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European Landscapes and Forests as Representation of Culture

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Abstract

European forests and landscapes bear witness to cultural processes and developments, and show evidence of the impact on their existence of numerous, constantly changing human needs. The shaping and re-shaping of forests and nature over the centuries is the result of private and public land management decisions that are taken against the background of the predominant cultural values, ethical convictions and societal trends. They are extrapolations of contemporary visions based on traditional knowledge and aesthetics from the past, as interpreted in the present. Understanding this legacy and acquiring more information about it and awareness of it through interdisciplinary research will lead to new insights. The information and awareness that will be generated with this approach are essential to allow more appropriate decisions to be taken, setting present-day cultural competence and practical responsibility in the context of environmental decision-making.

Keywords: *environmental decision-making, cultural values, European cultural landscapes, simulacra, palimpsest*

European Landscapes and Forests as Representations of Culture

Franz Schmithüsen and Klaus Seeland

1 Introduction

Natural environmental conditions and processes of cultural development have determined the spatial distribution of forests and the intensity with which forest vegetation has been influenced by human activity. This applies both to forests that have been exploited and to wooded areas that to all appearances have barely been touched. The reasons for the current delimitation of the forest and of open spaces are manifold: for instance, a particularly high value allotted to forests for social and cultural reasons or, conversely, the lack of economic interest attributed to their use in the past. Differences between intensively exploited areas and those showing few apparent human interventions depend on social values and needs, political demands and institutional regulations, and the usable economic resources potential. In general, one can say that all forests – including those considered to be forests close to a primordial state – have been and still are spaces manipulated by man.

2 Cultural processes shaping forests and landscapes

Landscapes and large forests are holograms of a complex historical continuum in their geographical location over time. History reveals itself in landscapes as a man-made configuration of self-referential citations referring to previous historical layers. They are a contemporary amalgamation or palimpsest of the past as viewed at present. Societies can neither abstain from shaping landscapes and forests and transforming natural resources, nor can they fail to perceive and interpret them. And the way in which landscapes are perceived and interpreted at present always includes the information about their historical development that is encoded in their physical shape, their history and their cultural memory (Harrison, 1992; Seeland, 1993; Schama, 1995).

The various layers of temporal representations of culture as distinct geographical locations are sediments that have become inseparable over the ages. They are a fabric formed from physical appropriations of natural elements such as rivers, lakes, hills, meadows, mountains, agricultural land and forests, on the one hand, and the time-bound testimony of man-made cultural artefacts and their alterations over time, on the other. The bed of a river, for instance, represents its history and culture. It reflects the energy of flowing water, under human command and willpower, developing the material culture of a society at a certain stage of development – driving a water-mill, for example. The spirit of history reveals itself in the water power of rivers in this example. It reveals itself in the nutritional value of fish in lakes or the value of the latter as drinking-water reservoirs, and the extent to which firewood, timber and a wide range of forest products other than wood are used. Landscapes and forests represent natural history in the conditions of specific stages of cultural development. Whatever is appropriated by humankind from nature and transformed into cultural assets becomes visible in a landscape as a specific stage of its material and cultural development.

For millennia, human beings have been influencing the spread of tree species and the botanical composition of forests. During the long history of land use, forest areas have been transformed into fields, grasslands, and wooded pastures; settled areas have been abandoned,

returning to fallow land and subsequently to forests again. Varied landscapes have been formed by successions of vegetation that are often still clearly visible today. The present distribution of forest areas and species only partially reflects what the vegetation would be without human intervention. An important indicator of the degree of ‘naturalness’ of forest vegetation is provided by the current development of soils and herbaceous flora. As a consequence, the wooded areas of Central Europe show a mosaic of varied landscapes, often subject to rapid changes.

The forests of Western and Central Europe have served as local resources available to the whole population, as indispensable raw material and energy resources satisfying growing pre-industrial demands, and as the basis for the development of an industrial forestry and wood-processing sector based on sustainable wood production (Hauser, 1972; Hasel, 1985; Corvol, 1987; Mantel, 1990; Cavaciocchi, 1996; Schmithüsen, 2005).

