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**State experiments with public participations: French nanotechnology,
Congolese deforestation and the search for national publics**

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State experiments with public participations: French nanotechnology, Congolese deforestation and the search for national publics

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Introduction

In certain areas of public life, public participation has become a quasi-mandatory exercise for governmental action both in the so-called developed and developing worlds. Authorizing new kinds of consumer products (e.g., GMOs), deciding about nuclear waste, building transportation infrastructures or preserving natural environments now comprise participatory initiatives. This empirical phenomenon has been accompanied by social scientific studies, which in turn have contributed to shape ‘public participation’ as a specific domain of scholarly interest and political intervention (Callon *et al.* 2009; Gourgues 2012).

In the public participation literature, the state is often present as a negative reference, the locus of activities from which interesting (in both analytical and political terms) initiatives distance themselves. The usual tendency is to oppose ‘participatory’ politics and ‘representative’ democracy. This casts a contrast between deliberative, decentralized and inclusive initiatives, on the one hand; and electoral mechanisms and authoritative monitoring inscribed in the traditional functioning of the state, on the other. The analytical exploration of this opposition takes various forms. One can identify a normative perspective that describes participatory instruments as ways of contravening the constraints imposed by state government. This perspective comprises works praising the spontaneous and vibrant political awareness of civil societies (Bayart *et al.* 1992; Scott 1998), and describing the political value of deliberation, which, contrary to electoral systems, does not presuppose that individual will can be unproblematically assessed (Manin *et al.* 1987). But the opposition between traditional government and participatory activities also appears in a critical guise. Such perspectives analyse the very devices that claim to be ‘more democratic’ as micro-processes, through which political power is exercised in concealed manners. The critical perspective sees participatory mechanisms as a ruse creating obstacles toward a ‘radical democracy’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

When expressed in the Foucauldian language of governmentality, it focuses on the micro-politics at play within devices meant to construct ‘deliberating’ citizens or ‘empowered’ communities (Cruikshank 1999; Li 2007). For both the normative thinkers and the critics, ‘real participation’ is beyond what the state can do, and happens elsewhere.

This chapter seeks to rethink the question of the state in participation studies. It examines two attempts at articulating public participation and governmental interventions in domains related to the public administration of environmental issues: a national debate about nanotechnology conducted in France in 2009–2010, and participatory initiatives

addressing national forest loss in the Congo in 2011–2012. By contrast to the perspectives outlined above, the chapter adopts an agonistic perspective about what ‘public’, ‘participation’ and ‘the state’ mean. Its objective is to account for situations where participation and governmental action are mutually at stake, considering that the perimeter of the state (Mitchell 1991a) and the modalities of its intervention are not to be taken for granted but should be treated as outcomes of processes and analysed accordingly.

Through its focus on a French national public debate on nanotechnology and participatory initiatives in the Congo dealing with deforestation, this chapter demonstrates the relevance of approaching public participation as a vehicle for the empirical and theoretical investigation of the state. Despite their differences, these situations – a developed country confronted with the production and potential consumption of a new technology and a developing country seeking to participate in an international environmental regulation – illustrate the increasing use of *ad hoc* participatory interventions to deal with issues framed as national. The first section of the chapter explains why we propose to apprehend them as ‘state experiments with public participation’. The chapter then analyses a first situation, in which French governmental agencies with different technical expertise must coordinate in order to address an elusive national public, and a second situation, in which Congolese civil servants, expatriate consultants and members of the so-called civil society must temporarily speak in one voice. The analysis of nanotechnology in France and deforestation in the Congo display two different political constructs. But they both highlight moments when the state describes itself as a unified and delimited political entity in front of an audience. In the two cases, the (difficult) implementation of public participation at national levels contributes to the possibility of a self-description that can be qualified as a ‘state demonstration’ (Linhardt 2012), expected to make the democratic quality of the state visible.

Experimenting with public participation

Public participation does not happen in an institutional void, but is often, in one way or another, related to governmental initiatives. Whereas the literature on ‘dialogic democracy’ in the late 1990s approached participatory mechanisms through stylized empirical examples in order to present them as potential models to be replicated (Callon *et al.* 2009), our purpose here is to examine public participation as part of broader political operations and to focus on processes whose participatory qualities are *a priori* more ambiguous. Situations where issues constructed as national are at stake appear particularly interesting in that respect.

Consider, for instance, the case of the British national dialogue on genetically modified organisms, GM Nation?, held in 2003 and meant to be a response to growing controversies about biotechnology. This governmental initiative has been widely commented on, by science and technology studies (STS) scholars (Irwin 2006) and students of public participation interested in organizational or evaluation matters (Rowe *et al.* 2005). This now abundant literature treats GM Nation? as a paradigmatic site for the study of public participation. But the initiative was also a process through which the

very existence of a national public was problematized, as well as the modalities of governmental intervention. The British government sought to gather the opinion of a national, GM-attentive public. In fact, and as STS scholars have argued, the mechanisms drawn on to make this new entity speak actively performed a national public opinion about GMOs. By setting several meetings in various places, with selected and non-selected participants, the organizers of GM Nation? ended up producing many kinds of stakeholders (such as consumer groups or environmental movements), of interest for the British government and private actors (Jasanoff 2005, 129; Reynolds and Szerszynski 2006). The intervention aimed at constructing a common national position after years of controversy. It framed GMO issues as a general topic of concern for public opinion, whereas they could have been dealt with through localized regulatory puzzles targeting different products. The participatory initiative here was initiated by the state, albeit in a way that did not directly commit the government to follow its outcomes. It was an attempt by the state to demonstrate that it acts in a democratically acceptable manner on an issue framed as a concern for its population. This example invites us to simultaneously problematize the identity of publics who are expected to take part in nation-wide participatory mechanisms, the definition of the issues to be dealt with by these government-led mechanisms, and, eventually, the characteristics of the state engaged in public participation.

