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Innovation in the plural of the alpine cre-actors

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Abstract: The capacity to innovate for a sustainable development of alpine territories cannot depend only on economic, legal and political conditions defined by the State at national and international levels. It depends also on local conditions that situate historically and geographically the actors in a continuity of social and ecological relationships. This approach highlights the collective - thus organisational - dimensions of the innovation process, including the imagination, the development, the implementation and even the diffusion of a new practice. Our point of view is that for contributing to the sustainable development of the Alps, innovations need to change the ecological,

political, social and cultural relationships engaging the actors in these territories. This change affects as much the object territory as the subject actor of the territory. This is why innovating in the Alps means also innovating the Alps and the alpine actors (Cosalp, 2008). Based on a research about local people's participation in the management of alpine communal forests, the article shows the importance of local interactions involving actors of diverse occupation, gender, age and origins¹.

Keywords: organisational innovation for the sustainable development of territories, participatory governance, valorisation of local patrimonies).

Why situate innovation locally?

Why this interest in innovation? Indeed, the ecological and economic crisis calls for change, but as modernisation and the type of social change it generates is problematic, one needs to ask what type of change is desirable, and which are the conditions enabling the concerned actors to create that change. In order to be sustainable, an innovation needs to make sense. It needs to address current issues and to meet the various actors' values. According the theory of interaction, the construction of meaning is the result of a collective work, by which the actors in presence (in one time and space) reinterpret the past according to their actual situation for imagining desirable futures.

In a period of crisis, the future is perceived as uncertain, and the construction of meaning in a shared place contributes to the security (ontological) of individuals and communities (Giddens, 1990, 1991)². An innovation in order to be carried forth needs therefore

¹ Social Agency in Alpine Communal Forests: Local Actors' Interactions with Communal Forests in the French and Swiss Alps. University Albert-Ludwig Fribourg in Brisgau (Allemagne), 2005, <http://www.freidok.uni-freiburg.de>.

² We refer to Anthony Giddens's concept of « locale », constituted of spatially and temporally situated social interactions with a certain continuity (we broaden this understanding to ecological interactions). According to Giddens, modernisation disembeds the actor from its locale, which hampers its (self)confidence, necessary for the construction of individual and collective identities.

to be rooted in a shared re-present-ation of what should be conserved and what counts to be valorised. In order to be recognized by a community, the change generated by an innovation needs to contribute to its social reproduction. Economists usually associate the community of interest promoting an innovation with an enterprise. According to this approach, organisational innovation is mostly about the organisation of the work force (Brown, Duguid, 1991). The 2008 alpine week has enlarged the use of the concept of innovation to a geographical unit, of which a group of actors attempts to represent itself and the Alps in ways that contribute to their sustainable development. But who is this collective actor working in this innovative interaction? How does it organize?

There are innovations in products, services, processes of production and forms of organisation. We are mainly interested in this last type of innovation because it creates the conditions favouring all the others³. We propose to approach organisational innovation in a sociological way, highlighting the way actors (individual or collective), in a given structural situation, use their margin of freedom – therefore their creativity – for elaborating a strategy of action. A strategy meant to avoid, minimize, use advantageously or modify constraints and to account for the uncertainty immanent to other actors' choices, in order to achieve at best its objectives. In what respect are the Alps an object or a situation that favours or constrains innovation?

Historically, the alpine societies have learned to compose with the constraints and potentials of their geographical situation. At the crossroad of migrations, they took advantage of multiple cultural influences. Extreme topographical and climatic conditions shaped their life styles and induced them to learn from distant peoples' experiences and to innovate for developing practices adapted to their territories. The innovation capacity of alpine communities is probably related to their situation in this system of constraints and potentials, varying according to place and time.

We defend the idea that the conditions of innovation need to be analysed at a local level, for taking into account the diversity of structural, geographic and cultural situation across the Alps. Indeed, for an innovation to make sense and to contribute to the sustainable development of a territory, it needs to be situated in a time and place that allows the actors to interact through a certain continuity and proximity with the natural environment. This perspective is based on a study of residents' perceptions and interactions in relation with their communal forests, in an alpine territory, transboundary to Switzerland and France.

