The Socio-Political Conceptualization of Serengeti Landscapes in Europe: The Case of 'Western Iberia'

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Abstract—This paper reflects on the socio-political conceptualization of 'Western Iberia', one of Rewilding Europe's first pilot areas. Drawing from Actor Network Theory and social theories discussing Politics of Scale, we illustrate how 'Western Iberia' is continuously being negotiated through practices in different sites within/outside its geographical boundaries. We identify five different versions of 'Western Iberia' for illustrative purposes to claim that there is not one 'Western Iberia' but many. We conclude that these multiple versions are contingent and produced in networks of actors, but also limited to unique social and material conditions. Through better understanding socio-political practice in constituting, approaching, arranging and representing 'Western Iberia', we aim to complement on-going ecological studies that traditionally reflect upon natural processes of rewilding.

"A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (Tsing 2005, p.5)

Introduction

Subsidized agricultural production faces economic downfall and related depopulation in South/Eastern Europe. Due to these socio-economic developments, land properties are abandoned and remaining populations are aging (cf FAO 2006; Rewilding Europe 2013b). Yet for many European landscapes that currently face land abandonment, there are few economic alternatives to subsidized agriculture. Even more so, in places where abandoned land is left unmanaged, related social and environmental problems emerge. One of the most notable is the growing risk of fire connected to the development of fire-prone scrubland on abandoned and no longer managed lands (Navarro and Pereira 2012; Terres, Nisini, and Anguiano 2013).

Rewilding Europe - a new nature conservation organization founded through a network of ARK Nature, WWF-NL, Wild Wonders of Europe, Conservation Capital and numerous locally established NGOs - aims to re-vitalise agricultural societies by means of alternative land use strategies that value wilderness as a strong business case. In order to Re-wild Europe's abandoned landscapes, Rewilding Europe has devoted itself to "support and work with five, ultimately ten, local Rewilding areas around Europe for a period of at least ten years" (Schepers 2013[1]). That is the least possible time necessary "to build, together with the local partners, meaningful Rewilding examples at a scale that can inspire others to follow" (Ibid). Through these envisioned collaborations, Rewilding Europe expects Europe to become "a wilder place" with much more space for 'natural' and 'wild' landscapes. Rewilding Europe projects to transform a total of 1 million hectares of European land, particularly those being abandoned, into imagined wildernesses by 2020 (cf. www.rewildingeurope.com).

The wilderness that Rewilding Europe envisions is not just any kind of wilderness that can emerge if land literally becomes abandoned. Instead, particular natural conditions are designed to enable restoration of natural processes in order to allow spectacular wildlife species to thrive. As such, frameworks for the establishment and management of particular conditions are 'developed' that support the restoration of abandoned agricultural lands into a particular version of wilderness. A version of wilderness that is, as we will discuss further down, in line with discursive understandings of ancient European ecosystem time-lines and contemporary versions of large-scale wilderness that can still be found in the Serengeti's or Yellowstones of this world. Particularly emphasising such restoration practices according to particular bodies of knowledge and visions of wilderness, we will, in this paper, use the concept of restoration in line with concepts such as 're-development' and 'management' instead of with those related to 'preservation' or 'conservation'. We choose to do so to flesh out the socio-political dimensions that are part of the contemporary formation of any re-wilding or wilderness restoration objective - and their related (passive) management frameworks (cf. Bulkens 2014) in Europe today.

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[1] http://www.rewildingeurope.com/news/articles/rewilding-europe-now-a-beneficiary-of-the-dutch-postcode-lottery/

As intimated earlier, science plays a significant role in the Rewilding initiative. According to Arts et al. (2013) contemporary restoration projects in Europe favour 'native' species introductions, making the 're-development' of wilderness dominantly influenced by strong restoration ecology thinking. There are, however, many other scientific and non- scientific discourses that led to diversified visions of what wilderness in Europe should be and what kind of (passive) management frameworks are required to restore such envisioned wilderness and a subset of related objectives. Some of these visions of wilderness have, we argue, very few connections to what essentially pristine wilderness would have looked like in ancient Europe. Examples vary from: e.g. the contemporary capitalisation of nature conservation (e.g. ecosystem services and eco-tourism), (back) breeding programs aimed at returning and/or recreating iconic wildlife that has been lost through past destructive (human) practices (e.g. Auroch and Tarpan[2]).

