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The production of territories seen from a materialist perspective: milieus in the politics of territorialisation

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Ethic Statement

The authors state that all participants were informed of our research process. They gave their informed consent to the use of the interviews in a scientific article. The name of the participants are anonymised, but such alterations have not distorted the scholarly meaning.

Abstract

How are territories produced? We conduct an analysis at the micro level of the reciprocal adjustments among actors in a “new valley” that emerged in northwest France after the removal of two dams. By distancing ourselves from approaches that focus exclusively on the socio-political actors of territorialization, we show that territories are generated through a site-specific process prompted by the affordances of milieus. From the field data collected through interviews, we demonstrate that the materiality of the milieus plays an important role in the politics by which territories are demarcated and collective entities defined, some of whom are included and others, excluded. Discussion shows that territorialisation is politics rooted in the materiality of milieus.

Keywords: territory – milieu – territorialisation – politics – affordance

1) Introduction: How are territories born?

In an “ultra-territorialised” world, where each actor belongs simultaneously to several territories, these appear as political, institutional, and administrative products in which everyone inserts themselves. And yet, a territory does not declare itself. It cannot be imposed by an overarching political or administrative decision. A territorial jumbling and the sensation of a multitude of territories that are “already there” tends to make us forget about their genesis, for that matter. But how and by whom are they built, and by which processes are they generated? These dynamics of territorialisation, understood as processes of producing territories, form the central concern of this article.

In his book “The Birth of Territory”, S. Elden masterfully traced the genealogy of the relationship between power and space to show “how the concept of territory emerged within Western political thought and practice” (2013 : 6). In his own way, he answered the question of how the concept of territory came into being. In the present article, the focus is not so much on territory as a concept, instead on actual and specific territories: their actors, their dynamics, and their anchoring to the materiality of terrain and land. We consider territory in a less European-centric sense (Halvorsen, 2019), by not limiting the process of territorialisation to socio-political actors struggling for the affirmation of a sovereign power over space. Territory is seen as a web of actors, defined, following the precepts of actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005), as any being that possesses its own agency and is able to participate in the process of action by making others act. A very empirical application of ANT is conducted here. We highlight micro-processes of territorialisation that arise as successive processes of arrangements in which actors prompt each other to act (Haraway, 2013; Latour, 2005; Tsing, 2015), adjusting their respective positions to coexist in shared milieus. We show that they are site-specific, and that the social and material context in which they are produced is decisive. To our knowledge, this attention to micro-processes which leads to the building of territories has never been carried out. The case study adds to the literature of how local populations act as they adjust and counter-territorialise their environment.

We have analysed the processes of territorialisation at work in the recently drained valley of the Sélune, a small, coastal river in Normandy, in northwest France, following the removal of two hydroelectric dams. A “new valley” has appeared before the actors’ eyes in place of the erstwhile lakes, offering milieus that have not yet been appropriated. This geographical atypical situation (even if resultant dynamics of territorialisation are not exceptional) allowed us to conduct an analysis, most often at the micro level, of the politics through which territories are born. We consider milieus, a notion

that we prefer to that of environment in order to better highlight the entanglements of relations between all actors (users, wildlife, vegetation, river...), as specific surroundings where territorialisations occur. By considering milieus as substrata, the article reveals their active role in the production of territories. It thus forms part of the materialist approach that has recently been initiated in studies on territory (Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2020; Usher, 2020). Territorialisation is politics rooted in the materiality of milieus.

2) A materialist approach to analysing territorialisation

There is a broad consensus in the literature that territories should be considered as socio-cultural production (Delaney, 2005). Painter (2010) talks about “territories-as-products”, or “territory-as-effect” to distinguish them from “given entities”. This avenue was opened by Lefebvre’s work on the production of space (1974) and the idea of space as a relational production (Massey, 2005). By challenging the notion that space is a pre-existing container, these works have adopted a genealogical approach to show that space is produced by the interactions between actors. The dynamics that generate territories are usually found either in power relationships or in daily practices.

2.1) Territorialisations through power

When Sack (1986) introduced the concept of territoriality – “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area” (p. 19) – to the social sciences, he was seeking to distinguish it from an usage which at the time was essentially ethological (Antonsich, 2017). According to him, territory is not the result of an animal instinct, instead of a conscious power strategy; it is thus an intentional, and very human production. From this perspective, territories are generated by a power that asserts its sovereignty over a space. They constitute “political technologies” (Elden, 2013), “a means through which power is reified” (Storey, 2020). As a result, they appear almost as side effects of strategies for controlling a space and the people or resources within them.

Power actors, who thus produce territories, are primarily viewed as exercising a one-way domination that is potentially repressive (Clare et al., 2018). The States and their sovereign power are the most typical figure. They are constituted through and on spaces that become their territories, and which are demarcated, administered, and controlled (Elden, 2013). But Sack’s definition opens the door to non-state holders of sovereign powers who are also potential producers of territories (Agnew, 2005), for example urban real estate developers who produce gated communities or shopping centre operators. With this kind of power, a territory is established through the legitimate use of force, the erection and defence of boundaries, which often constitute an essential aspect of territorialisation (Agnew, 2005), and the centralisation of power within a place (Alliès, 1980; Brenner & Elden, 2009).

Sack’s approach nevertheless runs the risk of focusing more on the effects of territoriality, defined as a strategy for achieving an objective of control, than on the process of the institutionalisation of territories (Murphy, 2012). Once instituted, their genesis is forgotten, because this constitutes a historical event lying in the past (even if history may repeat itself, and these territories could be contested, attacked, and overturned). This gives the impression that, once territories are instituted, they represent the perennial framework for public policies and the exercise of power, whereas, in reality, they are continually being produced through the political process (Cochrane, 2012).

Works using the concept of territorialisation emphasise the process of how territories are born. Some come from agrarian studies (many of whom have worked in Southeast Asia), and others from the field of literature on the urban resistance to dominant state and capitalist powers (very often in Latin America). The former follow in the footsteps of the ground-breaking article by Vandergeest and Peluso

(1995), in which the concept of territorialisation is defined as “the process by which a specific geographic area comes to be understood, recognized, claimed and controlled”. The practices that make territories belong to various registers – “violence, communication, administration, enclosure, dwelling, movement and imagination” – or logics – asserting a national identity, erecting symbols or capitals, representing, mapping, issuing rules, and using force to apply them (Shattuck & Peluso, 2021). These works show that the spaces of forests and mountains at the edge of national spaces are territorialised through land registries, maps, parcelling, and the sale of concessions to companies that extract natural resources, or, to the contrary, by converting them into particularly exclusive protected areas managed by the government (Buch-Hansen, 2003; Kumar & Kerr, 2013; Peluso, 2005; Sowerwine, 2004; Vandergeest, 1996). In this instance, states appear here as the main artisans in the production of territories, and they are studied through the government actors and how they actually exercise the power with which they have been entrusted.

