



Forestry in interaction. Shedding light on dynamics of public opinion with a praxeological methodology

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ABSTRACT

Forestry institutions integrate divergent interests in forest uses into their management concepts, like recreation, timber production and nature protection. In this context, knowledge on public expectations of forestry is valuable to forest owners as well as administrations, especially in the face of the growing critical citizenship they encounter during their work. This paper examines findings from opinion surveys as well as studies of conflict and participation in order to describe the current dynamics in the relationship between forestry and the general public. It then explains in detail how a praxeological research design, grounded in American pragmatism, helps to conceptualize forest conflicts as interactional phenomena. The value of such an approach is exemplified through one case analysis from a broader “Sociocultural Forest Monitoring” carried out by *institution anonymized*. The article concludes with an assessment of the knowledge to be gained by the conceptualization of citizens’ relationship to forestry as dynamic opinion formation with the help of a praxeological epistemology and methodology.

1. Introduction

Forests are important and contested resources, not only in the economic sense but for society’s diverse and at times contradictory needs (McDermott et al., 2010). Especially in densely populated areas, the diversity of interests occasionally takes the shape of a conflict (Konijnendijk, 2008; Gritten et al., 2012). One widespread discord around forest uses is grounded in the competing rationales of timber production versus nature conservation, the latter having developed into a major policy objective on regional, national, and international level in the last decades (Niemelä et al., 2005). The resulting complex network of regulations, gives ongoing occasion for negotiation and struggle about the legitimacy of forestry practices. While many of these conflicts have developed into fairly institutionalized processes with political and administrative agencies, NGOs and associations as routine actors (cf. Krott, 2005, pp. 69–149), the interest of the study at hand is in understanding a more recent and a less established frontline: regional conflicts between citizens and forestry administrations or forest owners when forest management is perceived to be in opposition to public expectations of recreation or nature conservation. In such cases, the ‘opponent’ to forestry practices is a heterogeneous general public, comparatively unorganized, and accordingly difficult to grasp. Broader developments in forest policy leave their mark on such conflicts, e.g. a general commitment to the importance of nature conservation on the

part of citizens, but they usually occur and evolve outside of political arenas. In Germany, several forestry administrations were shaken by conflicts of this kind in recent years. The instances are few when measured against the overall contentment with forestry, as several surveys have pointed out (cf. Bethmann and Wurster, 2016). But contextualizing them within Europe-wide tendencies for an erosion of trust in administrations and changing expectations of forests in urbanized societies, they demand administrative, political and scientific attention.

In several countries, politicians and administrations have begun to actively request social scientific support to facilitate foresighted management and conflict resolution with regard to demands of the general public and civil stakeholders.¹ For some administrative goals, for example in the case of sustainable development, it is common practice to include the public in management decisions to some degree (Primmer and Kyllönen, 2006). Strategies range from incorporating evidence from social science research, to providing information for the public unilaterally, and to participatory committees with or without real political influence. In this context, the survey has become an important instrument to understand the public’s relationship with forestry. But opinion surveys have limitations, especially when it comes to understanding challenges in the communication between forestry officials and citizens.

A growing corpus of literature on conflicts and participatory process sheds light on these blind spots (Eckerberg and Sandström, 2013).

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¹ In the German-speaking countries, one large resulting survey is the Swiss *Sociocultural Forest Monitoring* (Hunziker et al., 2012a, 2012b). Another study has been initiated by the state forestry administration of Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

These studies show that the relationship to forests and opinions of forestry are dynamic phenomena that are partly shaped by communication and interaction with forestry representatives. Often, they mainly focus on procedural issues and put less effort into systemizing the attitudes citizens hold on the institutions they engage with. In the following section, we bring together insights from public opinion surveys as well as more process-oriented research into conflict and participation in forestry. From the literature, we bring out the argument that opinion is something that takes shape and is expressed situationally, and we suggest to explore the role of public opinion in forest conflicts as a dynamic object. After that, we unfold a methodology driven by a theoretical conception of interaction informed by the praxeological theory of American pragmatism. Specific methodological principles are defined so as to enable the analysis to establish a connection between the actions of conflict opponents and the contradictory worldviews that are documented within such actions. The methodology is put to practice with one case study from the *Sociocultural Forest Monitoring* research project (2015–2020), a study with a regional focus on forest-related conflicts in Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany, funded and conducted by *institution anonymized*. The article concludes with an assessment of the knowledge to be gained from the conceptualization of citizens' relationships to forestry as dynamic opinion formation.

2. Understanding the public's relationship with forestry

With the paradigm of sustainable forest management (SFM), forestry institutions have incorporated the ideal of providing services for multiple needs and expectations of the societies they serve. Given the complexity and contradictions within the goal to provide public goods for all citizens, social conflicts over the appropriate objectives of forestry institutions are inevitable (Eckerberg and Sandström, 2013). The developments in some regions of the world have shown that such conflicts can induce dramatic changes and challenges for the forest sector, especially when administrations cannot maintain the public's goodwill, respect and trust. In some countries, forestry has undergone an extreme transition after a crisis that began with the environmental movement of the 1980s (Maier and Abrams, 2018; Halvorsen, 2003; Dennis, 1988), though of course the history of social conflicts about forests' resources goes back much further (Niemelä et al., 2005). The US Forestry Service (USFS) is a particularly indicative example of escalating conflict: Over the years, the USFS has lost its authority to define objectives single-handedly and was forced to include participatory planning in almost every decision. Despite new management strategies, social groups' conflicting interests and the looming threat of administrative appeals and lawsuits, USFS administrations are still occasionally caught up in a gridlock with problematic consequences both economically and ecologically (Maier and Abrams, 2018; Germain et al., 2001).

