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Can we understand the role of NGOs in environmental politics without questioning the nature of the changes they propose and the scales they work at?

What role do international environmental NGOs really play? This question has been the subject of many debates over the last ten years. Political scientists, geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, etc. have all brought elements towards a better understanding of the impact of these actors on environmental politics. This is the task that the authors of *Global Policy Outcomes: The Role of NGOs* set themselves.

We can only agree with the arguments presented by Jonathan Stilwell and Nwabufo Okeke Uzodike when they demonstrate, drawing on an ample bibliographical review, that NGOs do influence environmental politics and that there exist, in the long run possibilities for NGOs “*to significantly change the nature of international relations through affecting implicit changes in the hearts and minds of citizens of more developed democratic states and their elected officials*” (this issue). Thus, we can say that through their participation in international events and in the drafting of key documents, as well as through their actions bringing about changes in behaviours, international environmental NGOs have contributed to bringing attention to environmental questions. It is undeniably clear, for example, that they actively participated in the construction – during the 1970s – and to the implementation – in the 1980s – of the notion of sustainable development (Chartier & al. 2005). Since the early 1990s, with the radical change of the international context, NGOs have continued these actions, maintaining environmental question on international political agendas. In this period, the actions of NGOs spread across various political scales, making these actors key players in the renewal of the political. In continuation with the aforementioned authors, and drawing on the ideas developed by Beck (2006a, 2006b), we can say that they could bring about a cosmopolitical renewal of the State. Alliances between NGOs and nation-states would, in effect, enable multilateral,

multiscalar and multimetric territorial politics that are, in Beck's work, identified as more adapted to contemporary globalisation processes. Furthermore, these are essential for the establishment of environmental policies.

Although Stilwell & Okeke Uzodike's paper points in this direction and offers substantial and pertinent arguments to understand the contemporary role of NGOs, I wish to discuss two ways in which the strength of their argument is limited. The first is methodological and concerns the lack of precision with which the term "NGO" is employed and the fact that, in referring to NGOs generically, the scale of their intervention is not taken into consideration. The second, and more fundamental issue, concerns their lack of critical engagement with the kinds of changes that NGOs propose and bring about. In this sense, the authors take for granted that what NGOs propose is, by definition, good, whilst I hope to show that this can and should in turn be opened up to critical analysis.

1. What NGOs are we talking about? Where are we talking from?

The authors address this question, and state that their interest is in international NGOs. They then very appropriately differentiate, along with Connely and Smith (1999), "cause groups" from "interest groups". But this is not sufficient, I would argue. It is widely agreed that the diversity that lies under the term "NGO" is immense (Vakil, 1997; Willet, 2002; Chartier, 2005), thus in speaking of NGOs generically without specifying exactly what it is one is talking about, one runs the risk of drawing over-generalised conclusions on a deeply specific world. However, this is not the main methodological problem. The authors state that they are using a "*multidisciplinary research methodology*", but their conclusions, it can be argued, remain those of political science. I would argue that this is because they have not been able to construct a common language on this profoundly pluridisciplinary object, a common difficulty encountered when working on NGOs. This results essentially from the fact that the question of scale is overlooked. Whether one is interested in definitions or in the roles of these organisations, one always approaches the

question from a particular scale, in accordance with the particular discipline one is working from. For example, research on the non-governmental domain of international projection remained, until the late 1990s, the quasi-exclusive prerogative of jurists and researchers in international relations (Ryfman 2004). Conversely, anthropologists, sociologists and to some extent geographers, observed the action of these organisations at national and local levels (Thomas *et al.* 2001, Fisher 1997). Consequently, the role of these organisations were perceived very differently, as the case of international environmental NGOs illustrates.