In this paper we argue that these processes of knowledge production and power need further attention, especially when taking into account Bulkens (2014:139) observation that different visions of what European wilderness is, together with their related restoration objectives and management frameworks, "object of controversy on different scales". Whatever discourse is put on the table to justify Rewilding practices in various European landscapes, so far little attention is given to the role of politics. As Rewilding Europe is about to expand to different regions in Europe to create parallel wilderness landscapes of the future, we expect a range of frictions to occur. It is, from our point of view, necessary to further scrutinize the socio-political forces that influence or determine Rewilding practices as they unmistakeably have a powerful claim to physical developments of targeted Rewilding landscapes in Europe.

A useful conceptual tool to tie socio-political forces to physical landscapes is the concept of landscape itself. According to Görg (2007) landscape is a concept that bridges social with natural sciences in order to examine connections between different levels of knowledge production, and how these relate to both the (physical) landscape and to one another. By following Swyngedouw's 'politics of scale' and by borrowing from Actor-Network Theory and related conceptions of object formation (Duineveld, Van Assche, and Beunen 2013; Law 2004; Law and Urry 2004; Mol 1999 2002; Tsing 2005) we will look at the development of one particular Rewilding area referred to as : 'Western Iberia'.

'Western Iberia' represents a trans-boundary nature conservation region situated in between the North-east of Portugal and the East of Spain. In this paper we examine this newly imagined space for Rewilding in terms of multiple object formations taking place at various locations within and beyond its established geographical boundaries. There are, as we will argue, several realities of a 'Western Iberia' made possible through unique human and material conditions played-out at different sites in the socio-political network of (and beyond) Rewilding.

Before we describe several of these realities, we will first explain the theoretical concepts related to the politics of scale making and object formations that informed our analysis (cf Görg 2007; Swyngedouw 1997 2004). Second, based on field visits in 'Western Iberia' between 2012 and 2013, we will sketch a few example conceptualizations of multiple versions of 'Western Iberia'. These versions are currently envisioned and practiced by networks that use similar or different scales in their unique observations of 'Western Iberia'.

Theoretical Position _____

Scale and Object Formation

Following Görg (2007), the 'Western Iberian' landscape can be observed as both natural and social. The natural landscape is shaped by physical elements e.g. mountains, canyons, rivers, plains, oak trees and other natural forces e.g. wind, heat, cold, drought and fires. How we come to recognise, use, influence, shape, interfere-in and value such natural landscapes is the result of endless series of combinations of such natural and human elements (Fuchs 2001; Latour 2005). The outcomes, or how we come to know and use nature, is influenced by the way in which human networks are politically organised (Haraway 2001; Swyngedouw 2004). This assembling and using of nature is referred to as the metabolism of nature, as a pure social process (Swyngedouw 2004).

Scale

How we come to know a landscape and define the geographical scales of that landscape (e.g. by thinking of its borders) does not only extend over a certain geographical scale, but also over a socio-political scale: the scope of a social network in which a particular landscape (here 'Western Iberia') is known, shared or made (Meadowcroft 2002). Swyngedouw states that any social or material condition "is constituted in and through temporal/spatial social relations that operate over a certain scalar extent" (2004: 131). In theory, this means that there are different versions of a landscape produced and known over different relational spaces (e.g. a community, a coalition between NGO's, a nation, between two friends) but which might also stretch out over similar, smaller or bigger, bordering or overlapping geographical scales (e.g. the municipality of a Portuguese village, a contingent river Valley, 'Western Iberia' as a region between Portugal and Spain, etcetera). Consequently, the transformation of nature as in the example of Rewilding Europe is embedded in a series of social, political, cultural and economic constellations and procedures that operate within a nested articulation of significant, but intrinsically unstable, geographical scales" (Swyngedouw 2004: 130). Although we should not underestimate the power of local material conditions of place, these conditions can only exist in societal relations to place. "Place [therefore] matters but scale decides" (Swyngedouw 1997: 144).