The use of the forest as a local resource complementary to agricultural production, meeting many everyday needs and providing essential components of nutrition, has characterized landscapes in numerous ways. It has, for instance, favoured the preservation of deciduous forests, particularly stands of beech and oak, and of mixed forests in the neighbourhood of villages and towns. Forests in the past were less dense than they are now, due to intensive use. Traces of agroforestry and silvopastoral systems are still visible in many landscapes. The vegetation that developed under the influence of diverse forms of historical exploitation such as pollarding and lopping, gathering of fodder, stripping the bark from oaks, the use of the forest litter, and the roaming of stray cattle in the forest is often perceived by people today as something attractive, representing a state close to nature. It is worth remembering that such forests have for a very long time been influenced by humans, who have considerably modified the selection of species, the structure of the stands, and the edaphic conditions. These forests, in the same way as the stands that succeeded them, reflect the social and economic needs of the past.

The separation between the systems of agricultural production and forestry that is clearly visible today developed gradually after the beginning of the modern period. The trend corresponded to demands on the part of reformers in the agrarian sphere for an increase in agricultural yields through intensive use of arable land and pastures. Forest management followed this process. Ways were sought to limit factors harmful to the development of forests and to create more favourable conditions for increased timber production. In both cases, this led to severe consequences for the structure of the landscape and the diversity of species. Biotopes that had developed within the framework of mixed exploitation disappeared or at least lost ground, either in agricultural zones or in the forest environment. The separation between areas of arable land, pasture land, and forests has been one of the major factors in landscape changes.

From the 15th to the 18th centuries, large-scale wood exploitation developed, combined with systematic exploitation of the more accessible areas, in order to satisfy the growing pre-industrial demands for energy and raw materials. The importance of wood required for the development of new technologies and production processes indicates the major role it played up to the industrial revolution at the beginning of the 19th century. The economic potential of forests was asserted by various interest groups, often in contradictory ways. The greatest divergence was between demands by the local population to be able to take advantage of the forest for their own needs and the endeavours of sovereigns and local landlords to lay their hands on new exploitable wood resources in order to procure revenue and supply factories

and long-distance trade. Until the 19th century, this divergence was apparent in the prolonged and serious conflicts that took place over user and property rights. In addition, there was increasing competition between the use of wood for energy and the demands for timber by craftsmen and pre-industrial enterprises. There was also a strong rivalry between towns, which wanted to safeguard their annual wood supplies, and private entrepreneurs prospecting for accessible new resources.

The immense demand for wood as a source for energy and raw materials for villagers and citizens, for pre-industrial mining and metallurgy, for salt and glass production, and for long-distance trade for shipbuilding and port installations, led to the systematic exploitation of forests in many European regions. All of this resulted in landscape changes that can still be observed today. Large-scale and concentrated felling not only changed the forests exploited at any given time; it had severe consequences on the structure and composition of forest stands that developed naturally or were reforested after clear-cutting. Deciduous forests and mixed forests retreated in regions such as the Harz mountains, the Black Forest, and the Alps, where there was a particularly high, concentrated, and long-term demand for wood for pre-industrial processing; and consequently coniferous species, mainly spruce, superseded beech. The spread of other tree species, such as fir, was also influenced to a lesser extent. Where logging concentrated on large-scale selective cutting, such as for shipbuilding and the long-distance timber-rafting trade, more differentiated tree stand structures and species compositions were, at least partially, preserved.