2. First act of a transdisciplinary research axis: taking scales and metrics into consideration to reveal the complexity of NGO roles

At the international level, researchers tend to focus more on the influence of NGOs on international and state agencies. The predominant approach generally taken in this literature is closely matched by Stilwell and Okeke Uzodike's. In both cases, NGOs are presented as progressive actors, essential to the advancement of democracy and to the extension of a more liberal mode of thinking. NGOs are in effect perceived as a new technical solution to environmental problems, the State being presented as an inhibitor (Fisher 1997). Others, more critical towards existing environmental politics, nonetheless see them as organisations that are capable of transforming the State and society, in particular thanks to their capacity to produce alternative discourses to those of development or environmental agencies (Le Prestre 2003, Wapner 1996, Princen *et al.* 1994). Conversely, some authors, taking as their starting point a factual analysis of local actions, give a completely different interpretation of the impact of NGOs on environmental policies. This literature presents these very same NGOs as politically non-legitimate and as counter-productive organisations, the most radical analyses going as far as describing them as emissaries of a globalised and ultraliberal form of capitalism (e.g. Hours 1999). Aside from the radically different conceptions of development invoked by these different authors, the reasons that induce such divergence in their interpretations

flow from the spatial bias adopted at the outset. A local Brazilian NGO, such as a grassroots fishermen's association, will not have all that much in common with an international organisation like Greenpeace or Conservation International, it can be argued. The difficulties brought about by the question of scale are even more problematic when the objective is to understand the action of an international NGO working both at the local and the global level. A researcher analysing the role of international organisations such as WWF in international lobbying will probably not come to the same conclusions about this organisation as an anthropologist researching this same organisation in the field, at the local level (Chartier 2003). Some authors have attempted accounts with a multiscale perspective, but their original disciplinary training tends to give rise to the prominence of a particular scale over others in the final analysis. This is the case in the work of Paul Wapner (1996) who came to certain conclusions about the local action of NGOs by analysing their impact at the level of international agencies, without, however, confronting global-level discourse to local practices. This is also the case with the paper presented by Stilwell and Okeke Uzodike. However, and equally problematic, some authors focus only on the disjunctions between discourse and local practices, thus losing sight of the impact NGOs may have at other levels. They can thus omit an important dimension of the impact NGOs have in putting important environmental questions on the agendas of international organisations, as Stilwell and Okeke Uzodike have convincingly demonstrated.

Scale must therefore be taken into consideration, and, where possible, within a diachronic perspective. I argue that scale is an essential element in the understanding of the role of NGOs and in understanding the evolution of their position within civil society. In order to apprehend the role of NGOs in a complete and transversal manner, other important elements such as the mastering of different metrics must also be taken into consideration. Whilst this point will not be developed here, I simply wish to draw attention to the fact that questions of metrics and scale, although a product of my own bias as a geographer, are important if one is to understand the nature of imbrications, the degree of insertions, and thus the political power of NGOs in relation to actors of the

public and mercantile spheres that these civil society actors are typically contrasted to (Chartier 2005).

3. From the diversity of roles to the nature of proposed changes: the example of the Good? The case of Greenpeace's actions for tropical forests.

Reflecting on the role of NGOs surely must include questions about what it is that they are changing, not just how they effect change. Such an approach reveals a wholly different aspect of these organisations, and complexifies the analysis we can make of their impact on environmental policies. Can we accept without question the causes that NGOs champion and the solutions they propose? By so doing, do we not run the risk of taking for granted the notion that they inherently “do good”. In order to explore this question further, I propose, in what follows, to outline Greenpeace's involvement in national forest conservation policy.

Greenpeace began its campaign for primary forests, in the early 1990s. This campaign was initially quite anecdotal in relation to the organisation's more typical campaigns (such as anti-nuclear testing, in support of the protection of oceans or against the diffusion of toxic substances). However, the forest campaign quickly became one of Greenpeace's main axes, with a total budget of 4.3 million euros in 2001. The forest campaign was initially directed at primary boreal forests, but it was soon widened to include humid tropical forests, and Amazonia more particularly. Although Greenpeace did and still does conduct some actions of the forest campaign in Africa and Asia, since the 1990s most actions were conducted in Amazonia, and finally, in 1997, an Amazonian office was created, which is administered by the international head-quarters in Amsterdam.

In its strategy for primary forest conservation Greenpeace acts on two fronts. The first is in the context of international gatherings (such as the WTO and the G8) where Greenpeace lobbies for governments to commit financially to primary forest conservation and the blocking of illegal commerce of ancient forest products as well as to commit to

taking up a policy of eco-certification of wood and paper products used in the public sphere. The second front is more visible and consists in providing information in the form of reports and carrying out mediatised local actions. These actions have for aim to raise public awareness so as to influence forest policy decision-makers.

