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An Institutionalist Approach to Environmental Valuation: The Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland as an Example

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impacts of different formal and informal institutions upon the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland (1997–2001). The divide between formal and informal institutions is a binary distinction: it is used as a discursive tool for identifying social structures and processes and for articulating their significance in development and environmental planning, valuation and decision-making. In the end part of the paper, there is a brief discussion of how normative and moral issues can be explicitly and more creatively integrated into the practice of environmental policy.

KEYWORDS

Formal and informal institutions, institutional economics, environmental planning, reasonable value

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years a few regional forest-related environmental and developmental planning processes aimed at integrating economic activities, environmental concerns and social dimensions of development have taken place in southwest Finland. The purpose has been to develop regional practices of participatory and discursive planning. In this paper I will be focusing on the major one of those processes, namely the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland.

The purpose of the Programme was to bring local and regional groups together and create a sense of partnership. This current emphasis on environmental

cooperation is at least partly explained by revisions made to Finnish legislation and to various international instruments. The Act on Environmental Impact Assessment took effect in 1994 (1994/468). The renewed forest legislation (1996/1093) was put in practice in 1997, the Act of Nature Conservation (1996/1096) in 1997 and the Act on land Use and Construction (1999/132) in 2000. The Convention on Biological Diversity was first signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and then ratified by the Finnish Parliament in 1994. Subsequently formal environmental norms have changed in rapid succession. Forest legislation was revised in 1997, the Act on Nature Conservation in 2000 and the Act on Land Use and Construction in 2001.

The demand for environmental cooperation ties in closely with a recognition of the need for multiple ends in regional forest management planning. This twin development is due not only to the changes made to legislation, but perhaps more importantly to the revised principles of economic policy and environmental governance, which are evidenced by a multitude of new social, cultural, ethical and political concerns in relation to the environment and development. In this regard there has been a shift from dichotomised legal rights and duties towards reciprocal legal and moral rights. The Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland is a good example.

The Programme was organised in two phases, viz. in 1997–1998 and then in 2000–2001. The purpose of the Programme was to draw up a strategic plan for regional forestry for 2001–2005, with special reference to multiple economic, social and ecological needs and objectives. To meet the requirements of stakeholder cooperation and communication, two working groups were established, one focusing on the economic side of forestry and the other on the environmental side. A total of 21 regionally important interest groups took part. During both phases, the groups met on six occasions. The purpose was to shed light on the multiple ends, means and tools present in regional forestry and in management planning. I participated in the economic working group.

Even though the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland was a success in its own right – i.e. the stakeholders managed to agree on its results – there still remains a great deal of work to be done in order to improve the practices of cooperation and planning for multiple objectives. One reason why regional forestry needs to review its own conditions of existence in a more critical light is that official forest policy and management planning, as practised by formal interest groups, is highly consensual. There is of course nothing wrong with consensus in itself. Indeed the prevailing state of the art should call for closer scrutiny of existing social conditions, if for no other reason than to maintain and enhance consensus.

It was quite surprising to see how closely norms, societal goals and codes were accepted and followed. Or perhaps this was not so surprising after all. Regional forest policy and management planning is a serious business, which is why it is better to organise the planning process in a safe, formal manner:

AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

to send out an invitation for the interest groups to participate, to lay down the ends and goals, to discuss the impacts, and assess the meaning and significance attached by interest groups to alternatives and impacts.

There is nothing wrong with this. However, the fundamental problem of environmental planning is not to get planning procedures formally right and then to feed in already known and thoroughly articulated knowledge, but to unmask the life-worlds in which the planning is embedded. It is to find out what kind of information on disturbances, problems and solutions exists in a given locality, and also how distributed and embodied information is constitutive of environmental disturbances, problems and the creation of alternative courses of action. Given the significance of everyday life to individual and communal resilience, resistance or adaptability, it is surprising how little consideration has been given in environmental planning to diversity and patterns of collective action. An innocent excuse is that environmental planners and practitioners are not aware of living conditions beyond the formal boundaries. However, often it is not an innocent ignorance that is at work but an active denial of local social systems and their significance.