However, states and their actors do not have a monopoly on territorialisation (Corson, 2011). By contesting the territories of the dominant powers, local populations participate in “counter-territorialisations” (Clare et al., 2018; Haesbaert, 2013; Lombard et al., 2021; Sandoval et al., 2017; Schwarz & Streule, 2022). Local, diffuse practices strive to assert other powers over a contested space (Brad et al., 2015; Isager & Ivarsson, 2002; Lestrelin, 2011): demarcations and counter-zonings, namings, rituals, tree plantings, parties, burning the dead... all these practices represent claims, which are the original act of producing territory (Smith & Hall, 2018). The power exerted by these local actors is different from the one asserted by sovereign powers. Clare et al. (2018) constructively use a distinction in English that comes from the Spanish between “power over” (*poder*), a one-way power of control, and “power to” (*potencia*), which is envisioned, from a Foucauldian perspective, as a power distributed among actors that procures and bolsters their power to act, their agency. “Both of these powers operate simultaneously” (Clare et al., 2018) to produce territories.

2.2) Territorialisations through social practices

Another part of the literature holds that “Territories are interactional: they result from encounters and from the effects developed during encounters. Territories are the effect of material inscriptions of social relationships” (Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2020, p. 59). From this perspective, the processes of producing territories are immersed in the life of a society; relations emerge between actors and their practices. The relational approach stems from the pioneering work of Raffestin, for whom territories are the product of a community’s work in “carving out a space” (Raffestin, 2012). For him, space is the raw material for building territories. It is transformed by work and techniques: “a territory doesn’t just happen; it has to be worked for” (Painter, 2010, p. 1105). For Raffestin, the ensuing territoriality reflects a set of relationships between a society and its environment. It is through these relationships to the environment that social groups form and evolve; territorialising also means building relationships, adjusting one’s distance from other people, forming groups in and through space. The definition of boundaries as both social and territorial is key to territorialisation (Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2020). They give shape and thus define territories. Above all, boundaries separate stakeholders from outsiders, separating those who have an interest in participating in the same territorial issue while leaving out those who participate in other issues (Gonin, 2022). Territorialisation is a socio-political process of defining socio-territorial collective entities: “Territorialization helps to define, communicate and enforce a set of relations through the deployment of spatial arrangements (boundaries, zones, inside/outside distinctions etc.) » (Blomley, 2019, p. 235).

In concrete terms, and in contrast to approaches focusing on power strategies, territories are envisaged as a production generated by social practices (Painter, 2010) that yield daily activities (Ince, 2012; Smith & Hall, 2018). Thus, frequenting, passing by, imagining, inhabiting, developing... builds

territories. Knowing a region, a landscape, simply being there, occupying a place for a period of time, experiencing a personal attachment, coming back regularly for a certain usage (e.g., playing *petanque* in the public square every week), leaving identifying markers in the landscape (e.g., graffiti), developing or enhancing resources (e.g., cultivating a field) also builds territories. Practices that produce territories may be either material or ideal. They constitute a collective appropriation of a space in two ways: on the one hand, developing a space to render it suitable for a usage and to meet needs, and on the other, developing a sense of belonging (Bonnemaïson et al., 1999). Territorialisation can be a side effect of social practices not explicitly sought by users, but it can also be a “tactic” for occupying and claiming a space (Kärrholm, 2007). This is the case of the counter-territorialisations described in the previous part. They form part of strategies for creating alternative territories through a resistance to the dominant sovereign powers. But in actual terms, the production of alternative territories “emanates/derives from everyday practices, that is from ‘below’” (Shattuck & Peluso, 2021, p. 199).

Territorial development is another recognised source of producing territories (Pecqueur, 2009). The decentralisation and de-concentration of government services (which accompanies the territorialisation of public policies, not in terms of producing territory, but in defining public policies within the local and regional administrative perimeters of states) and the growth in local development projects in the Norths and the Souths leads to an “unbridled fabrication of territories” (Antheaume & Giraut, 2005). In this case, the relationships between actors are formalised in the context of a development project. The challenge here lies in bringing together actors and the resources to effect change within a given perimeter; the projects thus create their own territories. A preliminary diagnostic leads to the identification of a problem (a high unemployment rate, environmental pollution, etc.) or a resource to be developed (an exceptional ecosystem, heritage, typical food products, etc.). Goals and actions to achieve them are defined in plans. For example, a group of livestock breeders, artisanal and industrial cheesemakers, politicians and experts from local governments and community organisations working for the enhancement of local heritage join forces to seek recognition for a local cheese production as something specific and expressive of qualities tied to the enhancement of local ecosystems. They file an application with the European Union to obtain a PGI, a Protected Geographic Indication, which includes a charter governing the production of this cheese. The territory that is thereby produced is both the specific area where the cheese is produced and also the network of actors who participate in its production and the governance of the production system. This represents a form of project engineering that is also a territorial engineering, in the sense of a formalised practice for the production of territories, of which local governments, economic actors, NGOs, and community organisations are the main actors.

In these different approaches, territories emerge from multiple sites that do not necessarily constitute sources of power. They are immanent in the life of a society, in the interactions between individuals and in their practices. Territories are produced everywhere, all the time. The result is a jumble of “territories [that] exist and overlap within the same area” (Haesbaert, 2013). Thus, no single territory can remain isolated or exist on its own (Gonin, 2022); some are constructed in opposition to others, while yet others are simply the result of a distinction at a given point in time created by a project or an activity by a social group. Relations are dynamic, groups reshape themselves, and territories are thus endlessly reconstituted. They are more or less “stable and enduring, or immediate and ephemeral” (Kärrholm, 2007), depending on their degree of institutionalisation and formalisation of the social relations that produce them.

2.3) Milieus in the politics of territorialisation

Whether emphasis is given to strategies or social relations, a certain gap remains between the exercise of a power or certain social practices and the territories that they generate. A micro-analytical

approach to the adjustments actors make may thus document more precisely how territories are constructed. How are new connections formed, through which territories are born, live, and transform? Raffestin (2012) proposes a framework for analysing the process of producing territory that involves the actors, their practices, their work, the mediators, as well as the environment on which they act. But this is an abstract model. In this article, we propose analysing, based on a case study, how the actors position themselves in a new environment, how they interact with one another, how relationships are created, and how they participate in a current process of territorialisation. Even if they are not necessarily strategic and do not concern power, the relationships that engender territorialisation are built on politics.

Moreover, whether their approaches are power or practice-based, analyses of the processes of the production of territories remain within the social sphere. Only socio-political actors are mobilised. Their interaction with their environment (Raffestin, 2012) and the materiality of the space (Kärholm, 2007) are certainly crucial to the process, but the environment is still treated as a context, and its objects are simply mobilised in function of the arrangements that socio-political actors make with each other. However, territories have biological, physical, and social components that are equally active (Brighenti & Kärholm, 2020). The environment is not just the backdrop against which territorialisation unfolds. This materialist approach was (re)integrated into the analyses of territorialisation conducted by Usher (2020): “When territory is conceived as a dynamic material substrate rather than fixed spatial extent, the importance of cultivation, and the physical characteristics of the earth, becomes apparent, in addition to borders and enclosure” (p. 1020). Since “Gaïa’s intrusion” (Latour, 2015; Stenger, 2009), we have come to recognise that biophysical processes play an active role in social processes (Latour, 2005). To accomplish this, rather than consider the space as a substratum of the territorialisations (Gonin, 2022; Raffestin, 2012), we will start with the milieus.

