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## **Ontological approach of corporate sustainability:**

### **Proposal for a shift**

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**Abstract:** To achieve sustainability, corporations need to shift their ontology: leave the classic, static and predetermined view of the firm to a dynamic, relational and deliberative one. This paper explores the historical content of a proto-sustainable situation and proposes a theoretical framework to fulfil this ontological re-conceptualization.

**Keywords:** firm ontology; sustainability; dynamic, deliberative and processual methodology; historical approach

## I. Introduction

What **is** a firm in a sustainability context? As S. B. Banerjee stresses (*cf.* (Banerjee, 2007)), new insights on the ontology<sup>1</sup> of corporations are needed to enable them to become genuine sustainable agents.

This paper combines an **historical** approach and a **theoretical** framework to show that sustainability achievement requires to leave a standard static and predetermined view of the firm and to shift to a dynamic, relational and deliberative conceptualization of corporations.

In this purpose, in **part II**, we analyse the historical case of Bersimis' dam conducted by Hydro-Québec in the 1950's. Indeed, this firm presented the following characteristics: a fixed ontology (based on predetermined socio-economic assumptions) and a specific relationship with the Nature: the wilderness –conservationist view –. Furthermore, before the specific identification of sustainability issues, it was confronted by a concrete sustainable-like situation – a **proto-sustainable** situation – *i.e.* a risky and uncertain situation (forest fires in this case) where several actors and dimensions (social, natural, economic, cultural...) were entangled.

We bring out that, even in this early context, as soon as this firm faced up to this situation, it was led, in a non-anticipated way, to collectively and deliberatively re-design its own ontology, in order to **articulate** its-self with other human and non-human actors.

This case drives us to argue that to achieve sustainability, this non-anticipated ontological shift has to become lucid and conscious. So, in **part III**, under notably the scope of B. Latour's approach (*cf.* (Latour, 2004)), we discuss this assertion and finally propose a dynamic, deliberative and processual methodology to fulfil this ontological re-conceptualization. As an outcome, this proposal allows firms not only to develop coping mechanisms to face up to pluralism, uncertainty and risks, but also to become actors of a sustainable society.

## II. Bersimis: the North Shore Rush

On April 1944, the Quebec legislative assembly creates a publicly owned commercial venture, the Quebec Hydroelectric Commission<sup>2</sup>. This decision follows the taking over of the Montreal Light,

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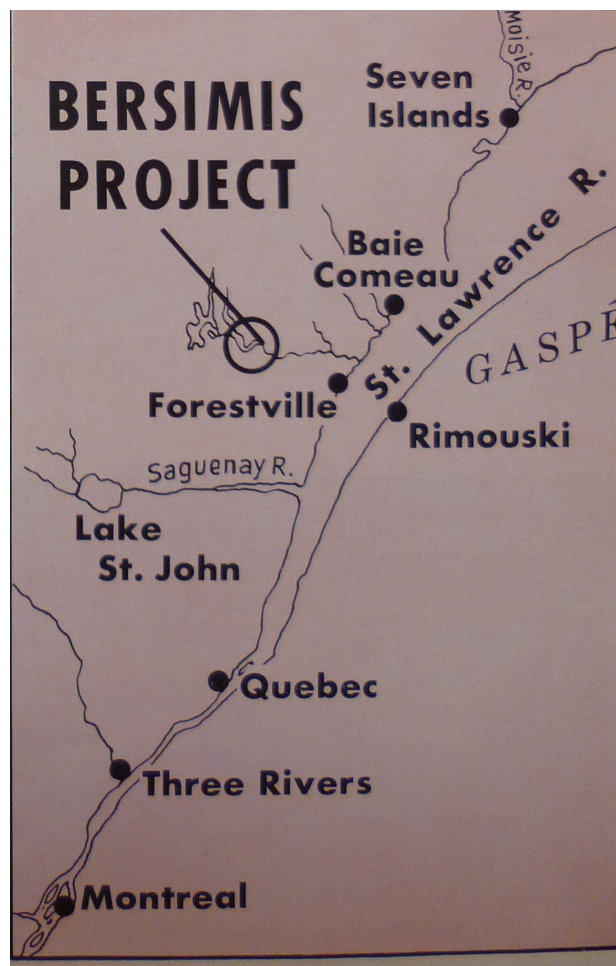
<sup>1</sup> Ontology is “*our assumptions about the reality of objects and the nature and relations of being*” (in (Banerjee, 2007))

