Eco-Demos: Using Public Demonstrations to Influence and Manage Environmental Choices and Politics

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Abstract

This paper shows how members of NGOs, scientists, journalists, industrialists, political and administrative authorities use different forms of public demonstration to influence and manage environmental choices and politics. The analysis is based on three case-studies on protests and on scientific and technological demonstrations made public in France and in England. It focuses on demonstrations of the danger of nuclear waste, anti-road protests and demonstrations in the field of waste management. The paper highlights the roles played by these ‘eco-demos’ and reflects more generally on the social uses and politics of public demonstrations.

Keywords: Public demonstration, politics, protest, environment, waste management
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In his book *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville claimed that “the world is not led by long and learned demonstrations” (Tocqueville 1981: 55). If Tocqueville is right, what kinds of demonstration, if any, are used to lead the world? I would like to address this issue by looking more particularly at the ways various kinds of actors use different forms of public demonstration to influence and manage environmental choices and politics – i.e. “eco-demos.” The actors involved include members of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), scientists, journalists, industrialists and political and administrative authorities. They use all kinds of demonstrative performances, including street protests and scientific and technological demonstrations made public, in order to produce various forms of collective mobilization.

My analysis is based on three case-studies. The first one focuses on demonstrations of the danger of nuclear waste in La Hague, France. The second bears on anti-road protests that took place in England. The third focuses on demonstrations in the field of waste management in France. I analyse each of these cases in turn and then reflect on the role of eco-demos and on the social uses and politics of public demonstrations.

1. Demonstrating the Danger of Nuclear Waste

The first case-study focuses on how the danger of nuclear waste processed by a specialized plant and stored in La Hague in France has been progressively perceived as a reality by epidemiologists, doctors, journalists and the public. This perception was the result of a series of key demonstrations.

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1 © Copyright Claude Rosental, 2011, All Rights Reserved. Author’s address: Institut Marcel Mauss - CEMS, CNRS-EHESS, 190 Avenue de France 75013 Paris, France. Email: claude.rosental@ehess.fr. I would like to thank Juliette Beziat for her comments on an earlier draft.

2 This case has been studied by Cyril Lemieux and my analysis is based on my reading of Lemieux (2008).
For many years, the danger of nuclear waste near La Hague remained relatively invisible to the public. This situation has gradually changed, and several public demonstrations have contributed to this evolution. The following three examples will illustrate this.

In 1995, an independent laboratory measuring the levels of radioactivity in the west of France announced during a press conference that a site in La Hague that was supposed to store short half-life radioactive waste was holding one hundred kilograms of long half-life radioactive waste, namely plutonium. This piece of information was published by various newspapers. The manager of the plant responded to this denunciation, saying that plutonium was diluted across the entire site and that this was not news. He argued that this piece of information was already present in a report that had been made available to the public.

This report weighed seven kilograms and a great deal of motivation was needed to gain access to it. Furthermore, this particular piece of information could only be found in one of the report’s numerous tables, which were opaque to non-specialists. One of these tables showed an on-site activity of ‘Pu 39’ of 211 914 Giga Becquerel. An expert translation was therefore required for it to be noticed that one hundred kilograms of plutonium were present on site.

It might of course be argued that in a sense this piece of information was not hidden. But in order to make it visible to the public, expert investigations and a strong desire to extract and present data in a relevant format were required. In order to demonstrate the danger of nuclear waste on the La Hague site to journalists and to the public, scientific results had to be framed in a specific manner. Journalists could be used to reveal the danger of nuclear waste as long as they were given the relevant demonstration.

This is what epidemiologist Jean-François Viel learned when he tried to demonstrate the risks of leukaemia near the nuclear plant in La Hague. Since the end of the 1980s Pr. Viel had had the intuition that the risks of leukaemia were particularly high near the La Hague plant. In 1990, he looked at local population mortality rates and did not notice any impact of the plant on health. In 1994, he looked at the figures available for illness rates among the local population and noticed a slight correlation with the proximity of the plant. His published
results were relayed by the press. These results had no major impact on the perception of the
danger of the plant, because Pr. Viel had been very careful when drawing his conclusions.

Pr. Viel then learned about a new method of statistical analysis at a conference. This
method could be used to produce a map of epidemiological risks. When applied to his set of
data, this method allowed him to produce a 3D diagram which highlighted in a spectacular
fashion the risks of leukaemia near the plant in La Hague. Indeed, the diagram showed the
relationships between the risk of leukaemia and residency. The risk reached a peak at the
location of the La Hague plant.