In order to further develop the analytical reflection about the connections between public participation and the state, we suggest focusing on ‘state experiments with public participation’. State experiments with public participation, as we have labelled them, are empirical situations in which governmental institutions conduct experiments with public participation. But state experiments with public participation are also situations in which the modalities of state action are experimented with. As we argue, the notion allows us to identify and examine settings and moments where the ability to configure the autonomous action of the state on a nation-wide issue is questioned.

A first step in the development of this approach is to clarify what we intend to capture with the vocabulary of the ‘experiment’. The term has been widely used in STS, first to describe scientific activity and display the mutual construction of scientific knowledge and social order (Shapin and Schaffer 1985; Latour 1993; Jasanoff 2004), and then to extend the realm of STS analysis to political initiative where the nature of the objects and issues at stake are redefined and where the form of democratic activities are questioned (Callon *et al.* 2009). Participatory initiatives, for that matter, have been analysed as experiments, whether laboratory experiments undertaken in closed, controlled conditions (Lezaun 2011; Bogner 2012) or open experiences within which the ontological characteristics of mundane things and of the people interacting with them are put to trial (Marres 2012). From this body of work, we take a notion of experiment that helps us to grasp situations characterized by public demonstrations performed through sociotechnical instrumentations, and meant to explore social and/or technical uncertainties.

The language of experiments points to three related dimensions, namely the apparatus used to conduct participatory initiatives; the recombination of the identities and issues at stake; and the demonstrations conducted in order to assess the validity of the undertaken initiatives. The experiments we analyse lead to ‘state demonstrations’ (Linhardt 2012).

The constitution of a public for managing issues framed as national concerns is the expected experimental outcome, and the modalities of state intervention are questioned in front of various witnesses, including the sociologist. As shown by the two examples described in the following sections – French nanotechnology and Congolese deforestation – state experiments with public participation offer an analytical opportunity for characterizing the state in situations where explicit public participation is required but state power still matters.

The French state on trial: experimenting with a national public debate on nanotechnology

Making nanotechnology governable

The French public bodies in charge of science policy made nanotechnology a priority in the early 2000s. Public funding was attributed for research, itself conducted by private companies and major public research bodies such as the Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique (CEA), the historic research institution for nuclear energy which recently diversified in other techno-scientific areas. In France as in other places, nanotechnology was considered as a source of potential public concerns, at environmental and/or ethical levels. A particularity of the French situation is that the opposition to nanotechnology in France has been extremely vocal. Nanotechnology has been targeted by activists claiming that nanotechnology developments would further increase human control over nature and the human body (by developing personalized medicine, introducing new chemicals in the environment, and offering paths for greater control thanks to application in electronics). Activists, gathered within a group called PMO (Pièces et Main d’Oeuvre), have been particularly active in Grenoble, in southeast France, a major hub for nanotechnology research, particularly at CEA (Laurent 2007).

In this context, the national consultation on environmental regulation that the newly elected president Nicolas Sarkozy launched in 2007 discussed nanotechnology under some pressure. Civil society organizations that were present at the time (mostly France Nature Environnement, a federation of French environmental organizations) called for a ‘national debate’ on nanotechnology and for the traceability of nanotechnology objects. These propositions were eventually included in two laws, through which the French government committed itself to organize such a national debate, and introduce a mandatory declaration of nanotechnology substances.

The dual concern for the national position within the ‘global nanorace’ (Hullmann 2006) and for the ‘responsible development’ of nanotechnology is not specific to France. The French case has two interesting particularities, though. In France, many of the participatory activities about nanotechnology are directly state sponsored and connected to public bodies. In other countries, the boundary between public and private initiatives related to ‘public engagement in nanotechnology’ has been more diffused. For instance, the notion of ‘upstream public engagement’ took shape in the United Kingdom within a collection of think tanks, consulting firms and research laboratories (Wilsdon and Willis 2004), themselves part of a diverse landscape of public participation with a wide range of connections with public bodies (Chilvers 2010). Second, France has been active within

international arenas as well as through national initiatives in the redefinition of risk regulation processes for nanotechnology, and regularly argues in front of European institutions for the need to reshape the regulation of chemicals in order to take the risks of nanomaterials into account.

When faced with its self-commitment to organize a national debate on nanotechnology, the French government chose to ask a public agency called the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP) to organize it, with the mission of collecting the opinion of the French public about nanotechnology development and its issues, and using it to ‘enlighten public decision-making’ (*éclairer la décision publique*). Created in the mid-1990s, CNDP has developed an expertise in the organization of public debates. Its usual procedure consists of a series of public meetings during which stakeholders are invited to speak and answer questions from the audience. The meetings are complemented by written contributions submitted by all interested parties. A procedure inscribed in the legal regulation of industrial activities makes the organization of CNDP *débat public* mandatory for industrial projects reaching a certain amount of investment. In 2002, CNDP became an Independent Administrative Authority (*Autorité Administrative Indépendante*), meaning that it received additional autonomy from the government itself. It then became competent for the organization of so-called *débats d’option générale*, that is, debates in which the question being discussed is a broad policy decision. The national debate about nanotechnology was organized under this legal provision. Before that, CNDP had organized only two such *débats d’option* on national public policy issues that were also connected to local development projects¹.