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[2] See description of the Tauros project: http://www.taurosproject.com/

In political ecology, scale theory is often used as a hierarchical tool to understand local-global, vertical-horizontal, configurations. Here we rather examine scale non-hierarchically to understand the development of multiple object formations that depend on interconnections of practices taking place at various sites (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005). A site is seen here as a context (not necessarily connected to a physical place) where exchange of knowledge/power takes place between actors during different events (cf Latour 2005; Schatzki 2005). It is at these different sites that we can see diverse developments of 'Western Iberia'. In each of these sites, we are able to identify which forms of scale making are decisive, and to what extent they influence other developments of 'Western Iberia', or more general of Rewilding, elsewhere.

Sites of Object Formation

How transformations of nature, through knowledge production and practices, emerge and are shared over social networks, has been the particular concern of researchers interested in Actor Network Theory and power (cf Duineveld et al. 2013; Latour 2005; Law 2004; Mol 2002). They are interested in processes of object formation: any object, thus also (natural/cultural) landscapes, is the result of a continuous crafting of relations between different conditions and elements, e.g. people, knowledge, meaning and natural phenomena (Duineveld et al. 2013; Fuchs 2001; Van Assche, Beunen, Holm, and Lo 2013). The observation, crafting and communication about these objects take place at different sites in socio-political networks. In these distinct sites, observers identify elements and make use of various concepts to make sense of the world (Fuchs 2001). Because of the unique social and geographical position of each observer, processes of object formation (theoretically) always result in different knowledge and use of landscape(s), constructed out of different elements and conditions at different sites (Fuchs 2001). If such practises are to be foregrounded, there is no longer a single passive object in the middle, waiting to be seen from the point of view of seemingly endless series of possibilities" (Mol 2002: 5). Instead, multiple objects can be observed that are crafted out of different elements in different practices that stretch over different geographical and socio-political scales (Swyngedouw 2004 and Görg 2007).

Obviously, some of the sites, in which conceptions of landscapes are assembled, are better connected - or more influential in the socio-political network than others: they can temporarily act as "authorities of object formation" (Duineveld et al. 2013: 2) or what Latour (2005) would call "oligoptica". Authorities of object formation exist only temporarily, as these networks are unstable and relations are continuously made, broken and altered. An assembled landscape therefore is not only situational (a limited distribution over a socio-political scale as well as a geographical scale) but also sequential in nature (Duineveld et al. 2013; van Assche et al. 2013). Temporality of object formations as such demand an examination of 'events' to understand how various possibilities of Rewilding unfold into particular stabilizing/de-stabilizing differences (Marston et al. 2005).

In the context of (landscape) governance in 'Western Iberia', theories on object formation provide a promising basis that "allows us to think about relations between power, knowledge and reality" (Duineveld et al. 2013:15). The different formations of 'Western Iberia' further help us to understand how, despite the many differences and frictions, larger and more universal projects like Rewilding can possibly stabilize or collapse over time (Massey 2004; Tsing 2005).

Illustrative Formations of 'Western Iberia' _____

The following will examine five interesting examples of unique formations of 'Western Iberia' that take shape at various sites; through practices in nature conservation, history, entrepreneurship, charity, and local homes.

'Western Iberia', a Spatial Site for New Wilderness Conservation

'Western Iberia' is one of the pilot areas of Rewilding Europe in the border region between western Spain and northeastern Portugal. The invention of the name 'Western Iberia', tied to a designated conservation region by regional partners of Rewilding Europe, is based on the fact that the area is situated in the western part of the Iberian Peninsula. According to one local Rewilding employee, 'Western Iberia' "has the largest […] continuous landscape [...] [(Dehesa)] and most of the species in Europe".

