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Video

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Transcript

Introduction

I'm a political scientist. I'm a forest conflict researcher, or more generally, I study natural resource conflicts, particularly from a critical perspective. A lot of conflict research is about how to resolve conflicts and how to get rid of conflicts, and I'm interested in how these conflicts are an important messenger, telling us that there is something that we must pay attention to. There is something that we need to change, that somebody's voice is not currently being heard – they need to be protesting, they need to be resisting. I've been looking at the Finnish forest policies from this critical perspective since the late 1990s, and I'm particularly interested in structural conflicts; for instance, conflicts related to Indigenous people's rights, where it's not about a particular case, but those cases where conflicts between Indigenous Sámi herding communities emerge. They reflect a broader structural problem, the situation that we have today. My research has been about unpacking and highlighting those, critically assessing the capacity of the policy and forest governance actors to address these underlying issues.

What is a forest? Researching living ecosystems

[My work] is communication about the environment, and communication for the environment, and trying to find more sustainable and inclusive, I mean, also socially sustainable, ways of doing forest policy and forest management. [It] means that we need to define what the forest is. Yes, we might have more timber in terms of cubic meters in the forest than what we had sometime earlier, but that doesn't equal forest. Forest is a living ecosystem with biodiversity, and the type of diverse forests, that can sustain the biodiversity that they once hosted, are dramatically declining. Finland is, in fact, failing to protect the remaining – what is usually called – ‘old-growth forests’ or ‘high conservation forests’. Habitats are decreasing, and the volume of forests is increasing at the same time, [which] might be bad news for biodiversity, because that is being achieved through intensification methods, that seek to increase the volume of timber at the expense of biodiversity. Some of that volume also comes from peatlands, that were not originally forests, but that were ditched and turned into forests. That also [means] biodiversity loss and habitat loss for peatlands. The fact that you have more timber somewhere doesn't mean that you have more forests, and it doesn't mean that you have more diverse forest.

Forest management policy has a long-lasting impact

One of the consequences of the Finnish forest management methods – because there is such a long rotation period – is that the choices you made in the 1950s and 60s still show in the forest. There was a period in the Finnish forestry, for instance, when birch was considered a weed. Finland was using heavy pesticides to keep birch out of forests, for instance, in the

Sámi traditional territory. Birch and aspen were actively removed from industrial forest lands to benefit pine and spruce. The legacy of that was suddenly, that the forest industry was short of birch, and it was imported from Russia. I don't have the most recent figures on the imports, but there has been up to 20 millions of [cubic meters of] wood being imported from Russia, and a lot of that was birch. So suddenly, Finnish forest industry was dependent on birch existing somewhere else, because the legacy of its own policies, where it had removed these three species. Even from the industry perspective (not talking about the impacts on biodiversity), this sort of very monocultural policy with a raw material that takes so much time to grow, means that you can have quite problematic impact. So, yes, importing timber has been a fundamental part of Finnish growth strategy of the industry today.

Every responsible company needs to know where [their materials] come from, and they need to start becoming interested in the [environmental and social] implications of their wood procurement. I would say that it's a totally untenable position not to know [it]. I would imagine, that these companies know that today. But on a general note, I could say that one of the things that we need in forest policy debate is to start unpacking the concept of forest industry. We often talk about it as one unit that has unified interests. We even think that forest owners and forest industry have the same interests. [As we start] unpacking these interests, they are becoming more and more diversified. It's well known in Finland that carpenter industries and those, who need wood and not pulp, are struggling with the consequences of Finnish forest policies and the type of wood it is producing. It's very

difficult to get hard old big wood for carpentry, house building, window frames. If you want to do any of these, you import wood from Russian boreal forest. And I think we need to then understand that Finland has driven forest policies that have been in the interests of the mass industry of pulp and paper, and the interests of that industry are not identical to other users of wood. I think our discussion has been simplistic [around] that issue. And it's very important to understand that you can do forestry on very different terms, [that] have different consequences not only for biodiversity and non-timber interests, like recreation, but also for those who actually want the wood.

Different needs drive conflicts

We need industry diversity, and we need to recognize that those interests within the industry might conflict with one another. For instance, a continuous cover forestry compared to [clear-cutting] might be beneficial for some sections of the industry, but not for pulp and paper, who are looking for big volumes, because that would mean [them] reducing the volume. We need to start talking about these tensions, and it's the same thing about wanting carbon, [and] the role of forestry in climate issues. Some people want to use it to produce energy. Others want the forest to be there to buy the carbon, and research is showing that it is the more rational strategy, but we need to start talking about these tensions that are there, and be much more transparent about them.