Commissioning CNDP to organize the national debate about nanotechnology was a prudent choice by the members of the public administration in charge. They hoped to benefit from the ability of CNDP to act as a neutral organizer of public debates held in controversial situations. The Independent Administrative Authority statute is only one component of a series of practices through which the commission may demonstrate its independence during the public debates it organizes. The loose standardization of the procedure, defined in very broad terms in the law and adapted to every new case according to principles and practical advices gradually defined by CNDP and circulated to organizing teams, and the composition of the teams themselves mostly made of retired civil servants, have allowed CNDP to find ways of answering recurrent questions about whether or not it is indeed independent from the parties involved.

For the French government, this expertise was particularly valuable in a situation where the preferred modes of public action were far from certain, and where a device such as the CNDP public debate was considered to be potentially useful, if applied to complex large-scale science-related issues. At a time when CNDP had become an illustration of ‘public participation *à la française*’, as French political scientists named it (Revel *et al.* 2007), using the public debate procedure was meant both to test the participatory device on larger issues than local infrastructure projects, and to experiment with potential new ways of crafting the national technology policy.

Making national publics speak

The CNDP debate on nanotechnology was conceived as a replication of a procedure well adapted to local infrastructure projects. This replication translated into the division of the discussions into sub-themes, related to the local places where the meetings were held. For instance, the applications of nanotechnology in cosmetics were discussed at Orléans, where the cosmetic company L'Oréal owns a production factory. A similar approach was adopted in other geographical sites. Overall, the division of the national debate into localized sub-issues can be understood as a way of grasping the variety of nanotechnology as a science policy programme, as well as an attempt to attract local concerned publics in the hope that the collection would constitute the national public the nanotechnology debate looked for.

Yet it was difficult for the organizers to maintain the representation of nanotechnology in various sub-issues, as participants systematically displace the original framing of the discussions. The processes through which public discussions escape predefined framing are familiar to public participation specialists, including to those who have studied the CNDP procedure (Fourniau 2007). The particularity of the CNDP debate on nanotechnology was that the pervasive uncertainty about the nanotechnology objects and programmes prevented any easy location of the concerns expected to be discussed. Participants regularly stumbled over whether or not particular industrial sectors used nanomaterials, and witnessed the impossibility of the public administration to identify the circulation of these potentially hazardous substances within the French territory. For instance, lengthy discussions occurred during a public meeting about whether or not the food industry used nanomaterials. NGO representatives claimed it was the case, while the industry representatives argued for the opposite. Officials from different ministries publicly expressed their disagreements, and eventually a senior official from the ministry of health concluded that 'all depended on the chosen definition'².

The identification of the concerned publics that the public debate hoped to attract was as difficult as that of nanotechnology objects. Among the expected concerned publics, civil society organizations were explicitly targeted by the organizers, who were keen to encourage them to submit written contributions and participate in the meetings – even if most of them were poorly acquainted with nanotechnology. But the most active participants in the public meetings were PMO activists strongly opposing nanotechnology and the participatory initiative itself. The activists considered nanotechnology as a global programme pertaining to the control of humans and nature for economic interests. Opposing the participatory objective of the CNDP debate, the anti-nanotechnology activists interrupted several meetings. They proposed a counter-model of citizen participation based on a critical distance to nanotechnology. They grounded this counter-model on what they label 'critical inquiry' – that is, a combination of critical descriptions of technological development programmes and public interventions targeting participatory initiatives³. The attempt at constituting a national public and a manageable national problem through the division of the debate into many local debates was subverted by PMO. It became an opportunity to realize the 'converging fights' (an expression regularly used by the activists) by bringing together all anti-technology movements in the various places where the debate circulated: nanotechnology was not a collection of sub-issues any more, but a national programme that comprised the debate itself.

Eventually, the activists' interventions made it necessary to adapt the public meeting format so that this uncontrollable public could be isolated. Organizers made extensive use of Internet exchanges and claimed that the online public was 'more representative' than the physical one, by virtue of its larger size. They attempted to divide the meeting rooms in two parts, one truly public and another one closed, where only invited participants sat, and where discussions were held – phone communications from the first to the second room remained possible, in a somewhat symbolic gesture meant to maintain the possibility of a public dialogue. Eventually, the last public meetings were all but cancelled, and replaced with closed ones held in locations that were only revealed once the would-be participant had duly registered. After the initial opposition from PMO and the subsequent adaptation of the device, most of the civil society organizations withdrew from participation, while only the representative of France Nature Environnement (the same federation of French environmental organizations that had argued that a national debate was necessary) participated in all the discussions, including the final secluded ones.

Displaying the French state in action

The French government reacted to the national debate on nanotechnology two and a half years after it ended. The document it released in 2012 explained that the debate had demonstrated that the state should adapt its functioning to nanotechnology:

[The conclusions of the debate] imply that the state ought to propose and put in place instruments that could:

- take health and environmental risk issues of nanomaterials into account, as well as the social and ethical issues related to nanotechnology;
- facilitate the integration of these issues in industrial strategies and technological diffusion⁴.

