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Rewilding experimentations in Europe, an attempt to explore nature's multiplicity

(#Biodiversity #Conservation #Europe #Participation #Wild)

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Biodiversity is in a state of absolute crisis. Scientists agree that we are on the verge of a sixth mass extinction of life on Earth and that Humankind is responsible for it (Cowie et al., 2022). In this context, rewilding has emerged as a practical and cultural solution, capable of responding to the concrete loss of biodiversity and proposing an alternative framework for human behavior in relation to nature. Concretely, rewilding proposes to make ecosystems self-sufficient by limiting human interference and reintroducing extinct species.

In 2009, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling to set up a dedicated policy on wilderness (Resolution on wilderness areas in Europe, 2009). Until now, the most ambitious European Union (EU) biodiversity policy remains the strategy implemented in 2020 as part of the Green Deal. Entitled "Bringing Nature Back into Our Lives" it reflects a commitment to acknowledging the interconnectedness between human life and nature (European Union, 2020). The ambition is to preserve 30% of the European territory by 2030. Even though the text does not use the term rewilding, preferring the term restoration; it is expected to create a conducive environment for the resurgence of the wild in Europe.

The United Nations General Assembly has decided to dedicate this decade to ecosystem restoration, from 2021 to 2030 (United Nations, 2019). All too many precedents of unmet objectives call for caution², but one thing is certain: achieving biodiversity objectives means taking social issues into account. Rewilding has long incorporated this social dimension and could therefore be a model for reversing the trend of biodiversity loss.

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² Only 5 out of 20 objectives of 2010 worldwide biodiversity Aichi targets were considered partially achieved (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2020)

Rewilding: a paradigmatic solution to the biodiversity crisis?

The concern for nature preservation in the format of restricted areas was born in the United States in a context of conquest of the wild West. European settlers, confronted with landscapes of majestic unspoiled nature, felt the need to preserve this singularity, in which they saw the manifestation of the biblical Garden of Eden (Cronon, 1996). The movement was inspired by deep ecology thinkers such as Baird Callicott, Arn Naess and Aldo Leopold. What they had in common was the conviction that the ecological crisis called for fundamental changes rather than technical or adaptive solutions, of what they called "superficial" ecology. In the book chapter "thinking like a mountain" Leopold, one of the fathers of environmental ethics and conservation, describes a founding experience: while hunting wolves, he looked in the eyes of a mother wolf he had just killed and started to think this death from the point of view of a mountain. From this point of view, the death of wolves means proliferation of deer, which would ultimately kill the vegetation on the ground (Leopold, 2000).

Like an echo to Leopold's thought, the reintroduction of wolves into the Yellowstone National Park half a century later remains a major reference for rewilding promoters to this day. This reintroduction and its effect on trophic chains, i.e. food chains between species, had a series of beneficial consequences for the park. These include the return of salmon, bears and riverside vegetation, linked to the regulation of beaver and elk populations. The example of Yellowstone illustrates the practical implementation of deep ecology: trust in the autonomous functions of ecosystems, free from any active human intervention. This element will also be present in European rewilding, which will focus on large herbivores rather than carnivores.

Rewilding Europe³ : an experimental network in a structuring process

The European rewilding movement was born in the 1980s around a handful of large-scale experiments. The Oostvaardersplassen (OVP) nature reserve is an old and representative example of these key experiences. This small park that existed since 1968 became a laboratory for the *large herbivore approach*, promoted by Frans Vera, a Dutch biologist. His theory was that the pre-historical European landscape was mostly made of large plains of low vegetation maintained by the grazing of large herds of herbivores before the generalization of agriculture. Vera had the opportunity to test it by reintroducing in the park herds of herbivores such as deer and wild horses from 1983. This project has been seen as a reference for a new form of "accidental ecology" based on "surprise", supposed to renew the scientific approach by accepting a practice whose results are unpredictable (Lorimer & Driessen, 2014).

After a phase of structuration of the major rewilding associations in the early 2000's, like Rewilding Europe, Wild Europe, Large Herbivore Network and Wildland Research Institute ; the European rewilding movement is in a phase of massification of experimentations (Barraud et al., 2019). One of the most promising opportunities for rewilding in Europe is through the abandonment of agricultural land. In a context of high land pressure, the only front where spaces seem to be freeing up that could become wild again are abandoned farmlands. Estimated around 3% of EU total land by 2030,

³ Rewilding Europe is also the name of the main European rewilding association.

abandoned farmland is situated primarily in areas that are difficult to access for farm machinery (Pereira & Navarro, 2016).

What kind of nature in the Anthropocene? A multiplicity of wild

Rewilding revolves around two main practical parameters. Firstly, the *wild*, which refers to the autonomy of nature. Respect for this autonomy can range from non-intervention (spontaneous rewilding, through abandonment of farmland) to active intervention (rewilding by flora, herbivores, large predators, etc.). Secondly, the *re-*, which refers to a return to a previous state. The reference period could be pre-colonization for the Pacific Islands, the Pleistocene or Paleolithic in Europe or North America. The idea is always to aim for a period when human impacts are deemed acceptable. For example, the OVP experience is classified as paleo-rewilding. This is because the point of reference is the supposed state of nature in Europe in the Paleolithic before the Neolithic and introduction of agriculture (Jørgensen, 2015).

