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Points of view

Landscape conflicts and the making of contemporary European societies: a dialogue with Olaf Kühne

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Abstract. This article reflects on the ways “landscape conflicts” are likely to shape contemporary European societies. Based on an interview with Olaf Kühne, a German geographer with a strong background in sociology, the article first outlines the underlying theoretical framework, drawing on social constructivism and Dahrendorf’s conflict theory. The load-bearing axis is the idea that landscape is a social construction and, as such, constitutes a source of conflict. Conflicts basically revolve around an emerging “environmental dilemma” concerning the ostensible necessity of choosing between the energy transition and landscape conservation. However, these should be seen as “productive” conflicts in that they serve to foster social progress. The authors then reflect on the role nation-states and the European Union play in enacting regulation as part of landscape governance.

Keywords: landscape, conflict theory, social constructivism, environment, power, inequality.

WHEN GEOGRAPHY MEETS SOCIOLOGY

Andrea Bellini [AB]: Olaf, before starting, let me thank you for having agreed to be interviewed for Cambio. When the editors asked me to conduct this interview, I did not hesitate, for several good reasons. First of all, you have developed an innovative and effective empirical approach to the study of contemporary societies and social change based on a robust interpretive framework derived from sociological theory. As such, it is markedly interdisciplinary. This makes it a perfect match for Cambio and its vocation of exploring new theoretical and methodological frontiers in social research, at the intersection between different disciplines. That said, this talk probably would not achieve its goal if we did not start by tracing your personal history. I believe that telling the readers about your academic career – first as a student and later as a researcher – is crucial to enabling them to understand your point of view. In fact, you have an eclectic

educational background. You studied geography, modern history, economics and geology at the University of the Saarland, in Saarbrücken, and, then earned your doctorate in geography and sociology from the University of Hagen. Since 2013, you have been a professor of geography. So, the first question is: would it be correct to define you as a “social geographer”?

Olaf Kühne [OK]: Interesting question. I cannot give you a definitive answer. Yes, I see myself as a social geographer; no, I do not see myself as only a social geographer. In any case, not in the sense of a sub-area of human geography, comparable to economic or population geography. My dissertation was in the field of physical geography, on the topic of the urban climate. Even though I no longer conduct intensive research in the field of scientific geography, I still fall back on methodology time and again, for example, to investigate social and physical-spatial relationships. To give you an example, I am currently working on the spatial equality of opportunity, using the example of Baton Rouge, in Louisiana. Here, it is noticeable that the urban overheating can be found near the ground, just as the population with the least symbolic capital lives there; for instance, the tree population is most sparse here, so no shade is provided. On the other hand, there is also a lack of opportunities to take measures for individual protection because the economic capital available for the purchase and operation of air conditioning systems is too limited. This example illustrates what interests me. The relationship between society and space, under a social science framework.

AB: When and where did you encounter sociology? And how did you understand that it would be so important for your career?

OK: Geography is a cross-sectional science that uses the theories and methods of numerous disciplines and refers to spaces (by which I mean not only physical spaces, but also socially constructed ones). In this respect, I became involved with sociology at a very early stage. Sociology, or more precisely sociological theory, has taken on a great deal of importance in my habilitation. Here, I have been dealing with the effects of system transformation on the state of the environment in Poland. I started out with an urban ecology approach, but in the course of my work it became increasingly clear that the political, economic and social foundations of system transformation deserved a stronger focus. The result of the investigation was, then, a system-theoretical interpretation of the change from a real socialist to a democratic market economy social system, illustrated by the example of developing air pollution in Poland. This paved the way for additional doctoral studies. The subject of my sociological dissertation has shaped my scientific career to this day: the social construction of landscape. It may seem strange to many that the main roots of my enthusiasm for sociology lie in Luhmann’s system theory, which is not necessarily considered very catchy, but I have taken this somewhat crude path. To return to your previous question: I understand myself, if I am to define myself as a scientist, as a three-part hybrid. First, within geography, between physical and human geography. Second, between geography and sociology. And third, because I worked for ten years in various ministries, implemented EU funding programmes here, was in charge of setting up a biosphere reserve, and headed a regional planning department before I became a university lecturer.

AB: Sociologists apart, have you had the opportunity to cooperate with people with a different academic background, in your professional career? How did this help you to develop your ideas?