Through this conclusion, the French government recognized the potential risks and problems associated with nanotechnology and attempted to make industries aware of their responsibilities. No sign of the opposition appeared, and the debate became a demonstration that new regulatory categories for nanotechnology needed to be created, and that new devices for dealing with uncertainties about the publics and objects of nanotechnology were necessary. This final move referred to the initiatives in which the same civil servants active in the national debate were involved. In 2011, France was the first country to introduce a mandatory declaration of 'substances at a nanoparticulate state' in the public regulation. Through an innovative legal intervention on a still widely uncertain technological domain, the new regulatory category of 'substances at a nanoparticulate state' granted a legal existence to nanotechnology objects. For the civil servants in charge, this was also a way of demonstrating at the European level that a new regulation for nanomaterials was possible (Laurent 2013). In its final declaration answering the conclusions of the CNDP debate, the French government spoke in one voice, in the name of the state. The state appeared as a consistent entity, made of diverse, yet well-organized, components (i.e., the public agencies in charge of implementing the

mandatory declarations; CNDP that organized the public debate; and the government itself). This can be seen as an answer to the multiple requests, during the debate itself, for ‘the state’ to act voluntarily in front of the uncertainties related to nanotechnology⁵. This final move is a reconstruction of the state as a single actor, able to speak to an external and internal witnesses in one voice. But the debate had made this configuration much more complicated to sustain, as it exposed the diversity of the ‘state’. Thus, the preparation of the document presenting the position of the French government on nanotechnology was complex. Views of the issue at stake were different across the ministries involved, which caused difficulties for the coordinator of the preliminary report. He was an adviser to the minister of the environment⁶, in charge of ensuring the internal consistency of a document made up of contributions written in different ministries. Contributors from the ministry of research stressed the crucial role of national science policy programmes in harnessing the scientific and economic potential of nanotechnology. At the ministry of health, the civil servants in charge considered that their duty was to ‘prevent another health crisis’⁷ and that the national debate should explore the relevance of such policy tools as risk-benefit analysis or labelling for the public management of nanomaterials. This diversity was reflected in the team constituted across various ministries, in charge of monitoring the debate and its further development, and which intervened during the public meetings mostly to restate the (unclear) objectives of the debate, and the involvement of the government in the public management of nanotechnology.

But the state was also present during the national debate as a stakeholder among many others, through the contributions of public agencies working on health, environmental and occupational risks, and public research institutions such as the Commissariat pour l’Energie Atomique (CEA) or the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). All these public bodies submitted written contributions to the debate, alongside private companies and civil society organizations. This attracted criticisms, as some of the civil society organizations withdrew from the debate while claiming that the role of these institutions was improperly drawn: they considered that CEA, being the main research operator and filling up the ranks of the public administration for science policy issue at the ministry of research, should not have been a stakeholder among many others, but the operator whose projects are debated⁸. The critics had a particular version of the CNDP debate in mind, namely the debates organized about local infrastructure projects. In these latter cases, of which CNDP had become expert, the company in charge of the project commissions the debate and presents its project in front of all stakeholders, who can voice their opinions and concerns. The critics of the nanotechnology debate hoped to restore this configuration by drawing separations among the public bodies involved. For them, the state was to be the neutral organizer and the neutral regulator of nanotechnology, the development of which was undertaken by CEA, a public research body that resembled the private companies developing infrastructures (as in the case of local public debates). What was questioned at this point was the ability to distribute the roles and responsibilities of various public bodies so that the state could conduct nanotechnology policy in a participatory manner. This distribution was criticized in a whole different way by the most radical activists, for whom the very possibility of distributing state interventions was not possible. For PMO, organizing public debates,

regulating nanotechnology or fostering its development were all related to the making of nanotechnology as a global programme – precisely what was targeted by their critique. Through the gaze of PMO, the state could not act for the interest of the national public since it made both scientific development and participatory practices components of a threatening technological programme.

Throughout all these discussions, the debate questioned the possibility of the state to speak as a single entity acting on a problematic topic framed as a national issue. The response to the conclusions of the debate by the French government marked an attempt to reconstruct the consistency of the state as an actor integrating in its missions the public management of social and technical uncertainty, for the benefits of the national community and within the external witnessing of European institutions.

Extending the expertise of the French state

With the CNDP debate, the state experimented with public participation as much as the state was experimented with. The picture that emerges from this event is that of a state acting from multiple places, which attempts to reinvent its way of dealing with technological issues. Yet as it appears through the nanotechnology-related initiatives, this reinvention implies that the state redraws the perimeter of its activities, bases them on the centralized works of the public administration, while also reorganizing the various centres from which it intervenes in technology policy.

This movement is inscribed into, as much as it contributes to shape, the trajectory of a powerful state, expected to guarantee the neutrality of administrative expertise and prone to integrate new concerns in this very expertise. Political scientists have described how the French state managed to integrate environmental issues related to industrial activities into the centralized public administration of industry (Lascoumes 1994). Others have analysed the response to health crises in the 1990s and showed that the French state created health agencies meant to ensure the neutrality of its technical expertise while also taking participatory concerns into account (Benamouzig and Besançon 2005). These works display a state constantly attempting to integrate new components in a centralized expertise that grounds the legitimacy of its intervention. This powerful state is able to act through an expertise owned by various government components, public agencies and research organizations, brought together for the sake of the development and control of technology. Nanotechnology in France, as a public programme of technological development expected to be managed and controlled by the public administration, takes place within this definition of the state. Accordingly, the CNDP debate appears as a particularly explicit moment of trial for the French state, as it attempts to make both the conduct of public participation and the public management of technological uncertainty part of its roles and responsibilities, and a component of the expertise on which its interventions rely. In the meantime, the CNDP debate also displays the multiple centres from which industrial development is conducted and regulated, whether they are various ministries with different priorities, ‘independent administrative authorities’ organizing public debates, public research bodies, or health agencies providing technical expertise. This state experiment is a lens into the French state, for which industrial development is a crucial matter in defining its own identity (cf. Hecht 1998), and is dealt with in a plurality

of inter-connected centres of administrative expert interventions.