In contrast, surveys throughout Europe indicate that so far, citizens trust the administrations that tend to their forests (Hunziker et al., 2012a, 2012b; Wippermann and Wippermann, 2010; Rametsteiner et al., 2009; Grant and Smillie, 2007). While conflicts occur between particular stakeholder groups (e.g. hunters, environmentalists and forest owners), the legitimacy of forestry practices and policies is largely uncontested in the general population. For example, a Swiss national survey (Hunziker et al., 2012a, 2012b) has documented widespread satisfaction: 88% of the participants are content with their visits to the forest. 68% agree with the amount of timber production in Switzerland. This number has almost doubled since 1997, indicating an increasingly positive image of the forestry sector. Similar tendencies have emerged from surveys in several German regions (see Bethmann and Wurster 2016; Wippermann and Wippermann, 2010), and likewise in a UK as well as a European meta-study (Grant and Smillie, 2007; Rametsteiner et al., 2009). Only a small percentage of people appear to be critical of tree felling per se, or of forest management standards more generally (Grant and Smillie, 2007, p. 13; Wippermann and Wippermann, 2010; Bethmann and Wurster, 2015). The UK meta-study

holds evidence that citizens are more skeptical of forestry practice in their own local forests than they are of forestry in general (Grant and Smillie, 2007, p. 9) – an attitude that commonly leads to the stigmatizing labeling “Nimby” (“not in my backyard”) (Marg and Walter, 2013, p. 103). One might deduce from that a rather indifferent attitude of citizens as long as they are not directly affected or distressed by the consequences of forest management. Or, as experiences from participatory processes show: Citizens' interest in forestry is mostly incident-related. When there is no particular reason to engage with the topic, people give little thought to the fact that forests are managed (Bethmann and Wurster, 2016). In this context, Valkeapää and Karppinen (2013, p. 58) have contributed an interesting insight from Finland: “The more people knew about forest policy, the less legitimate they consider it to be.” Stakeholders such as private forest owners not only have more knowledge but also notice the effects of forest policy much more immediately than do ordinary citizens.

Looking at a range of literature that addresses forest conflicts (Niemelä et al., 2005; O'Brien, 2003; Halvorsen, 2003; Hellström, 2001; Rametsteiner et al., 2009), a number of relevant contexts can be identified for the decline of trust: changes in forest management (e.g. the implementation of automatized procedures and altered woodland aesthetics due to natural regeneration) or increased environmental awareness, but also, more universally, a tendency towards distrust in public administrations and elected representatives. A growing relevance of critical citizenship can be observed in several European countries. In Germany, a term has been coined for this phenomenon: “Wutbürger” (“anger citizens”). The *society of German language* voted for this expression as “word of the year” in 2010 (GFDS, 2010). Remarkably, it was first used in the context of cutting down old trees in an urban park in Stuttgart for a major railway infrastructure project (Kurbjuweit, 2010; cf. Stürmer, 2011). Certainly, administrations from other sectors are forced to respond to growing expectations on democratic standards in their procedures as well, but for forestry, the specific challenge is connected to the complex values and emotions attached to their objects: trees and woods (O'Brien, 2003). People have strong emotional ties to trees and forests, especially when they form landmarks at particular places people feel attached to (Creighton et al., 2008). As O'Brien (2003, p. 11) states: “Trees are potent symbols of nature, and eco-protesters have chained themselves to trees in acts of protest to stop the destruction of the countryside” – or, in the case of Stuttgart, in opposition to the perceived destruction of a public space. The aforementioned study on forest policy's perceived legitimacy in Finland (Valkeapää and Karppinen, 2013, p. 57 f.) has shown that laypersons have a particularly critical view of procedures such as clear-cutting and even-aged forest management. But more importantly, they question the procedural justice within forest policy and administrations – topics that our analysis of German citizens' initiatives turns up as well (see below). In this context, some citizens express their concerns on the internet, in social media and newspapers; they approach politicians, collect signatures and form citizens' initiatives²; and thus, foresters are prone to lose their exclusive expert status and power of definition (cf. Hellström, 2001, p. 37). Therefore, while the status quo (as reported from surveys) is a trustful attitude of the public towards forestry institutions in general, the legitimacy of the latter's procedures is fragile under current social conditions. Conflicts do occur when people feel affected by forestry measures.

One strategy for intensifying the dialogue with the public in the European forestry sector has been the implementation of participatory processes in management decisions, driven by the SFM paradigm (Tabbush, 2004; Kangas et al., 2010). Compared to the US example, procedures are usually less obligatory and less strictly defined.

² A national initiative as recently been founded that serves as an umbrella organization: <https://www.bundesbuergerinitiative-waldschutz.de/> (accessed: 10.12.2017).

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