Landscape commons, following wind power fault lines. The case of Seine-et-Marne (France)☆

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ABSTRACT

Our contribution aims at adding to the understanding of opposition to wind power. We follow the progressive emergence and structuring of a so-called "opponent" network to a highly conflictual wind power project (Seine-et-Marne, Parisian basin, France), paying particular attention to the shared landscape resources engaged in the development of this project.

The paper draws on various strands of literature interested in landscape as a socio-material assemblage, a commons as a collective management of shared resources, and issues such as a political articulation of matters of public concern.

Our case study suggests that local opposition to wind power is symptomatic of the shortcomings of French institutions' treatment of the shared resources engaged in the development of wind power projects. So-called "opponents" to wind power are not opponents per se. Rather, opposition arises from the tension exerted by (French, privately developed) wind power with respect to shared (relational, landscape) resources. Thus opposition and landscape issues in relation to wind power can just as well be regarded as demands to recognize the necessary collective underpinnings of wind power projects.

1. Introduction

Landscape issues in wind power development, planning and projects have been the subject of an extended literature. Yet the different, multiple existences of landscape in wind power processes, whether visual, a collective practice or an institutional or legal entity, have not been thoroughly analyzed. In particular, the ways in which landscape is rendered present in wind power processes through its shared/collective dimension, which may come to be challenged and contested in these processes, demands a better understanding.

This article explores the question on the basis of a contested wind power project in a village in Seine-et-Marne (Parisian Basin, France). The project under consideration was the first to be developed in the Île-de-France. Its process started in 2005. The project received a favorable administrative decision in 2009 and was cleared after appeal in 2013. It was supposed to go into service in 2014. The project aroused violent oppositions (breaking of family ties, breakdown of community life, physical violence, property damage) and shattered the articulation between the private and the public spheres that underlaid village life and the local political practice.

Our analysis follows the emergence, the progressive constitution and the structuring of oppositional trajectories, starting with individuals who did not have an a priori position vis-à-vis wind power.[1] At the heart of this wind power drama, we explore the role of the centralized French administrative tradition of landscape protection, for which we coin the expression "state landscape", specifically in its difficulties to acknowledge locally shared landscape (commons) and support the emergence of a shared dimension for this wind power project.

We thus attempt to clarify the different roles of landscape in such a conflicting situation and their relations to the potentially collective dimension of this project. We do so by drawing on ideas of "commons" (Ostrom, 2013; Coriat, 2013) and of "public" and "issues" as treated in the pragmatic tradition (Marres, 2007). Such a perspective emphasizes the collective dimension/construction of wind power development and, its possibility and conditions for emergence. It evidently departs from the usual "nimby" analyses in that it does not presuppose that opposition to wind power is geared to individual interest or precedes project development. Instead, it leaves open the possibility that opponents could have followed another path and that their trajectory or demands conveyed an alternative wind power becoming.

We proceed in three steps. The first part of the paper presents our approach and elements of context. The second part analyzes the case of the village of Ventville[2] (Seine-et-Marne, France), highlighting the difficult way in which the articulation between the public and private dimensions of French power policy is played out. The third section turns to a discussion of the relationship between landscape, commons and wind power policy.

2. Landscape, commons: a wind power project and its public

2.1. Opposition to wind power

Landscape issues in relation to onshore wind power have been important since the take-off of wind power in countries such as France in the early 2000s.[3] Issues pertaining to wind power have also developed in other European countries such as Denmark and Germany, however famous they may be for their successful "civic model based on local ownership of wind farms (Bolinger, 2005; Meyer, 2007; Nielsen, 2002). A striking feature in social science literature about wind power development is the uneven consideration of landscape issues. Some analysts have attempted to relate landscape issues to visual impact through quantification (Bishop and Miller, 2007; Möller, 2010). Others have discussed landscape issues in relation to the extent of public consultation and deliberation in planning (Aitken et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2009; Wolsink, 2009; Toke et al., 2008; Zografos and Martínez-Alier, 2009; Gee, 2010), or by pointing to the ways in which landscape was represented in planning processes (Cowell, 2010; Nadaï, 2012; Nadaï et Labussière, 2009, 2010; Labussière and Nadaï, 2014; Jolivet and Heiskanen, 2010). In this paper, we explore a slightly different route: we build on insights from political ecology, pragmatist sociology and institutional theory in order to foreground the role of landscape as a shared resource in the development of wind power and in underpinning local opposition.