Over the course of three centuries, starting at the beginning of the 18th century, forestry and wood processing became productive sectors of the economy, using a renewable resource in a sustainable manner as a basis for business management. This development was based on scientific models that allowed harvesting intensities to adjust to the long-term potential of forest sites, species composition, age classes, and forest stand structures. The most important aspect was probably the regeneration of forests over large areas and the management of uniform stands. In the plains and lower mountains, the introduction of sustainable wood production during the 19th century quite often favoured an organization of stands by predetermined periods of rotation, allowing the regeneration of clear-cut areas. Seeding of conifers and large plantations of spruce or pine allowed the afforestation of exploited and devastated surfaces in which natural regeneration was difficult or even impossible at this period. In general, conifers were systematically promoted because they corresponded to economic purposes, according to which the thinning and final felling of even-aged stands allowed a rapid increase in wood production. In the Alps and, to a lesser extent, in other mountainous areas of Central Europe, the practice of selective logging combined with natural regeneration continued to be a traditional practice, which has in the meantime developed toward various forms of silviculture that are close to nature, such as selective cutting and regeneration in small areas.

3 Local landscapes and global identification

During the 20th century, the transformation of agrarian and industrial societies into service-oriented and globally oriented societies broadened the public's view of the meaning and value of forests. Their role as water storage areas, biodiversity parks and carbon sinks has become increasingly relevant. Landscapes and forests are being increasingly valued for their environmental services at a higher level of political relevance. The integration of forests into the European Landscape Convention, for instance, has given them a new significance that combines several important functions that they have in modern societies. The environment, although it remains locally significant, is tending to be appropriated on an increasingly global scale. A reversal has occurred in the palimpsest of layers of significance that have been prominent for so long among the sediments of cultural meanings; earlier meanings are now being superseded by others that have risen to greater prominence due to increased environmental awareness of the population.

A preponderance of recreational uses in natural landscapes and forests over other uses has developed along with the emergence of service-oriented societies. The value of natural environments has been upgraded as modern lifestyles have become more and more separated from natural ways of life. Modern citizens, who rarely have any contact with nature and forests in their ordinary professional lives, acknowledge the environmental importance of forests and identify themselves with political and economical initiatives to safeguard them in order to stabilize the climate all over the globe. Local environments are tending to become increasingly meaningful at the global level rather than at the local one, as many extra-local world citizens identify themselves with localities other than those where they reside. Tropical forests, for instance, have become a relevant political issue in the environmental politics of non-tropical countries.

What forests mean at the present time to the population, landowners, and specific user groups has become an interesting and topical subject of research. Empirical studies on people's perceptions and attitudes to forests and forest management provide information about the development of their social significance (Schmithüsen et al., 1997; Rocek, 1998; Jensen and Koch, 2000; SAEFL, 2000; Schmithüsen and Wild-Eck, 2000). The findings indicate, first of all, that for most people the forest continues to be a usable and productive part of the environment and that its management is notably conditioned by economic preferences. On the other hand, it can also be stated that for a growing part of the population, forests represent a free space for recreation that is different from other widely transformed parts of the landscape. At the same time, forests are identified more and more as a primordial natural environment, perceived by many people to be subject to little or no human influence. Forests represent the free interplay of natural forces, in contrast to inhabited areas and surfaces intensively exploited by agriculture. This new development reflects the needs and attitudes of contemporary society and crystallizes the desire on the part of an ever more urban population for recreation in natural surroundings close to cities. It reflects concerns provoked by the impending threats to the environment and to biodiversity, resulting from personal experience and sensitivity toward global-scale phenomena. It is founded on the individual values of a large number of people for whom the forest represents a place for meditation, reflection, and freedom.

The motives of the interviewees vary depending on individual preferences and on their social and economic conditions. They usually emphasize that the forest is a place where one can walk, practice various sports, study nature, or breathe and relax; and a place where one feels happy and can reduce the stress of everyday life. The survey results underline the importance of the forest as a place to which one can withdraw and express one's love of nature, as a quiet place for personal reflection, and as a realm of physical and emotional experiences and sensations. While visitors to the forest come for many different reasons, many of them are attaching increasing importance to emotional, spiritual, and mystical values. Contradictory expectations and demands thus affect today the use of forests and forestry management. For town dwellers, the forest above all represents a favourable area for leisure and relaxation. Inhabitants of mountain regions see it as a protection against natural hazards and as a tourist attraction. For forest owners it is an important source of income, and for the wood processing industry forests provide the elementary raw material resource basis. For one part of the population, the forests are unique, and the necessity to conserve them predominates. Another part considers that the economic aspects of wood production in providing employment and a source of revenue are preponderant.