Greenpeace's fields of action are numerous and varied in function of their aims and the public they are directed towards. Rather than speaking too generally, I will expose here, in some detail, one campaign that I find particularly representative of Greenpeace's involvement in Amazonia¹. This is the campaign for the introduction of the Forest Stewardship Council eco-certification label (hereafter referred to as FSC). Greenpeace has campaigned a great deal to demonstrate that the main threat that Amazonia faces is commercial logging. Three overlapping objectives were identified in the mid-1990s to confront this: fighting industrial logging, particularly illegal logging, the protection of mahogany and the promotion of timber consumption from FSC certified forests only. In order to implement these objectives, Greenpeace set up a coalition with local Brazilian groups and began a campaign against large commercial timber industries. The aim was to combine local actions with massive pressure on Britain where the consumption of mahogany was the highest. This campaign, which rapidly spread to the whole of Europe, had a resounding impact. On the Brazilian side, the government announced a moratorium of two years on the logging of Mahogany and Virola, in 1996. This moratorium was then further extended. In Europe, the campaigns prompted the British government to commit itself in 2000 to using only certified timber in public market contracts, such as public sector building-work. The French government followed the British example two years later. In 2002, after several years of lobbying, mahogany was placed on Annex 2 of the Convention on International Commerce of Wild Fauna and Flora Species Threatened by Extinction.

While it is clear that conservation campaigns such as these affect both national and international political agendas, it can be argued that these campaigns also have an indirect effect on international policy-making. By raising awareness amongst consumers,

¹ For a more complete analysis of the Amazonian campaign, please refer to Chartier (2005).

organisations such as Greenpeace force large multinationals to change their policies. For example, the group IKEA, international leader furniture shop, committed itself to use only timber from FSC certified sources. Lapeyre, the largest retailer of Brazilian timber in Europe signed, along with the main French DIY stores Castorama and Leroy Merlin, a pledge committing them to using only timber from renewable sources by the year 2005.

These examples illustrate the scope of the success of organisations such as Greenpeace, WWF, or Friends of the Earth in influencing governmental policy and multinational entrepreneurs. Although these are very promising results, it is important to ask how effective these policies are in practice, or in the field, so to speak. I therefore propose to look more closely at the main assumptions on which Greenpeace's campaigns were based in order to think more broadly about the effect of the campaign on forest conservation in Amazonia. Three main assumptions are at the centre of Greenpeace's forest campaign in Amazonia:

1. The idea that commercial logging (in particular by transnational companies) is the first cause of deforestation.
2. The idea that FSC is the only credible eco-certification label, and one that is valid for all forest-types. In their words: "*FSC is the only organisation offering a credible worldwide timber certification scheme for all forest types and plantations.*"
3. Greenpeace claims that if European consumers bought only certified timber, the problem of deforestation in Amazonia would be largely resolved.

What can we say of these statements? The first claim, according to which commercial logging by transnational companies is the first cause of deforestation, is only partially true. It is true that the causes of deforestation in Amazonia have evolved, and that the presence of transnational logging companies is very central to the question of deforestation. However, it is extremely problematic to omit that, three quarters of deforestation recorded in Amazonian countries results from the expansion of land for agriculture and that the majority of the annual production of timber materials goes to the

internal (Brazilian) market (Smouts 2001 : 46). Secondly, Greenpeace's claims concerning the FSC label need to be considered critically. There is a substantial literature concerning the history of this label and debating its validity (e.g. Arnould 1999, Bedif & Boudinot 2001, Karsenty 1997 and Zhouri 2002). Drawing on this literature we can say that, in terms of forest management, the FSCs adopt performance standards that are more concerned with end results than with actual practices. They are at times based on imprecise or very general criteria, which leaves much to the interpretation of the accredited organisation. As a label, FSCs favour large and established landowners over smaller landholders who do not have the resources to fulfil the requirements of the label on their plots. Finally, despite Greenpeace's claims, there are many other viable eco-certification systems (such as the International Organisation for Standardisation). To claim the contrary is not only untrue but more illustrative of a marketing ploy than of a conscientious and rational process aimed at establishing the best possible management of tropical forests. With regard to the final claim, namely that a change in European timber consumption, towards FSC certified timber would largely resolve the problem of deforestation in Amazonia, it is important to note that FSC timber represents only a small part of commercialised tropical timber. Given that only 10% of Brazilian timber goes to export, that tropical timber represents only a fifth of world timber production and that in 2001 90% of FSC certified forests were temperate or boreal, it is quite erroneous to propose FSCs as a miracle solution.