The preparation of the Congolese state: making civil society participate in decision-making about national deforestation

Our second case provides a contrast in which the nature of state intervention is radically different. It focuses on a series of participatory initiatives undertaken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the context of international climate policies⁹.

Since 2005, climate change negotiations have been investigating how to create economic incentives that would encourage developing countries to reduce their deforestation, considering the carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions attributed to the phenomenon. The international debate on ‘REDD+’ – ‘Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation in developing countries’ – has stimulated a set of interventions across the world. Supported by public funds from Northern governments, international organizations have launched so-called ‘readiness’ or ‘preparation’ programmes that intend to prepare developing countries to participate in the future incentive-based global policy. Since 2009, the Congo has benefited from this financial and technical assistance. Because negotiators decided to frame the reduction of forest loss as a problem in need for state actions, preparation programmes target forestry administrations and expect national commitments to the issue. This section considers one of the devices tested within the Congolese preparation for REDD+ and expected to demonstrate such a commitment: the Thematic Coordination Groups (TCGs) initiated in 2011. These groups are participatory settings gathering civil servants, NGO representatives and members of private companies in order to explore various policy options that could reduce national deforestation (e.g., energy alternatives to charcoal, sustainable agriculture, community-based forest management). While numerous countries are undertaking readiness processes, the Congo is an interesting case because of both its reputation as an undemocratic state and its strong dependence on foreign aid¹⁰. Therefore, the attempt to display participation through the creation of the TCGs led to situations where the distinctions between national and international, and ‘civil society’ and the state, are questioned by the actors themselves.

Preparing a country for REDD+

In order to understand the experimental character of the Thematic Coordination Groups and how this participatory initiative connects to governmental action in the Congo, it is necessary to situate it within the preparation process for REDD+. Since the end of the war in 2002, the Congo has been subjected to many aid interventions (Trefon 2011), such as the construction of infrastructures or the implementation of health or education policies targeting the Congolese population. The preparation for REDD+ is quite different from these interventions, which resemble the processes through which colonial or post-colonial states have emerged (Mitchell 1991b, 2002). It was deliberately tentative (Ehrenstein 2013) and its first and main achievement was institutional. A *Coordination Nationale* (National Coordination) in charge of preparation activities and belonging to the ministry of environment was constituted. This temporary organization comprised both Congolese and non-Congolese people. All of its members were working with the status of

consultants hired on an annual basis by the two funding programmes (one managed by the World Bank, the other by the United Nations Development Programme), and most of them, whether national or expatriate, were previously employed in other development projects in the Congo or elsewhere. With limited resources, the *Coordination Nationale* sought to make tropical deforestation a national concern. Its members attempted to identify development projects that were already undertaken with international resources and that could be slightly modified in order to become, as they put it, ‘REDD+ governmental actions’¹¹. For instance, the conception of a large programme funded by the World Bank, which was meant to improve transportation infrastructures for the revival of the agricultural sector, was seen as an opportunity to include provisions for non-deforestation. The state’s capacity that the preparation for REDD+ intended to harness for dealing with forest loss was mainly constituted by aid interventions.

As an experimenter, the *Coordination Nationale* performed demonstrations addressed to a variety of audiences. Among them stand the funding agencies, but also international NGOs based in Europe or North America and connected to Congolese organizations or individuals¹². The NGOs and their partners were attentive to ensure that the preparation for REDD+ was in line with criteria like the participation of local communities and the respect of indigenous communities’ rights¹³. This close monitoring had been stimulated by past development projects in the forestry sector (e.g., the reform of the forestry legislation) that were criticized for benefiting logging companies at the expense of people whose livelihoods depend on forestry resources. In 2009, such surveillance targeted the early steps of the preparation process. At that time, the minister of environment and the new-born *Coordination Nationale* decided to delegate to the consulting firm McKinsey & Company the definition of possible national options for decreasing forest loss. Greenpeace publicly condemned the collaboration. The NGO considered that McKinsey’s recommendations would benefit the private sector by planning to provide incentives for the regulation of the forestry industry, while blaming the agricultural practices of local communities as one of the main causes of deforestation (Greenpeace 2011). According to the critics, the report was serving private interests and not the national one. The creation of the TCGs, which would meet regularly over a relatively long period of time, was an outcome of the controversy. The groups were expected to convince these external witnesses that the ministry regarded the formulation of policy options for REDD+ as an inclusive and progressive process that involved, among other stakeholders, civil society organizations speaking on behalf of local communities.

Representing civil society

For the *Coordination Nationale*, the demonstrative role of the TCGs (i.e., displaying the participatory nature of the preparation process) was clear. Less so was the content of the initiative, or the material and human resources it required. Who should and could participate in the TCGs? And how? Looking at the answers experimented by the team of consultants is a way of not taking for granted the reality of the Congolese society, but to decipher how it is actively performed by participatory devices. This is an important analytical task in a context where the means of political representation are saturated with development projects, whether they are related to international organizations like the World Bank or to international NGOs such as Greenpeace attentive to the participatory

nature of aid and speaking for local communities.