When Rewilding proponents speak of 'Western Iberia', they speak of multiple land characteristics including Dehesas, Montados and Sierras; traditional farming systems and economic downfall; land abandonment and aging populations; fire risks and biodiversity loss due to uncontrolled scrubland densification (Rewilding Europe 2013b).

In both sides of the Portuguese/Spanish borderland, thousands of people live dispersed in relatively small villages. Land ownership is scattered, and often it is unknown to whom particular land belongs. Two local NGOs (FNYH in Spain and ATN in Portugal) started their conservation activities in two privately owned reserves (varying each between 600-800 hectares): Campanarios de Azaba and Faia Brava (see figure 1). Rewilding Europe and both NGO's not only aim to reintroduce keystone species but also aim to transform 100,000 hectares of land into new wilderness landscapes, a genuine challenge (cf Jobse, Witteveen, Santegoets, and Stobbelaar 2013).

Figure 2 shows a corresponding future vision of this region as depicted by Rewilding Europe. The poster clearly illustrates 'Western Iberia' as a habitat for wild horses, wild cows, deer, Spanish Imperial Eagles, Egyptian vultures, and the Iberian Lynx. If one looks carefully, tented camps and safari trucks indicate the presence of wilderness tourism in the midst of this 'Serengeti-like landscape' that extends over Spain and Portugal. However, agricultural practices are absent in this poster.

This ideal picture of 'Western Iberia' is the result of particular modes of observing, which are challenged by or to be combined with others.

Figure 1—'Western Iberia' on Google Maps (c.f. www.rewildingeurope.com).

Figure 2—Artistic vision of 'Western Iberia', by Jeroen Helmer (ARK Nature/Rewilding Europe).

'Western Iberia' as a Historical Reference

Especially ecological and biological observers have conceptualised the 'Western Iberian' landscape by making use of historical references. Navarro and Pereira (2012) were among the very first to report on Rewilding Europe in academic circles. They indicate that in order to introduce large herbivore species, certain open natural landscapes need to be created to allow nature to 'do its work'. Rewilding Europe wants to create such landscapes by referring to authentic natural heritage of European landscapes as they used to exist millennia ago. Even though Rewilding claims that they do not want to stick to a particular time period, they often propose eco-system transformations that have similar characteristics to e.g. (Frans Vera's) half open, grassland like, landscapes in the Oostvaardersplassen (cf Rewilding Europe 2013a; Vera 2009). Vera's timeframe relates to 6000/8000 years ago (the mid-Holocene). It is around this historical turning point that agriculture was about to change the European landscape. As stated by Rewilding Europe: "Let the natural processes continue unaltered, and reintroduce the missing wildlife species and let them multiply as they can, unmanaged. Then we will all see in a few decades time what those parts of Europe possibly may have looked like when man first came onto the stage" (Rewilding Europe 2013a). In this quote at least a strong restoration ethic surfaces that refers to a pre-human interference in the European landscape.

Locally, 'Western Iberia' incorporates references to the well-known UNESCO world heritage rock engraving of the COA valley: Côa Valley Archaeological Park (PAVC) and the Côa Museum[3]. These engravings are believed to exist since 22,000-8,000 BC, and represent images of Auroch, horses, and various other animals as well as humans. The Auroch and horses are considered as foundational species of half open, grassland, eco-systems that existed in Europe before large scale human interferences. As such, the Auroch has become to symbolize much of Rewilding's experiments in Europe. The Auroch is the species from which many domestic cattle breeds in this world have evolved. Historically, attempts have been undertaken in order to breed back the Auroch by selective breeding programs (Heck 1951 in lorimer and Driessen 2011). More recently a joint initiative between, amongst others, the Taurus foundation and Rewilding Europe, has started to selectively breed back Auroch-looking bovines by using primitive cattle breeds and repopulate European wilderness areas with these (Tauros programme 2013[4]). In Campanarios de Azaba, a Spanish reserve that is part of 'Western Iberia', one of these primitive breeds, the Spanish Sayaguesa cattle, have recently been introduced.

