

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. By combining social theories related to Politics of Scale and Actor Network Theory, 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 understanding these socio-political practices, we hope to complement on-going ecological studies that traditionally reflect upon equally important 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 different socio-economic developments, land properties are abandoned and remaining populations are aging (cf FAO, 2006; RewildingEurope, 2013b). In many of these European landscapes, there are few economic alternatives to address related social and environmental problems, like fire risks in places where abandoned land is left unmanaged (Navarro & Pereira, 2012; Terres, Nisini, & 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. The wilderness that Rewilding Europe envisions is not just any kind of wilderness that can emerge if land becomes literally abandoned. Instead, particular natural conditions are designed to enable restoration of natural processes in order to allow spectacular wildlife species to thrive. As such, conditions are developed to resemble both ancient ecosystem time-lines and contemporary European versions of large scale wilderness that we commonly find in the Serengeti's or Yellow Stones of this world. Therefore 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, 2013¹)". 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

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

Europe to become “a wilder place” with much more space for (half-) open ‘natural’ landscapes. Rewilding Europe projects to transform a total of 1 million hectares of abandoning European land into imagined wildernesses by 2020 (cf. www.rewildingeurope.com).

In this Rewilding process science plays a significant role. According to Arts et al. (2013) contemporary restoration projects in Europe favour ‘native’ species introductions, making the restoration of wilderness dominantly influenced by strong restoration ecology thinking. There are, however, many other scientific and non-scientific discourses that led to diversified new wilderness developments in Europe, some of which have very few connections to what essentially pristine wilderness would have looked like in ancient Europe. Examples vary from: e.g. 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 Tarpan²).

In this paper we argue that these processes of knowledge production and power need further attention. 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 examine the socio-political forces that influence or determine Rewilding practices as they unmistakably 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, & Beunen, 2013; Law, 2004; Law & 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 which informed our analysis (cf Görg, 2007; Swyngedouw, 1997; Swyngedouw, 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

² See description of the Tauros project: <http://www.taurosproject.com/>

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 extent 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, p. 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 called Citadelhe, a contingent Coa Valley, Western-Iberia, Portugal and Spain, Europe, Africa). 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; p. 144).

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, & Woodward, 2005). A site is seen here as a context (spatially and non-spatially) where exchanges of knowledge/power take 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, 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, a.o. peoples, knowledge, meaning and natural phenomena (Duineveld et al., 2013; Fuchs, 2001; Van Assche, Beunen, Holm, & Lo, 2013). The observation, crafting and communication about these objects takes place at different sites in socio-political networks. In these distinct sites, observers observe 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 practices 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, p. 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 would see as "oligoptica" (2005). Temporarily, because these networks are unstable and relations are 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 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 temporarily 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 North-Eastern Portugal.; 'The invention of the name 'Western-Iberia', tied to a particular targeted conservation region by Rewilding Europe, is based on the fact that the area is situated in the western part of the Iberian Peninsula and "has the largest and

continuous landscape [...] (The Dehesa) and most of the species in Europe” (Spanish Rewilding employee).

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 (RewildingEurope, 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 wilderness landscapes, a genuine challenge (cf Jobse, Witteveen, Santegoets, & Stobbelaar, 2013).

Figure 1: Western-Iberia on Google Maps (c.f. www.rewildingeurope.com)

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.

Figure 2: artistic vision of Western-Iberia, by Jeroen Helmer (ARK Nature/Rewilding Europe)

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

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) have been one of 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 heritages of European landscapes as they used to exist thousands of years 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 landscapes in the Oostvaardersplassen (cf RewildingEurope, 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” (RewildingEurope, 2013a). In this quote at least a strong restoration ethics surfaces that refers to a time-line of before large scale human-interference in the European landscape.

Locally, Western-Iberia incorporates references to a well-known UNESCO world heritage site on rock engraving of the COA valley: Côa Valley Archaeological Park (PAVC) and the Côa Museum³. 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 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; cf Lorimer & Driessen, 2011). More recently, a joint initiative between a.o. 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 (Taurus programme, 2013⁴). 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 Loterij⁶[...] spectacular wilderness areas at places that are abandoned by people" (translated from Dutch) (KanjersvanGoud, 2012). In this documentary Martijn Krabbé is taken by one of Rewilding's directors, Staffan Widstrand, to Western-Iberia to experience that you can actually go on "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 a 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 particular reintroductions of 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 wilderness development and business models for nature conservation. Vast experience from African nature conservation organisations like the African Wildlife Foundation (particularly in conservation

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).

enterprises such as in Eastern Africa) 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 (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 (Giles Davies, April 2013). Such land uses either complement or replace 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 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 is 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. were to plant crops, were to feed pigs and when to butcher them will be lost as well. "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 extent their areal. 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 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 real' Western-Iberia. Instead, and 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 political (Marston et al., 2005) and as Swyngedouw has argued (2004), can have serious consequences for the physical configurations of the current and future Western-Iberian landscape. Where Western-Iberia is used as one example here, similar mechanisms of object formation can be expected in other spatial developments of other pilot areas of Rewilding (e.g. Danube Delta in Romania; Eastern Carpathians in between Poland, Slovenia and Ukraine; Southern Carpathians in between Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland; and the Velebit in Croatia, etcetera), producing multiple formations of local Rewilding around Europe.

Second, the establishment of "Western-Iberia", as a trans-boundary 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 materializes. Related future plans and visualisation of a wild Western-Iberia are similarly resulting from a contingent co-operation between Rewilding Europe and local NGO's and takes shape through local knowledge, practices and experiences as well as the knowledge, practices and experiences from previous and current Rewilding activities taking place elsewhere at sites stretching beyond the boundaries of an imaginary Western-Iberia.

Third, even though Rewilding landscapes such as Western-Iberia – now and in the future – are dependent to political interrelatedness of different sites with different scalar reach, we also stress that Rewilding landscapes remain locally attached to physical and non-physical characteristics of place. 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, contemporary natural processes, limited social involvement, lack of wildlife, lack of natural conditions that enable survival of future wildlife populations, or an underdeveloped tourism infrastructure.

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