Sustainable forest management – which in European forestry developed over centuries, gradually following profound cultural dynamics in society – started from specific local patterns of use of forests in early history, and narrowed down to a focus primarily on wood production in order to procure state revenue and extensive profits during the industrial age. It has only been in recent decades that it has again come to include a wide range of other non-wood forest uses and social values. In a modern management-oriented definition (Speidel, 1984), sustainable forestry means the ability of landowners and land managers to produce wood, infrastructure services, and other goods for the benefit of present and future generations. In a locally specific combination, it can fulfil the prevailing demands for private and public goods and values and corresponds to the long-term physical potential of forest sites and forest stands. It means maintaining and creating the entrepreneurial conditions necessary for a permanent and continually optimal fulfilment of economic and extra-economic needs and goals.

While land-use conflicts were previously at the fore, the very purpose of the forest and the way it is currently managed now dominate the major part of debates about the relationship between humankind and the environment. Different fundamental concepts and management systems, with their distinct emphases, have now come into the focus of the political debate. In the light of the increasingly pressing demands for environmental protection and conservation of biodiversity on a large scale, it is not the principle of sustainable wood production that is in question, but certain forestry practices that are judged to be incompatible with sustainable development. From this point of view, a forest economy that is capable of taking account of emerging new currents of opinion in society, based on cultural change, will benefit from the approval and acceptance of the population. The sustainability concept in the modern and largely global view of forest and landscape management implies a time perspective of permanence and continuity, distinct activities such as maintenance and creativity, objectives for meeting new needs and goals, and qualifying criteria for optimal results in the form of sociocultural achievements.

4 Cultural foundations of environmental decision-making

Landscapes and large forests that have been shaped in a particular historical era do not replace each other when each era comes to an end and another takes over. The spirit of a new era transforms them only to a certain extent. The relics and remainders of earlier epochs, with their distinct forms of production, survive and can still be detected today. Historical information is the key to deciphering the enigmatic totality of cultural landscapes. This palimpsest of layers in landscapes and forests, as witnesses of the history of mankind, consists of sediments. Investigations can scratch these virtual layers here and there and occasionally bring to light citations of earlier representations of culture (Seeland, 1997). A landscape observer's historical awareness can detect and interpret the manifold material and cultural relics of earlier times that can be seen in landscapes and forests and bring them to the surface of contemporary attention in society. In this way, it can become relevant to political and policy-making discourses.

Observation and reflection against the background of local experience and scientific knowledge allow introspection into this palimpsest of the spatio-temporal layers of visible cultural history. Observation, perception and interpretation of landscapes and forests can unify the information available about the different strata and can contribute to the establishment of a synoptic view and a holographic understanding of the phenomena. The knowledge of past land uses and management objectives enables us to understand landscapes as representations of local history and a succession of cultural developments. With their distinct elements, such as rivers, lakes, forests etc., they have been subject from time immemorial to social and political changes. More often than not, these changes have been caused by regional, national or global political and socio-economic factors. The governing ideas of the past that shaped the development of the modern forest economy, developing as a function of changing needs, are quite often in contrast to the significance given to today's forest cover by a largely urban population. To understand present and future options in managing forests and landscapes, one has to be aware of the historical context that has determined the conditions and objectives for using and managing them in. One must also be aware of the local and indigenous knowledge that reflects their cultural importance today (Seeland and Schmithüsen, 2000; Seeland and Schmithüsen, 2003).