'Western Iberia' as a 'Charitable Duty to Bring Wildlife Back'

The return of wildlife in 'Western Iberia' has also been conceptualized as a 'charitable duty'. In November 2012, the Dutch television broadcasted an episode of 'Kanjers van Goud[5], dedicated fully to 'Western Iberia'. Martijn Krabbé, a well-known Dutch TV host, visited 'Western Iberia' to see how Rewilding Europe is creating, "with help of the Postcode Lottery[6] [...] spectacular wilderness areas at places that are abandoned by people" (translated from Dutch) (Kanjers van Goud 2012). In this documentary Martijn Krabbé is taken by one of Rewilding's directors, Staffan Widstrand, to 'Western Iberia' to experience "safari in Europe", to see nature being given back to agricultural areas that are being abandoned, to visit wild vultures at a feeding station and hideout in order to make "our natural heritage more accessible" (Staffan Widstrand, interviewed by Martijn Krabbé). A main story told in this short episode, is the fact that Rewilding Europe aims to make nature more profitable, a vision that has never been practiced before in Europe. Staffan Widstrand underlines that with the funding of the Postcode Lottery something very ambitious can be 'jump started' in order to develop the 10 different Serengeti parks in Europe. Being asked by Martijn Krabbé why Auroch need to be reintroduced in places like 'Western Iberia', Staffan Widstrand explains that the Auroch was killed / eaten by us humans, and that it is therefore "our duty to bring them back".

'Western Iberia' as a 'Business Concept'

Rewilding Europe is furthermore inspired by African experiences in securing land for wilderness conservation. Vast experience from African nature conservation organisations like the African Wildlife Foundation (particularly in the practice of conservation enterprises) influences how newly envisioned wilderness, as an alternative productive land use, is framed in Europe. One of Rewilding Europe's founding partners is Conservation Capital. Conservation Capital is specialised in making community-private partnership deals to increase economic returns out of land use through nature-based economies. As Giles Davies (personal conversation in April 2013), the founder of Conservation Capital argues: "I would like to see much more wildlife (...) and that is our job, our job is to build the businesses and revenue flows that help pay for it all". Examples are the development of high-end lodges that overlook great African and now also European plains, full of wildlife. But increasingly, also more combinations between agriculture and nature conservation are being sought. Such land use either complements or replaces more traditional agricultural uses of land owned or managed by local communities.

African experiences are shared with local Rewilding organizations that plan similar kinds of Conservation enterprises to help finance nature conservation. The particular choices made here, influence the ultimate shape of physical landmarks as particular eco-tourism structures are being built and new infrastructures are demanded, e.g. high-end eco-lodges and accessible roads. At the same time other existing

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[3] http://www.arte-coa.pt/index.php?Language=en&Page=Gestao&SubPage=Fundacao.

[4] http://www.taurosproject.com/

[5] http://www.rtl.nl/xl/#/u/b5e4cbc6-ac9f-3628-80a3-d35a61197412.

[6] The Postcode Lottery, part of Novamedia/Postcode Lotteries, donates 50 % of its stakes to charity foundations. The mission of Novamedia is "to set up and operate Charity Lotteries all over the world to raise funds for charities and increase awareness for their work". Rewilding Europe is one key receiver of charity income from the Postcode Lottery (3.6 million euros in 2011, and since February 2013 became a beneficiary of the Postcode Lottery receiving 500,000 euro's annually for five years).

buildings might need to be demolished, existing businesses need to alter their way of working to cater for new kinds of visitors, and well-trained personnel are required.

'Western Iberia' as 'Home'

'Western Iberia' has been inhabited by people for thousands of years (e.g. Côa Valley). Nowadays, it is a rural area that allows for different agricultural practices; pig breeding, sheep herding and Mediterranean agriculture (olives, almonds and vineyards).