This research identified a great diversity of local organisations with some relationship to the communal forests, according to who takes part, why and how. The results distinguish the organisations according to whether they aim more at reproducing or at changing social structures shaping the forest, its residents and their future. The following paragraph summarizes elements of this research and its methods. It will ground our analysis of innovation capacities in the context of local organisational processes.

³ The tourism sector promoting innovation at the scale of destinations considers in particular its organisational dimensions (InInnotour 1/08 : "Innovations do not fall from the sky", p. 4-5).

Question organisational innovation concerning the management of alpine forests

The ideas discussed in this article are based on a doctoral research about the participation of residents in the management of their communal forests in the Swiss (cantons of Vaud and Valais) and French Alps (department of Haute-Savoie). Six communes have been selected out of a regional sample of 79, for having an important portion of their territory covered with communal forests and a population under 3000 inhabitants. The communes have also been selected for illustrating variations in terms of institutional conditions (between two countries), demographic trends (more or less growing population), and economic activity (varying importance of the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors). The final selection includes two communes with a strong tourism sector, mostly developed around skiing (Leysin in Switzerland and Châtel in France) ; two communes in which the primary sector – farming and forestry – are important in terms of occupation and land uses (Rossinière in Switzerland and Vacheresse in France) and communes, where the residents are mostly occupied in the secondary and tertiary sectors, commuting often to nearby valleys (Vollèges in Switzerland and Nancy sur Cluses in France). (Fig. 1)

The objective of this comparative study has been to understand how the local actors perceive their communal forests, how they interact with and about them, and how they take part in their management. Sixty five residents of various profession, age, gender and social situations were interviewed across the 6 communes. The interviews were transcribed in detail along the terms used by the informants, and the text analysed along qualitative (grounded theory methodology, Glaser, 1992).

Based on the theory of Lewis Coser (1955), stipulating that social conflicts are the motor of social change, the first phase of the analysis consisted in inducing from the texts the themes of conflicts. Then, noticing that a substantial part of the texts was not about conflicts but about values associated with the communal forest, we defined the thematic categories of these values. A third step consisted in the identification and analysis of the collective actions having some relation with the communal forests, comparing them according to the type of actors initiating - and participating in - them, the objectives and strategies of action individually and collectively pursued, and the means of organising these interactions. The results of these analyses show that the involvement of the local actors in the management of the communal forest and their capacity to organise collectively vary according the institutional, economic, geographic and demographic situation of the communes. The type and intensity of tourism development appear determinant, considering in particular how this activity integrates, valorises or affects the other sectors (forestry, farming and pasturing, industry and craftsmanship). It is in the communes where tourism is not the predominant occupation, where the primary sector is not marginalised in local governance and where tourism valorises the local patrimony, that there are more interactions concerning the communal forest. Indeed, a local economy and governance that allows the participation of the various occupational groups favours interactions between the residents and their communal forest.

But what are then the interactions we could qualify as innovative? In fact, it is in these communes with a more mixed economy and participatory governance that we find more organized interactions and also creativity in the offer of new products, processes and services (agritourism, regional products and certified processes AOC, FSC and other new recreational, educational and cultural activities). On the contrary, the communes which have developed (mass) tourism in a rather exclusive way, at the cost of the primary sector, show less interactions in relation with the forest and local natural resources.

Indeed, innovation was not the focus of this research. However, two findings emerging from the analysis of the twenty one local organisations inform our question of innovation of and in the Alps. The first is that the organisations differ according to (a) the type of actor controlling the process – either governmental or non-governmental - and (b) the outcome of the actions – either to reproduce or change social structures. The second finding was to realise that the capacity to change social structures depends on the aptitude of local actors to self-organize and to manage conflicts. In fact the dynamism of local interactions, by airing conflicts, not only reaffirms shared values (mostly patrimonial), but also generates new values (for addressing new issues). For instance, a conflict on the reintroduction of the lynx, opposing hunters, farmers, wildlife managers from public administrations, and members from environmental associations, will partly forestall thanks to the novel organization of a festive day reproducing in the communal forest a partly forgotten tradition of building charcoal grinders. Thus, new shared values emerged from the conflict, integrating objectives for conserving the local cultural and natural patrimony and for the social and economic development of the region, promoted among others by a new forestry association and an organization promoting the project of a new natural regional park⁴.