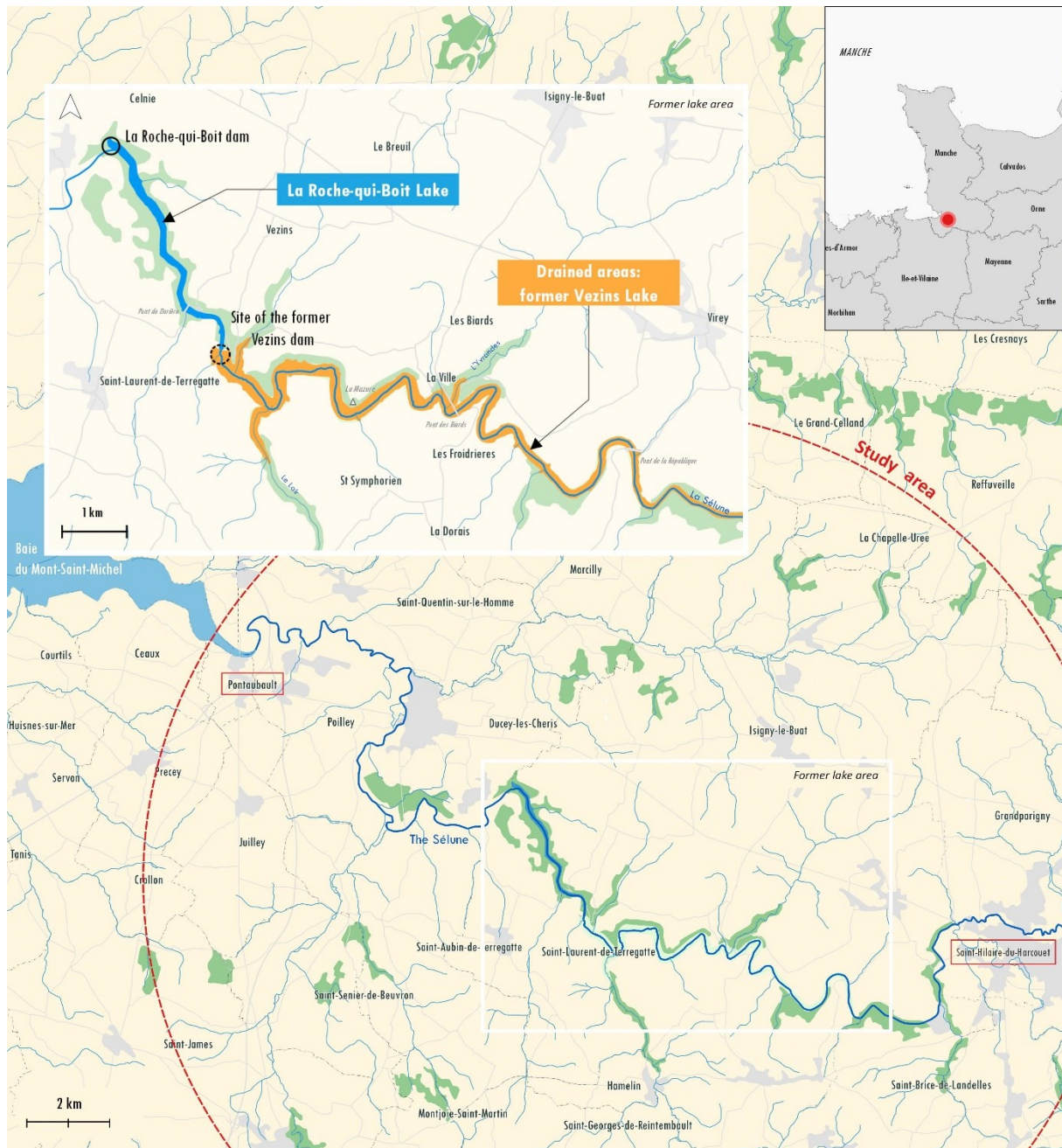
3) The Sélune Valley, a “new” milieu open to territorialisations

The Sélune is a coastal river that with a catchment area of 1,014 km² that runs for 68 km before flowing into the Bay of Mont Saint-Michel. Our field study took place in the South of the Manche Department, in the federated municipality of Avranches. This is a rural area with a population density of less than 60 inhabitants/km². The dominant agricultural system is dairy, with a land use share between seasonal pasture, fodder corn, and grains.

In this upstream part, the flow of the Sélune was cut in the first half of the twentieth century by two hydroelectric dams (36 and 16 metres in height) that retained the water for almost 20 km downstream. In 2009, the government decided to dismantle these two dams to allow salmon to spawn upstream, thereby launching an environmental restoration project. This decision provoked strong local opposition (Germaine & Lespez, 2017). The result of this opposition, coupled with the procrastination of subsequent governments and the difficulty for local politicians to take a position on the matter is that this environmental restoration remains unfinished in 2022. The reservoirs have been emptied and the engineering works in Vezins and La Roche-qui-Boit have been removed (respectively in late 2019 and the summer of 2022), but the future of this drained space (roughly 200 hectares) has not yet been decided in terms of its configuration as a landscape, its usages, and its land status. The processes described in this article thus form part of a very open-ended transitional phase. The landscape has changed radically, from a lake to an enclosed valley, whose banks, which are being heavily reshaped by the sediment management operations, are in the process of being taken over by vegetation. The milieu offered to the actors is thus far from “natural”; it is the result of an intensive development project.

[Figure 1: Location of the field study]

Figure 1 Alt Text: Map of the study area around the river Sélune, in the north-west of France



Author : Nina Kiryenko, 2021. Sources: Corinne land cover 2012, BD Carthage 2021, BD Topo 200

Our field study, which extends along the Sélune from Saint-Hilaire-du-Harcouët to Ducey, is thus in some ways exceptional. The valley's draining entailed a total metamorphosis of the landscape over a very brief time period. It was transformed by the technical restoration operations (sediment management, draining the lakes, dismantling the dams, and reshaping the riverbanks) conducted by the national government (which owned the Vezins dam) through its regional development agency and by the national electricity company EDF (Électricité de France, owner of the La Roche-qui-Boit dam). The dismantling of the dams and the re-wilding may be considered as an initial territorialisation conducted by sovereign powers. It is on the basis of this initial territorialisation that multiple processes are playing out, which are the more low-key ones that we have analysed. This section of the Sélune

represents an utterly new milieu potentially open to multiple usages (including agriculture, hiking, canoeing and kayaking, and new habitat for wildlife).

Since the announcement of the dams' removal, several attempts have been made to formulate a territorial plan for the Sélune Valley (Germaine & Lespez, 2017). Though ongoing, they have largely failed; while the opposition to the dams' removal brought inhabitants together, the possibilities offered by the new valley have not resulted in the same level of mobilisation. The local governments from whom the national government has demanded a conversion plan have yet to submit them and they struggle to appropriate this space, the management of which they doubt will be entrusted to them. In the absence of any plans, the valley's future is thus marked by uncertainty. We must therefore analyse a process that remains unfinished; the issue at stake is not the result per se, rather how the actors have positioned themselves during this transitional phase in which the Sélune is being developed as a territory. No governance plan has emerged between state actors and EDF, directors of the environmental restoration project, the politicians of the federated municipality and local elected officials, community organisations, economic actors, and the inhabitants. Thus, there is no territory being produced currently through this engineering project in the Sélune Valley. There are processes of territorialisation, but we must look at other logics and relationships to milieus and others. This area constitutes a relatively rare instance of a milieu that is not yet, or barely, territorialised.

