

Industrial air pollution in Fos-sur-Mer : from associative and political action to the implementation of a scientific policy. Birth of the Eco-citizen Institute for pollution knowledge.

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In industrialized regions, the “social acceptance” of industrial development raises the question of the vulnerability of the population and the representations of actors taking part in the regulatory devices of pollution and industrial hazards. Historically, the beginnings of the institutional consideration of the sanitary condition of populations belong to a monarchical desire to assure State power in the 18th century, between enhancing industry seen as the motor of national grandeur and the growing concern to preserve public health which was expressed through the development of hygienism. However, following numerous recent works, the question of reactions in the face of pollution by industry incites us to question the place of collective organisations (associations, trade unions, different groups) in the founding and implementation of these norms. In this field, environmental conflicts are as fundamental to analysis as knowledge of the systems of negotiation which followed.

Using an ethnographic survey carried out in the Golfe de Fos-sur-Mer (Bouches-du-Rhône) from 2010 to 2012 (over 40 semi-directive interviews), we will look at the appearance on the public agenda of questions of air pollution and their consideration by local authorities in a context in which air quality management belongs firstly to the State.

We shall firstly look at the way in which the associations against air pollution build their own forms of participation on a local scale. From a conflict concerning the building of an incinerator for household waste on one of the most industrialized regions in France, the industrial-port zone of Etang de Berre and the Golfe de Fos, several associations set up different forms of exposure and protest, helped by the highly vindictive discourse of local councillors.

In this region, the concerns for air quality have long since been present and visible with the foundation of the first SPPI (Secrétariat Permanent pour les Problèmes de Pollution Industrielle – permanent bureau for industrial pollution problems) in 1971 and the oldest existing air quality surveillance association, Airfobep. But it was the plan to build an incinerator which caused air pollution problems to re-emerge in 2000 with 2 associations of residents being founded, claiming rights (linked to the environment and to democracy) and organising the diffusion of well-documented representations of air pollution and its health impact.

The historical perspective and analysis of the issues of the political and territorial conflicts tends to highlight the close link between these ranges of actions aiming to “defend a healthy environment” and citizen criticism, heirs to regional development which drastically changed the landscape in 1972, against decision-making processes which, according to the opponents, committed only the

national authorities and the industrialists, excluding citizens and local authorities. The process of exposure caused growing momentum in expertise of the individuals concerned and contributed to the foundation of shared representation (between the opponents) of the causes and consequences of air pollution in the Etang de Berre area. The search for proof, in particular, between the deterioration of the health of the local residents and air pollution, was constantly based on official, public data with a view to making positions more credible, even if this co-existed with a much more demonstrative form of dramatising media coverage of the local situation. This exposure also included criticism of the limits of air quality monitoring, its management and local governance by State services.

A closer examination will look at the institutional consideration for these concerns by local authorities, the founders of the “Eco-citizen Institute for knowledge of pollution” which personifies a sort of outcome of the councillors’ involvement in this conflict which had lasted for 10 years. This Institute set up in 2010 is a unique example of a scientific policy adopted by a local authorities aiming at joint production of knowledge. It is seen as part of the AIGRETTE survey (integrated approach to regional environmental risk management) carried out by the West Provence local authorities, which represents a “zero” pollution and environmental state to allow for the installation of mid and long-term management measures. The object of this institute, based on a scientific committee with a joint board of administrators is to acquire a more complete meteorology of atmospheric pollution, complementary to that carried out by the certified air quality surveillance association and to set up experimental surveys of the health impact of this air pollution.

The foundation of this institute is thus the formalisation of the intention of the local authorities to take their place in the regulation of industrial pollution in their region and to take over its future. It is also part of the strategy of assertion of the councillors of the west of the Etang du Berre in a political conflict with the Marseille agglomeration seeking for territorial expansion and sharing the interests of the Port of Marseille in charge of developing the industrial-harbour zone. Thus paradoxically, what may appear to be making use of the environmental cause by councillors, does on the contrary put local stakeholders in a position of being able to count on a proactive policy of knowledge and prevention in health-environment