2.2. Landscape and the ontological trouble

Political ecology scholars have recently developed a strand of research interested in conflicts triggered by unconventional energy developments, notably fracking (Pearson, 2016; Willow and Willie, 2014; Willow, 2014; Willow et al., 2014). They explore how these developments impact on the ways in which landscape is experienced by local inhabitants. They rely on the idea of landscape that is familiar to landscape studies, which conceive of landscape as a relationship and a process (Hirsch, 1995; Mitchell, 1994), and encompasses the various ways in which people understand and engage with the material world around them. So defined, landscape is a contested thing (Bender, 1998). Explorations of the effect of fracking processes show that tensions pertain to various dimensions such as the anxiety induced by physical harm (or its threat, either tangible or not, real or imagined) or the change in the usual human relation to the environment. Landscape thus results in being contested at the level of experience and at the symbolic level, notably because of conflicts between ways of envisioning the ideal relation between human beings and the environment (the environment as a place for human-environment relation) and the priorities that are foregrounded by public policies (environment as an opportunity for economic development). Conflict stems from the destabilisation of the intricate relations among different dimensions of landscape and results in what has been called "ontological displacement", in the sense of an alteration of social relations and sense of belonging: "[...] mining transforms landscapes, introduces new hazards, and alters social relationships, some feel alienated from places that previously grounded their sense of belonging" (Pearson, 2016:50).

2.3. Opposition as a public-in-the-making

Ontological displacement in the sense of a change in identity – from villagers to "opponents" to wind power - associated with a destabilisation in the sense of belonging to a place (the village and the village life) is the core to our case study. The idea echoes that of *ontological trouble,* which is the core of the pragmatist approach to democracy in political philosophy (Dewey, 2003) and its most recent reinterpretation in the analysis of material participation (Marres, 2012). To put it in a nutshell, the rise and centrality of technologies in modern society have made political participation necessary but increasingly, if not essentially, problematic because of the many interferences generated by these technologies (Latour, 1991; Callon et al., 2001; Pestre, 2013). The ensuing challenge for the actors who are intimately affected by technological development (called a "public") is to make themselves relevant – for instance, by becoming capable of accessing and acting in the spheres where decisions are made in order to influence the course of this development. This issue has been assimilated to ontological trouble because this "public" is concerned but not necessarily relevant, and because of ontological redefinitions, and associated redistributions of political capacities, are at work in these processes (Marres, 2012).

Pragmatist sociology thus starts by paying attention to the consequences of activities on actors and entities. It directs specific attention to the ways in which this "public" attempts (and in certain cases succeeds) collectively to articulate the consequences its experiences and turn them into shared concerns so as to have them be acknowledged in the policy processes. As suggested by Noortje Marres (2007), a good starting point in analyzing a process of politicization is the idea of "issue" or "matter of concern". The term "issue" points to the indistinct status of a concern when ongoing practices, categories or codes (economic, political, scientific) fall short of taking responsibility for it. As the name suggests, the future of an issue is to find a way out, a way to be categorized, stabilized and governed. The process by which an "issue" emerges is a political one; it is the moment in which a "public" comes into being (Dewey, 2003). The public is thus inseparable from the issue. It is a collective of people *concerned* with this issue and attempting to articulate it as a "problem" in order to make it public. Noortje Marres insists that the construction of a "problem" requires a collective and collective work.

2.4. Landscape as a common and a terrain for contestation

Landscape is a terrain in which the setting of turbines and the types of appropriation they call for (rents, contracts, visual presence, works) become perceptible if not tangible in many ways. It is thus a terrain around which issues and publics in relation to wind power development often arise. In order to understand the politicization of wind power at the interface between the (privately developed) project and landscape concerns, it is essential to account for the diverse modes of appropriation at work in the landscape.

We owe to Elinor Ostrom (2013) the proposal to replace the Public[4] (state) vs private (market) dichotomy in property rights analysis with careful attention to the variety of collective forms of organization around (and the regulation of) commonly pooled resources. As Ostrom (2013) and others (Coriat, 2013) have proposed, the term "commons" indicates non-state forms of collective appropriation, more informal yet possibly underpinned by elaborate forms of management. While Ostrom has advanced a rational model of collective organization based on a neat distinction of types of rights, others have expanded her proposal by considering ordinary practices as enactments of rights, allowing for a less formalized yet relevant discussion of new forms of commons (Coriat, 2015; Ostrom and Basurto, 2013; Bellivier et al., 2015). In our case study, the forms of landscape

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[2] A pseudonym used for the sake of confidentiality.
[3] For France, see, for instance, Nadaï (2007a). For the United Kingdom, Cowell (2010), Toke et al. (2008).

[4] We here capitalize "Public" to indicate the state/market or Public/private dichotomy, which Ostrom's seminal work proposes to overcome, and to distinguish this acception of the term from the pragmatist notion of "public" as a collective of concerned actors.