From another point of view, the Sélune also represents a typical case. Its rural landscapes are relatively ordinary for the region. Elected officials from the municipalities and the federation of municipalities experience difficulties in their dealings with the national government or in the governance of the federated municipality, which we can see elsewhere. The web of local actors does not exhibit any particular characteristics. In particular and contrary to other dam removal projects (Brewitt, 2019; Gosnell & Kelly, 2010; Ohno, 2022), no initiative has been fostered by citizens or community organisations to uphold an original project that would create a territory. The valley is in a phase of transition, but the incomplete dynamics we see along the Sélune today are not unique to it. Elsewhere as well, processes continue to play out; nothing is ever definitive or set in stone. It is this mix of exceptional and ordinary that justifies the choice of the Sélune as a terrain for studying the processes of territorialisation through a relational lens.

[Table 1: Interviews conducted]

Actors	Number of interviews	Of which on-site interviews and participant observation
Farmers	9	5
Fishermen	3	1
Hunters	2	
Hikers (trail walkers and runners, mountain bikers, kayakers)	4	1
Technicians	14	0
Politicians	13	0
Total	45	7

The method of inquiry is based on several series of interviews (Table 1). This involved on the one hand multiple interviews with the restoration project stakeholders: technicians working in government departments and local politicians in the Sélune valley area. On the other hand, and for the most part, it consisted of interviews with users who did and did not belong to larger collectives (community organisations or informal groups), and with local inhabitants, especially farmers. These interviews aimed to grasp the relationship between actors and their transforming environment, especially by exploring the terrain together to identify the places or motifs with which relationships are in the process of forming. These peripatetic interviews allowed us to focus on how the various actors grasped the new valley, on their usages and current practices, and on how they see themselves very concretely in the new valley. They revealed categories of users that were pulling back (fishermen, hunters, hikers, and bicyclists) and others who are very invested (kayakers, trail walkers and runners, and farmers), and who are formulating territorialisation projects and initiating them concretely by appropriating the milieu. These interviews were conducted over a three-year period, from 2019 to 2022, but they follow on the field campaigns that began with the project's announcement, and which have dealt with the evolution of the landscapes and the monitoring of the socio-political stakes involved in the environmental restoration project.ⁱ They were rounded out with participant observation that has consisted of attending meetings between politicians and technical departments regarding the entire operation. At the same time, a mapping process was conducted to locate the territories appropriated by the different categories of actors. This relied on a spatial interpretation of the interviews and an analysis of satellite images and of maps to identify the places or objects mentioned during the interviews.

4) Territorialising: on the interactions between territories and milieus

From a modern perspective, milieus are resources in development projects that are subject to transformation. We instead uphold the idea that they play an active part in (re)territorialisation processes. Milieus are understood from and through the perspective of existing territories (4.1). They are transformed to adjust to practices that have already been territorialised elsewhere, at the same time that they transform actors and prompt them to act (4.2) in their search for cohabiting solutions (4.3).

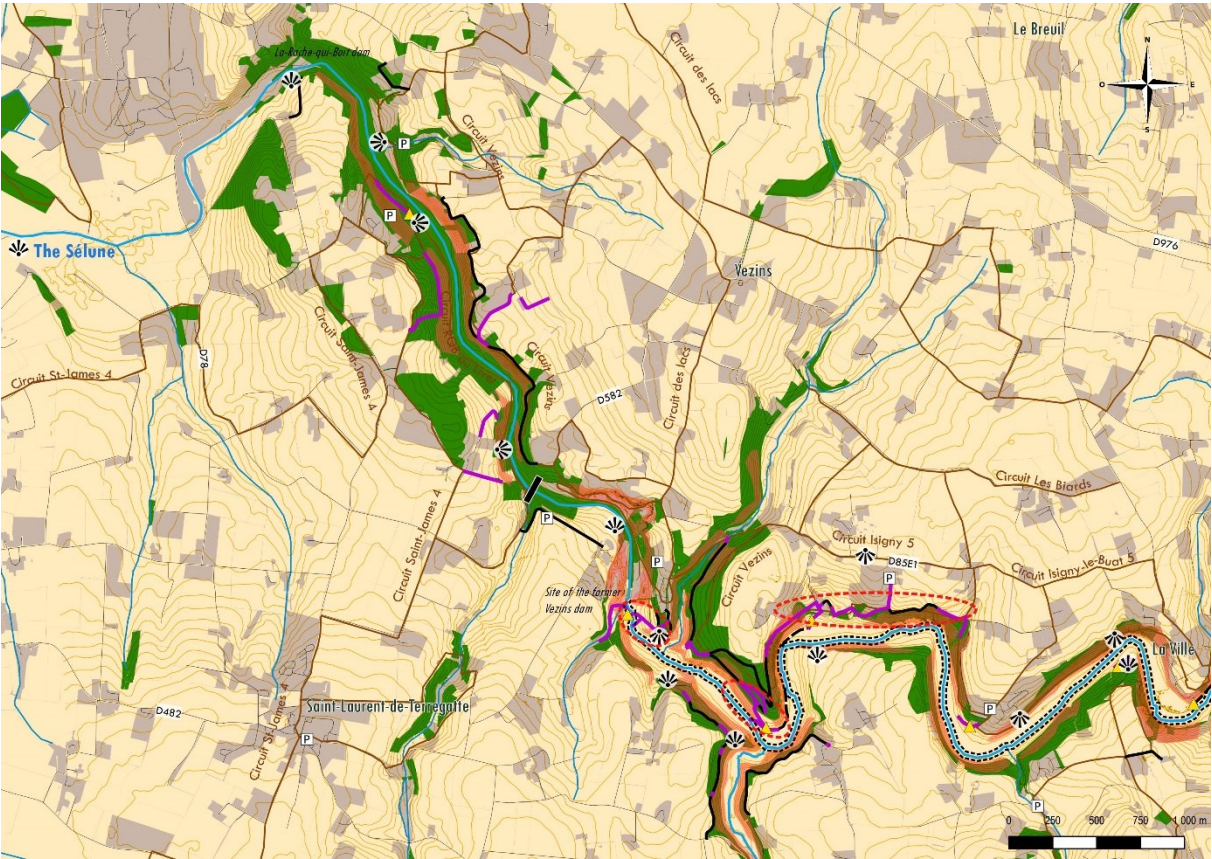
4.1) Affordances as a relationship at the origin of territorialisation projects