Historical roots of the forest management system in Finland

First [of all], there are forest owners' associations, that have staff consisting of foresters and forest engineers – people who are trained in timber production and [those] giving them advice. A lot of forest owners follow the plan, produced [for them] by these people. Then, you also have the government forest agency Metsäkeskus, the Finnish Forest Centre, that is part of the state forest administration, supervising the implementation of the forestry law, but they also used to provide services to forest owners. All of this has been a system, actively facilitated by the state. Finland has had this corporatist model of forest policy, where the state, the forest industry and small forest owners have been the three parties. The state has tried to facilitate a balance [of forest ownership]. Finland is one of the countries [with] a unique combination of not the industry owning the forest, or the industry having the forest licensing. When this system was created 100 years ago or earlier, the key was to find a system where you could respect the forest owners' right to own but make the industry sure that they would get the raw material they needed. Having a forest industry was a matter of great national urgency and interest for the government, because this was basically the industry that the government built the whole nation around. And it's not exaggerating to say that it was part of Finland's ability to become independent. If a country doesn't have a functioning economy and income, there is no independence. These issues have been highly interconnected. We created this corporatist way of decision-making where, considering how diverse the forest ownership structure is, how many individuals own the forest in small plots, it's fascinating how uniform the landscape looks. And it's not because these people by magic have all chosen

to do the same thing in their forests. They have been very heavily steered by forestry regulations to carry out their forestry exactly the way the government and the industry wants them to do. Just like you said, it was obligatory to do clear-cutting earlier. People have been brought into court for trying to do continuous cover forestry in earlier decades. Sometimes there is this discourse, that because there are so many different forest owners, then forest, by definition, is diverse. That's a massive misunderstanding. Finnish forest policy has been very hands-on, making sure that those people deliver wood to the market. For instance, the taxation policy earlier – I don't remember the exact year this changed in the past 15-20 years – was that you would pay taxes for your forest property, irrespective of whether you logged or not, every year. This creates a logging automate, because if you anyway pay tax, of course you want to log it, when it's finally in the age when it actually gives you an income.

Sustainability transitions are challenged by existing certification system and lack of alternatives

I hear the dilemma you're describing. This is the tragedy of today, that partly because of the history of how we have logged our forests, there is no availability of maybe that type of timber that you want to have. The second problem is that how could you get it out of the forest in a responsible way? And like you say, if you go to a sawmill and you ask for a particular type of wood, they will deliver it. But how will you know how it was logged? Conventionally in the past, since the 1990s, the solution to this has been forest certification by a forest steward council. If [you declare that you] only want FSC certified birch, [it] means that whatever birch they deliver to you

has to come from forests that comply with FSC standards. Of course, for that to make sense, there [must] be enough FSC certified forests, which is not the case in Finland. Finland has very little FSC certified forest. And the other question is, does FSC standard deliver on continuous cover forestry? I mean, FSC has been about fine-tuning clearcut forestry, to put it bluntly. If you only want birch from continuous tree cover forestry, what kind of system do you need to create yourself, to be able to locate it? What kind of chain of custody do you need to create? And is there any mechanism in place, that would help you to do that? And even if you managed to do that, would you be able to find enough volume? I'm very uncertain about the answers to those questions. I'm not aware of a system that would provide you with a chain of custody for continuous tree cover forestry birch. And I'm not sure at all that there would be enough of that in the market, partly because forest owners would not be committed to that type of forestry, but partly because they cannot invent an 80-year-old birch that doesn't exist, because Finland poisoned them away 40 years ago. And this is exactly the kind of challenge we have in sustainability transitions, that we often don't have the good alternative.

As of the 1990s, there was a clear pressure on forestry actors to be able to say that they are forestry certified. The market mechanism of certification became a dominant discourse. And it was necessary – there was no viable way out, saying that I'm just not certified. Instead, it became a competition between different certification schemes, in short, [about] who gets to have a say. And FSC is the only system that had a balanced decision-making authority, that opened for other actors and the forest owners and the forest

industry [a chance] to have a say. Because FSC has three chambers – the economic, the social, and the ecological, it said that “okay, because we will be benefiting from this label as forest owners and as industry, we are willing to give you, environmental movement and Indigenous movement, some influence over the criteria, so that when we get your acceptance, that gives us the leverage on the market”. We understand that we cannot get your support unless we give you some decision-making power. So, let's create this system where we have three equal chambers. In Finland, this has not been acceptable for the forest owners' associations. They have simply found it unacceptable to give the environmental movement or the Sámi as an Indigenous people this level of influence. They still wanted the benefit of having a certification scheme on the market. They still wanted that selling point, but without giving the influence to its critics. Clearly, they have made the assessment that it's viable for them to create a certification scheme, PEFC, which certified business as usual. It's basically certifying, following Finnish legislation. Clearly, they have considered that it works for them in the market. Sweden has a very different situation. Practically, a big chunk of the forestry and big companies have gone along with FSC. Then, you can discuss the standard and level of ambition, and it has become very contentious when the environmental groups and some representatives have wanted to revise the standard – which is a standard procedure within FSC. Most of us would think that that means to improve it, that you sort of [improve the] standard all the time. That has proven very difficult in Sweden. But Sweden did choose a way where FSC was the main solution, because it wanted the conflicts off the table. The Finnish forest industry and forest owners have made an assessment that they can ignore. They can refuse to

