as ‘communist’) previously allocated to the political sphere in the strict sense, is underway, which suggests that we should consider it a primary loss that we lack a language to socialize difficulties and talk about rights through registers that are not biological or symbolic. Ultimately, through my fieldwork I try to understand if the struggle around the offshore wind power plant provides the basis for redefining political subjectivity, extraction and the environment.

NOTES

1. ‘*Sovranista*’, in Italian. This term is a neologism very much used in Italy today, in political language, in newspapers and in social and political science, in order to describe a political position that advocates the defence or regaining of national sovereignty by a people or state, in antithesis to the dynamics of globalization and in opposition to supranational ‘agreement’ policies (in Italian ‘*politiche di concertazione*’, i.e. policies based on mediation and agreement mechanisms). Mimicking dynamics that could be described as nationalist, however, this ideology is also practised by

groups that oppose the very nation state, perceiving themselves as economic or cultural minorities.

2. This is the term used by many activists from anti-wind installations, local committees and some Sardinian newspapers.
3. ENEL: Ente Nazionale Energia Elettrica; ‘Decreto Sardegna Energia’, *Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*, 29 March 2022.
4. Istat, <http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?queryid=11483>.
5. [thetimes.com/world/europe/article/sardinia-blows-up-over-invasion-of-wind-farms-j290z6255](https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/sardinia-blows-up-over-invasion-of-wind-farms-j290z6255) (accessed 23 September 2025).
6. A recent study using quantitative methods was published in *PNAS* on this topic (Strokes et al. 2023, accessed on 11 April 2024). Among the findings, one aspect emerges that may be interesting to address using a critical anthropological approach geared toward the study of socio-environmental injustices: according to the authors, it is the white and wealthier population that opposes wind farm installations the most. This suggests a challenge regarding what the authors call ‘energy privilege’: the delay involved, or the removal of clean energy projects from wealthier and whiter communities, leads to continued pollution in poorer communities and non-white communities.