The TCGs were expected to represent the diversity of the public concerned by deforestation by involving spokespersons of the so-called civil society, representatives from private companies and public administration officials. The use of the term ‘civil society’, which stems from the political sciences, is worthy of analytical attention in this context. The notion was used in the 1990s by development agencies to rethink their actions and promote associative ways of dealing with public problems and services instead of supporting the public sector (Ferguson 2006). Today in the Congo, what is referred to as civil society is a set of numerous small NGOs specialized in the different sectors targeted by international cooperation – sanitation, health, education, etc. (Trefon 2004). For instance, one of the organizations focusing on forestry issues and the preparation for REDD+ was the Réseau Ressources Naturelles (RRN; ‘Natural Resource Network’). This Kinshasa-based team of about 15 people represented more than 150 environmental small organizations disseminated on the Congolese territory interacting closely with people directly affected by forestry policies. It was funded by the European NGO Rainforest Foundation Norway, particularly active in the promotion of community-based forestry management and the defence of indigenous rights. ‘Consulting civil society’, as the *Coordination Nationale* says when speaking in front of international NGOs or governmental donors, means that a few meetings have been held in Kinshasa with members of organizations such as the RRN. Congolese civil society is as much an outcome of the relationships between international and national organizations as it is a collection of Kinshasa-based individuals mobilizing for the sake of environmental concerns, understood in the broadest sense of the term, given that campaigns for forests are also campaigns for the protection of human rights and against economic inequalities.

In this complex landscape, an analytical account that would describe, in a Deweyan manner, the formation of concerned groups related to the emergence of new issues not dealt with by existing institutions (cf. Marres 2007) would fail to grasp the specificity of the process. The highly equipped and tentative dynamics that might constitute national publics in the Congo is well illustrated by the functioning of the TCGs. In Kinshasa, participation in workshops and meetings related to projects receiving foreign aid is paid. Participants usually receive lump sums for travel costs, as well as daily allowances known as *per diem* (about US\$10 per person)¹⁴. They are also provided with snacks and soda (‘sweets’, *sucrés*, is the colloquial term). Compared to the average salary, these benefits are significant amounts of money and sources of revenue in their own rights for participants who may attend up to six workshops a month. In Kinshasa, civil society and civil servants are in ‘the race for workshops’, as an expatriate expert involved in the reform of the forestry sector puts it¹⁵. Therefore, receiving ‘sweets’ and *per diem* was a fair expectation according to the participants in the TCGs, but a budgetary challenge for the organizers¹⁶. The practical and moral issue of the payment of allowances was directly connected to the construction of a convincing channel for the civil society to speak. During discussions among members of the *Coordination Nationale*, differentiating the economic interest to participate from the concerns (whether environmental, economic or political) the participants were expected to represent proved impossible and finally irrelevant: indeed, being a member of a TCG was considered as a kind of consultancy work that should be rewarded.

If the *Coordination Nationale* agreed on turning civil society representatives, ministerial officials and private-sector actors into mission-paid consultants (like themselves), its members disagreed on the work to expect from the TCGs. For some of them, the groups aimed at collectively exploring how different policy options could be translated into concrete interventions for reducing deforestation, which could be implemented by applying for additional aid assistance and funds. But for other consultants of the *Coordination Nationale*, the TCGs were a unidirectional channel, through which they would explain the options the ministry had chosen to this assembly of spokespersons, and for them to then provide the information to the rest of the Congolese population. With the TCGs, the preparation process for REDD+ was oscillating between two configurations: trying to set up a dialogic forum or establishing a mere information channel.

Speaking for the Congo

While some participants in the TCGs were members of the civil society, others were civil servants from various administrative bodies, and these were particularly reluctant to contribute to the participatory initiative. Whereas the *Coordination Nationale* considered their participation as part of their mission given that, according to one expatriate consultant, ‘the state asks them to’¹⁷, the ability of its international staff to represent ‘the state’ was challenged. The civil servants were unwilling to consider the demand formulated by the *Coordination Nationale* as a governmental one. The role of the TCGs as state-sponsored initiatives was questioned through the mixed status of the *Coordination Nationale*. The latter was formally a part of the ministry of environment, under the authority of one of its senior officials as well as the minister himself. But its staff were dependent on and accountable to international organizations – United Nations and World Bank programmes – that provided their salary.

That the *Coordination Nationale* acted as a national public body and owed its existence to international policy is of no surprise in the development world (see examples in Ferguson 2006). For our analysis, it is more interesting to note that the preparation process and the experiment with the TCGs challenged its capacity to talk on behalf of the Congolese state. This issue was raised even more straightforwardly in international settings. Climate change policies such as REDD+ are designed during regular international negotiations. During these meetings, side events are organized to present publications or interventions related to climate issues. In December 2011 at the negotiation session in Durban, South Africa, the preparatory activities conducted in the Congo were displayed as those of a country speaking in one voice¹⁸. What mattered was to represent a state-party of the United Nations, in front of an international community composed of aid organizations, governmental donors and international NGOs. This took the form of a careful choice of speakers, complemented by various rhetorical strategies. In South Africa, the work done by the *Coordination Nationale*, such as the creation of the TCGs, was presented by the Congolese members of the team only (and not the expatriate ones) and by a few representatives of Congolese NGOs (including RRN) who acknowledged the participatory qualities of the preparation process¹⁹. The side event concluded with two speeches. In the first, a senior official from the World Bank congratulated ‘the Congo’ for its achievements. In the second, the spokesperson of a UN funding agency stated that this example of preparation for REDD+ was led by national

will. He used a colloquial expression within international cooperation – ‘country ownership’²⁰ – implying that the Congo was considered the main actor of the process, and not a passive beneficiary of foreign assistance.

