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La forêt sur le devant de la scène : une ressource naturelle témoin de notre temps ?

Foreword

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Foreword

Franck Giazzi

EDITOR'S NOTE

Traduction : Brian Keogh

The forest, a natural resource and mirror on our time

- 1 It is generally considered that the European temperate forest gradually became established during the Holocene epoch, some 10,000 years BP. Its history, in the true sense of the word, began with the first real impacts of sedentary and agricultural man in the Neolithic era, around 7,000 years BP for the area that is now southern France. Thus the long story of man and the forest began, a story that has been marked by the contractions and expansions of the forest area with the ebb and flow of demographic movement. These fluctuations are an expression of the intangible link between human societies and the forest. Over time, the tree became a cult object, often seen as an earthly link with the after life, providing the means to bring relief to the suffering, avoid misfortune, and achieve happiness (Corvol, 2009).
- 2 Bertrand (1975) is one of the first geographers to have described the creation of what he called “agrosystems”, in which the forest is an omnipresent but fluctuating component. Bertrand traces the ecological history of rural France from what he calls *the pre-agricultural climax model* to *the finite agricultural space* of the 13th century and *the planted and bounded space* of the 17th and 18th centuries, the latter resulting from a rigorous policy to protect and manage the forests (the Great Reformation created by the Colbert administration). He highlights the periods of forest expansion and the different threats the forest has been subjected to. A particularly favourable time for the forest was from the 14th to 16th century, when the forest area expanded as the countryside became deserted following the 100 Years War, the Black Death, and unfavourable climatic conditions for crops; man retreated, while the forest advanced.

From the 18th to the 19th century, Bertrand observes, we saw *the beginnings of agricultural expansion*, marked by an unprecedented contraction of woodlands as the area under agriculture rapidly spread and, more especially, the consumption of wood reached a peak during this pre-industrial period. Man advanced and the forest ultimately owed its survival to the discovery of the fossil fuel, coal.

- 3 Recognition of the role of the forest in regulating soil losses, particularly in mountain areas, was also an important factor in its conservation. After the Forest Code was introduced in 1827, more radical measures were applied from 1860, the year when the role of the RTM (Restauration des Terrains en Montagne) became effective. The measures met with strong resistance from mountain dwellers (Gervreau, 2007) who found themselves in conflict with the State and sometimes dispossessed of their land as the government imposed a return of the “virtuous forest” (Kalaora et Savoye, 1986). “... *the members of rural communities fought against the measures, which they thought unfair and dangerous, by using legal means, but also violence (translation).*” (Chalvet, 2011). Thus the return of the forest was also the result of high-handed action by the forest authorities of the 19th century.
- 4 Today, the forest covers more than 15 million hectares of the French mainland. Its spatial extent is comparable to that observed at the end of the Middle Ages. Man has retreated to his urban areas following decades of agricultural decline, and rural landscapes, have seen uncultivated agricultural land invaded by spontaneous forest growth. History is repeating itself. This spatial antagonism resulting from a “pas de deux” between man and forest has left its mark on today’s landscape.
- 5 The lessons learned from past experience and historical analysis should encourage us to take better care of our forest heritage, since we are now at the dawn of a new energy era in which wood will most probably once again play an important role.

The forest on centre stage

- 6 At the international level, the forest has been a key element in environmental issues for a number of years. Questions are frequently raised concerning the evergreen and tropophile forested areas of the humid tropics, threatened by the clearings of itinerant agriculture and the clearcuts of large agricultural farms, but also the extraction of precious woods by logging companies. Temperate forests have been less in the news, which might lead one to believe that they are in better health and in good hands, namely those of the forest authorities. This is not wrong. In France, sylviculture has been supervised both by public authorities of a technical nature, such as the ONF (National Forestry Office), and private organisations (Centres Régionaux de la Propriété Forestière) for some fifty years. The forest is being managed, so why, today, is there a renewed interest in this element of our landscapes?
- 7 There are several reasons for this. First, the notion of sustainable development has become part of our collective conscience, particularly in the minds of our environmental managers since the Brundtland report of 1987 and the Rio Summit of 1992. What is more sustainable and more renewable than a tree? If well managed, it is an inexhaustible natural resource. Thus wood is once again becoming a sought-after construction material in the building industry. Another reason, and not the least important, for the renewed interest in the forest is its energy potential. It is clear that we are beginning to feel concerned, if not worried, about wood as a resource, especially