<sup>2</sup> After a second period of nationalization, the Commission became **Hydro-Québec**. Despite the historical etymological distinction in the two periods of nationalization, we use the last name with a concern to provide a more global comprehension of the phenomenon under study.

Heat and Power (MLH&P) by government and a long-term government-owned public politics started during the 1930's to fight against the electricity trust, its high rates and its excessive profits (*cf.* (Bolduc, Hogue, & Larouche, 1979), (Chanlat, Bolduc, & Larouche, 1984)). This context leads to a **classic definition of the firm**, in which the firm is designed as static and predetermined, and where the only goals pursued are economics and the pressures are legal. Obviously, the nationalization includes the pursuit of public interest, but it takes place in a predetermined juridico-economic framework. As we will argue further during our study: a fixed ontology.

In order to meet the growing electricity demand in Quebec, characteristic of the postwar boom period, Hydro-Québec is granted by the hydraulic concession of **Bersimis**<sup>3</sup> River on the north shore.

Map n°1: Bersimis localization



Archive: The Harvester, January February 1955, Fund HQ, H2/1500-00, Box n°13028

3 Bersimis River was named over the Betsiamites River, an innu term. According to (Landry, 2009), the name modification comes from difficulties in the pronunciation.

Montreal needs power to reconstruct itself<sup>4</sup>. Then, the aim is to create a network between the north and the island of Montreal. This represents a major step towards the re-appropriation of this economic sector by the French Quebec (the first studies were conducted by a direct competitor – the Shaminigan Water & Power Company – a Canadian and American owned firm).

So, in 1952, Hydro-Québec begins the construction of its first hydroelectric dam and power station on a faraway area (historically the others were run-of-the-river). This is a huge project because it needs a highly specialized know-how and requires human efforts and material technology never asked before<sup>5</sup>. The dams' construction needs the diversion of river<sup>6,7</sup> and the felling of forest, which causes great disruption in this natural site. To these major transformations of the landscape, we must add a twelve kilometers-long tunnel dug right into the granite's mountain (which is then extended to fifteen kilometres with access galleries and other derivations) and the eight turbines underground power station nested in an one hundred and seventy-two kilometres long cave dug right in the rock. But the real innovation point resides in the building of the high voltage power lines. As we have seen, the Hydro-Québec's project is first about linking up to Montreal by passing through Saguenay's river and the town of Quebec.

To « cross over » Saguenay's river, 1525m of cables is needed while the average practice is about 320m... Moreover, Saguenay being a waterway, space is needed for boats, which leads Hydro-Québec's teams to set up 60m height pylons, themselves being built on two hills 180m over the water.

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4 Internal press *Entre-nous*, 1956 : *Décembre 1956*, vol 36, n°12, pp 8-11 18-19 « En survolant le Nord ».

5 Press files, cote #3 Sec. Gén, acquisition A-85-08-09. Intern press years 1954-1955.

6 Technical report by H.G. Acres & Company Limited, Niagara Falls, 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1963 – Fund HQ - Box 571.