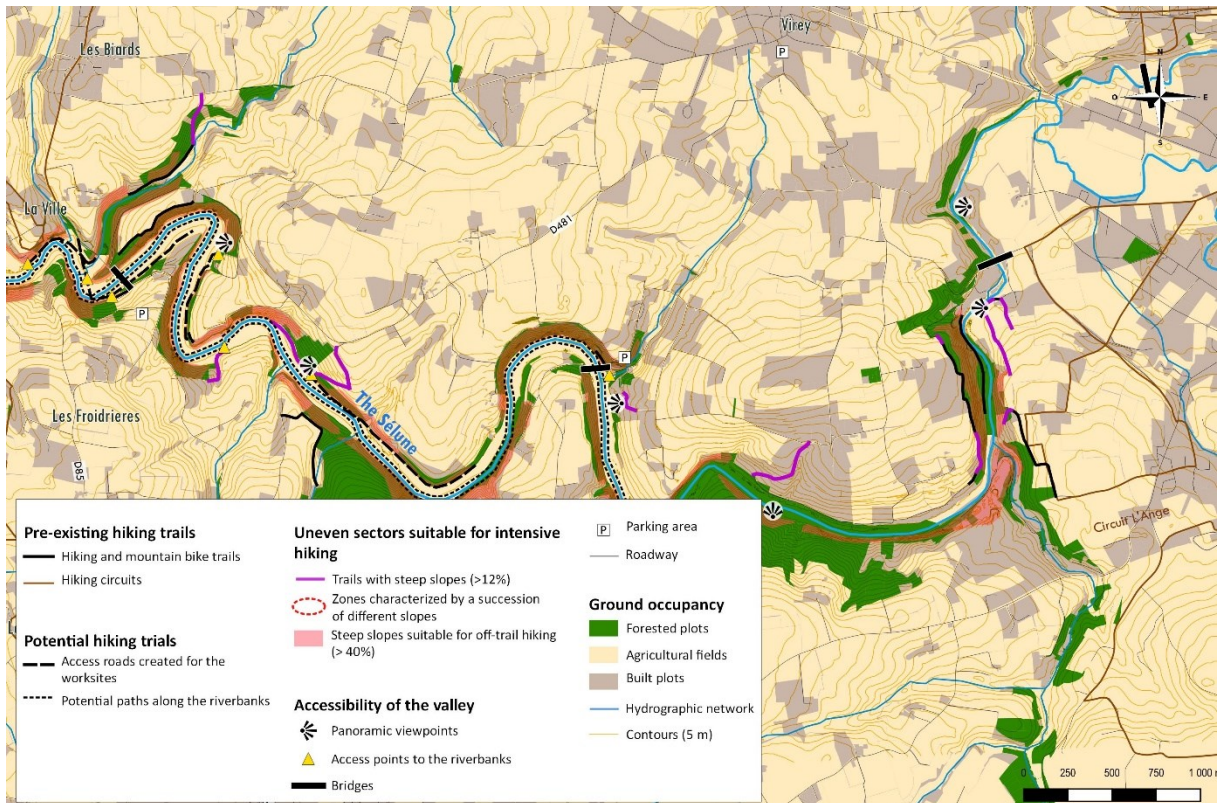
The drained Sélune River Valley is perceived differently, depending on the categories of actors and the potential usages. Thus, the significant height difference between the plateau overlooking the river and the valley floor includes very steep, if not totally vertical slopes that provide a rather atypical surface elevation for the region. This aspect is of great interest to trail walkers and runners and to mountain bikers. This alternation of steep ascents and descents is highly prized on such athletic paths. "We want to create difficulty rather than look for speed"ⁱⁱ, said a trailer. To the contrary, this is a drawback for farmers, because steep pathways often render access difficult to plots on the valley floor for heavy machinery. The considerable difference in heights is an example of an affordance in this milieu, which Gibson (1977) defined as "the way in which certain perceptions, evaluations, and actions are made available (afforded) by the environment to a perceiving subject and an acting body". It is an objective characteristic of a milieu, but which is determined in a relationship, depending on what an actor makes of it (Maniglier, 2021), for example, a steep path along a trail. Affordances serve as primers in the territorialisation of milieus, as they *elicit* projects from actors who perceive them (Gonin, 2022). The milieus are not passive; they instead possess an agency that plays a role in the territorialisation process. Obviously, the sports club of Isigny-le-Buat, a local community in the valley, play a primary

role in the organisation of a trail in 2021 and 2022 in the Sélune Valley; however, the considerable differences in height that were revealed when the lakes disappeared and the sporting interest in the itineraries they revealed also elicited the organisation of these trails. They are what attracted the sports enthusiasts. The affordances also act as localised anchoring points for the new territories. They outline a possible geography with which the process of territorialisation will be composed, and which will ultimately be felt in the shape of the territories [Figure 2]. To draw the itinerary, trail walkers and runners must deal with the location of the steep inclines, the possible paths, and the places where the river can be forded. They can't create a territory just anywhere, in a blank space; they have to deal with the geography of the affordances within this milieu.

[Figure 2: Potential territory for trails and mountain bikes]

Figure 2 Alt Text: A local map showing the Sélune valley and hiking trails





Author: Nina Kiryenko. Sources: BD Carthage (IGN 2021), BD Topo (IGN 2020), Land Registry (DDTM 50, 2017), MNT (GeoFIT 2019, Etheis 2017), worksite plans (EDF 2020), parking areas and panoramic viewpoints (Mathilde Carré, 2017), hiking circuits (Mathilde Carré, 2017).

Affordances are perceived by actors because they resonate with the ways in which actors have already experienced other territories in which they practice. “I think there is even more potential than before the dam. There could be even more people here than before”, said one kayaker. Kayakers look at rivers using a scale of six degrees of technical difficulty, depending on several criteria (constancy of the current, presence and length of rapids, difficulty in overcoming obstacles in terms of their height and number, and longitudinal slope). During their first excursions to explore the Sélune, kayakers from the club in Avranches, located along the neighbouring Sée River, knew exactly what to do. They immediately divided it into segments of increasing difficulty that could serve as possible itineraries for different groups of people (athletes, tourists, pupils, etc.). This analytical approach to the affordances, in this case the longitudinal slope and the rapids created by the thresholds, already forms part of the territorialisation. It is made possible by the fact that the kayakers are already territorialised; they know navigation techniques, the codes (the scale of six degrees, but also the needs and constraints of other groups of potential users), and how to read surface eddies. Of course the Sélune is a specific milieu, which retains its unknowns, like seasonal changes in water levels. For example, the low water mark in summer calls into question whether the river remains navigable at the height of the tourist season. In any case, the kayakers are able to read the attributes of the water that, without this territorial aspect, would remain mute.

[Figure 3 : An affordance for kayaking]

Note: A rapid created by a weir (the ruins of a mill), which is perceived as an affordance for a kayaking course. May 2021, Pont des Biards, Isigny-le-Buat.