OK: Yes, this is the result of my curriculum vitae, inter- and transdisciplinarity. For me, what is always particularly interesting is the edges of the disciplines, the transitional areas, where one can compare different perspectives on certain phenomena or even develop them anew. When I think about who I have already published with, I find geographers and sociologists, of course, but also landscape planners and architects, people who have studied political science, psychology, philosophy, and others. Personally friendly, professionally critical discussion helps to develop one’s own thoughts.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

AB: You said that Luhmann has been a source of great inspiration for you. Luhmann (1984) saw “social systems” as separated from the “environment” in which they are situated. In this sense, the environment is everything that is not

part of the system. It includes the “natural” environment as well as “human beings”, the latter being autonomous entities, distinct from social systems. Do you agree with this view? What is your personal understanding of the relationship between human beings, society and the environment?

OK: Luhmann’s understanding of social systems is very abstract, that is his analytical strength. With the help of his system theory, we can grasp logics and connections that we would otherwise not have noticed in the multitude of individual cases. With regard to the natural environment, his thinking is very helpful in avoiding the moralizations that are found everywhere. The economic system constructs the natural environment according to the logic of making money, the political system according to power, science according to knowledge, etc. We should understand this before we cover everything and everyone with moralizing.

AB: You have a broad range of research focuses. Among them is the study of what you call “landscape conflicts” (Kühne 2018; Kühne, Weber 2018; Kühne et alii 2019). When you made your conception of “conflict” explicit, you referred to Dahrendorf (1957; 1969; 1972; 1992). Would you define yourself as a “Dahrendorfian”?

OK: In part, yes. Especially when it comes to the topic of conflicts, but also his political philosophy of an open society. But the various theories of Dahrendorf have their limits in terms of their suitability for scientific questions, which with my topics revolve around social-space relationships. When I look at the subject of “landscape”, for example, I can frame conflicts about landscape very well with Dahrendorf, including an openness towards different understandings of landscape. However, social constructivism according to Berger, Luckmann and Schütz helps me much more in understanding the origin of this idea of landscape. Or, if I investigate the question of the spread of aesthetic judgements on landscape, the processes become much more illuminating from a perspective based on Bourdieu’s theory of taste.

AB: When and where did you become familiar with Dahrendorf’s work?

OK: I have two answers to this question. On the one hand, as a political person, I have been interested in the political-philosophical writings of Dahrendorf from an early age. On the other hand, in my doctoral studies in sociology, I studied role and conflict theory although without applying the Dahrendorf perspective to landscape at that time. There, social constructivism was in the foreground. Dahrendorf became interesting for me when I started to deal with landscape conflicts.

AB: In your work, you assume the idea of “productive conflict”, which, indeed, is at the heart of Dahrendorf’s theoretical architecture. Dahrendorf (1953; 1961; 1967; 1969; 1972), for his part, took inspiration from Marx, from whom he nevertheless distanced himself, recognizing that change is neither inevitable nor necessarily violent. Could you explain the meaning and implications of this conception, in a few words?

OK: I will try, although I would like to add two more names to the system of coordinates for the classification of Dahrendorf’s conflict theory: Parsons and Popper. I make it very woodcut-like. He flatly rejects Parson’s system theory, because it describes conflicts as dysfunctional and does not recognize their productivity. In this respect, he understands this theory as a theory of standstill. He shares with Marx the acknowledgement of the productivity of conflicts but rejects his social ideology and his fixation on the fact that social progress is linked to revolution. Here, again, Popper comes into play, and Dahrendorf places himself in Popper’s line of tradition: on the one hand, in its rejection of bloodshed as a legitimate means of social change, and, on the other, in its commitment to an “open society” containing as many ways as possible of dealing with challenges, among which the most suitable should prevail. Through the search for conflict resolution, bloody revolutions are replaced by gradual evolutions.

AB: In effect, conflict theory is a classical sociological perspective. How could it still contribute to innovating social research? What is its added value for reading social change?

OK: I think the idea of social change that I have just put forward is more topical than ever before. In many societies, in Europe, North America and beyond, we are experiencing increasing radicalization, especially by means of echo chambers in social media, with sometimes violent effects on non-virtual life. This affects not only populists

in the right and left spectrum or even religious fanatics. I observe with concern a radicalization in parts of the ecology movement that, instead of the evolutionary search for appropriate ways to deal with ecological challenges such as anthropogenic climate change, dreams of solutions outside of democratic legitimacy. Here, I see – from Dahrendorf's perspective – at least two major problems: first, I have to be very sure that the path I have chosen is the right one and that all possible alternatives would not lead to the same results; secondly, dealing with people who do not want to follow the chosen path ultimately leads to violence.