7 Resolution BG-483/68 meeting of the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1968.

Photography n°1: The cross of the Saguenay river



Source: Hydro-Québec

During the same time, Hydro-Québec builds and manages a village, Labrieville, from scratch, as well as roads in collaboration with a pulp and paper firm – the Anglo Canadian Pulp and Paper Company<sup>8</sup>. Hydro-Québec has also to cooperate with the **Laurentian Protectiv Forest Association** (cooperative union directed by the heads of forestry industry, which mandates, according to the bill of 4<sup>th</sup> march 1919, the firms obligation towards forests protection and the **fight against fire**). Protection of their landownership is, for the heads of the forestry industry, the reason of this bill. In order to construct the dam, Hydro-Québec has to burn some acres, but is bound to manage the fire: this forest is the resource of pulp and paper firms. But beyond the legal obligation between Hydro-Québec and the Laurentian Protectiv Forest Association, the relationship between these two is completed by private financial agreements for fire starting. These negotiations show off till 1953 in “Manager’s report – Season 1953 of the Laurentian Forest Protectiv Association”.

This could be understood in two ways: an economical interest in repairing financially, and before a legal sanction, the ecological and technical impacts of fire, according to a standard static and predetermined view of the firm; or the beginning of an ecological interest exceeding the juridico-economic framework in order to respond to a new, risky and uncertain situation. The page 5 of this

8 Box n° 784 and fund H1/1600-00/3398



report helps to clarify this question. It details a **cooperative work project on fire controls** between Hydro-Québec and the Laurentian: illustrative videos are shown to Hydro-Québec's staff during weekends at Labrieville, "Fire first-aid" trainings are delivered by Laurentian Protective Forest Association's sworn instructors to Hydro-Québec's team, and a poster campaign is created to sensitize workers. This cooperative work **isn't a one-shot try** but takes place in a long-term time: the three years of the project construction.

Poster campaign n°1: Consciousness rising about ashes and cigarette butt by the Laurentian Protective Forest Association



Archive: Laurentian Protective Association. The title says "Deadly negligence"

Moreover, a short film, directed by the Laurentian Protective Forest Association but ordered by Hydro-Québec's Head, mister Ludger-Eugène Potvin, is shown in Hydro-Québec headquarter, René Lévesque boulevard in Montreal. The beneath objective is twofold. First, Hydro-Québec wants to increase its top management awareness of forest fires issues. Here, Hydro-Québec inserts into the decision-making process a non-human actor: the forest. Second, Hydro-Québec wants to provide its top management a new **"how-to" react to sustainable-like situation: cooperation**. This leads Hydro-Québec to assert new actors and **new dimensions to the classic view of the firm**.

All these materials clearly illustrate how the arrangement between Hydro-Québec and the Laurentian

Protectiv Forest Association on the project Bersimis goes **beyond the legal obligation** coming from the bill, as well as **beyond economical interest**.

Nevertheless, Hydro-Québec **acts in a non-anticipated way**. This conveys a very **specific conception of Nature**, which can be related to the concept of **wilderness** (*cf.* (Berrier-Lucas, 2012)). This conception of Nature can be traced back to the first decade of the twenty-century in the United States of America during the famous episode of Hetch Hetchy valley (California) and the damming of the Tuolumne River. During this event, one running schism emerged between the **preservation** (John Muir) and the **conservation** (Gifford Pinchot) movements. Briefly, the conservation movement is defined “*as the wise use or planned development of resources*” under a technical scope, when the preservationist rejects “*utilitarianism*” and advocacies “*of nature unaltered by man*” (*in* (Nash, 2001)). Both of them can be linked to the concept of wilderness. The conservationists juxtapose the “*needs of civilization with the spiritual and aesthetic value of wilderness*” (*in* (Nash, 2001)) by assuring resources regeneration for the future generations interests, to **renew with the Benthamian maxim** plus adding the question of time “*the greatest good, for the biggest and for the greatest time*”. Whereas the preservationists advocate for a **preserved and uninhabited Nature for its own**, mystical and religious values, a kind of “*romantic sublim*” (*in* (Cronon, 1995)). Put in another way, **for one the Nature** is a **bunch of resources**, which should be carefully used for the greatest good, and **for the other the Nature** is a living environment intertwined which **exists for itself and should be preserved**. Nevertheless, both movements conceptualized the wilderness as a fulfilment of the Judeo-Christian romantic project: to reproduce its values in Nature itself (for example the classical definition of a mountain as a temple). No matter if the wilderness is described as “*the original garden*” or “*the frontier*” – the savage world – or “*the bold landscape*” – the frontier heroism for initiated young men – or the “*sacred sublime*”, this notion is masculine in gender, conceptualize for/by occidental white well-to-do city elites and Judeo-Christian based (*cf.* (White, 1967), (Cronon, 1995), (Nash, 2001)).