Figure 3 Alt Text: Photograph of an old small mill dam on the Sélune, which is broken in the middle, creating a rapid for kayakers



Author: Alexis Gonin, July 2021, Isigny-le-Buat

This territorial *habitus* also makes it possible to gauge the affordances and the interest – or not – of effectively implementing territorialisation. For the new parcels along the Sélune to be interesting to farmers, they must supplement and increase their territory of operation. This can be defined as an agricultural and economic system (of productions, outlets for agricultural equipment, or the current organisation of their work) adapted to a series of plots of land (the surface area and locations of parcels being farmed). For many of them, the affordances as they are currently perceived exhibit prohibitive difficulties: steep slopes, difficulty of access, very heterogeneous and humid soil for much of the year, river rock that could damage agricultural equipment, weeds competing with the crops being farmed, and the fear of parasites that could be transmitted to cows. “The lake took a long time to empty. All that remains is clay, rocks, and a bunch of weeds. Willows are growing on that,” said one local farmer. These farmers will not farm the land along the Sélune because these milieus cannot be integrated into their territory without this impacting them negatively. However, these affordances are interesting to others. For example, a local farmer would like to use two fields that have surfaced to keep his heifers in a pasture year-round, whereas they currently have to spend the winter corralled due to a lack of available grassland, which causes them to contract more illnesses. For another farmer, the fields along the Sélune would allow him to establish a new herd of dairy cows, which would provide a new source of revenues for his son, who is joining the business. Although they have not yet been able to carry out this project due to the ongoing earthworks, we can clearly see that the territorialisation of the milieus along the Sélune would allow them to consolidate their livestock operation.

4.2) The milieus prompt socio-political actors to act

Once perceived and gauged, the characteristics of the environment represent a stumbling block for the composition of a new territory. Actors thus transform the milieus so that they correspond to

their practices. Farmers located relatively flat fields along the valley floor. To cultivate fodder crops of a certain quality and yield, they cut up the vegetation that was growing there naturally, worked the soil with tine tools, and seeded select species. One farmer made several cuttings to export hay. Another installed a fence and put in an access path to provide pastureland for his cows. These are all territorialising practices that transform emerged land (a milieu) into grassland (a territorialised milieu). Aside from the perceived affordances, the dynamics of the milieus still hold many unknowns for the farmers. They invest work time, energy, risking damage to their tools and illness to their cows. “I’m not against taking over those fields – far from it. But only if it can’t cost me and if it can’t break [the machines]”, said one local farmer. Thus, territorialisation reduces milieus to a known, controlled form. Once again, a certain territorial *habitus* serves as a matrix for this transformation. The technical process used on the new fields along the Sélune was tested on other parcels to be used. This allowed for the stabilisation of a mix of land use, fodder, feeding livestock, tools, and work time in a known territorial form.

[Figure 4: A milieu territorialised by a farmer]



Author: Alexis Gonin, St-Martin de Landelles, July 2020

Note: In the foreground, a field transformed into grassland; in the background, the vegetation naturally growing in the non-territorialised milieu. Above and to the left, the remains of a dock hint at the water level of the former lake.

Alt Text: Figure 4 Alt Text: Photograph of a piece of land cut and seeded in the Sélune valley, to create a meadow for cows.

However, in this process, the revealed milieus are not only appropriated and modified to correspond to already proven practices; they also compel actors to adapt. Practices change, sometimes subtly, to

adapt to the original characteristics of the revealed milieus. For example, to avoid the weeds getting the upper hand over the selected fodder crops and because the nitrogen-rich sediment of the Sélune allows for this, one farmer is “sowing tightly”, seeding two to three times more per hectare than what he usually does in his other fields. Sometimes the milieus also react more strongly, in opposition to their territorialisation (Granjou, 2015). Thus, a farmer breaks his machine while cutting down the vegetation that naturally springs up in particularly rocky field that has emerged, and he thus gives up on his plan to create a pasture. Springs reappear and feed wetland areas, which hinder the transformation of emerged fields into agricultural plots. The vegetation grows swiftly along the riverbanks, especially willow and alder. In just a few years, these trees become hard to cut down, and it becomes more expensive to prepare fields for cultivation. The growth of the vegetation constitutes a time pressure for those who want to develop and have open landscapes in the valley, and who see the vegetation gaining the upper hand in the absence of any decisions and action. “The longer we wait, the harder and the more expensive it will be; we should have put in grassland sooner”, according to the fishing federation. Therefore, the milieu itself is a stakeholder in the territorialisation process.

The milieus’ dynamics also participate in the forms of reterritorialisation of practices established on existing territories. For example, the emerged milieus interfere with the hunting territories that overlook the former lakes. The lakes formed an insurmountable barrier for the wild boar that reproduced in a forest located along their southern edge. With the disappearance of the lakes, the wild boar can now cross the Sélune and occupy the woods and fields along the northern edge. The farmers and hunters agree on the problems with the wild boar’s proliferation. The former complain of their impact on their yields caused by hordes of wild boar. The prefect authorises government-sponsored hunts to limit the populations and the damage that these wild animals can cause to fields. On this occasion, former rival local hunting clubs collaborated on hunting territories that were enlarged with this addition of new agricultural plots that used to be sheltered by the lakes, but which have been invaded by wild boar since their disappearance. “I turned all my land over to the hunting club, because I was afraid of the pests. I want them [the hunters] to take care of them”, said one farmer. In this same perspective of overflow, most of the farmers express their fears, imagined or confirmed, that the naturally growing vegetation springing up along the drained riverbanks is seeding in their riparian fields and contributing to what they see as a return of weeds, some of which, such as thistle and dock, are hard to eliminate using chemical products. “The seed stock along the [valley] floor is immense!” One of these farmers, concerned with the proliferation of thistle in the emerged areas in the valley adjoining one of these fields, called a local politician and had experts from the national government offices in charge of the dismantling of the dams come to inspect. Thus, the emerged milieus contribute to a recomposition of the relationships between actors and a modification of their practices. The milieus participate in the reterritorialisation of territories created in a constant cycle of territorialisation, deterritorialization, and reterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980).

4.3) Sharing the milieus: adjustments and antagonisms

A territorialisation never happens by itself. There is never just one actor who composes with a milieu and what it suggests. A milieu must also be shared with others, and a place is formed by granting others a place. Thus, several territorialisations are always co-present and concomitant (Kärrholm, 2007). The processes we observed exhibit two means of adjustment: either agreements are made among actors, or the perception of affordances remains antagonistic. In each instance, the specificities of the milieu play a large role in these means of adjustment.