My argument is that regional forest-related development and environmental planning is not improved by making it more rational, i.e. more abstract and formally rule-based. Instead, planning practices need to be made more reasonable, i.e. more embodied, discursive, engaging, ethically sensitive and scientifically plural (Commons 1990; Connolly 1999; on a difference between rational and reasonable, see also Habermas 1998; Rawls 1996). Bearing this in mind, planning, impact assessment and valuation face two practical questions: How do we make sense of social systems and institutions in a collaborative planning situation? And what are the most workable and fair ways to create or find, and then select the most appropriate productive practices from within the web of formal and informal institutions?

INSTITUTIONS

Well-functioning regional forestry and its maintenance depend upon information on ecosystem structures and functioning. But that is not all. Practitioners – planners, managers, decision-makers, economists – also need to have information as well as an understanding of social structures and functioning. This knowledge, I suggest, is necessary because existing social arrangements, structures and processes are both the source of and the solution to environmental problems: they constitute the collective action that makes it possible to produce new and possibly contested effects, to identify them as disturbances, define them as environmental problems, and articulate alternative solutions to them. Collective action also gives power to take decisions.

From the point of view of development and environmental planning and valuation, it is important to note that people do not interact with one another. Instead, while engaged in productive practices people *transact* with one another through social arrangements, structures and processes (Commons 1990; Lloyd 1994; North 1997; Williamson 1996). An understanding of the characteristics of social systems and the significance of them does not come about all by itself, but requires an active effort to unmask the existing problematic conditions of everyday life, both individual and organisational.

Facing this challenge, I have found institutional economist John R. Commons' view of institutions useful. According to Commons (1990), institutions are collective action in restraint, liberation and expansion of individual action. Collective action restrains opportunities for action by prescribing which productive practices cannot or must not be exercised. It liberates practices by letting people choose the activities they please. Institutions as collective action also expand opportunities for action by providing new enabling structures for the people to get engaged in new practices. Institutions provide order, direction and behavioural patterns for individual and social life.

Commons' definition of institution is a binary one. Collective action is at once organised and unorganised. The first side of the binary definition refers to collective action that is ordered and ruled by tangible, written, articulated and publicly accepted norms and other formal rules. Unorganised collective action refers to internalised, collectively shared intangible moral rules. All institutions prohibit, obligate and allow, but unlike formal collective action, informal collective action is constituted in moral rather than normative fields. In the institutional literature this binary is also known as a divide between formal and informal institutions, respectively (See also Rutherford 1994; Ramstad 1990; North 1990).

NORMATIVE FIELDS

Adherence to a given set of norms suggests that one has put one's faith in a certain future, a purpose. Or, to put it differently, acceptance of a given set of norms means one has confidence in how things should come to an end. The content of a norm lies in what kind of formal order constitutes a good end: the end itself and the rules of its manifestation. Answers are suggested in different spheres, the most used of these being the political, religious and cultural spheres. Political norms direct collective action towards an accepted goal of public life. A religious norm directs collective action towards an accepted goal of life itself. And a cultural norm directs collective action towards an accepted goal of communal life. Norms are procedural and substantial.

Norms must be expressible by means of language, and the mechanisms of normalisation must be sufficiently explicit; otherwise we are not talking about

AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

norms but something else. Laws, acts, agreements, treaties, sacred texts, guidelines, contracts, standards, rules of inference, etc. are all articulated, agreed upon and accepted examples of maintaining the order of things in a given locality. These tangible artifacts are manifestations of our prior moral commitments. Norms and other formal rules organise the public sphere. They do so by framing the space of what is possible with prohibitions and other exclusionary rules, by staking it out with formal obligations and commitments, and by attributing to groups and their members allowances, entitlements and permissions. (For more on this, see Commons 1995; Brandom 1994; Castoriadis 1991; von Wright 1963.)

Regional forestry in southwest Finland is a complex web of norms. A total of 21 regionally important official interest groups took part in the preparation of the Regional Forest Programme. All of them had their own set of interests, norms and rules, some of which overlapped with others', some of which did not. Their norms and formal rules constitute a normative field that affords to regional forestry certain characteristics of order, direction and patterns of individual and social behaviour. From the point of view of the operation of the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland, three aspects become important: How do *norms* constitute order? How do *abstract principles* frame the direction of collective action? And how do *codes of conduct* affect the participants' behaviour?