AB: *Conflict over what? What are the main "battlegrounds" in contemporary societies, in your view? And what actors are involved?*

OK: I have already mentioned some examples. But these are instead the larger social conflicts. From my point of view, however, we live in a time in which even the smaller conflicts are increasing. Society is pluralizing, the number of world interpretations, different morals, aesthetic approaches, etc. are increasing – beyond the big dichotomizing questions – and, with them, the number of conflicts. Here, again, the relevance of Ralf Dahrendorf's conflict theory becomes clear: if conflicts are to be productive, i.e. to serve social progress, they cannot be resolved; this would mean eliminating their social causes, which is not possible, because every society experiences differences that lead to conflicts. But conflicts cannot be suppressed permanently, either, because this increases their intensity, which ultimately ends in a violent eruption. Conflicts can only be settled, i.e. an agreement reached that both conflicting parties can live with. This, in turn, requires that the conflicting parties recognize that the position of the others is basically acknowledged as legitimate, that the conflicting parties are organized and that arenas exist in which conflict resolution can take place in an orderly manner. This order includes the existence of a third party who has the power to intervene in the event of violations of the rules of procedure up to and including the dissolution and reconfiguration of the arena.

AB: *Dahrendorf, however, is not the only author that you mentioned. As a matter of fact, your interpretive framework is a mix of sociological theories and concepts cleverly combined in order to explain the complexity of social phenomena related to the governance of landscapes. You have borrowed from systemic, conflictual, constructivist and culturalist theories. This is not all that common in the social sciences. I wonder whether this is a logical consequence of your inter- or, as you said, trans-disciplinary background or, rather, a necessity due to the specific character of the field of study, that is, landscapes. In fact, we may say that landscape is, at the same time, the environment in which we are embedded, the battleground of everyday life and the memory of time, which transcends us. As such, it is an inherently polysemic concept and a multifaceted subject.*

OK: Yes, landscapes are a very complex subject. They have a material substrate, they have social and cultural meanings, but we also make individual contributions. When I have such a multidimensional object, it is difficult to grasp it from a single perspective. In this respect, it seems legitimate to think beginning from the goal, i.e. to capture multidimensionality and the interaction of the dimensions. Then I need several approaches. I call this understanding of science neo-pragmatic. I combine theoretical perspectives and methods to investigate a complex object. This means that neither the mix of methods nor the different theories are an end in themselves but are instead based on the object of research.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LANDSCAPE

AB: *Let us focus on landscape conflicts. You said that the way you look at landscapes draws on social constructivism. This also has to do with knowledge and experience or, in other words, the way we know the physical world, doesn't it?*

OK: My approach to landscape is fundamentally a constructivist one. This does not mean that I deny the existence of a physical world. However, I am of the opinion that landscape as a complex concept constitutively represents an interpretation, a synopsis of physical elements. Here, I also connect to Popper with his three-world-theory. World 1 forms the world of physical objects as the substrate in which landscape is interpreted. World 3 refers to

social ideas, in this case, landscape. World 2 comprises individual consciousness. This interprets elements of physical space, drawing on learned patterns of interpretation and evaluation. Based on this understanding, I would like to speak of landscape 1, 2 and 3.

AB: *If I have gotten it right, landscape 1 is the landscape “as it is”; landscape 2 conveys “individual” meanings, intimately connected with memories (identity) and the personal understanding of beauty (aesthetics); landscape 3 is a translation into “collective” meanings, which contribute to producing stereotypes.*

OK: You are completely right.

AB: *What is the role of stereotypes in the construction of landscapes? Why is it so important to study landscape stereotypes?*

OK: Stereotypes make our lives easier, because otherwise we would always have to abstract from multiple individual cases. Stereotypes are usually socially mediated. This also applies to landscape. We learn in childhood and youth which spaces we can call landscapes without a loss of social recognition, and which adjective attributions are desired in which contexts. If we want to implant alternative interpretations into landscape 3, we must already have a high level of cultural capital, here I am referring to Bourdieu, in order to succeed, for example we must be artists, landscape architects or geography professors with the appropriate specialization.