Decisions relevant to space and spatial planning are generally taken from a sector-defined administrative point of view, rather than in relation to landscapes and forests as such – i.e., in their primordial state of nature. Decision-making on natural phenomena such as forests and landscapes encodes a cultural rationale that does not comprise their entire being, but merely utilitarian aspects of them. Administrative decisions are thus time-bound representations of cultural values that are constantly transformed according to the logic and rationale of politics, economics, natural resource management, etc. Interest-driven alterations of forests and landscapes do not affect their genuine authentic forms, but their simulacra – i.e., their man-made appearances that have been historically shaped to fulfil certain purposes at a specific time. Decisions are always taken on formations that have already been shaped earlier by human decisions. Future decision-making processes in forest and landscape policies need to take this phenomenon into account. As a consequence, an encompassing view requires a holographic approach to decision-making that refers not only to the utilitarian aspects of forests or other elements of landscapes, but also to cultural landscapes in the broadest sense of the term. Perception and knowledge will allow political decision-making on the basis of the cultural origins of the palimpsest and simulacra. The original remains unknown – there are no

primordial forests and landscapes left in mid-Western Europe any more, and we have only come to know man-made copies representing facsimiles of them (Baudrillard, 1976).

The principle of sustainability – or, to be more precise, of sustainable development – today represents an imperative dimension for rational decision-making regarding natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations. It is based on the understanding that the present level of consumption and its effects on the environment have to respect an equilibrium that will provide the necessary room for manoeuvre for future options, for a framework of conditions that allow the harmonization of present interests with future potentials. The sustainable use of forests and landscapes is thus linked to concrete economic and technical conditions and therefore depends on fundamental human perspectives and social norms in the same way. Sustainability does not in itself express an intention to use resources; rather, it forces certain social and political communities to recognize their responsibility for management.

If we concede that any social or natural phenomena that we encounter in the world today are the result of many unknown and hardly traceable decision-making processes, the question arises of the way in which the concept of sustainability can shape the future of mankind. The innumerable, multiple and interwoven decision-making processes, in all sectors of social life and environmental management, which are subsidiary to the concept of sustainability may contribute to remarkable changes in this concept. Although we cannot know precisely what future cultural values may be, they will undoubtedly shape the lives of future generations for as long as the members of the human race are cultural beings. They will continue to be the basis for as yet unknown future social needs and demands.

A recent retreat to somewhat natural lifestyles began in Western Europe in the early 1970s, and no one can foresee at present where climate change and the political prospects of the worldwide green political movement will take the world. For instance, will largely ageing cyber-based societies in mid-Western Europe favour wilderness as their preferred vision of forests and landscapes? Or will there be Thoreau-like ‘Walden’ individuals or communities who live in the woods, on the one hand, and in cyberspace on the other? What impact these changes may have on European forests and landscapes is certainly an open question. Can environmental policy decision-making based on cultural values take the opportunity to grasp the entire hologram of cultural values, including future dynamic changes, within a perspective of sustainability of this type? Is it in a position to foresee the ways in which culture might induce a transformation in perceptions of nature that will certainly lead to a different form of natural-resource management in the future centuries of post-service societies? What will come then, and will natural resources still play the role they do in today’s discourse on political sustainability? Will the future challenges to the forests and landscapes of Europe be mostly or to a large extent due to climate change, and can these challenges be met by environmental policy decision-making with any major effect? In other words, will human society be in a position to decide on the future of forests and landscapes, or will it be the climate as an anonymous superpower that will act as the sum of millions of decision-making processes in almost all the policies we have at the moment in all the world’s societies?

5 Conclusions

Present-day cultural developments are not only adding an additional contemporary layer of decisions relevant to forests and landscapes on top of previous ones. They also recall earlier meanings and thus evoke the hidden memory of the historic past and make it relevant to decision-making. The heuristic value of the palimpsest model is that the underlying cultural values involved in decision-making are reverted to when a new era emerges. Thus, decisions are never fundamentally new; since they follow a cultural continuum, the rationale underlying them represents the general history of the human mind and spirit, in which humanity transcends its social development to move towards new horizons – but not towards new natural surroundings. Decision-making can be based on new ideas and intellectual concepts, but the natural foundations of forests and landscapes involve pre-existing historic layers, in the same way as the Renaissance referred back to sources in antiquity and thereby superseded the spirit of the Middle Ages. Post-industrial decision-making processes, being participatory, democratic and decentralized, are currently shaping local life-worlds on the basis of global values.

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