Norms

The interest groups involved in the Regional Forest Programme accepted the existing set of formal norms as a primary condition for forestry activities. The existing set of prohibitions, obligations, commitments and entitlements was considered an unchallengeable meta-structure for environmental and development planning and valuation. Present environmental disturbances and problems are either results or side effects of allowed activities – i.e. they exist despite (and are not against) legislation, agreements, forest certifications etc. Therefore, no environmental crimes have been committed. There are no reasons to challenge the official norms that order and organise the situation. In other words, the formulation of environmental and developmental problems and the resolution of those problems are matters of strategy, tactics and taste – not questions of inclusion and exclusion, life and death.

In the practice of the Regional Forestry Programme, consensual acceptance of the official norms led to a situation where no consideration was given to collective action taking place outside the interest groups involved, i.e. those excluded from the collective action by existing institutional arrangements. No one even asked whether there are such groups. Planning and valuation were firmly grounded in the *status quo*, mainly because the regional environmental groups and movements were the constituents of this very same status quo. In fact, this meant that there were only a few real alternative angles on identifying

disturbances, defining problems and constructing workable solutions – none of which challenged the prevailing order of things.

Acceptance of the official norms and rules that prescribed the order of things went even deeper than this. Namely, the process did not lead to any discussion, let alone an agreement upon rules for the governance of the planning process itself. The participants did not think there was any need for process-specific prohibitions, obligations or incentives. In other words, there was no need to restrain interest group cooperation with artificial *ad hoc* norms and rules. As a result, the existing formal organisation of regional forest planning was maintained in order to draw different groups into a realm of shared purpose. Consequently, an effort was made to turn regional planning into a community enterprise. However, due to the formal organisation, the boundaries between the groups and their purposes remained rigid.

Abstract Principles

The interest groups accepted the abstract principles of the planning process, such as globalisation, efficient forest economy, fair distribution of environmental costs and benefits, discursive democracy, participatory planning and biodiversity preservation. These principles were presented at such a high level of abstraction that none of the interest groups really could disagree. The interest groups do not differ all that much in terms of their abstractness. They all shared the same abstract sense of purpose.

In southwest Finland, it seems, there is a broad politico-ideological consensus. This raises two questions. First, does consensus prevent the critical identification of disturbances and the articulation of environmental problems? If so, then political consensus is an obvious sign of danger. Planning has no sensitivity to struggles, differences and disturbances. Second, does the absence of disturbances and problems make political consensus possible? If so, then consensus cannot be considered a serious political problem. However, the situation calls for this question: How is it possible that there are no problematic disturbances between the organised collective actors interacting over scarce resources?

Abstract principles can facilitate consensus in two ways. First, these principles are collectively accepted reasons for action. Principles are outside of individual experience and social practice – principles without an empirical content (Fish 2001). Abstract principles are an articulation of a hope. According to the other interpretation, principles are more like emerging discursive attractors that frame and guide discussion to the issues that are, for reasons that as yet remain unclear, considered worthy of being loaded with concrete content.

The Regional Forest Programme was a mixture of these aspects: it employed abstract principles as ideal or utopian social goals, but at the same time these abstract principles served as diverse discursive fields which allowed and induced a growing multitude of articulations of disturbances, activities, problems

AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

and meanings. The first aspect was attempted on purpose, the second followed coincidentally. There is no doubt that there is a forest consensus in southwest Finland. This consensus exists for two interrelated reasons: it is allowed by formal institutions, and it is accepted by the organisations and their members.

Codes of Conduct

People transact with one another. They apply external structures of various kinds to support their actions and facilitate the information flows (Clark 1997). Formal institutions are no exception to this (North 1997). People adhere to the norms in order to make intentions and activities more anticipatory and consequences more rewarding. Norms imply reciprocity. Therefore, formal institutions also inform people about the codes of appropriate conduct.

It was no surprise to see that the representatives involved in the Regional Forest Programme adhered to the formal norms of society and to the purpose of their own group. They played out their formal role in a formally arranged process: one by one, the representatives of official interest groups articulated their concerns about the future and argued for and against different ways of getting there. The working method of the steering group or working groups was not problem-oriented but order-oriented. This kind of scheme is familiar from rational planning theory.

What is more, the presumption of formal codes of conduct spilled over into the planning situations. The process emphasised individuals', for instance forest-owners' capacities for logical inference, rationality, maximisation of economic utility, and deliberation of incommensurable environmental assessment of the social and economic impacts of actions taken. It was accepted as a norm that people not only follow articulated and commonly accepted rules of rational inference when weighing alternative courses of action, but that they actively and knowingly act according to all other formal building blocks (agreements, guidelines, codes of conduct, for instance) when acting on behalf of their group, family, firm or community.