AB: *In your recent work, you have reflected on the social impact of the “energy transition”, related to the phasing-out of nuclear power and the development of renewable energies, with specific reference to the German case (see, for instance, Kühne, Weber 2018; Kühne et alii 2019). The analysis revealed that this transition is not accepted as peacefully as we might expect. On the contrary, different forms of civil protest have arisen. Protest has polarized around two arguments, connected with the ideas of “landscape” and “homeland” (Kühne et alii 2019). In these circumstances, these concepts assumed a normative value in that any kind of disruption of what they represented – indeed, a stereotypical beauty or, even, home – was perceived as the transgression of a norm. In this sense, a wind farm was seen as an “irreversible change” in the “unchangeable”. This is a clear example of how landscape 1 can actually translate into multiple landscapes 2 and 3, which sometimes give rise to conflicting identities and discourses. That said, would you say that the physical world acquires meaning when it becomes landscape – or landscapes, in the plural? If so, is an “unsentimental” approach to environmental issues possible?*

OK: There are landscapes only in the plural. Our socializations are too different, even more so if we integrate different cultural backgrounds into our considerations. In the example of wind turbines: A landscape 1 is translated into several landscapes 2 against the background of an interpretation and repository for evaluation from landscape 3. However, since conflicts tend to be dichotomized (here, I once again agree with Dahrendorf), two dominant interpretations for or against wind power emerge.

I do not know whether an unsentimental approach to space and landscape is possible. People emotionally attach themselves to objects and object constellations, objects are charged with symbolic meanings. But this also leads them to care about objects. In this respect, such sentimentality is quite ambivalent.

AN ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMA?

AB: *Reaching the key point, your research is of great interest not only because it reveals the inherent nature of landscape as a social construction, but also because, in so doing, it uncovers the “bivalent” character of environmental issues. Concerning energy transition, specifically, both consent and dissent are distributed along the objective-subjective (or, even, rational-emotional) line of differentiation (see Kühne, Weber 2018). Seemingly objective (and rational) arguments can be identified in favour of transition (e.g. climate change, energy prices and energy self-sufficiency) as well as against its possible indirect effects (e.g. decline in tourism, fall in property prices and health-related issues). On the other hand, subjective (and emotional) arguments can also be found (e.g. the fear of nuclear radiation and of the loss of home envi-*

ronment, respectively). To tell the truth, it was a collective emotional collapse following the nuclear disaster of Fukushima that triggered change. Therefore, my first question is: are objectivity and rationality mere illusions in this process?

OK: I don't think we can achieve them, but we can strive for it. At the moment, we are seeing a transformation of challenges into moral issues. However, since there are many morals, conflicts are inevitable. Conflicts that I cannot manage well, because I am not concerned with objectivity, but with assigning blame. The consequence is then the retreat into one's own echo chamber and the obstruction of others. The possibility of achieving a sustainable future in this way seems at least questionable to me.

AB: Furthermore, does this situation give rise to an emerging "environmental dilemma"? In other words, is the choice between energy transition and landscape conservation a zero-sum game?

OK: We should make it clear that we can only maintain a certain standard of living and protect the climate if we continue to produce energy, which, due to its lower energy density as compared to fossil fuels, is more prevalent in the landscape in terms of its production facilities. We can, however, practice the joy of renunciation, that is, we can renounce the use of energy in large parts of our lives. Whether this is socially agreed-on, I dare to doubt. We can also try to use energy more efficiently, but I still have to produce it. To that extent: I cannot demand change and leave everything as it is. We must resolve this paradox somehow.

AB: Here, sociological theory comes to our aid. Based on Dahrendorf's theory, in fact, you have argued that landscape conflicts are productive conflicts that «demonstrate the engagement of a society in processes of development that will create continuous opportunities for its members» (Kühne et alii 2019: 86). In this view, the resolution of the "environmental dilemma" is the key to a better society. Someone might object that processes of conflict resolution are influenced by uneven power relations between social actors, and that the outcomes of this process often reproduce the existing unequal distribution of "life chances" – to borrow, again, from Dahrendorf (1979; 1988). How would you respond to this objection?

OK: A successful conflict settlement according to Dahrendorf is really a prerequisite. And in the current debates it seems to me that these prerequisites are largely lacking.

