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Land-use management and the idea of nature in Southern European Protected Areas. Lessons from the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park.

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The ideas that I am going to present come from two applied research projects, carried out with Social Anthropologists from the Pablo de Olavide University: *Tourism, environmental recreations, and sustainability in Andalusian Protected Areas: Socio-ecological resilience, social participation, and collective identifications* (2007-2011) and *Environmental Recreations in relation to cultural and nature tourism in Andalusia: Local actors, economic agents, administration and tourists* (2005-2007). I carried out my own PhD alongside these two projects. I analysed the symbolic, historical and political dimensions of those conflicts that have been triggered following the establishment of the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park.

I analysed particularly how local farmers, livestock producers, shepherds, land tenants and fishermen contest conservation measures in this protected area. For example, the ban to mass tourism and intensive agriculture under plastic poly-tunnels; the limitations to non-intensive dry farming, grazing and in-shore fishing and also the contestations to the promotion of nature tourism. These contestations are to be framed within two decades of conflicts between these local groups and the Park supporters, mainly scientists, NGO members, new exurban inhabitants and nature tourism entrepreneurs. My study revealed that a key element to understanding these conflicts is that they are connected to the coexistence of different worldviews and, more particularly, the coexistence of different ways of understanding nature and the 'proper' place of humans in it.

Leaving aside local groups and their environmental perceptions, which maybe I can explain later if there is any questions about it, my intention in this

presentation is to focus on the environmental narratives that underpin the conservation policy in Cabo de Gata. I will present some of the elements that I consider formative to these narratives and also I will highlight the role of those actors that support them. In short, what I want to do, is to initiate contribute to the ongoing discussion within this panel about the social construction of conservation narratives in Natural Protected Areas and how they strategically use modernist ideas of nature to achieve the control of natural resources.

What are the lessons that we can learn from analysing the Cabo de Gata case? To answer this I need first to talk about the contexts. In Europe, we cannot understand conservation policies in Natural Protected Areas without taking into account an ongoing process of “reterritorialisation”, which especially affect the “so-called” Periphery of Europe. This involves 1) a redefinition of these areas, which affects the activities carried out within them, 2) changes in their position in relation to other territories, especially urban areas, and 3) changes in their environmental meanings.

Behind this reterritorialisation several interests underlie. In the Andalusian case, where Cabo de Gata is located, two reasons stand out: 1) a territorial balancing, which aims to compensate the outcomes of central highly industrialised areas while protecting the periphery and promoting a service economy in it; and 2) the promotion of multifunctional economies, so that marginal areas become less dependent on highly subsidised farming and fishing practices. These have deeply conditioned the goals of conservation policies in Andalusia, portraying a top-down political strategy, which reveals the strong influence of the European Union’s interests and affairs. However, these issues cannot be only regarded as the product of supra-local or supra-national initiatives. Behind these phenomena of territorial redefinition there is also a cluster of local agents and stakeholders, with their own situated interests and desires. The transformation of Cabo de Gata, from a marginal farming and fishing area within Spain to one of the most popular destination for nature tourism and also one of the most iconic conservation hotspots, has been possible, to some extent, thanks to the action of scientists and new exurban inhabitants.

In the 70s the Spanish government asked a group of biologists, geologists and geographers to elaborate a catalogue of areas that were worth protecting. These scientists came to Cabo de Gata and during years analysed its flora and fauna, its underground, its ecological conditions. In the same epoch Cabo de Gata also witnessed the arrival of numerous people from Spanish and other European urban areas that decided to stay and settle down after discovering this place as tourists. The reason was that, unlike most other parts of the Spanish Mediterranean Coast, Cabo de Gata had not “fallen victim” to the development of mass tourism by then. These new inhabitants found this feature especially attractive, so Cabo de Gata became the ideal place to initiate a new, “alternative” life, far from cities, industries and the alienation of modern life.

In the late 70s and early 80s the expansion of intensive agriculture under plastic poly-tunnels and also the construction industry associated to the development of mass tourism was almost reaching Cabo de Gata. Scientists and new inhabitants considered this as a major threat to its values. An environmentalist movement emerged as they lobbied for the protection of this area, meeting their demands with success as the Park was put place in 1987. Most of these scientists soon became Park managers, while the new inhabitants initiated the development of nature tourism, opening rural hotels, offering guided tours, and the like.

In order to protect the Park natural resources, its policy followed a twofold strategy. On one hand, it granted some groups, mainly scientists, the privilege to use and manage local natural resources. On the other hand, it dispossessed certain local groups, mainly farmers, fishermen, land tenants and construction entrepreneurs of their capacity to be an active part in process of decision-making. What I want to highlight in relation to this process is the role modernist ideas of nature played on this redistribution of land rights. To do so I find especially interesting having a closer look at the Park land-use zoning plan.