There was some statistical uncertainty concerning the diagram. The diagram alone did
not contain said piece of information. As a result, the exact level of danger displayed on the
diagram was particularly difficult for non-specialists to grasp. But Pr. Viel was aware of the
utility of his diagram. It could be used by journalists to clearly demonstrate the danger of the
nuclear waste in La Hague to the public, whereas many previous scientific studies were not
suitable for that purpose. Viel used this demonstrative device in an article that he published in
a popular scientific journal. His article was echoed in various major newspapers in France.

Viel’s demonstration generated contradictory interpretations. But overall it was
successful in generating major debates concerning the danger of the nuclear waste in La
Hague. Indeed, although various members of the scientific community validated certain
versions of Viel’s study, some doctors contested its value. They based their argument on
Viel’s use of probabilistic models, and on the distinction between the correlations displayed
on the diagram and the lack of causal models explaining how an excess of leukaemia could be
produced by the plant. Local press journalists who consulted these doctors were reluctant to
relay Viel’s study. But the demonstrative device Viel used was extremely powerful, and the
resulting coverage in other newspapers was such that the local press could not avoid devoting
significant column space to the “event.”

Viel learned from this experience that he needed to be more careful about the
interpretive flexibility to which his claims might be subjected in the media. In a later study, he
made sure that journalists would be able to summarize his demonstration in a simpler and
more straightforward manner. The summary he offered to them evoked a clear relationship
between cases of leukaemia and the weekly consumption of local fish and seafood near La
Hague. This summary proved to be a key factor in the success of his demonstration in the media.

The power of demonstrative adequacy can be illustrated by another example. In 1996, Greenpeace organized a press conference to present the results of a study carried out by an independent laboratory. This study showed an abnormal rate of iodine 129 in the terrestrial moss near the La Hague plant. This demonstration of the danger of nuclear waste based on a simple statement was a media success in itself.

But Greenpeace is accustomed to using other types of public demonstration to show the danger of nuclear waste and these are not necessarily traditional protests. Not far from La Hague, Greenpeace mobilized divers to take seaweed samples in Cherbourg in order to measure radioactivity levels. This activity attracted large media coverage by TV channels.

Dinghies and divers are particularly well-suited for TV cameras and photographers. The level of cooperation between journalists and demonstrators depends on the right choice of demonstrative formats. Journalists rely on the demonstrative intelligence of third parties to be able to work, i.e. to deliver ‘news.’ It is for this reason that journalists may even be tempted to organize or at least influence the production of public demonstrations.

For example, one member of Greenpeace reported that a French newspaper journalist had offered to subsidize a public demonstration in the Casquets ocean trench – located not far from La Hague. Between 1950 and 1963 the UK sent 17000 tons of radioactive waste to the Casquets ocean trench near Cherbourg. The journalist suggested that the Greenpeace member send a dinghy and a diver to the trench at the newspaper’s expense so that a picture could be taken to serve as the cover page for an issue of the newspaper. The offer was rejected by the Greenpeace member, but this is a clear illustration of the attention and value that journalists attach to relevant forms of public demonstration.

2. Anti-Road Protests

The ways public demonstrations are used to influence and manage environmental choices and politics can be illustrated by a second case. This case bears on the anti-road
protests which took place in 1995 and 1996 against the building of the Newbury bypass in southern England. The story of these protests has been reported in several publications.³

The Newbury bypass was a nine mile road project involving the clearance of 360 acres of land, a third of which was composed of woodland. This project led to some of the biggest anti-road protests in Europe, involving approximately 7000 people. Approximately 1000 people were arrested.

Several types of demonstration were used during the protests. During the second half of 1995, some protestors used the strategy of ‘tree sitting’: they built tree houses and lived in them. They gathered together in camps. Some hoped this would stop the clearance work which had begun during the summer of 1995. The main idea was to use human shields to prevent bulldozers from felling the trees.

Another strategy consisted in building a network of tunnels in order to stop builders driving heavy vehicles on site. Demonstrators wanted to discourage drivers from moving. If they moved, they ran the risk of collapsing the tunnels and of burying protestors.

Both actions represented concrete attempts to freeze the clearance work. But at the same time, they helped to make the opposition to the bypass visible to the builders, the authorities, the press and the public. Demonstrative strategies were very much oriented towards the media. One of the main goals was to rally the public to the environmental cause.