The prerequisites are that the conflicting parties be organised as much as possible, that they mutually recognise the legitimacy of the other party and that a third party provides the framework which ensures that the agreed-on rules of the game are adhered to and, if necessary, can resolve the conflict even against the will of the conflicting parties.

Let us look at the energy system transformation conflicts: the parties to the conflict are (at least supra-locally) mostly diffuse, the other party is usually morally discredited, and the third party, which in Dahrendorf is the state, is itself a party to the conflict. The result is a society which lies in a state of permanent agitation and lacks consensus around a direction in which to develop. It slides from case-by-case decision to case-by-case decision without the possibility of seeing where the whole thing should lead. Okay, these are our findings from Germany, but when I look at other European countries, there seems to be a pattern.

LANDSCAPE, POWER, AND INEQUALITY

AB: What is the relationship among landscape, power and inequality more generally?

OK: In many ways, landscape is linked to the unequal distribution of power. Here, the different relations of landscape 2 to landscape 1 and 3 become clear. The individual experiences a power-laden imprinting of his or her understanding carried out by society in the course of socialization. It is here, for example, that the physical arrangements I can call a beautiful, industrial, picturesque or much more landscape without any loss of social recognition are created. The individual has the possibility – provided that he or she is in a position of power in this context, for example as a university professor to whom relevant competencies are granted – to change social ideas of landscape. On the other hand, the individual also intervenes in the physical space. The nature and extent of these interven-

tions depend on his/her power. At the same time, powerful inscriptions in the physical space, in connection with social institutions, regulate the individual's actions in physical space. So, the act of leaving paved roads with your car and simply driving cross-country to the quarry pond is generally associated with negative sanctions.

AB: *You wrote, following Dahrendorf (1988), that the state cannot play the role of an «independent arbitrator», because «the state is itself a conflicting party» (Kühne et alii 2019: 85). It is a situation of asymmetrical power relations in which localized civil protest conflicts with wider collective interests represented, indeed, by the state. What happened in Germany, in this regard?*

OK: The state is not a monolithic block. Especially not in Germany. We are a federal state, and regional planning is a matter for the federal states. If the federal government decides on something, such as the energy turnaround, that does not mean that the states will create the legal planning conditions. So much for the power gap.

On the other hand, the citizens' initiatives against the expansion of renewable energies have been quite successful, at least as far as delaying the proceedings is concerned. In Germany, hardly any wind power plants were built last year because the approval procedures are so complex and there is a lot of resistance. This is because people who want to defend their stereotypically beautiful landscape or their home landscape are perfectly capable of organising, and they have a sufficient financial basis to professionalize the resistance.

CHANGING LANDSCAPES (AND SOCIETIES): WHAT ROLE FOR EUROPE?

AB: *As a matter of fact, Europe is another influential political actor in this field. What is Europe's idea of landscape? Do European policies help to resolve landscape conflicts?*

OK: With the European Landscape Convention, Europe has given itself a quite remarkable framework for dealing with landscape. Remarkable, on the one hand, because it is defined as being perceived by people. Other formulations also suggest an essentialist and positivist understanding of landscape. On the other hand, it is remarkable because the required landscape policy is a policy focused on involving the population. The Convention was adopted in Florence some 20 years ago. Since then, societies in Europe have changed. They have become more plural and, often, more mobile. A landscape policy must take this into account, today. The demands associated with the mitigation of and adaptation to anthropogenic climate change require an increased willingness to at least accept changes in physical space. In landscape conflicts, however, they also require the strong third party mentioned above, which can redefine conflict arenas. This would be a task for the state. However, in the context of changes in the physical space interpreted as a landscape in the course of the energy revolution, the latter has increasingly become a party to the conflict. Landscape policy could thus also shift from a moderating framework back to a representative-democratic framework.

AB: *The last question is: what's next? I wonder whether and how the continuous redefinition of EU borders – as a consequence of enlargement, on the one hand, and Brexit, on the other – affects environmental and landscape policies. Concerning Brexit, in particular, is it more likely to strengthen or weaken the international role of the European Union in this field?*

OK: I am not a political scientist who deals with the EU. As far as landscape is concerned, we have at least lost a valuable perspective on landscape in the EU. Not just landscape. I think that the Anglo-Saxon perspective has generally been good for the EU.

AB: *Would you like to add something or make some concluding remarks?*

OK: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you, here.

AB: *Thank you, Olaf.*

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