This rapid overview shows that Greenpeace has at times built its claims on questionable propositions and half-truths. This raises the question of the relevance of the propositions that this organisation put forward, particularly if one considers the influence Greenpeace has on international forest policy. So although Greenpeace's actions keep forest conservation on the agendas of governments and policy-makers, the resulting policies are not always optimal. Indeed, and contrary to Greenpeace's claim, the real causes of tropical forest degradation will remain practically unaffected by the gesture of an FSC consumer.

Two further concerns can be raised, which I borrow from Smouts (2001). Firstly, certification of small islands of forest vast expanses of badly managed forest leads to a

fragmentation of regions which is not compatible with the idea of integrated forest planning. Further, the construction of a demand for certified forest products creates an expectation of immediacy which implies simple, rapid and homogenous solutions for forest conservation despite the fact that, as Smouts argues (2001 : 308), there is nothing more removed from the forest than this ethic of urgency. Finally, given Greenpeace's influence, we can ask if this organisation does not at times divert attention from the primordial causes of deforestation by proposing quick-fix solutions. By this I mean that, by adopting somewhat manichaeic propositions in order to be persuasive, Greenpeace provokes a contraction of debates regarding the solutions to put in place to resolve the problems of deforestation. I have argued elsewhere that these methods are in part due to the institutional logic of the organisation. Large international NGOs must at times privilege media type-logics in order to ensure the continuity of their existence. This is in part due to the fact that 95% of Greenpeace's budget (which in 2002 stood at 160 million euros) comes from individual donations. Media presence is thus a fundamental prerequisite for the maintenance of the organisation's income. These institutional imperatives come into conflict with the organisation's project and may at times impede the development of sound policies, such as in the case of forest conservation.

I have chosen to outline this particular case as it concerns a similar issue to that presented by Stilwell and Okeke Uzodike. This case study is merely presented as an illustration of the complexities involved in thinking about the role of environmental NGOs. Other works show how, at the local level, some organisations can carry values and ideas of nature that are more or less directly at odds with those of the local populations they seek to work with (Chartier 2005, Kolher 2006). I have argued elsewhere that these organisations can be seen as increasingly engaged in an ecological modernisation of capitalism. In effect, by working with large multinational firms who do not fundamentally change their practices, some NGOs, such as WWF for example, merely "green" their commercial partners. This amounts to accompanying the very system which is at the origin of the environmental problems it seeks to address (Chartier 2006, Aubertin 2005).

4. Questioning the changes proposed by NGOs

To conclude, I do not propose to contradict Stilwell and Okeke Uzodike when they express a degree of hope as to the influence of NGOs on national and international public policy. I do however express reservations concerning the nature of this influence, for this raises many important questions. Do the internal logistics of certain NGOs not interfere with the causes they defend? Can the necessary change in behaviour and practices in matters of environmental concern really be brought about by organisations that merely ecologically modernise capitalism? Do the values they carry and defend have any kind of universality, and if so which? Finally, what kind of natures and what kind of societies are imagined and reproduced by these organisations? The answer to these questions resides, I would argue, in a question of scale, but one that is temporal too. The urgency of environmental questions requires short term solutions and answers. These are thus, for the time-being, perhaps more necessarily inscribed within the process I have called ecological modernisation of capitalism. However, a more enduring response to these pressing environmental problems inexorably will require a revolution in the values and principles that govern this destructive system, one inscribed within a much longer time frame. But whichever the temporal frame one is working with analytically, it has become increasingly clear that we cannot make the economy – neither as researchers or activists – of a deeper reflexion on the relation to science and the values implicitly embedded within NGOs. For this will in turn condition the basis upon which alliances between NGOs and actors of the public or private sphere will be re-established. And clearly such an alliance is indispensable for the cosmopolitical renewal of the State.

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