Learning from practices — implications of the "practice based approach" for forest and environmental policy research

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ABSTRACT

With the book publication "Forest and Nature Governance — A practice based approach" (Arts et al., 2013, Eds.) the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group of Wageningen University, The Netherlands demonstrates its high aspirations of developing a new research approach. This article aims at discussing the methodological and conceptual contributions of the book to the field of forest and environmental policy research and proposes perspectives for further developing this methodological approach. It finds the "practice based approach" being an innovative, theoretically sound concept, which is able to produce valuable and "thick" empirical results. The approach is also found offering a plethora of possibilities to link up to analytical policy research. Yet, the approach will require further elaboration, especially on questions regarding the role of definitions, its contribution towards explaining social phenomena, and concerning the use of normative orientations in some of the empirical cases. The future challenges of the approach lie in either moulding a niche for further developing it independent from other schools, or in influencing mainstream approaches through theoretical innovations or surprising empirical results.

1. Background and objectives

Recent forest and environmental governance research suggests a "turn" in research towards practices (e.g. Schatzki et al., 2000; Turnhout et al., 2012; Mert, 2009, critically Giessen, 2012). With its joint book publication "Forest and Nature Governance — A practice based approach" (Arts et al., 2013, Eds.) the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group of Wageningen University, The Netherlands demonstrates its high aspirations of developing a new research approach. This paper aims at discussing the methodological and conceptual contributions of the school of thought to the field of forest policy research and proposes perspectives for further developing this methodological approach.

2. A theoretically and empirically sound concept

Forest policy research is not poor in formulating new scientific approaches or paradigms. From the early beginning of the discipline in the 18 century on nearly every professor in a leading position designed and formulated his own approach (Steinsiek, 2008; Wiersum et al., 2013). What can a researcher in forest policy learn from such new "paradigms" one following another? Do they reflect progress made or do they demonstrate the opposite: that no new concept will be long-lasting? Are these different concepts a huge tool box offering rich alternatives on how to conduct meaningful and sound theoretical

and empirical research or are they a graveyard of flawed approaches? And finally does forest policy research have a tendency to split into many small islands of "true" concepts or is there an evolution toward a common basis?

The "practice based approach" is a good example to discuss these questions because the book presented by Bas Arts et al. (2013) from his Wageningen group has a unique strength: it neither merely presents a theoretical concept, nor does it provide empirical cases only. It comprises both, a sound presentation of the school of thought and recent and well elaborated cases of research following this new approach. Never before in forest policy research were a basic concept and relevant cases of research put together as thoroughly as in this new book.

3. Rich and sound empirical results

The nine reputable empirical cases offer the chance to look at the very results the "practice based approach" is able to produce. This is a valuable starter to look into the added value of the new approach, because the greatest contribution of forest policy analyses to science and practice are its empirical findings about forest and nature conservation governance. It is not feasible here to evaluate all nine case studies presented in the book. Discussing a few examples might be sufficient, while the selection follows the summarising chapter written by the editors themselves (Behagel et al., 2013 p. 243-255).

An important common feature of the cases is to analyse the steering of the "collective behavior of others" (ibid., p. 244) in the fields of forest and nature governance. Empirically the case studies go far into the field, either in the Netherlands, in developing countries or at the global level

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and detect much more than had been expected by the researchers. They were "puzzled" that the practices do not follow simple concepts and found complex procedures with high relevance for forest policy in practice. For example, the "rules of the game" are taken seriously by the researchers but they found out that these laws, contracts or organisations were outmatched in practice by "modes of social change relying on the specific social factors the political actors are embedded in." In one case (Nandigama, 2013) women preferred to stay outside the formal options to participate in community forestry in favour of the informal strategy to "empower themselves in behind the scene" (Behagel et al., 2013, p. 245). These empirical results clearly demonstrate the limitations of a rationalistic model of steering by well-designed institutions and the importance of other factors not covered by the concepts of formal rules and institutions. These findings are clearly described and empirically proven. Every empirical oriented researcher in forest governance can build on them well now.

Another example is the chapter dealing with the global forest regime. Arts and Babili (2013) focus "on cases in which positive effects on forests and people have been reported by the communities, to counterbalance the narratives on global forest governance failure" (ibid., p. 129). This is a kind of evaluation study. The evaluation by the formal goals of the international forest regime complex was taken from the literature and evaluated against the "people's interpretations" of the local performance (ibid., p. 129). In using such different references results differing from mainstream analyses are produced (see also Arts and Buizer, 2009, contrary Giessen, 2013b). A failure of the international forest regime, which is described by some scholars (see Giessen, 2013a, b for an overview of interpretations), goes hand in hand with specific cases where the (local) "people" report some successes. These are solid empirical hints for unexpected positive effects in which a plethora of researchers in this field will be interested and which can be analysed using analytical concepts (e.g. Arts et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the authors do not answer the question whether the success examples actually indicate a positive pathway for the global regime or if the successes remain specific for the cases only and are globally irrelevant. The authors are wise in not providing a concluding answer here because their empirical basis is too limited for such a conclusion.

