Bringing politics back in: a political study of the resilience and sustainability of century-old irrigation systems in Switzerland

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Abstract

Recent trends towards ‘governance’ or ‘socio-ecological system’ thinking indicate a shift in emphasis in the study of collective action in environment-related areas. While the distinction between social and ecological systems is fading away, analyses tend to become more normative than explicative, with a focus on good policy design or wise decision-making. Research is moving towards a vast array of enchanted (and enchanting) concepts like ‘sustainability’, ‘resilience’ or ‘adaptive management’, and away from politics, power relations or conflicting interests. Such concepts are, however, not neutral, and questions over whose conception of sustainability or resilience gets prioritized are all but futile. Environmental policymaking does not represent a common quest to reach the best possible outcome, but rather reflects power and social interactions, negotiations and trade-offs, competing rationalities and strategies.

In line with other scholars (e.g., Smith & Stirling 2009, Voss & Bornemann 2011), the present contribution thus argues that there is a need to ”bring politics back in”, and to adopt a political science perspective in order to fully capture the dynamics related to the resilience and sustainability of ecological (resourcial) systems. More precisely, the proposed paper aims at studying how social interaction processes between strategic actors shape decision-making and environmental outcomes. It develops a conceptual framework using a ‘game’ metaphor as a ”frame of attention and interpretation” (Scharpf 1997: 7) that directs attention towards the constraints and opportunities that institutions represent (what are the rules of the game?), the structure of the actors’ network (which actors are playing and how do they interact?), their endowment in policy resources (which cards are they holding?), and the interests and strategies they pursue (which cards do they play? are they trying to cheat?). It then applies the framework to small case studies related to century-old and multifunctional irrigation systems in the Swiss Alpine canton of Valais (the bisses irrigation systems, situated at the interplay between agriculture, environment and tourism).

Overall, the case studies demonstrate the necessary trade-offs the actors had to face when dealing with the governance of complex resourcial systems. They, moreover, highlight how it is not collaborative discussions or social learning that prevailed, but rather the confrontation of the competing strategies of actors pursuing diverging interests. In this context, it is clear that the social interaction processes at play – and the power relations inherent to them – determined the winners and losers of the game, and strongly influenced the resilience and

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sustainability of the resourcial systems.


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