The case studies show that the autonomy of local non-governmental actors provides a favourable context for innovation but so is the active involvement of the local foresters and municipals. This convergence of conditions is important because organisational innovation implies structural changes, therefore shifting power relations. If these conditions are not met, innovation will meet the resistance of the actors who consider that it threatens their privileges (Agarwal et Ostrom, 2001). In the communes where land management results from a centralised and exclusive governance, in terms of representation of the various local interests, local organisations are more often mobilised by the punctual expression of conflicts, but little able to manage these conflicts over time, to generate shared values and to propose alternatives.

In what respect are the identified collective processes innovations by themselves, or only incubators or favorable contexts for the innovation of products, services and products? Based on our comparative analysis, it appears that an organization is innovative by itself

⁴ Another collective experience animated this commune : the storm Lothar which blew down a large part of its forest in December 1999. The inhabitants organized themselves actively to help the affected persons and to restore the places. Five years after, local perceptions were still marked but often commented in positive terms. Most said that the forest was recovering well and that the storm and its damages had remobilised local people and the municipality for sustaining its management.

and by its achievements, when it gives place to new interactions among actors hitherto little involved, when it pursues objectives that are adapted to actual issues, and when it modifies the structures of the community and opens thus its margins of freedom. Even though it goes beyond the research completed in 2005, the twenty one organizations studied could be evaluated along these criteria. It would probably result in a gradation of innovation capacity which would differ according to the commune and vary along the life time of the organizations. Without attempting this evaluation at this stage, our analysis of forest related interactions reveals constraints which impact probably also the innovation capacity of organizations. The interviews show that the inhabitants often avoid addressing or solving conflicts at the local level⁵. According to the case studies, the newly emerging local organizations have often as objectives the conservation or improvement of quality of life and the local actors' social integration, which is not always compatible with objectives of structural change. And when local organization seek to oppose some action perceived as threatening (i.e. their quality of life), they often organize informally and only over the lifetime of the conflict. They are maintained in a marginal position by local authorities and structures of power relations with which they disagree; they are usually denied the needed legitimacy for proposing alternatives. These results indicate the weight of constraints local actors face when they attempt to manage conflicts at a local level, hence to change governance structures and innovate for addressing new issues.

Albeit the mentioned limits, the power of action and innovation particular to local actors-creators, rests on the continuity of ecological and social relationships with the nearby environment, rooted in patrimonial values. The patrimonial values are generally associated with the place's natural and cultural values, but less often with the local organizations and institutions that support them. It is, however, them which generate the patrimonial process that involves always some innovation. Indeed, the patrimony could not be conserved, restored nor valorized if it were not re-presented, meaning re-interpreted, therefore in part transformed, for the stakeholders to imagine - and project themselves into - the future (Micoud, 2005). At the example of our cases, we will explore what we mean by "organizational patrimony".

Patrimonialization: a process animating a community to innovate

The analysis of alpine actors' perceptions related to their communal forests reveal the importance of patrimonial values, distinguished from resource – environment - protection against natural risks and recreation – values. Without defining here further these values, it is useful for this discussion to precise what the interviewed understand by these patrimonial values. They are associated in their discourse to the following terms : a private

⁵ This finding comes close to Lewis Coser's theory (1956), for whom, involved in social relationships of closed groups (clan, church, party), the actors expose globally their identity and their various social networks. In this context they fear even more social exclusion and tend then to repress conflicts, which aggravates their effects.

property, a public or common territory ; an element of the architectural heritage ; a legacy of work and knowledge transmitted across generations ; a place of exchange and social binding ; an element of the personal or community identity ; a place and object of cultural and festive events ; a symbol (in local art, craft, tales, etc.). It is mostly women, the young and people working in the tertiary sector who have expressed patrimonial values in relation with the forest. These same social categories are generally marginalized from decision-making about forest management. The communes where their participation is weak show less organized interactions in relation with the forest.