A particular situation is configured during public events such as this one in Durban. It is characterized by the self-description of actions undertaken by a united state that, albeit in need of external resources, is able to harness them for the sake of a national interest. It relies on a staging during which these actions are displayed in front of witnesses positioned as external to the country. The event reconstructs the Congo as an autonomous political actor, worthy of international attention, partly given its experiments with public participation. That such a reconstruction does not account for the many practical difficulties encountered by the preparation process is not what matters here. At stake is the possibility of making the Congo speak as a member of an international community, able to deal with nation-wide issues in the right way because it involves civil society. Accordingly, one of the outcomes of the TCGs experiment was to make such a description persuasive.

While the demonstration in South Africa seemed to convince its audience, the national unity was soon challenged. One year after the Durban performance, RRN and other Congolese NGOs publicly voiced their dissatisfaction with the preparation for REDD+. In a letter addressed to the World Bank, they explained that the *Coordination Nationale* was asking the TCGs to rapidly provide recommendations, even though they felt that the work done by the groups was not completed and feared that, once they provided the outputs, they will not be further involved in designing concrete interventions (Groupe de Travail Climat REDD 2012). They also highlighted the fact that the TCGs never received what they described as ‘needed operating costs’ – that is, *per diem* and sweets. By circulating this complaint within international institutions, the civil society distanced itself from the preparation process and its actors – Congolese and expatriate consultants, the ministry of environment and the funders. For a short moment in December 2011, it had been possible to construe the Congo as a unified political entity by separating national actors and external witnesses. One year later, Congolese NGOs drew another separation that opposed civil society (be it national or international) and actors directly involved in ministerial initiatives (again, national and international).

Making the Congo an actor of the development world

One can identify issues similar to the case of the French nanotechnology debate: How to speak in the name of the state? How to constitute publics within participatory settings linked to governmental intervention? How to frame a national problem for the state to deal with? Here, the Congo experiments with the TCGs as much as the Congolese state is experimented with through the participatory initiative. Such a state experiment with public participation questions the possibility of constituting an entity able to play a role in international arenas and to conform to moral imperatives such as ‘public participation’. It is an analytical opportunity to see the Congolese state in action, where it has to produce a self-description, to manage a public administration problem, and to organize channels of representation under the gaze of witnesses like the World Bank and international NGOs that are deeply involved in the practical conduct of the experiment and in the constitution

of the political entity called the Congo²¹.

Analysing state experiments with public participation is useful to characterize the Congolese state. It has often been described as failed (Reno 1999; Trefon 2009) or more recently as fragile (Karsenty and Ongolo 2012). These qualifying terms tend to see Congolese leaders as unwilling to act for the general interest, and the administration as unable to implement political decisions. Indeed, one cannot pretend that everything is fine and democratic there. Yet, the Congolese state might also be characterized by highlighting the permanent displacement of its perimeter. Consultants working in the *Coordination Nationale*, Congolese organizations speaking for civil society and backed by international NGOs or civil servants hoping to receive economic benefits additional to their official salary all act at some point in the name of the Congo, but they all also manifest uncertainty about where exactly the Congolese state begins and ends. The study of participatory devices tested in the preparation for REDD+ shows that the elusiveness of the boundaries of this political entity is a modality of its action within international settings.

Conclusion

The two cases examined in this chapter have described state experiments with public participation. They constitute interesting opportunities to reflect upon participation and state action in (at least) three ways. First, our analysis apprehends the use of public participation by governmental actors within broader state interventions. Second, state experiments question the channels of representation when the issues to be dealt with, such as technological development or environmental concerns, are constructed as national, partly through the participatory devices themselves but also because they relate to the integration of the countries in international programmes and regulations. Third, these experiments end with state demonstrations during which external witnesses are created to observe where the state is and what it does.

The chapter focused on situations that cannot be described in terms of emerging concerned groups willing and able to participate. In the French case, it proved impossible to create a physical arena where pacified discussion could happen given that one of the most concerned and active stakeholders stood against any participation in the debate, which was considered as another extension of technocracy. In the Congolese case, it proved necessary to include in the organization of participatory meetings the distribution of monetary rewards to both ministerial officials and representatives of civil society, whose attitude toward the initiative was quite ambivalent, praising its participatory qualities and then denouncing its flaws in front of the same audience. The rooms hosting the French national debate and the bank notes required for the functioning of the Congolese TCGs can be seen as examples of the instrumentation through which public participation is produced, but also through which two different forms of state action and state power are displayed. Separating the invited speakers of the debate on nanotechnology from the rest of the public, including anti-technology activists, says something about the French state, where a powerful techno-scientific expertise is at the core of decision-making. Using *per diem* to indifferently incite civil servants and environmental associations to participate in regular meetings about policy-options to

reduce deforestation says something about the Congolese state, where the public–private demarcation, which characterizes an ideal Western modern state, is irrelevant for a resource-less public administration.

One of the main analytical interests of state experiments is to offer empirical entry points for the exploration of different kinds of political organizations called states. The example of nanotechnology displays the centrality of expertise in the constitution of France. As the French state attempts to govern the social and technical uncertainties of nanotechnology, the variety of administrative resources and expertise centres requires coordination. The CNDP debate then appears as a moment when the polycentric organization of the administration is made explicit, publicly questioned and then re-stabilized under the guise of the single state able to publicly engage in technological development in front of internal (French citizens) and external (European institutions) audiences. By contrast, the constitution of the Congolese state as a political actor in international arenas stems from processes that intertwined aid projects and ministerial initiatives dealing with deforestation. The example of the preparation for REDD+ shows the blurring of the divide between public and private interests, in addition to casting light on the problematic fluctuation of the frontier between what is considered as Congolese and what is not. The participatory tool tested by expatriate consultants on behalf of the ministry of environment comprises trials for the elusive localization of the Congolese state.

