

Scientific ecology in environmental impact assessment: tensions between scientific imperative and deliberative imperative.

Rodriguez, L.

In a context of uncertainty and conflicts about ecological issues, environmental impact assessment (EIA) gives rise to a crystallisation of the challenges faced by environmental public action. On the one hand, EIA is meant to properly estimate the environmental degradation caused by development plans or projects, by using the best scientific standards. On the other hand, the relevance of EIA also depends on its ability to suggest strategies to make land use planning compatible with environmental constraints, while guaranteeing democratic processes. The dominant model of EIA in many countries is characterised by the stranglehold of experts on the provision of scientific and technical information. Project managers and experts are supposed to act as neutral agents who provide evaluations for decision makers. This model has at least two weaknesses: it underestimates the complexity of ecological relationships, and it does not take into account the related human dimensions, neither on their social complexity, nor with respect to democratic issues. These constraints suggest that two major conditions are necessary to get a satisfactory environmental public action. First, the expertise ought to be credible, that is to say that it must mobilise reliable and relevant knowledge. Secondly, this expertise ought to be legitimate, which means coming out of a satisfactory process from a justice and equity perspectives. To meet the first condition, knowledge qualified as “scientific” is generally highlighted, to such an extent that Céline Granjou and Isabelle Arpin have noted a “scientific imperative” at stake in environmental public action. In response to the second condition, a deliberative and participatory requirement has emerged in communication and legislation since the 1990’s. Loïc Blondiaux and Yves Sintomer have concluded to the emergence of a “deliberative imperative” for public action. Although credibility and legitimacy are both required to a satisfactory public action, scientific and deliberative imperatives appear to be in tension, both in theoretical works about EIA and in practice. In this talk, I lean on a case study including five projects and their EIA, which were undertaken between 2009 and 2015 at Saint-Martin-de-Crau (France). First, I question the theoretical dissociation between scientific imperative and deliberative imperative. Then, I show the lack of evidences of deliberation in EIA, whereas the scientific imperative is dominant. From these results I conclude that, more than a tension, there is an asymmetry between scientific imperative and deliberative imperative in the EIA. I thus suggest a possible way to overcome this asymmetry, by reframing the epistemic and ethical significance of

these two imperatives, with a conceptualisation of science for environmental action as a social activity.