Patrimonial values are to a great extent generated by a history of common property or management systems. It is the communes which hold in memory common property or management systems that have most collective interactions in relation with the communal forest. For instance, these actions consist in Vollèges (Valais) in the common property, restoration and use of a bread oven, heated with fuelwood from the forest of the bourgeoisie⁶ and collected by the members of the association ; in Nancy sur Cluses (Haute-Savoie) in an association of residents who volunteer for creating and maintaining hiking routes in the communal forests and pastures ; in Vacheresse (Haute-Savoie) in the organization of a common of estovers⁷.

These associations emerge from an organisational patrimony of common property regimes that are still quite widely in use in the alpine sylvo-pastoral economy. With modernization, these régimes tend to erode (Kissling-Näf, Volken, Bisang, 2001), often de-legitimized and deprived off their decision-making and economic power by the dominant institutions of the State, science and the market (Giddens, 1990). But our research shows that the remnants of community organizations and institutions can reemerge and renovate their objectives. We notice that these contemporary forms of organizations meet the needs of a defined community of interest, are characterized by their objectives of conserving the local patrimony and of maintaining or improving the inhabitant's quality of life. This last point differs from the objectives of common property and management regimes before modernization, which were mostly to ensure the subsistence of the group.

The community organizations of today innovate notably in the way to represent values, to re-discover "old-new" products, giving a contemporary flavor to traditional and local products.

Indeed the image conveyed with these modes of valorizations need to be understood by actors who do not live in the same place. These « postmodern » commons integrate multiple exogenous references (Giddens, 1991), while attempting to represent and valorize the authentic, therefore unique, character of the territory. This work of representing the local patrimony, or « to repeat what relates us to each other », according to André Micoud (2005), legitimizes also those who claim the right and (sometimes) the responsibility to conserve it, thus who want to decide over its future.

⁶ The bourgeoisie is a common property regime dating from the medieval age. It is the most widespread type of forest ownership in Valais.

⁷ The annual distribution of fuelwood, collected from the communal forest, to the commune's residents.

The organizational patrimony of alpine commons can feed a « trans-appropriative » patrimonial strategy, to which all actors having some impact on the resource or the territory take part (Ollagnon, 2005). This process of « patrimonialization » is necessarily unique to each place and innovative of new relationships between the subjects and objects, between the cre-actors of the land, between the alpine people and the Alps. This process creates collective actors, as well as it creates new products and services, possibly capable to both conserve and valorize the local natural and cultural patrimony.

Conclusion: Innovate locally for finding a way out of the global crisis?

The discourse on « innovation » stresses generally what is new and changed. Alike the concepts of « development » and « modernization », it tends to conceal the conditions of the process, in particular its roots in the natural and cultural patrimony of the actors of which it engages the knowledge, the social networks, and the creativity. It is neglecting the fact that every innovation needs to be re-cognized by a collectivity, for enabling it to project its identity into the future. An innovation needs therefore to solve or mitigate conflicts and to address issues perceived by this collectivity as threatening or determining for its prospect.

Our discussion uncovers a need to further explore apparently paradoxical relations between innovation – generally understood as resting on an individual capacity – and the conservation of the patrimony – understood as resting on a collective form of engagement. We have approached the organizational dimensions of innovation and underlined the importance to situate the cre-actors in place and time. Our study leads us to comprehend innovation as a collective work of creating meaning and of sustaining a prospect. This work carries forth both, social change - considering actual conflicts and issues - and the reproduction of shared values and social structures - associated with the identity of the individual and collective actor.

Figure 1

Figure 1: Social agency in communal forests: selection of communes in the Swiss and French Alps. (Finger-Sich (2005))

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