

Social acceptance or the hypothesis of sociological voluntarism

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Abstract

It could be assumed that social intervention practices targeting the social acceptance of a technical device are inspired by the modes of sociological explanation of the invention and diffusion of technical devices addressed by social innovation. From a deterministic standpoint, the practices related to social acceptance appear to seek to accelerate the ways and rate of appropriation of the device, as illustrated in the epidemiological model (Everett M. Rogers, 1971). From an interactionist perspective, they would seem rather to seek to increase the influence of innovators defined on the basis of their social characteristics within social networks described as systems of influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964; Merton, 1949). Accepting these two explanations shows that social acceptance arises from the acceleration of a change that is completely beyond the control of its authors, or determined by the dynamics of the networks themselves, which the authors of the change are unaware of. And yet, in both cases, social acceptance seeks to bring about the appropriation of the technical devices concerned.

Taking a fresh look at these approaches and their epistemological bases, we aim to understand why and how *social acceptance* was involved in two projects concerning the production and use of new energy sources; one, in the construction of off-shore wind turbines, and the other, the use of a hydrogen-powered passenger ferry. Analysis of these innovative procedures shows how *social acceptance* is part of a general movement of social rationalisation. While the use of a social acceptance measure or approach seems to acknowledge the capacity of the players to orient their decisions and decide on their activity, it reveals above all the extension of social engineering on all human behaviour. Managerial utopia fosters the concept of social acceptance. The latter is the expression of sociological voluntarism, understood as an organised influence on the will of the individuals involved to find a collective agreement. But does this voluntarism dispense with in-depth understanding of the reasons why each individual would have acted in a particular way?

The questions raised by the concept of *social acceptance*

1 – We put forward the following hypothesis: the search for or observation of *social acceptance* concerning the creation, installation or use of a technical device is based on a social system of practices and of individual and collective representations of the *lifeworld* (Husserl, 1935-36). This system determines the way that the appearance, use and/or spread of this device are accepted.

The psychiatrist C. Jeangirard (2006, 92, 93) identified two instinctual arrangements involved in constructing views of the *ecumene*, defined simply as the whole of the anthropized world. I quote him below, underlining the terms to which I will return during the oral presentation:



“From time immemorial, man the builder, homo habilis and sapiens, has built the elements for his survival, perfecting them to a degree that is the cause and effect of technology. The forms produced are similar in nature and structure to those that life creates through its immanent geometry (in which the concept of beauty/ugliness does not exist), to which are sometimes added creations attributed to people from the community, inspired by a ‘spiritual’ tendency, while maintaining a utilitarian goal. A closed system, inspired by the logic of need, driving him to clear the land up to the limits of spatial coexistence with other human groups who may prove to be rivals or competitors. The general plan of the earth’s surface is empirical and regulated (...). Another instinctual arrangement (...), which could be described as metapsychological insofar as it is not generally inspired by need or practical considerations, concerns the mystery of Space. This terrestrial space, for as long as it had no measurable representation, dwells in archaic memory. (...) Instinct, which is inexhaustible, is expressed in new fantasies or representations under the influence of new viewpoints. (...) Its name is ‘landscape.’”

The political intent to push for acceptance of a particular device, related to a greater or lesser extent to renewable energies (production, use), involves a now familiar way of constructing thought and action, namely the *“administration of the general interests of society”* (de Saint-Simon, 1813), on the grounds of reason and for which *“the government of things replaces that of men”* (Comte, 1822, 25). This is the prevailing way of thinking. The issue of measuring *social acceptance* is thus raised for all types of management, aspiring to be rational and efficient, of human interactions and of the relationships between humans and their non-human environment. This way of thinking and acting has two sides. It can no doubt play a role in pacifying mores and reducing social violence, which often arises from the relationships between technological devices and people. But it can also play a role in technifying human relationships, a process to which Gurvitch (1959) drew our attention for the *“incalculable harm”* that it could cause.