But our analysis of state experiments with public participation has also emphasized similar mechanisms. It showed that framing issues as national concerns may occur through *ad hoc* participatory devices that supplement the more traditional representation processes. We accounted for operations through which states are delimited as entities in front of an audience (citizens or partners). In both cases, experimenting with alternative forms of public participation contributes to the possibility of such a self-description. In the Congo, it enabled the *Coordination Nationale* to show to external partners that the whole country was united in the preparation for REDD+, more than if only a couple of ministerial officials would have appeared on stage. In France, the experiment sought to create a national public, and required coordination among public bodies for the state to address this audience's concerns. What is at stake in the two situations we analysed is the possibility of constituting the state as a sovereign political power while demonstrating the democratic quality of its interventions.

Identifying state experiments helps the sociological analysis of the state. In the two cases the configurations in which participatory initiatives aim to construct publics for state intervention and public concerns for the state to act on are not pre-given. The state experiments analysed in the chapter contributed to create these configurations and maintain their stability. As a result, they display to the sociologist what the French and the Congolese states are made of and how they are expected to act.

We introduced this chapter by highlighting the proliferation of explicit public participation initiatives in state interventions. This calls for examining further the connections between these experiments and other kinds of state experiments. For instance, the analysis of the CNDP debate on nanotechnology can be pursued with that of

the regulatory innovation that the mandatory declaration of nanotechnology introduced, and the description of the TCGs as a state experiment suggests the need to account for the other initiatives undertaken under the preparation process. But one can also rephrase the specificity of the participatory domain (both as a characteristic of collective undertakings and as an area of scholarly investigation) by considering that it is itself an outcome of state experiments to analyse. The opposition that the national debate on nanotechnology faced might well make the French government reluctant to commission other large-scale debates to the CNDP. In the Congo, whether or not the TCGs are indeed participatory will be known once the *Coordination Nationale* manages to convince its external witnesses – which include NGOs with practical experience and a normative perspective on public participation – that it is indeed the case. Framed this way, arguing for a specific scholarly domain devoted to public participation risks predefining what is best understood as outcomes of state experiments, namely areas of collective action known as ‘participatory’. Rather, this chapter attempted to show that an empirical theory of the state grounded in the analysis of state experiments would allow us to locate the multiplicity of empirical sites where state power is problematized, and to identify the operations that make participatory initiatives specific components of state intervention.

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¹ One was related to transportation policy in south-east France, the other to nuclear waste policy choices related to a zone selected for burying them.

² This quote is an excerpt from the transcription of the meeting (translated from French).

³ The critical descriptions are presented in short articles distributed in various meetings, and published online on the organization's website (www.piecesetmainoeuvre.com).

⁴ *Réponse aux conclusions du Débat Public*, translated from French.

⁵ All the exchanges during the public meetings were transcribed and published online by the services of CNDP. One can easily locate the occurrence of 'the state' in this body of text. 'The state' is the entity that is almost always called for by participants in the public meetings when it comes to envisioning potential actions to manage nanotechnology and its concerns. We do not attempt to use this evidence to draw conclusions about the importance of an abstract notion of 'the state' for the French public. Yet this helps to characterize the situation that was constituted through the CNDP public debate, namely a public display of the uncertain ability of the state to deal with an issue, nanotechnology, that was itself uncertain.

⁶ He was interviewed by one of the authors in October 2009.

⁷ This expression was used by a civil servant from the ministry of health during an interview with one of the authors. The interviewee was then referring to a health crisis that happened in France in the 1990s.

⁸ These arguments were publicly stated in *Le Monde* ('Nanotechnologies, osez mettre en débat les finalités', *Le Monde*, 18 February 2010).

⁹ This section is based on doctoral research conducted by one of the authors (Ehrenstein) from 2009 to 2014. It comprised ethnographic fieldwork within the Congolese ministry of environment (March–April 2011) and at the Durban negotiation session on climate change in December 2011.

¹⁰ In 2013, the World Bank's initiative included more than 30 countries (Forest Carbon Partnership Facility 2013).

¹¹ This expression was used by an international consultant during a weekly team meeting attended by one of the authors in spring 2011.

¹² See the description of 'transnational advocacy networks' by Keck and Sikkink (1998).

¹³ Participation is also required by the World Bank for this programme (Forest Carbon Partnership Facility 2008).

¹⁴ For a similar account of the conduct of clinical trials in Kenya see Geissler (2011).

¹⁵ This expression was used by the regional coordinator for Central Africa of the projects funded by the World Resources Institute (WRI) on forestry issues during an interview in spring 2011.

¹⁶ Whereas the usual practice in development projects is to organize a few meetings that gather a maximum of 100 people, the TCGs were designed to assemble almost 300 people, which would meet within groups of 15 on a regular basis for two years.

¹⁷ The expression was used during a meeting of TCGs organized within the *Coordination Nationale*, which one of the authors attended in spring 2011.

¹⁸ One of the authors attended the session and the side event.

¹⁹ NGO representatives participated as members of the country delegation, whereas there is a distinct NGO status (independent from any country) within the climate negotiations.

²⁰ 'Ownership' has become a watchword for the World Bank and other aid organizations since 2000. The objective of such an orientation in development assistance is to guarantee that governments own the projects funded (and fostered) through international cooperation (Anders 2010).

²¹ Other countries are often more explicit regarding the external control they face. For instance, Brazil refused the introduction of constraining participatory requests during the negotiations conducted at the 2011 session of the Conference of the Parties.