Restrictions are not applied on a similar degree all over the Park, but in accordance to a spatial division in zones A, B, C and D. Zones A, where the most restrictive measures apply, are deemed as virgin natural areas barely transformed by human action. Only conservation practices and scientific

research are allowed in them. In Zones B the Park policy also allows some non-intensive farming, fishing and grazing practices as well as nature tourism: trekking, guided tours... Zones B are regarded as semi-natural areas, where “traditional” practices have shaped ecosystems in a way that have made possible that some natural values remain. For example, rare birds communities that depend on human use of graze lands, etcetera. In Zones C and D most practices are allowed, although under the supervision of Park managers (mostly scientists), so that these activities do not end up threatening those natural values in other areas. The reasons that justify a more permissive policy in these areas is that they are considered as barely having any natural value due to human exploitation.

This logic, that limit more practices with the argument of protecting a nature understood as separated of humans, society or modernity is strongly influenced by the worldviews of scientists and new exurban inhabitants. For scientists, nature comes first, meaning that the preservation of endemic plants, rare bird species or seaweed ecosystems takes priority over any other matter. For new exurban inhabitants, who are mostly nature tourism entrepreneurs, for them visual consumption is the only practice that ensure that nature is preserved. These two ways of approaching nature share many common features, as they both embody modern dualistic worldviews. But they also embody common interests.

In Cabo de Gata, nature-tourism is seen as an “indirect” way of preserving those values defined by scientific discourses. It is broadly assumed among these groups that to make possible the conservation of these values, it is necessary to promote some economic alternatives for the local population, alternatives such as these new kinds of tourism. However, to do so, this activity requires some environmental features and images to be protected, so that nature remains attractive and accessible for tourists. In other words, nature tourism and conservation has become mutually dependent.

What I want to highlight in relation to the environmental readings that underlie this Park policy is how they are used in a way that comply with scientists,

exurban inhabitants and nature tourism entrepreneurs' interests. If we analyse the land-use zoning plan in detail, we realise that it encompasses a well-defined hierarchy between different social groups. This hierarchy is key to granting some groups the privilege to use and manage local resources while, at the same time, to relegating others to a position where they are subjected to the will, interests and desired of privileged groups. In this table we can see that scientists are on top of this hierarchy; but, from what I said before, also nature tourism entrepreneurs. This should not come as a surprise as the very Park policy states that one of its main goals is to make compatible this activity with nature conservation, which eventually force Park managers to take into account entrepreneurs' demands.

A step below we find "traditional" farmers and fishermen, who are allowed to carry out their practices within the Park as far as they fit into certain ideas of tradition, wise use, defined by scientists... but also by entrepreneurs, as they are a powerful gimmick (these images of traditional farmers and fishermen) within this 'alternative' industry (nature tourism). In other words, they are allowed to stay but not to participate. Their role is merely passive and consists on complying with the guidelines provided from the top of this hierarchic system. At the bottom we find those who aspire to invest in irrigated agriculture and mass tourism. They can neither stay nor participate in process of decision-making, regardless of also being local inhabitants.

The lessons that I think that the analysis of Cabo de Gata conservation policy provides are the following: this policy pursues to achieve conservation goals by building up on environmental narratives that bring together the nature-society dichotomy and the object-subject dichotomy. As nature is objectified, in other words made the object of conservation, so they are 'local' inhabitants. They become deprived of their subjectivity. In some way, they are naturalised by creating a role, "the traditional peasant, the traditional fishermen", in where they have to fit so they become part of that objectified nature that is being preserved. On the other hand, the quality of subjects is granted only to scientists and nature tourism entrepreneurs: the people that know how to preserve nature.

So, the ideas I want to stress, especially in order to generate some discussions, are essentially that by using this logic, the Park policy does not only address supra-local interests and affairs, especially those coming from the EU institutions, but also those situated desires and interests of certain local agents and stakeholders. I think that this is important in order to go deeper in the analysis of the political dimensions of the ideas of nature. What is more, the phenomena I have just presented are neither new nor only restricted to the European context. Similar ones have already been observed in protected areas in Latin America, Africa and Asia, where concepts of indigenous people, especially those that are imposed from the outside, in fact disempower and even make invisible certain local inhabitants... This leads me to the conclusion that, even in Europe, modernist ideas of nature are still powerful instruments for domination, sustained on the fact that scientific criteria and development discourses remain uncritically assumed, at least for certain groups and policy-makers.