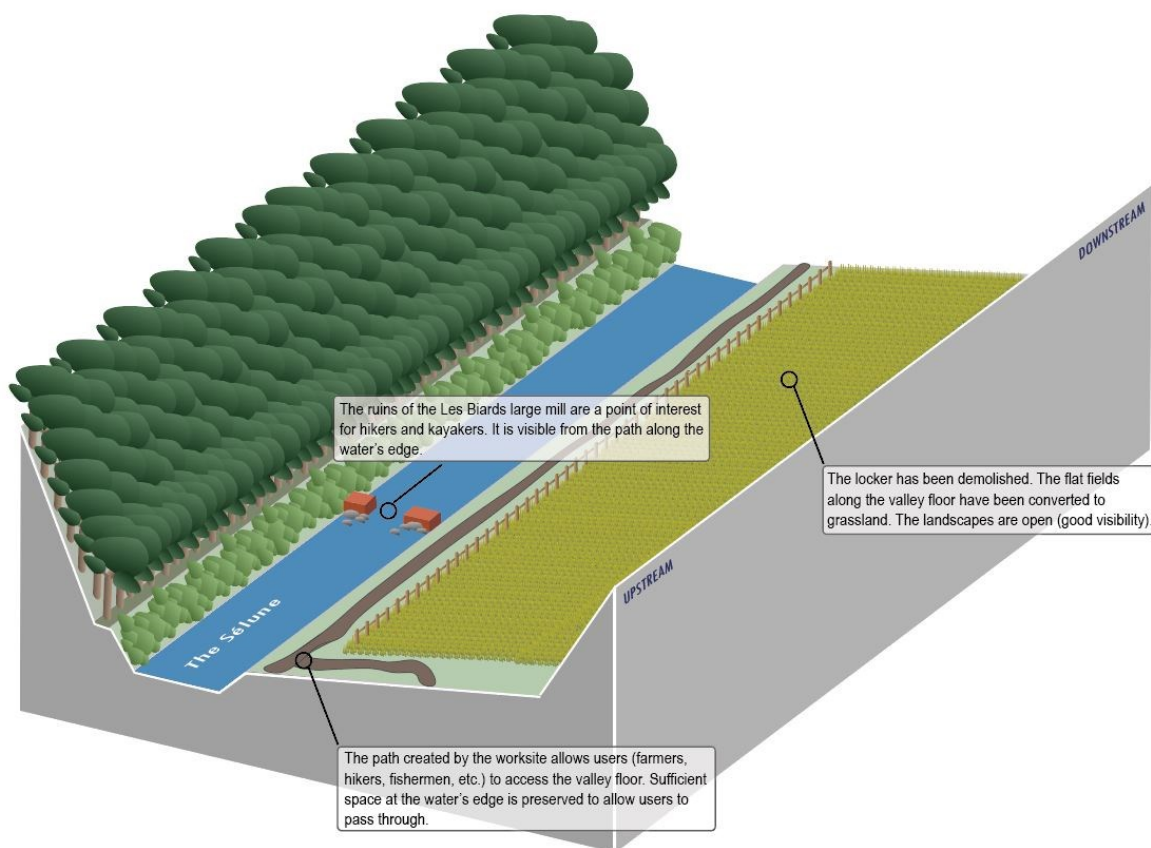
Whenever actors mobilise the same affordances, they seek an agreement, in terms of either a spatial or temporal avoidance. For example, the kayakers adjust their practices to those of the fishermen, and the behaviour of fish. They paddle along the opposite side of the river from where someone is fishing

so as not to stir up the water, and they avoid coming on the opening weekend of the fishing season, when many fishermen are present. They avoid the spawning grounds, and they do not put in along stretches of the river where birds nest. The practices adjust to one another. Even within the same user group, among the fishermen, there is an unwritten rule that one shouldn't stay in the same fishing spot for more than twenty minutes. Complementarities arise between different kinds of fishing: "When I flyfish, I have one or two fishermen behind me [in my wake]. I tease the fish, and so they come behind me [to fish it]." The territorialisation here has three parties working in synergy: the milieu (the fish), the first fisherman who adapts to this milieu (who moves between various fishing spots), and a second one who adapts to both the milieu and the first fisherman's movements. The territorialisations of the different usage categories can reinforce each other through complementarities or alliances. This is the case with the hunters who organise wild boar hunts in the fields where these animals cause damage; their hunting territory is thus expanded, and their activity rids the farmers of pests that destroy their crops.

Negotiations are held on boundary places, which represent places where people search for a coexistence between two territorial logics. The configuration of the milieus and the different ways of appropriating their affordances play a large role in the result of such negotiations. Thus, the profile of the drained valley reveals possibilities of coexistence among various usages.

[Figure 5: A shared valley]

Figure 5 Alt Text: Block diagram showing a cross-section of the Sélune valley, and showing the possible coexistence of footpath, forest and open grassland.



Although one farmer stated, “If there is a path for bicyclists and hikers, it won’t be possible to put cows there,” all the other farmers and potential hikers see the possibility of a cohabitation. The negotiation over the coexistence of the two activities thus specifically concerns the route of this path: either at the bottom of the slope and close to the river (as wished for by the hikers), or higher up on the slope, along the less fertile parts, where routes have already often been opened by the worksite routes. Aside from positions based on principle, the configuration of terrain reveals possible arrangements on a point-by-point basis, depending on the valley’s profile, the possibility or not of creating grassland, and the space available for a path. These arrangements are strictly local, i.e., site-specific. The milieu’s properties at this point of convergence are mobilised in the assembling of this arrangement. The meandering route of the Sélune and its steep overhanging cliffs make some stretches of riverbank inaccessible to both hikers and farmers. The configuration of this topography engenders territories for wildlife. In the segment illustrated by figure 5, the right bank is poorly accessible and has been left to develop on its own, whereas a hiking trail has been planned for the left bank, as well as fenced-in grassland along the valley floor.

At times the configuration of the milieu does not allow for any arrangement, and the parties’ different territorialisation plans become gridlocked. In such cases a decision must be made between two territorialisation dynamics that are essentially contradictory, which means that the formation of the territory will include some and exclude others. This choice is determined by the local power relationships, which may be conflictual, and to which the literature has given emphasis (Lombard et al., 2021). There is a debate currently about the removal of weirs in the river channel (Figure 3), ruins of ancient mills and fisheries which dammed the flow of the Sélune at frequent intervals. These rocks create small bodies of water upstream. They play a fundamental role in the kayakers’ plans, because they make their routes more fun and interesting by creating obstacles to cross. They are also interesting as heritage points on tourist itineraries. But for environmental restoration advocates, these sills are harmful to the spawning grounds of migratory fish who will hopefully return; though readily crossable for being mostly obsolete, the bodies of water they create upstream provide an unfavourable habitat for salmon. They may thus have to be removed. The weirs represent an invitation that has been perceived in two contradictory ways by these two territorialisation projects, the restoration of the Sélune’s ecological continuity and the river’s navigation for recreational purposes, which are in competition here. The kayakers have asserted their claim to the river by attending all the public meetings about the Sélune: “We increasingly appear to be actors of the region, of what can be done”. However, these actors were ignored in the conclusions of the diagnosis made by the experts from the French Office of Biodiversity, from whom the government departments have requested an opinion. The power dynamics between advocates of a pure rewilding of the river and the kayakers will decide the future of the weirs and consequently whether or not kayakers will be present at all in the valley. A similar opposition has emerged regarding the management of the springs that were below the lakes’ water level, and which now drain onto the slopes. Rewilding advocates see the wetland areas they create as contributing to the wealth of the milieus and as increasing biodiversity; for the farmers, they segment potential parcels and prevent them from using tractors to work the soil. The farmers would like to channel these springs “in three strokes” to feed watering troughs for their livestock. This development is for many *a sine qua non* for the creation of grasslands in the valley. At present, though, regulations prohibit this, which may thus exclude certain agricultural uses.

The springs and weirs are two examples of how certain affordances in a milieu require actors to make choices. These places express power relationships because they are perceived in contradictory ways by at least two territorialisation projects which are irreconcilable on this specific point, though not necessarily so overall. There is no certain, material configuration that renders their coexistence impossible; rather, this configuration is the subject, as an affordance, of two opposing interpretations. In the case of the weirs, they represent a configuration of the milieu deemed essential for the waterway to be used in a fun, athletic manner, but they are also viewed as a potential disturbance to the river's rewilding. In the case of the springs, they cannot be eliminated without damaging the ecosystems in the rewilding project, but they are perceived by farmers as preventing their use of the land along the valley floor. In these places, territorialisation becomes a matter of power relations, which results in insiders and outsiders.