since we learned that our use of oil is destined to become increasingly limited in the coming decades. Firewood, characterised for a long time as simply the “log”, today comes in a wide range of different products meeting the needs of modern domestic heating: the traditional log, used in stoves and fireplaces, the reconstituted log (e.g. from sawdust), wood pellets, and wood chips. The last three products are used in special burners or furnaces installed in some public buildings and private homes.

- 8 The environmental and economic stakes are important. This is the reason why measures aimed at improved forestry management at both the local and regional levels were introduced several years ago. Here, mention may be made of the Charte Forestière du Territoire (government initiative to promote the local and regional sustainable development of forests), the forest access programmes (to improve access to the forest resource) and the Plan d’Approvisionnement Territorial (French government initiative to promote the development of local woodland areas for energy purposes), which are all specific to wood energy. However, even though wood is one of the alternative energy resources, the current renewed interest in forests cannot be explained from a purely economic point of view. It is also important to appreciate the contribution of the forest to the planet’s biodiversity, a role long recognised by the scientific community. The protective role of the forest in mountain areas has also been acknowledged for many years. Thus it helps stabilise soils, mitigates the effects of runoff and fixes the snow cover on valley slopes. As already mentioned, these factors were instrumental in the introduction of planning measures as early as 1860 (with the RTM). More recently, the recreational function of wooded areas has been regularly highlighted in urban planning and development policies (parks and gardens, peri-urban forest), while at the same time becoming a subject of discussion and reflection among the research community (Lequin and Sarrasin, 2008).
- 9 The forest thus fulfils multiple roles, taking on a number of functions: 1) Production: acknowledged over many years but confined essentially to the forest industry. The use of wood for energy purposes is the opportunity to highlight the importance of the tree, this time in the eyes of the general public. 2) Protection: particularly in mountain areas, a function that has been recognised in the actions undertaken by the State for some 150 years. 3) Conservation: with the forest ecosystem acting as guarantor for nature and its biodiversity. 4) Recreation: characterised by ever-increasing visitor numbers from a population that has become predominantly urban and in need of renewed contact with nature.
- 10 Thus, the national forest of the Grande Chartreuse, although some 50 minutes by car from the Grenoble urban area, has been qualified as a peri-urban forest, and even as a “forest park” by Boutefeu (2009). Furthermore, increasing visitor use of these peri-urban wooded areas is posing a number of recurrent problems, generated by competition among the different recreational uses (Chalvet, 2011).
- 11 The forest is thus well and truly in the public and scientific limelight, as witnessed by articles on this theme in specialised publications for the general public, but also by meetings and events targeted at forest management authorities, such as the European Mountain Forest Conference (Journées Européennes de la Forêt de Montagne), held in Les Gets, France, in 2007. Similarly, the United Nations decreed 2011 as the “International Year of Forests”. The FAO also recently devoted a special day, 11 December 2011, to the protection of forests in mountain areas within the context of International Mountain Day. Finally, it is worth noting that, in the same year, the

International Geography Festival (FIG) in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges was also devoted to forests. Will this event mark the beginning of a new field of study for geographers?