Demonstrators used other strategies to achieve this goal, one of which was to try to get the media to report on the eviction of camps and on the conflicts between protesters and the police or security guards. Private security firms were indeed mobilized in addition to police forces in the struggle against protesters. In particular, climbers were hired by a private firm to evict protesters from the trees.

Other demonstrative strategies included a march of 5000 people, the organization by Friends of the Earth and the Green Party of a public meeting in Newbury, and specific ways

³ My analysis is based in particular on archives accessible here: http://www.ukrivers.net/newburybypass/factfile.html. It is also based on my reading of Hindle (2008) and Barry (2001: 175-196).
of interacting with police authorities and security guards. Protestors collectively favoured passivity, calm and humour over anger, in accordance with common practices of non-violent civil disobedience and with the advice of experienced members of environmental organizations. For example, some protestors tickled climbers who were trying to evict them, or dressed up as cows.

There was a quantitatively significant presence of media representatives on site, made up of newspaper and TV journalists, as well as freelance photographers. For the latter, photos and films of public demonstrations had a commercial value. Being able to record events as and when they occurred and to send them immediately to the media could be very lucrative. Storing images until an event occurred was also a relevant strategy for them, as when needed it allowed them to sell images of everyday camp life.

Journalists and protesters were thus dependent on one another. Journalists needed public demonstrations in order to do their job if they were employees of newspapers or TV channels, or in order to make a living if they were working freelance. Protesters needed the journalists to witness their actions in order to deliver messages to the public and to attempt to win political battles, but also in order to limit the occurrence of incidents with security forces or to exploit them via the media - security forces tended to act off-camera as much as possible, as violent acts against protestors were unpopular.

Both the media and protestors also relied on well-organized environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth which issued regular press releases and which had considerable experience and skills in this domain. Press releases helped protestors advertise their actions, while journalists were informed of present and future ‘events’ and fed with appropriate news and opinions. Symmetrically, environmental organizations benefited from local demonstrations which received solid media coverage. These demonstrations helped environmental organizations to wage their own wars on a more global scale.

In this respect, it should be noted that the protests failed to prevent the building of the bypass. Protestors were evicted in April 1996 and the bypass was completed by the end of 1998. It is now part of the A34 highway. But the Newbury battle was not simply a local struggle. Some of the protestors and of the organizations that were mobilized in Newbury wanted to make the public, political authorities and construction companies more aware of
environmental issues related to road-building. In this respect they did not see Newbury as a defeat. As far as they were concerned, losing the Newbury battle did not mean losing the war. On the contrary, in the long run losing this battle helped them weaken their enemies, if not win the war. Demonstrative performances in the context of the Newbury bypass project and of later road projects eventually led building companies to take local environmental parameters into account when designing and promoting road projects.

This is why Friends of the Earth organized an artistic event in Newbury called “Art Bypass” even after protesters were evicted. This type of event represented a way of capitalizing on the Newbury struggle and of continuing the environmental fight against highway projects on a larger scale. A press release by Friends of the Earth on July 25, 1996 described Art Bypass as:  

“A mile-long string of outdoor environmental art roadworks including: sculpture, performance and film […] Art Bypass will take us on an interactive journey exploring the lows of a typical mile of motorway including road rage, the service station, the family row, the breakdown, an accident, a traffic jam as well as honouring the nine miles of ancient Southern English landscape lately cleared to make way for the controversial Newbury bypass […] Because Art Bypass is highlighting the negative impacts of the car culture, we are asking people to leave their cars at home and travel to the event by public transport. There will be no parking available at the site.”

This action is worthy of note, as Friends of the Earth and many environmental organizations mainly tend to use scientific demonstrations and protests in the framework of their struggle, as the La Hague case also illustrates. One of the goals of Art Bypass was to attract public attention to the environmental damage caused by road projects. This public demonstration was used as a tool to create collective mobilization. Science, art and human bodies may all be involved in such a purpose, even if certain forms of public demonstration may be preferred over others, depending on the social spaces in which they take place and on the actors involved.

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4 http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/19960725182402.html
3. Public Demonstrations of Waste Management

The last case I will analyse here stems from sociological investigations that a group of colleagues and I conducted in the 1990's on the French system of waste management (Barbier et al. 1994; Rosental 1993). At the demand of the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (Ademe), we looked at innovation projects which were being developed in the field of waste management. We were interested in understanding the socio-technical dynamics that animated this field.

We were able to observe various demonstrative strategies used by different actors to promote their own methods or projects for waste management. Actors included industrialists managing refuse incinerators or factories employing workers to selectively sort household waste, representatives of associations collecting and recycling specific used goods such as ink cartridges, and executives of local and regional services in charge of collecting, recycling and valorising various kinds of waste.