Even though different landscape usages exist, the region is slowly becoming abandoned. Not only people leave, also wildlife numbers have plunged. Some are afraid that the knowledge that exists about how to work the land e.g. where to plant crops, where to feed pigs and when to butcher them will be lost. "People should increasingly understand that this is the land that delivers everything, then, in the near future I believe that our land will be able to produce again like it did in the past" (local bar owner in Portugal).

In order to revitalise the region, most residents welcome tourism as an alternative source of income. Bar and hotel owners will have more visitors and butchers as well as farmers will sell regional products. For some farmers however, land abandonment is also seen as an alternative opportunity. "Here in my village it is still possible to make good deals. I have bought a lot of land already, something over a hundred acres, but I still expect to expand" (local farmer). Like Rewilding, they aim to buy-up unused lands and extend their area. At the same time, they have mechanised their farming practises and use more lands by hiring less people. In this way, land abandonment is by the farmers seen as a good business opportunity. "I think that agriculture is an industry with a future (…) there is a whole variety of manners to make money out of the products (…) there are people who already did so and now they sell their product to the rest of Europe, Brazil and even China" (local farmer).

Conclusion

The examples in this paper briefly sketched a few different sites that co-produce the existence of a 'Western Iberia'. But there are numerous other related sites (with their own networks of observers: hunters and their hobbies, European politicians with their legislations, NGO's with their visions, etc. etc…) where 'Western Iberia' is being negotiated and practiced into different objects that each materialize through continuous change. We summarize our brief journey by means of three conclusions.

First, the sum of the variety of formations does not equate to one Rewilding concept of 'Western Iberia'. Where we understand the challenge and excitement of a powerful rewilding vision for 'Western Iberia', 'rewilding' must be understood as one possible scenario in friction with other scenarios on different and possibly overlapping scales and time-lines. Following Mol (2002), the multiple formations of landscape are differentiated, potentially competing, cooperating and locally embedded, but also related to more global developments. The temporal and situational outcomes of these formations of 'Western Iberia' are strongly political (Marston et al. 2005) and have serious consequences for the physical and socioeconomic configurations of the current and future landscape in 'Western Iberia'. The current ecological vision of Rewilding Europe in 'Western Iberia' lacks a strong vision for social inclusion, and as such runs the risk of not understanding other versions of a 'Western Iberia'. In the end we must not forget that rewilding needs to take place in the back gardens of hundreds of villages still existing in 'Western Iberia' or elsewhere.

Second, the establishment of 'Western Iberia', as a transboundary conservation region, is in itself a result from cooperation between locally established Portuguese/Spanish NGOs and Rewilding Europe. Even within this conservation network, there are multiple formations of what 'Western Iberia' is or should become. Yet it is through distinctive local practices and through the partnering between local conservation agencies that the whole idea of 'Western Iberia' and Rewilding can materialize.

Third, even though Rewilding landscapes such as 'Western Iberia' – now and in the future – are dependent on political interrelatedness of different sites with different scalar reach, we also stress that Rewilding landscapes remain attached to physical and non-physical characteristics of local places. These have, for example, been literally carved into the COA rock engravings. But also more contemporary physical developments in 'Western Iberia' constrain the current unfolding of a European wilderness dream; e.g. scattered land properties due to long standing inheritances, contemporary natural processes and connected native species, limited social involvement and understanding of new wilderness establishments in rural societies, the general lack and natural conditions that enable (spectacular) wildlife to survive, or an underdeveloped (wildlife based) tourism infrastructure in Europe.

This paper has aimed to flesh out some of the many socio-political dimensions involved in the re-development of wilderness and the framing of restoration objectives and (passive) management schemes in Europe. In doing so, we have aimed to argue for reflexivity in the way in which rewilding practices are currently being introduced and implemented in different places and on different scales. Such a call for reflexivity is not aimed at besetting rewilding practices right from the start. Instead, we aim to contribute to an understanding of the socio-political arena in which such practices are conceived, developed, implemented and reflected upon; our own work included. Such an understanding might prove fundamental in order to oversee, respond to and embed different versions of landscape and wilderness and their subsets of restoration objectives and management frameworks as rewilding in Europe expands to different sites and over different scales.

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