The forest is a geographical object

- 12 In France, the forest has been an object of geographical discussion for more than forty years. As Galochet underlines in his introduction to the text *“La forêt; ressource et patrimoine”* (2006), work by French biogeographers in this area dates back to the 1970s. It was in this same period that the Groupe d'Histoire des Forêts Françaises (GHFF) was created and numerous studies were undertaken by geographers on questions relating to the forests. The book coordinated by the GHFF in 1997 (Corvol *et al.*, 1997) on the perceptions and representations of the forest illustrates the variety of multidisciplinary contributions in this field (historians, geographers, forestry engineers, ethnobotanists, etc.) and shows the complexity of the forest as “object”. Even more focussed on the geographic discipline was the text *“Les milieux forestiers. Aspects géographiques”*, coordinated by Dubois (1999), which was inspired by the following question initially asked in the Geography section of the Agregation, the competitive examination for positions in the French public education system: “Les milieux forestiers: étude de géographie physique? (The forest environment: a study in physical geography?). From this classical and imposed vision of the forest, a more localised approach gradually emerged. In 2006, a study directed by Galochet described the forest as a resource and heritage. In 2008, Lequin and Sarrasin put forward the notion of “forest territories”, as Galochet and Glon also did in their later study, entitled *Des milieux aux territoires forestiers* (2010). Forest, resource, and territory are keywords that bear witness to a renewed field of discussion and debate; the forest is considered a natural resource within a given area or territory. Territory, a word that geographers have made their own (though they are not the only ones), conceals a complexity that we come to appreciate in studying questions pertaining to the forest. In this issue of the RGA, Avocat, Tabourdeau *et al.* refer, for example, to the complex interplay of actors and projects at different territorial scales with respect to the development of wood-energy in the Northern Alps. Their article, like that of Elyakime, deals with the forest as an energy resource. Both these contributions are in line with the on-going debate on energy changes now under way at the beginning of this 21st century. The end of the oil era is expected in the relatively short-term future and, among the alternative solutions to fuel-based domestic heating, wood energy has been proposed in different forms. Avocat, Tabourdeau *et al.* address this question and reveal a resource that is not easy to access, and therefore to exploit, in mountain areas, nor to market (difficulties in setting up fuelwood marketing channels: producers, consumers, network). Elyakime *et al.* suggest an approach that is more focused on the economic advantages of exploiting firewood locally, in the proximity of the farms. These two contributions demonstrate that wood, as a resource, is worthy of investigation at different scales.
- 13 The articles by Dumas, on the role of the forest in the interception of precipitation in the Chartreuse massif, and Nedjai and Nghiém on the impact of the forest cover on the physico-chemical properties of the lakes in the Jura, underline the importance of the forest in relation to water flows. The forest not only protects and filters; it also acidifies the environment when it is made up of mostly conifers, which is the case in mountain

areas. The changing landscapes that have undergone agricultural decline, and a concomitant reforestation of abandoned farmland, thus exhibit two important aspects: that of the protective forest, which absorbs some water, and that of a plant cover that is increasingly dense and monospecific, which tends to diminish biodiversity (benthic fauna). This example illustrates the need for caution and not concluding too hastily that the forest is systematically beneficial for the environment. Here we are touching on the notions of representation and perception, as Corvol *et al.* (1997) have done, with the forest enjoying an unconditional righteous aura among a population that is largely urban. The article by Papillon and Dodier is in the same vein. Their work shows that peri-urban forest areas may be seen as having both recreational and prophylactic functions.

- 14 This special issue of the RGA on forests, or more specifically mountain forests in the case of four of the five articles, opens up some rich avenues for thought and reflection. The questions raised provide us with valuable insights into the role of the forest in a number of important issues at the beginning of this 21st century, particularly in the context of changing energy forms and climate change, areas in which forests can act as “the finger on the pulse”. This issue of the RGA, however, does not claim to be exhaustive; it does not deal with the role of the forest in monitoring climate change, or the contribution of the forest cover in protecting slopes and man’s infrastructures. The study of landscape dynamics, where the forest constitutes a defining element, is another field that can help us better understand the links between the forest and society; “*Society changes, the forest moves* (translation).” There are unquestionably numerous subjects to stimulate other research and further publications.

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