Demonstrations produced by these actors were as much about showing as about omitting. The demonstrated “solutions” consisted to a large extent in displacing environmental problems and in concentrating or diluting pollution. The following examples will illustrate this point.

Promotion of the building of new refuse incinerators or the renovation of older ones among local authorities and the public mainly involved emphasising the use of air filters. These air filters were intended to clean the smoke from incinerators produced by the burning of household waste. The filters were supposed to limit air pollution, especially in the area surrounding the incinerator. Demonstrations of these air filters seemed to suggest that they would eliminate pollution.

But what did not appear so clearly in the demonstrations was that the use of air filters produced highly toxic industrial waste. Used air filters concentrated pollution and had to be sent to industrial dumps especially designed for this dangerous type of waste. The use of air filters led to pollution being concentrated in dumps instead of being diluted in the air. There was also a risk of the pollution being diluted at a later stage if the dump did not efficiently fulfil its role. Pollution was thus just transformed and displaced.
Another technical solution which was proposed to fight air pollution was that of cleaning incinerator smoke with water. But the corresponding demonstrations did not highlight the fact that this process led to water pollution. This process led to diluted water pollution if the water used to clean the smoke was released without further treatment, or to concentrated pollution again if water filters were used and had to be sent to industrial dumps. Pollution was once again displaced, although this displacement was not given much visibility.

Similar dynamics were required to demonstrate the advantages of selectively sorting out and recycling household waste to the public and to local authorities. These demonstrations were produced by the local and regional services in charge of waste management. They were intended to convince and mobilize populations to sort their waste. Some of these demonstrations were also produced by industrialists who offered to collect household waste and selectively sort it in factories, often by virtue of public subsidies. The intended goal was to recycle paper, plastic and glass, among others.

Generally speaking these demonstrations did not highlight the fact that used paper was sometimes sent abroad for recycling purposes. Moreover, used paper sometimes ended up being burnt in incinerators. Indeed, it was not always worthwhile for industrialists to recycle used paper. It all depended on the market price of this raw material and on the level of public subsidies which varied and fluctuated according to local and national policies. It also depended on the evolving cost of the recycling process. The efforts and expenditure of citizens who had sorted their used paper and subsidized the recycling processes via their taxes might prove to have been wasted. Furthermore, the industrial processes mobilized to recycle used paper were not ecologically neutral, nor was the impact on health of using recycled paper highlighted.

The same dynamics applied to plastic materials, whereas glass could be easily recycled and from an environmental standpoint this seemed to be worthwhile. But the fact that the recycling process was profitable and that private companies (as opposed to the public sector) were often in charge of the process was not clearly highlighted. In fact, private companies tended to reap the rewards, at the expense of citizens who sorted their waste for free.
Also, demonstrations of the advantages of the selective sorting of waste did not highlight the major difficulties that people encountered when following sorting instructions. Very often, oral and written instructions are not enough to achieve appropriate behaviour. Categories such as “paper” and “plastic”, and more subtle subcategories used for recycling purposes, are subject to interpretive flexibility within households. As a result, supposedly selected waste collected from among the population can be so heterogeneous that it cannot be used for recycling purposes. In this case, waste ends up being burnt in incinerators without the public being clearly informed.

Such examples illustrate how public demonstrations can be used to either draw attention to or avoid mentioning environmental issues and to generate local solutions and the displacement of environmental problems. On the basis of the cases I have analysed, and of the results of investigations I have conducted on the roles of public demonstrations in different social spaces, I would now like to reflect more broadly on the social uses and politics of public demonstrations.

4. Reflecting on the Social Uses and Politics of Public Demonstrations

The cases I have analysed show how various forms of public demonstration (such as scientific and technological demonstrations or collective protests) may be used to influence and manage environmental choices and politics. These demonstrations may involve science, as well as art and human bodies. They may be based on drawing attention to certain phenomena, as much as on not mentioning others. They may be used to generate various forms of collective mobilization.

The cases under study also reveal how cooperation between the media and demonstrators is important for the production of efficient public demonstrations. Key to such cooperation is an appropriate choice of demonstrative formats – what I have called ‘demonstrative intelligence’.