Raising the question of the *social acceptance* of a technical device means estimating or measuring, and taking into account the extent of possible resistance to its installation or functioning, even though it is justified on the grounds of its effectiveness in resolving the current energy crisis. The technical device thus meets one or several needs; that of a mass society that is concerned about maintaining its energy consumption, while preserving the environment on which it depends. What does this mean? We need energy – the survival of our way of life depends on it. As fossil fuels are finite, we need to develop renewable sources of energy. The problem is circumscribed. Thus, recourse to *social acceptance* and its organisation means speeding up innovation and social use of new devices. This recourse leads to a set of political strategies inspired by instrumental rationality (or technical rationality), on which the scientific process and the sciences applied to the production of technical devices rely. Today, this rationality is applied not only to technical issues (those raised by and related to the *“earth’s surface”*), but also to practical questions that are also and always symbolic. It applies to all objects (which are thus not subjects), but also to subjects that it tends to objectify. It aims to reduce fear, conflict and violence. As described by C. Jeangirard (2006, 93):

“The current wave of economic domination that drives humans away from their interiority and belief in liberty, directs them towards science or its technological appendices, confounding its field with that of need (...). This is an automatic repetition reflex, which is by definition the main wellspring of anxiety and inhibition (...).”

In contrast to this utilitarian and optimistic vision, which sees *social acceptance* as the instrument of reason governing the material planning and symbolic development of the *“earth’s surface”* and as a



particularly reliable social practice of the future, the search for this acceptance can be seen as a means of controlling and standardising individual and collective practices. These criteria are those that define all mass societies. Practices are unified on the grounds that the invention and dissemination of new devices need to be planned. This can prove to be symbolically violent, justifying their imposition, adding to the social inhibition of those who are affected by them. It is for this reason that C. Jeangirard (2006, 94) calls for the psychological and political expression of “landscapes”:

“The current notion of landscape is a defensive discourse used to break a deadlock, provided that it produces new concepts whereby human beings free themselves from those that constitute obstacles, such as that of a purely scientific ecology without consciousness. The signifier *landscape* currently underpins the parable whereby human beings and our mother earth can once again “understand” each other.”

The distinction between “land surface” and “landscape” can be used to introduce instrumental rationality, which is by definition a means of calculation, into an anthropological and metapsychological universe that is not, or no longer, marked (depending on whether it is viewed historically or logically) by scientific and technical evidence whose acceleration would facilitate appropriation.

The “landscape” builds on practices and representations that shape the way we live together, and proposes the reasons for doing so; the reasons, and not only Reason. The concern of *social acceptance* appears to have two dimensions. The first concerns the relationship implied in the expression itself; it brings together acceptance and social life. The collective action that leads to acceptance of a project depends on a rational injunction for management. This should lead to adherence to a decision (e.g. related to regional development) solely on the basis of the technical rationality of the validity of the technical device. The second refers to the chronological and historical linearity underlined by the expression. Referring to the social acceptance of a device is to acknowledge that our sense of togetherness can develop without difficulty through inevitable consent for everything belonging to the “earth’s surface”.

Social acceptance could sometimes be evaluated in terms of a risk of non-acceptance, manifested by the emergence of crises, resistance or conflicts. This vision borrows from the rationale of historical linearity attached to the notion of human progress accompanying the industrial positivism of the 19th century. In the foreword to his *Système de politique positive* (1852), Auguste Comte wrote: “*L’amour pour principe, l’ordre pour base et le progrès pour but*” (*Love as a principle, order as a base, and progress as a goal*). This was the inspiration of the motto of the Brazilian flag, *Ordem e Progresso*, created in 1889!

2 – Returning to the idea that *social acceptance* can be seen first within the perspective of planning the earth’s surface, it emerges as a “rationalisation of social issues” (Pécaud, 2015, 2010) encouraged by the expansion of the idea of human engineering. The underlying basis of the concern for *social acceptance* needs to be established. There are two main approaches. First, new devices need to be assessed and made acceptable to the people concerned. This *a priori* acceptability and possibly acceptance, which could be evaluated *a posteriori* by the way they are used (Bobillier-Chaumont, Dubois, Retour, 2006)¹, depends on their form, their location, the various disturbances that they