MORAL FIELDS

Development and environmental planning always and invariably disturbs collective understandings of prohibitions, obligations, commitments and entitlements that are embedded in existing productive practices, in those activities that are presently allowed (may and can) or obligated (must, must not). Depending on the perspective and situation, disturbances are sometimes positive and sometimes negative. The same applies to the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland. The purpose was to spot problematic forestry practices,

come up with alternative courses of action, weigh the impacts, and promote appropriate decisions.

It is important to notice that the intended results of the Programme were already prescribed in formal forestry institutions, e.g. in the renewed forest legislation (1996/1093) and in the forest certification criteria. The anticipated side effects of the Programme were also known in advance. For this reason, they were given an examination during the preparation of the Programme and carefully stated in the impact assessment section of the written document. The documents therefore contain very little that is surprising.

Perhaps paradoxically, however, the Regional Forest Programme paid little attention to those impacts that were due to its own exercise of power. By rank-ordering allowed productive practices, it tried to redirect the development of regional forestry from within, and while it was doing this, its intentional and accidental impacts were happening within the normative field and formal means of surveillance of regional forest institutions, in the space of unorganised collective action. Despite these unidentified and non-assessed impacts, there existed a forest consensus in southwest Finland. The informal institutions afforded regional forestry with conditions under which there was no room for social disruptions or severe disagreements.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the diversity of collective action, especially that of unorganised collective action, is important to the resistance, resilience and adaptability of the social systems in question (Hiedanpää 2002). The more diverse the set of informal institutions – i.e. local traditions, conventions, customs and routines – that is sustaining the same particular function, the more protected are the given systems against disturbances. Possible functions relate to various productive practices – from material and social production all the way to the reproduction of individual and social identities and group conformities. Therefore, it depends on the situation and the perspective adopted whether the present systemic resistance, resilience and adaptability of collective action are good features or bad.

Regional forestry in southwest Finland is a complex web of morals. In examining the significance of informal institutions in ordering, redirecting and guiding regional forestry and its developmental and environmental planning, three aspects come to the fore: How do moral *rights* sustain the prevailing order? How do good *ends* direct the collective action within the customary order? How does *approval* take place? (For a more detailed discussion on this, see Dewey 1994: 156–163.)

Moral Rights

When social practices are reflected and deliberated on against the background of traditions, customs and habits of a given locality, the issue of moral rights is called to the fore (Dewey 1988; Geuss 2001). For instance, forestland is tradi-

AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

tionally used for commercial forestry, non-timber activities, contemplation and recreation. If a forest-owner prefers to engage in one of those activities, from that particular traditional vantage point he or she has the *moral right* to do so.

Not all formally or morally allowed activities make equal sense, though. In given circumstances certain practices are more right than others. What traditions allow is not necessarily supported by local customs. For instance, almost 70 percent of the northern outskirts of southwest Finland consist of bogs and marshlands. Therefore, wherever there is strong forest growth, the local view of the farming community is that timber production is more right than, say, preserving the land for recreation or nature conservation. If the intended results of environmental planning are considered to threaten local traditions, then planning activities are more against the local moral rights than if the planning were targeted against idiosyncrasies – the habits of mind – of a few forest-owners. For instance, the planning and implementation of a European-wide reserve network known as Natura 2000 challenged local agro-forestry traditions, customs and habits, spilling over into a social conflict between the environmental authorities and landowners (Hiedanpää 2002).

Although the two processes had different purposes and means, the Regional Forest Programme had learned a critical lesson from Natura 2000. In this process the accent was not placed upon norms or other formal rules. It tried instead to influence the problematic practices that were previously considered beneficial within this region, but that were now regarded as harmful, such as ditching previously undrained forest lands or destroying invaluable habitats from within. It affected local customs and routines by challenging the way certain productive practices were rank-ordered. This is no doubt one of the crucial reasons why the programme sustained and enhanced the regional forestry consensus.

Traditions, conventions, customs, routines and habits create boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, boundaries between those who are engaged in certain practices and those who are not. Environmental disturbances or policy processes set up with a view to addressing the problems thus tend to challenge existing habits of mind of *being in the right*. Different groups take the view that different productive practices are right, and more or less take it for granted that this view of theirs is the right one. The preparation of the Regional Forest Programme involved one heated situation. The environmental conservation district of Satakunta took the stance that the Programme should take a firmer position on how many hectares of old-growth forest ought to be preserved in Southwest Finland. Others objected, saying that such issues should not be taken on board right now because they were being covered in an ongoing national level process.