In addition, the case-studies bring to light how public demonstrations allow various forms of political intervention. They also show that public demonstrations may be subject to various forms and scales of capitalization: demonstrations may be used by demonstrators for their own goals, but also by third parties for other goals. So if “the world is not led by long
and learned demonstrations” as Tocqueville claims, it would seem that various forms of public demonstration may nevertheless be used to lead the world, and in particular to influence and manage environmental choices and politics.

Moreover, the case-studies illustrate how demo-cracies have developed on a large scale. I use the term ‘demo-cracies’ here to refer to regimes which use public demonstrations to manage public affairs. Demo-cracies appear to have developed in many social spaces. Bill Gates’ famous software demos and the PowerPoint demonstration Colin Powell gave at the United Nations on February 5, 2003 to put the United States at war against Iraq are further illustrations of this.

As public demonstrations of science and technology are widely used in industrial societies, it may be that a large demo-cracy has developed on an international scale. Demonstrations of science and technology in particular may be no less, or even more, important for collective mobilizations than the street protests of social movements (Girard and Stark 2007). Further investigations are certainly needed to test these assumptions and to explore the demo-cratic landscape.

In past years, I started to explore this landscape while observing Silicon Valley and European Commission (EC) actors at work (Rosental 2007, 2011). According to the results of my inquiries, it would seem that demo-cracies are not identical to ideal democracies, and that their existence goes relatively unnoticed. Demo-cracies would in part appear to benefit the masses, if only in allowing them some specific forms of access to the closed world of science. But they seem to give power not so much to the ancient demos or people - as in an ideal democracy, by definition - as to the skilful demonstrators and to the institutions that rely on them.

European demo-cracy in particular might appear relatively invisible to most citizens. It is nevertheless very effective in giving significant power to efficient demos, talented demonstrators and the organizations that employ them. As I have shown in previous works, over recent years EC officials have indeed used public demonstrations as tools to regulate European public affairs (Rosental 2011). They have mobilized public demonstrations as methods and tactics to define and implement European Research and Development (R&D) policies. In particular, they have used demonstrations as tools to make scientific and
technological achievements visible to economic and political authorities and to the public, and as instruments to define European R&D arbitrations. In other words, EC officials have placed public demonstrations at the heart of the art and science of running European affairs and of making and enacting collective decisions in the field of science and technology.

The fact that "demonstration activities" are at the heart of the chapter devoted to science and technology in the recent European constitution project highlights this reality. Demonstrations have become a constitutional topic for Europe. Indeed, the European constitution project so indicates (Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe 2004: 109-110):

“The Union shall carry out the following activities, complementing the activities carried out in the Member States: (a) implementation of research, technological development and demonstration programmes, by promoting cooperation with and between undertakings, research centres and universities; (b) promotion of cooperation in the field of the Union's research, technological development and demonstration with third countries and international organisations; (c) dissemination and optimisation of the results of activities in the Union's research, technological development and demonstration...”

This statement illustrates how public demonstrations have been conceived as a way to manage European science and technology and have become part of a political project for Europe. It helps us to understand how European politics and policies of science and technology have been defined in recent years in management terms and how demonstration activities have become part of the toolbox of European public management.

Before concluding, I should add that various observations I have made in the past years suggest that public demonstrations should not be likened to tools which allow certain people to manipulate or mislead the masses. Indeed, public demonstrations might fail to produce the intended effects. They may be subject to variable interpretations and produce mitigated and heterogeneous reactions. A given demonstration may even be judged to have “failed” or “succeeded” by different members of the same audience. A priori, audiences are not composed of credulous victims: spectators may remain sceptical and maintain their critical sense. Additionally, third parties might produce counter-demonstrations to counter-balance a demonstration.
There might be some asymmetry between the relative ignorance of the audience and the expertise of demonstrators, or between the possible weakness of the audience - linked in particular to the limited time devoted to the attendance and assessment of demonstrations - and the possible strength of the demonstrators - linked among other things to their lengthy preparation of demonstrations, offering assets to demonstrators to guide and anticipate reactions, and manage their interaction with the audience. But very diverse configurations may be observed in this regard.

Thus, to conclude, I would like to insist on the fact that the uses of public demonstrations should not be altogether condemned. It would seem more important to be aware of their broad anthropological stakes. We may compare public demonstrations to Marcel Mauss’ total social facts, and be sensitive to the ways they impact on the transactions, material and symbolic goods, and fate of groups (Mauss 1954). Preparing and performing public demonstrations may mobilize or generate as many exchanges, resources, tensions, (re)distributions of alliances and intense moments of social life as does for example the preparation and celebration of another grand anthropological event referred to as wedding in many societies.

References