¹For the authors (2006), “Technological acceptance defines an individual’s interest in appropriating a technology. Acceptance is shown by the way an individual, collective or organisation perceives the issues linked to the new technologies (advantages, benefits, risks, opportunities) and reacts favourably or unfavourably.”



cause, and the services that they provide. Next, and this aspect seems to be overlooked, these devices that produce or use alternative energy to replace fossil fuels, which are considered to be limited and polluting, could be proposed or evaluated in terms of ethics. This dual direction thus incorporates technical and ethical concerns. It is inspired by both technical or ergonomic questions and practical questions, to the point of treating practical questions as technical or ergonomic questions. For example, is the question of whether or not there is a need to produce energy a technical or a practical question or both? As the response to the use and justification of new forms of energy depends both on the state of the science and on its applications, the issue of storing the energy produced appears to be a technological obstacle that is difficult to overcome. The response also depends on the various historical circumstances of political (operating conditions, geostrategic power relations), cultural (symbolic issues) and economic (operating and distribution costs, etc.) dimensions. The devices linked to these forms of energy are numerous. They modify both the “land surfaces” and the “landscapes”; they modify not only the “surface” and the rational discourse on which it is constructed, but also the imaginary space that they disturb.

Is this will to impose acceptance of these devices and to measure it objectively a sign of the intensification of the political effects of the “planning of the earth’s surface”? If so, acceptance involves a paradox: preservation of the global environment reinforces an intensification of bureaucratic planning, which reinforces the difficulties of those living on the land, both human and non-human. This raises several questions.

- Is there a mismatch between management of the “earth’s surface” through scientific knowledge and the technical know-how that arises from it on the one hand, and the individual or collective “landscape(s)” on the other? Does this mismatch reinforce individualism due to the division of the “surface” and the difficulty of sharing a common view of the “landscape”?
- Does the expression of this mismatch lead to the transformation of the “landscape” or to the ethical transformation of the political and psychological effects of appropriating this “landscape”?
- Does the increased rationalisation of the way we live together tend to commodify human and non-human beings?
- How can one deconstruct and reconstruct the anthropological category of *natural* in a context of intensification of the effects of planning the “surface” (cf., construction of the notion of “natural areas”)?
- How does the notion of “landscape”, and more precisely that of its preservation, relate to the projection of the self in a space that is both appropriate and appropriated (as opposed to one that is inappropriate or disowned)?²

The environmental changes brought about by new devices, like the variations in the appropriation of “landscapes”, cannot be understood without taking into account the arguments used to justify or refute the disappearance, transformation, or psychological reclassification of “landscapes”.

3 – Based on the issues raised by these new devices, we still need to investigate the way explicit or tacit acceptance is generalised, and to identify the risks of this acceptance, notably that of the

² The different types of NIMBYism reveal the symbolic frontiers between what is and is not appropriate(d). For example, NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard); BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything); LULU (Locally Unpopular Land Use); PITBY (Put in in Their Back Yard); NOPE (Not on Planet Earth); NIABY (Not In Anybody’s Back Yard); NIMFOS (Not in My Field of Sight); NINA (Ni Ici Ni Ailleurs); PUMA (Peut-être Utile Mais Ailleurs...), etc.



possible confusion between the technical and practical questions raised by the installation of the devices used to produce these alternative energies.

Modern societies are characterised by the calling into question of traditional ways of acting justified by global perspectives. These societies emerged in the 17th century, when the autonomy of reason became definitively established, in other words, the ability to reason is distinct from sensory experiences and global interpretations, including those of rhetoric (cf. the dispute between the Ancients and the Moderns), for example those on which the monotheistic religions are based. The reasoning attached to these interpretations gradually gave way to scientific reasoning and its technical applications. In what way can the scientific explanation justifying the installation of devices in the “landscape” facilitate their social acceptability? Like the natural sciences when they are applied, the human sciences are now called upon to facilitate this acceptability (notably by measurement). They are used to inform decision-makers (engineers, investors and politicians), to estimate the chances that a particular project will have a satisfactory outcome, or to estimate the social consequences of installing these devices.