A “cultural” parameter can be added, in the form of the degree of human interaction permitted in the protected area. For example, returning to the Paleolithic means going back to hunter-gatherers before agriculture but it can allow gleaning practices. On the other hand, if we take the Pleistocene as a reference, we are aiming for a state of ecosystems untouched by humanity. So, the question of whether humans should be involved in rewilding has given rise to debates which have greatly involved natural philosophers. Should nature be preserved based on its independence from the human world or, on the contrary, based on its cultural value? The philosopher Baptiste Morizot (2020) proposes to discriminate on the basis of the practices that make up ecosystems: which are respectful of nature’s autonomy, and which are not? His aim is to question our agricultural, forestry and other practices, and thus politicize the way we chose to use nature. This would mean banning capitalist and extractive relations with the environment but allowing sustainable agricultural practices.

To these differences of interpretation of nature, we can add a political one. Of course, rewilding is often promoted by left-wing forces, even if some are opposed to it, such as the productivist left or certain organic farming movements who see it as a threat to land availability⁴. However, this idea of a return to wild nature has also been integrated into reactionary political projects, as part of a generalized nostalgia for an idealized past. Even though making space unproductive seems contrary to liberal approach, rewilding can also be part of a capitalist program, based on the idea that the rise of technology will enable us to rewild more land by making exploited land more productive. This can help understand why many of the globalized capitalist companies, like Disney or McDonald’s, have foundations for the preservation of wild animals (Igoe et al., 2011).

A controversial approach, with an indirect institutional recognition

The rewilding projects in Western countries are not beyond reproach. The issue of public participation is a recurring one, which leads Dolly Jørgensen to describe rewilding projects as a “myriad of ways to exclude humans in time and space from nature” in an article that sparked debate (2015, p. 487).

⁴ On ecologists in favor of rewilding, see for example this decision by the board of the French Green party (2021); on organic farmers' unions opposed to rewilding, see Morizot (2020).

Indeed, some rewilding projects reveal oppositions in the rural areas between differentiated visions of nature: anthropized rural naturalness and wild naturalness preserved from human action. In the OVP park we mentioned, this led to the project being challenged in court because it offended the sensibilities of residents and walkers. Some animals were starving to death in winter due to a lack of food. And the managers left the corpses to rot in the open air, in accordance with the principle of non-intervention.

This opposition to rewilding also covers sociological issues, reactivating the divide between urban and neo-rural population on the one hand, and “tradition” rural inhabitant on the other. Indeed, these social groups tend to develop increasingly divergent valuations of nature (Dalgarrondo & Fournier, 2020). The most controversial issues are hunting and acceptance of the return of predatory species such as bears and wolves.

This context may explain why EU institutions do not openly support rewilding. Two of EU’s most important biodiversity legislation contain provisions close to that of rewilding: the Habitat Directive (1992) and the Bird Directive (2009). Both are based on the restoration of animal’s living space and ecosystem centered. They integrate the logic of qualitative and quantitative improvement of biodiversity by acting on the quality of the ecosystem. However, the two legislations do not use the term "rewilding", probably because of the sensitivity of this concept to the rural population. The Habitat Directive therefore uses the term "strict nature reserve" to designate nature preserved from all human interference. As mentioned above, the biodiversity part of the Green Deal doesn't mention rewilding either.

Despite this lack of formal recognition, the EU is supporting rewilding with other tools. First, the EU uses financial tools to support rewilding actions, mainly with the LIFE project (*L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement*): LIFE Re-Bison, LIFE Vulture, GrazeLIFE... This program was launched by the Commission in 1992 and has a comfortable budget of €5.4 billion for the 2021 – 2027 period. The institutions work mainly with the larger continental association, *Rewilding Europe*, which itself acts as a network head, delegating to nation or even regional associations. European institutions tend to favor projects with a financial viability, which can rely on tourism or insertion in the biodiversity compensation market. The EU also funds research projects under the Horizon Europe program, such as exploring and exploiting the potential of genome sequencing for extinct species (European Union, 2021).

An exploratory approach to the acceptance of other living beings

Despite the debates that characterize rewilding, field studies show a unity felt by those who implement rewilding in territories (Holmes et al., 2019). Rewilding practitioners differ on the reference period and the place of human beings, but what they have in common is that they try to restore the structure and function of ecosystems in order to achieve an autonomous and self-sufficient nature (Carver et al., 2021). They identify with a common network and field. The controversies that run through this community are representative of an innovative movement that is seeking to define itself and experiment.

Indeed, as we have already pointed out, rewilding stems first and foremost from a demand for radical solutions in the context of the sixth mass extinction. This extinction highlights the profound crisis in the relationship between nature and culture that is at the heart of our society. Rewilding thus functions as a laboratory, an experimental space for imagining the renewed forms that the nature/culture relationship could take. In this regard, rewilding is also a great source of political imaginary, attractive or rejected.

In the end, it makes sense that rewilding be controversial. Its added value in relation to classical conservation is precisely that it claims to reform our representations and the way we share our space. Rewild means accepting that the world needs space where humans are not the ruler. It poses a very contemporary challenge to our ability to build a world together. To make this shared world possible, we need to imagine new political and ethical forms that better integrate non-human living beings. And rewilding is a space for experimentation in this direction.

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