The sense of being in the right changes when a new habit of thought and productive practice has been internalised and spread throughout the space of what is possible. When social rights and being in the right merge, the time is ripe for more profound changes, which is what changes in formal institutions often appear to be.

Ends

People engage in productive practices that are within their reach, within their fields of opportunities (Biddle 1990; Bourdieu 1977). Traditions, conventions, customs, routines and habits as well as individual lived experiences effectively condition what people can, may, must, cannot or must not desire in a given situation. Therefore, if the reasons for the above concerns regarding old-growth forests had arisen from the malfunctioning of local productive practices rather than from national-level norms, it would have been easier to integrate such developmental and environmental worries into the regional forest economy. Ends are always already lived. They are not a desired state of affairs existing outside of human experience and a given locality, somewhere in the future (Gendlin 1997; Dewey 1988).

Informal institutions carry within themselves not only conceptions of right practices and wrong, but also of good ends and bad – of good directions and bad. This is something the Regional Forest Programme failed to take on board. It was considered sufficient to ask and state the reasons for the desired objectives and how those objectives could be reached. In other words, as soon the interest groups had come up with their objectives, these objectives were taken as given. They became taken for granted because they remained within the normative fields and abstract principles therein. By conforming to the unspoken etiquette of planning, all groups were equally granted with the moral rights for their objectives, after which the impacts of these objectives were assessed. The process tried to exercise both substantial and instrumental rationality.

One aspect of the process is clear: the purpose was not to exercise the genealogy of managerial reason. Namely, it has taken several decades for development and environmental planners and decision-makers to understand that forest-owners, when confronted with a choice between different management options, may also weigh social and ecological considerations in addition to economic interests. It did not take that long for the forest-owners' reasoning to change. In fact, multiple ends have always figured in their decisions. It has, on the other hand, taken quite some while for the planning apparatuses to change the way they work – their organisational routines and customary tools – and come to terms with this fact. In other words, informal institutions imply that landowners in particular and practitioners in general have always applied what may be called a means-consequence scheme, while the rational planning paradigm has forced the planning apparatuses to stick to the objectives-means scheme. In many cases this kind of rational abstraction has led to serious social conflicts. Somehow the Regional Forest Programme did not stir up any social tensions or conflicts.

Standards of Approval

Informal institutions not only create a social divide between right activities and wrong or between good ends and evil, they also maintain the thin line in between. Standards of approval (acceptance) are embedded in formal and informal institutions: they are internalised by imitation and exercise, and expressed in behaviour when institutions are subjected to perturbations. In perturbed conditions, people tend to praise or blame the causes and purposes of disturbances, they approve or disapprove of the facts and they encourage or condemn the collective action that has led to the situation. What follows depends upon the relations between individual experiences and expectations, the informal institutions effective in a perturbed locality, and the formal purposes followed and adhered to in a given situation (Gibbard 1992).

People express emotions and feelings of various kinds. Emotions are contagious. Emotions are social. Following William James, it may be said that people hate because they are collectively campaigning against something. Campaigning gives rise to collective feelings of hate. In social processes, positive emotions serve as positive feedback, accelerating and fuelling certain transactions. Negative emotions, by contrast, serve as negative feedback, dampening the system or making people critical or totally disengaged from certain transactions and practices (see e.g. Parkinson 1996). As we have seen, the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland did not stir up social emotions, either positive or negative. The Programme did not accelerate collective action, nor did it dampen or call for critical or analytical thinking concerning the state or the future of regional forestry.

The Programme was consensual. One possible reason for this is that the process was more public than it was social – it was built upon formal social arrangements and a formal mind-set rather than an unmasking and articulation of informal institutions. Namely, throughout the process there were only two meetings where landowners and the general public could express their attitudes to and voice their concerns about the past and the future of forestry. Attendance at these meetings was very low. The consensus might have been a sign of approval of the way that regional forestry worked and of the purposes of the Regional Forest Programme. This may indicate two things. First, it seems that in southwest Finland there is a critical amount of trust, confidence and reciprocity present in the regional forest economy. Second, it also indicates that individual expectations, ongoing unorganised collective action and formal institutions guiding the development are in sync without too much friction.