5) Territorialisation: politics rooted in the materiality of the milieus

The literature shows that territorialisation stems from politics. It consists of the claiming, appropriation, and demarcation of a space and its resources, whether through the assertion of power or, more subtly, the repetition of everyday practices. Lestrelin (2011) provides an example of these two political faces of territorialisation: in response to the attempt at creating an area protected by the central government in Laos (assertion of a power over a space), the minorities in the surrounding villages have cultivated fields and cut down trees within the protected space in an attempt at counter-territorialisation. In the case of the Sélune, and more specifically of the weirs and the springs, we have sought to show the active role played by the milieus, which shape the political process and configure its power dynamics.

First of all, what people are asserting in their practices and attempts at appropriation is a certain view of the milieu's affordances. Territorialisation does not entail one, sole possible usage of a milieu, which is initially merely potential and suggested. What is signified to others and asserted is a certain relationship between a group and a milieu that they have appropriated, a certain adjustment, a certain "set of relations between people in regard to a parcel of land" (Blomley, 2015). Territorialisation engenders and establishes a composition between actors, an affordance that has been made actual in contrast with other potential interpretations of the affordances in that same place. The milieus reveal and perpetuate the territories by materialising them. The power dynamics at the heart of the production of territory are immaterial and evanescent by their very nature, but their results are impressed upon the milieus. Territorialisation leaves traces in the milieus; for example, the regular passage of hikers creates a trail, while sowing and fencing in a space creates grassland. In response, the milieus "perform" (Blomley, 2013) a certain grasp of the affordances. The dialectic between the politics of territorialisation and the materiality of the milieus produces a territorial landscape. Its materiality lends a certain inertia to the changes at the same time that it stabilises the relationships between users and the milieus. Rooted in a certain development of the milieu, practices are thus corroborated and resist competing claims more effectively.

Second, the milieus represent the matrix of power relationships. More precisely, these relationships emerge only in certain configurations of the milieu. Figure 5 shows that different usages of the valley can be reconciled. The power dynamics only emerge in certain places: for example, the weirs or the springs. If the profile along the river had been different of the springs had not existed, the issues, actors, and the power dynamics would have been different. What plays out on these points around which differences emerge is the demarcation of territories in relationship to each other. Demarcation is a fundamental step in the process of territorialisation. This is when a selection is made between those who are included and those who are excluded. Even though this process is well documented in the literature (Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2020), we have wanted to show its essentially material

component here. Depending on the material configuration of the milieus and the workings of the ecosystems, the appropriation of the affordances allows for different territorialisation projects to coexist, or not. In our example, the weirs and the springs are boundary places where it may or may not be possible for different uses and representations of the valley to coexist. Territorialisation is a process by which collective entities define themselves, in our case, those collective entities whose interpretations of the valley's affordances will be recognised and who will therefore be able to practice their uses of the milieus. Other actors might not manage to garner this recognition. This game of inclusion and exclusion is a matter of power dynamics that play out in certain places, coming up against the material realities of the milieus.

Thus, the space is appropriated spontaneously through the occupancy of, and investment in, the sites by different private or collective non-institutional actors. Gradually the initiatives of the kayakers, trail users, and farmers may lead to the production public spaces; through their actions and their investment in the valley, they participate in socio-environmental transformations more often studied in urban settings (Blanc et al., 2022). However, these ordinary actors are generally rendered invisible. They are not taken into consideration in the definition of the plan to convert the Sélune valley that is debated in chambers by politicians accompanied by experts from local and national government offices. The local actors whose involvement with this new milieu that we have described are well aware of the limits of their power over the valley's future. They seek to find out whether the local governments are preparing a conversion project, and they fear that such a project will not emerge due to the lack of the politicians' involvement. "We really feel that local politicians are not including us at all in the process. I don't know if they themselves are involved in any kind of process. The decisions are tough, which is understandable in politics, but we don't know what's going on, or if anything is going on. We don't know how many, we don't know where, we don't know who". The bonds they have formed with the milieu and their actions have taken to get them to exist may thus remain totally sidelined in this territorialisation project. Therefore, they have to negotiate their seat at the table for the project that is being developed by attending meetings (when they are held), asserting their legitimacy, occupying the sites, and publicising their initiatives. Their presence seeks to pressure politicians to include them in the valley's future. The challenge for them lies in overcoming individual perceptions of the milieu to form a collective that is able to reveal the valley's potential and to assert their weight within the schematic logic (of territorial design?) used at the institutional level.

6) Conclusion

The radical transformation of the milieus of the Sélune, from lakes to a drained valley, definitely facilitates an analysis of the processes by which territories are produced. But behind this apparently exceptional situation lie ordinary processes. Territories are born from practices of adjustment among actors and in relation to the milieu. These processes are subtle and often slip under the radar of analysis, because they are not necessarily visible. With regard to the literature on counter-territorialisation, we show that these practices do not always, or not explicitly, have a claiming dimension. These adjustments don't come out of nowhere; existing territories serve as matrices for the territorialisation processes that are enacted for "new" milieus. Actors elicit projects, prompt other actors to act, and they recompose existing territories by modifying social relations. Each subject positions itself in relation to the others and tries to establish the relationships on which it depends. Territories emerge, everywhere at once, from these multiple bonds that are established during concomitant territorialisations of the same places. The result is a – once again commonplace – context of territorial entanglement, which confirms that territorialisations are always re-territorialisations. Heritage is reactivated; processes are never enacted in a blank page, even in the case of a valley whose draining reveals "new" milieus (Lespez et al., 2023). The production of territory is indeed a

fundamentally political process. Different and even divergent projects are conducted. Social and spatial limits are negotiated, which define collectives by “sorting” between insiders and outsiders. These political processes are marked by the materiality of the milieus. It is thus in the social involvement with materiality that defines the sharing of the milieus in which the actors must coexist, and which ultimately constitutes the main issue in the concept of territorialisation.

In ecological restoration framework and more broadly environmental policies, these results highlight the importance of grounded and fine-grained approaches while remote studies using generic data or models are increasingly being developed. For the stakeholders of territorial projects, our analyses demonstrate the need to work with the milieus and the agency of milieus. Environments – in this case the river as a hydrosystem – must be considered as a set of interrelations that are constantly reconfiguring, and whose outcome is uncertain (Boelens et al., 2016 ; Hommes et al., 2022). They form specific contexts and determine the future functions in which the projects take place. For those in charge of a territorialisation project, it thus seems necessary to engage with materiality of milieus, and the uncertainty it brings. In time, further research crossing social and biophysical perspectives will be engage to better decipher the relations between all these actors and more especially better understand how and with which conditions the different territories projected by each of them (farmers, kayakers, fishes, vegetation, ...) could (or not) cohabitate.

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Declaration of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Table 1

Actors	Number of interviews	Of which on-site interviews and participant observation
Farmers	9	5
Fishermen	3	1
Hunters	2	
Hikers (trail walkers and runners, mountain bikers, kayakers)	4	1
Technicians	14	0
Politicians	13	0
Total	45	7

ⁱ All information can be found on the webpage of the research programme and team: selune.hypotheses.org/

ⁱⁱ The interviews were in French and the quotes are our own translation.