Finally the case of databasing for biodiversity demonstrates the strength of empirical evidence (Boonnman-Bersons and Turnhout, 2013). The authors are puzzled how "infrequently the term "biodiversity" was used" (ibid., p. 188) in the meeting of the EBONE project aimed to produce a database for biodiversity. Discussions on data management and statistics replaced the very issue of biodiversity. "Biodiversity databases are linked to political objectives…" (ibid., p. 189), but this very political context is not fully revealed by identifying the individual actors, their interests and power sources. The case study draws an empirically sound picture how inventory scientists and experts struggle within a political context and how most of the politically relevant issues remain hidden behind a technical discourse (Stevanov et al., in press). The findings are strong empirical evidence against all linear models of the science-policy interface, which most natural scientists still prefer to believe (Böcher and Krott, 2012; Stevanov et al., in press).

Given the rich and "thick" empirical evidence produced by the "practice based approach" it offers a sound basis for scientific research. But empirical data alone does not make up scientific knowledge, neither in the concept of the "practice based approach" nor in most other theoretical and methodological approaches. Here it is crucial to mention the difference between a scientific and a practical discourse: science makes its theoretical approach explicit and the book is addressing this very task and explicitly elaborates on the theoretical basis of the new approach.

4. A new and emerging, yet serious theoretical alternative

Considering the thorough work undertaken in the empirical cases and the theoretical discussions, the book is a serious attempt to formulate an own and new approach to the study of forest and nature governance. It is the opposite of grasping a trendy scientific approach, sketching it in rough words, missing many important details and still claiming to turn towards new and better forest policy research. The self-conception of the authors is being on an own and fruitful path of science. They aim to describe what constitutes the "practice based approach," while at the same time – by drawing on a wide range of literature – the authors avoid being rigid and do not develop full rigour (Behagel et al., 2013, p. 249). Nicely said, but it means that the content of the new concept is not yet fully clarified and still evolving. This characteristic of remaining somewhat vague and flexible makes it difficult to clearly identify its strengths and shortcomings. Still, a partly vague approach might be the right strategy in the juvenile days of the approach to find out where the actual potentials might lie.

Arts et al. (2013) conceptualise "practices" using three distinct features. These three "sensitising concepts" are: logic of practice, situated agency and performativity (ibid., p. 246). The sensitising concepts are aimed to detect what institutions, actors and knowledge "actually do" (ibid., p. 246). According to the authors the "logic of practice acknowledges that on the one hand there is always some sort of logic implied in any (social) action—e.g. in terms of intentions, knowledge, bodily movements or routines—but that such logic does not necessarily follow a pre-designed and general model, theory, rule or plan. In the words of Bourdieu: "practice has a logic which is not that of the logician" (Bourdieu, 1977: 109) […]. Consequently, a logic of practice "decentres" the category of institutions by integrating it into the concept of practice in two ways: (1) by criticising the faith many scholars of governance place in institutions, incentives, rules and norms to change social action towards predefined goals and (2) by situating generative principles that steer human behaviour in a historically formed and specific field of practice rather than in universal accounts of the human being and/or the social" (Arts et al., 2013, 10). Following the authors situated agency "assumes that actors' ideas, identities and behaviour are shaped in the context of the social practices in which they are situated. It therefore challenges assumptions made in rationalist accounts, which describe human agency in terms of individuals operating strategically" (ibid., pp. 10, 11). The last sensitising concept – performativity – means that discourses and knowledge constitute the reality they describe […]. By criticising the assumption that discourse and knowledge represent universal and objective reality, be it social or natural, the concept of performativity focuses attention on how discourses and knowledge are shaped, produced, and reproduced in context-specific interactions and interpretations. This is to say that understanding the world cannot be separated from acting upon the world" (ibid., p. 11).

The authors of the book are basing the three sensitising concepts in a position of philosophy of science, making explicit how the concepts grasp reality. The book explicitly touches questions of ontology, i.e. what constitutes political and social reality, and of epistemology, i.e. what is science able to know about this reality. The authors classify the "practice based approach" as a critical alternative to the ontological school of objectivism and the epistemological school of positivism, which in sum assume a world existing independent from the researcher and which aspire objective knowledge about such a reality (Brymann, 2012, similar Nauman, 2006). In contrast, the "practice based approach" explicitly avoids "testing theories" about political reality and a "search for value free knowledge in which policies can be based" (Behagel et al., 2013, p. 248), which researchers rooted in the traditions of positivism aspire. The different assumptions of the "practice based approach" are discussed with respect to authors such as Bevir, Bourdieu, Giddens and others (ibid., p. 10). However, these components of the approach are not formulated as explicit philosophical assumptions. Instead they are discussed as theoretical elements within political theory. Hence, the ontological basis of constructivism and the epistemological basis of interpretivism (Brymann, 2012) are implicitly reflected in the concept. In this regard, the very last sentence of the book gives the reader a hint in this direction stating that "the world is what we make