REASONABLE ENVIRONMENTAL VALUATION

Much remains to be done to improve stakeholder cooperation and planning for multiple ends. My argument is that development and environmental planning is not improved by making it more formally rational. Instead, planning practices need to be made more reasonable, that is, more emphasis placed on substantial acceptability. But do we lose our capacity to plan collective action and the clarity of our collective insight if we begin to distrust formal human reason and methods based on pure rational inference? Of course not. I quote pragmatist Richard Rorty (1991: 37) at some length:

Another meaning for 'rationality' is, in fact, available. In this sense, the word means something like 'sane' or 'reasonable' rather than 'methodological'. It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for opinion of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force. These are the virtues which civilized society must possess if the society is to endure. In this sense of 'rational', the word means something more like 'civilized' than like 'methodological'. When so construed, the distinction between the rational and the irrational has nothing in particular to do with the difference between art and science. On this construction, to be rational is simply to discuss any topic – religious, literary, or scientific – in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous indignation.

Bearing this in mind, development and environmental planning and valuation face two practical questions: How does one make sense of institutions, formal and informal? And what are the best ways to influence these institutions with a view to selecting the best existing productive practices? The important thing to recognise is that these questions are not answered automatically out of formal interest group collaboration, by purporting to abstract societal goals or by acting according to rigid codes of conduct. It is equally true that answers do not spring spontaneously from informal institutions, i.e. from past-bound collective opinions concerning social rights, future-oriented ends, or social feelings of belonging, resentment or guilt. Sane, tolerable, reasonable, workable and fair answers can best be found from within the interface of formal and informal, organised and unorganised collective action (Hiedanpää and Bromley 2002).

In this concluding section of my paper I will further undo the binary distinction between formal and informal. This implies a focus on three characteristics from a new perspective: (i) the order, (ii) the multiple directions of collective action, and (iii) the conditions of individual and social self-realisation.

AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

	Normative Fields	Moral Fields	Fields of Reasonableness
Order	Norms	Moral Rights	Scaffold Ethics
Direction	Abstract Principles	Ends	Probes and Tags
Self-realisation	Codes of Conduct	Standards of Approval	Creative Action

Scaffold Ethics

Development and environmental planning is always a loose and ad hoc social construction, no matter how formally it is arranged. This is because formal interest groups and other collective formations invited to participate in a process bring along their own set of overlapping norms and formal rules, even though they adhere to formal societal norms, generally accepted abstract principles of organised collective action and codes of conduct governing the planning process itself. And the planning construction often also remains loose and ad hoc because the way in which it is structured does not resemble the organisation and structure of the disturbed and problematic locality. The planning community and the disturbance community remain separate.

For the most part, development and environmental planning is still an artificial, formal and rationalised abstraction. In order to come down to earth, development and environmental planning, valuation and decision-making should be organised and structured as a soft assembly. Soft assembly merges planning community and disturbance community by being constituted by all the collective actors that are connected to the birth of environmental disturbances, definitions of problems, and explorations of possible solutions. Soft assembly is a reconstruct of the critical social arrangements, structures and processes in a problematic local situation. (On soft assembly, see Clark 1999.)

Of particular importance here is that soft assembly exercises that I call scaffold ethics. It identifies disturbances, and by doing so articulates formal and informal institutions that constitute the problems and their definitions and weighs workable means to desired and intended outcomes. Scaffold ethics is a branch of practical ethics, attempting to create the conditions for the identification and selection of the best existing productive practices. Scaffold ethics shifts the focus of the planning and valuation process from the normative and moral discourse towards unmasking circumstances, contingencies and consequences of good and bad, right and wrong. That is, it effects a shift from formal normativity and informal morality to the articulation of and agonising over the sane, reasonable value.

Probes and Tags

Soft assembly takes abstract principles as actual, potential and possible discursive fields. It attempts to diversify those fields with a view to diversifying the possible articulation of disturbances, problems and solutions to those problems. The purpose of the act of diversification is to explore and unmask the possible ends already lived and embedded in informal structures and processes of a given locality; the ends that are already present in the current network of productive practices (Fish 1989).

Soft assembly applies two kinds of discursive tools in the creation of new means/consequences and tools for impact assessment: probes and tags. Probes are discursive baits that are felt and reacted upon – by certain participants in a game of giving and asking for reasons – as suggesting a negative, harmful disturbance. Probes raise negative emotions. Tags, on the other hand, are felt and acted upon as positive disturbances. Probes and tags can contingently change places. The more effectively probes hinder and tags facilitate the action, the more significant information they presumably contain.