do that and get away with it on the market. PEFC just doesn't want to go above the level of legal regulations and to give environmental groups and indigenous groups any significant form of influence over the standard.

Underlying conditions of uniformity of the Finnish forest industry

I want to go back to what you said earlier about this uniformity, or homogeneousness, of the Finnish forest policy field, or the way the forests are being dealt with. I think that is a very correct observation, and it all boils down to that now we are firmly outside of the issue of forest policy, and my competency is on that. We are more in the field of political history. But I do think you need to understand that somehow uniformity has been understood in Finland as your lifeboat. Finland had a Civil War before the Second World War. The country [was almost split] by Civil War in the 1917–18. Then, there was the Second World War, where Finland had to become unified, not to lose its independence against Russia. From that point on, diversity is also by definition dangerous, I mean social diversity, and conflict is dangerous, because it's interpreted as threatening the ability to maintain independence, and conflict around forest industry is particularly dangerous. Somehow this idea that uniformity, being homogeneous, doing everything the same way, nobody having any dissenting opinions or doing things differently, is safe. It's good. I think without this backdrop, it's almost impossible to understand this striving towards unanimous and homogeneous ways of addressing forest issues. And like I said, now it's becoming more diversified. As long as you're hungry, you are not worried about biodiversity. I mean, this is still true for the entire world. You need to survive first. Finland was a very poor country post-war, and biodiversity was

not an issue in the intellectual agenda at that point. People were just trying to make ends meet. It's not like we've had this world with biodiversity crises and climate crises, and all these relatively wealthy forest owners for the past 100 years have chosen not to do anything differently. No, we had a world that didn't know of biodiversity crisis, that barely had one, because industrial use of natural resources hadn't gone that far yet. We didn't have a climate crisis. We had poor forest owners struggling to make ends meet, and there was a forest industry willing to pay for their resource. The uniformity of all of this was understandable at the time. My critique in Finland is that once people want it to diversify, once there was critique [voiced out] from a biodiversity perspective, from the perspective of forest owners wanting to do things differently, there was a massive resistance from the system to allow them to do so. There has been a denial of the negative environmental impacts of forest industry and management. And it's been a struggle to get these issues recognized in Finland. It's the same thing in Sweden, and it's exactly the same thing in both countries with the mining industry. As soon as you have big industries that are super important for the national economy, to recognize that there is any problem with them, that anything needs to change, has been perceived as a threat. Environmental activists have been regularly called traitors in Finland. They have been called unpatriotic. Very harsh language, delegitimizing legitimate democratic participation in the society, the legitimate right to disagree, the legitimate right to protest [has been in use], and even the understanding that in a democratic society, nonviolent direct action is sometimes necessary, has not been tolerated in Finland. The resistance to critique has been massive, and I'm old enough to have experienced that firsthand. I have been following

this process since the early 1990s, I have seen these decades of change, and it's a result of hard work and persistence from those who challenge the dominant discourse and the resistance from the dominant discourse saying [that] “nothing is wrong, Finnish forestry is the most sustainable in the world”. It's been massive and it's interesting to listen to the mining industry during this mining boom [sounding] exactly like the forest industry in the nineties; every time they made a step towards recognizing biodiversity, for instance, the response was – okay, now we've done enough. After every step there has been an equal resistance to take the next step, despite the mounting evidence from research that we are nowhere near the goal yet.

Different funding mechanisms might bring about change in the forest management

There is an ongoing discussion about funding mechanisms for forest owners, who want to leave their forest standing – so not log their old forests, but to keep them. If they want any income from it, currently their only income option is to log it. In Southern Finland, they might get into conservation programs, like I said, but for the Northern half of the country, if you're a private forest owner, for instance, in the Sámi traditional territories, people own forests either as individuals or as forest commons, as groups of people, and the only way for them to leave the forest standing is to take the economic cost of not logging entirely upon themselves. There are now initiatives looking for private money that is interested in doing that kind of carbon offsetting in Finland, so starting to pay for those forest owners to leave their forests standing. So yes, there is an emerging field around this in Finland.