E. Durkheim (1893) supported the practical use of the social sciences, at a time that was still imbued with positivism. Inspired by the model of the natural sciences, social sciences could provide valid knowledge on which to base the rationale for action. He observed:

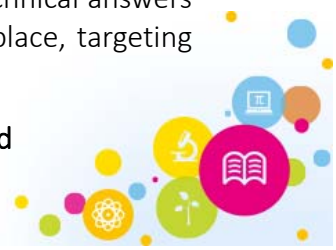
“Yet because what we propose to study is above all reality, it does not follow that we should give up the idea of improving it. We would esteem our research not worth the labour of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative. If we distinguish carefully between theoretical and practical problems, it is not in order to neglect the latter. On the contrary, it is in order to put ourselves in a position where we can better resolve them.”

Social acceptance as an intention recalls this age-old adage: better knowledge in order to act better. The reasoning underlying *social acceptance* is based on the idea that scientifically valid knowledge should have a predictive value on a human activity whose knowledge and dynamics are based on something completely different.

Can political decisions be taken rationally on the basis of scientific analyses of psychological activities and social practices? We know that there are other ways of taking decisions. While a distinction can be made between technical and practical questions (Habermas 1975, 1993), it is dangerous to confuse them in that only the applied sciences are used to conceive, implement and control the devices. The emergence of this type of decision leads to the creation of an increasingly bland “landscape” for the sake of the “general plan of the earth’s surface”. Like the devices, decisions appear as “surface” elements, imposing this surface as our dwelling place. The “surface” contrasts with the imaginary vision of a “landscape” in which we also in some way live.

Technical questions need technical answers, just as practical questions call for practical answers. The former involve the administration of things, the latter the government of people. No doubt. The confusion between them accelerates the commodification of people, the administration of things becoming the government of people (Musso, 2009). We know whom to approach for technical answers: academics and technicians who are now inspired as much by the sciences as by the human sciences. But who can provide the answers to practical questions? Everyone who lives in a shared “landscape” can claim to do so, provided that they do not restrict themselves to the administrative or behavioural perspective imposed by a project to build or operate a device, or that they are not caught in an industrial and economic procedure imposed in advance, even if it is only consultative or possibly participative.

To ensure that answers to technical questions inform the technical questions, two conditions are required: practical questions should not be formulated as technical questions, and technical answers should not be given to practical questions. Technical answers must remain in their place, targeting



only the administration of things, once it has been decided that the presence of these things is acceptable. Practical answers are a matter of common sense among all the inhabitants of the *ecumene*. The survival of this common sense faces a major threat, namely consensus, which, for better or worse, provide the basis and purpose of our “togetherness”. If we are not careful, we will end up only ever asking technical questions, and we will look for technical answers to maintain our reasons for living together.

The technical answers to technical questions are those dictated by the reasoning of the engineering idea underlying the “general plan of the earth’s surface”. This idea consigns to oblivion or insignificance the concern for being and acting together. It belittles the importance of current or future common sense. *Social acceptance* seeks to accelerate the social times of innovation and the symbolic and practical movements of appropriating the world. It mechanises and desecrates this time. But we live only in the “landscape” that we construct and nothing else. We do not live on the “general plan of the earth’s surface”, or not only. The map is not the territory³, even if it proves to be the banner of post-modernity following a provocative reversal, and hence more relevant than the “landscape” to organise “late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991).

(During the session, I will address the epistemological questions linked to the idea of defining social acceptance as sociological voluntarism.)

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³Allusion to the work of A. Korzybski (1998), A map is not a territory. An introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics [1933, 1949,1950].

“The entrance to the room was blocked by a large board, leaving a two-metre passage on either side, where Jed had put a satellite photo of the area taken from Guebwiller’s balloon next to an enlargement of a Michelin map of the same area. The contrast was striking: while the satellite photo showed only a more or less green soup with a few scattered blue spots, the map showed a fascinating network of roads, lanes, viewpoints, forests, lakes and hills. Above the two images, in black capital letters, was the title of the exhibition: “THE MAP IS MORE INTERESTING THAN THE TERRITORY.” Houellebecq M. (2010), *La carte et le territoire*, Paris, Paris, Michel Houellebecq et Flammarion.