Probing and tagging depict certain features of our world as salient, they make them pop out into the realm of human interaction and consciousness (Dyke 1999; Clark 1999). Probes and tags work in two ways. On the one hand, they carry relevant information in themselves. For instance, the notion of ‘mature forest’ may be loaded with significance: it tells someone many salient things about forest renewal, forest rotation and stand structures, and while so doing it facilitates certain actions. Here it is a tag that is at work. But if someone contests the importance of the facts about ‘mature forest’, and asks for reasons as to why they should believe certain facts about stand structure, forest rotation and so on, the notion is doing its work as a probe. In short, if the end-in-view suggested by the notion (word or phrase) is felt to enhance life, it is functioning as a tag. If the end-in-view is felt to suppress life, it is functioning as a probe. On the other hand, probes and tags may also carry a promise of new information. In this case they work like metaphors: they offer new conceptual tools for planning and valuation. Recently ecosystem health, the ecological footprint, ecological capital, social capital etc. have been used as metaphorical probes and tags in the theoretical discourse on forest politics, though to a lesser extent at a practical level.

An active and purposeful use of probes and tags has at best remained vague in development and environmental planning. This should not be so. Namely, probes and tags would effectively reveal complexities within institutions, as well as actualities, potentialities and possibilities when mapping out problems and different courses of action and the impacts of those actions. They help to articulate the abstract principles and reframe the discursive space for the creation of objectives. Therefore, and perhaps most importantly, probes and tags are informative and sensitive discursive tools for directing and redirecting the development of a given locality, a network of productive practices.

AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

Creative Action

Development and environmental planning should be a creative process, as indeed should any collective enterprise aiming to cope with disturbances, problems and selection. Formal organisation, accepted abstract principles and agreed codes of conduct are important for any planning process, but they are not a sufficient condition for effective social learning. An exploration of internalised conceptions of moral rights, ends and standards of approval is a complex basis for the identification of disturbances, the articulation of problems and workable decisions, but again, these are not sufficient conditions for environmental planning as a creative process.

Creativity requires spontaneity. But it also requires criticism. In other words, creative adaptability in changing environments requires both criticism and spontaneity (Dewey 1934; Joas 1996). Therefore, in order to be critical, a planning process must understand and be knowledgeable of the conditions framing and staking out the situation, i.e. the formal prohibitions, obligations and allowances. On the other hand, in order to be spontaneous, a planning process must have sufficient freedom and powers to function unpredictably while in progress. Creative environmental planning allows both negative and positive emotions to emerge, which enables and facilitates analytic, critical and joyous use of reason in a planning process. (On the significance of negative emotions, see Mackie and Worth 1991.)

Creative planning explores individual and social codes of conduct and the standards of approval – but it also affects them. In this respect, two kinds of working principles would facilitate creative planning: problem-orientation and function-specificity. The purpose of problem-orientated collaboration is to make sense of formal organisation and collective purposes effective in a given situation. In other words, groups and individuals constituting the soft assembly tackle the what-questions. In fact, this is what interest groups and other collective formations are normally doing when participating in a planning enterprise. As a working principle, function-specificity is unknown in development and environmental planning. Functions are unintended consequences that have emerged, found their niche within informal and formal institutions, and prevailed and stabilised themselves therein (Vromen 1995). By addressing functions and their social consequences, soft assembly tackles the how-questions.

Problem-orientation and function-specificity shed critical light on the conditions of power, stability, vested interest, the adjustability of collective action. These working principles are tools of guidance and facilitation of individual and social growth. With them, soft assembly attempts to afford capacities and conditions for critical and spontaneous environmental learning. Most of all, creative planning practice identifies, articulates and offers building blocks for the self-creation of groups and individuals.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss how formal and informal institutions are at work in development and environmental planning. More specifically, it has discussed how to approach existing productive practices so as to select the best possible ones for further development. The more knowledgeable planning apparatuses are, and the more sensitive they are to different forms of collective action, the better for everyone. Only a collective willingness to become aware of institutions can guarantee identification of disturbances, articulation of problems, a critical discourse on alternative courses of action, robust research on possible impacts, many-sided deliberation, and acceptable decision-making. A courageousness to bear the weight of the world is a true condition of reasonableness.

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AN INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH

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