To understand this background we could look closer at the landmark work of Jacques Mathieu and Jacques Lacoursière in “*Mémoires Québécoises*”:

“In the collective Quebecer memory, the nature has benefit from a huge evocative power. Nature always drives people to fantasize, give rise to/arouse feelings of strength and nostalgia. These feelings could be understood as: immensity, wilderness, pure water, unlimited resources and yesteryear winters [...]” (*in* (Mathieu & Lacoursière, 1991)).

In this specific nature’s conception, known as wilderness, forest left its mark on collective consciousness. With water, it has been associated to the economical rising of Québec, a fact that is



clarified by authors when quoting Fernand Harvey: **forest is a built-in component of the decision making**, but only through a taming demonstration of natural elements. Hydro-Québec and its stakeholders had integrated an environmental dimension to their decision-making process, more to demonstrate their capacity to act on forest than to aim economical or legal objectives.

Hydro-Québec's practices and discourses are "entangled" in wilderness. But the firm goes beyond this internalization and tries to renegotiate the environmental dimension in order to articulate "itself" with actors. This way the **forest stops being a "bunch of resources" and becomes a new voice**. Precisely Hydro-Québec was facing up a concrete sustainable-like situation – a **proto-sustainable**<sup>9</sup> situation – *i.e.* a risky and uncertain situation (forest fires in this case) where several actors and dimensions (social, natural and economic in this case) were entangled. By showing in Montreal's headquarter the short film, Hydro-Québec **challenges the classical frontier of inside/outside**. This point leads Hydro-Québec to **collectively re-design its own ontology**.

### III. Sustainable Corporate Ontology

How to interpret this re-configuration of the ontology of this firm? And why did it chose this way to solve this proto-sustainable issue? We propose here an explanation notably based on Latour's work.

Indeed, as explained in (Ornaf & Rambaud, 2012a), B. Latour offers an interesting leads on a political approach to ontology. For him, there exists two types of "things": the "**risk-free**" and the "**tangled**". He explains that we get used to divide reality into only well delimited risk-free objects, forgetting that some of them are "tangled". Risk-free objects have four characteristics: they have "*clear boundaries, a well-defined essence [and] well-recognized properties*". Their creators and producers, like scientists, technicians, become "*invisible [..., ] out of sight*" once the object is completed; the consequences, expected or not, of its existence are "*conceived in the form of an impact of a [...] universe, composed of entities less easy to delimit, and which [are] designated by vague names such as "social factors", "political dimensions", [...]"*"; these consequences, specially the unexpected ones, never have "*an impact of the initial definition of the object*" (in (Latour, 2004)).

In this world filled with risk-free objects, we try to define objects thanks to objective ontologies, like scientific or technical ones. In this search for a stable and prevailing ontology, Latour notices that, on the one hand, "*each scientist claims to be the only one able to behold*" (in (Jensen, 2006)) objects as they really are. On the other hand, this impossibility to find a clear pre-eminent ontology led to an

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<sup>9</sup> This term is explained in part III.2

extreme relativist ontological commitment, based on a radical social constructivism: from this point of view, we can only have subjective representations of objects.

This dichotomy relies on the classical “**Nature vs Society**” dichotomy (*cf.* for instance (Ornaf & Rambaud, 2012b)), or “**Absolutism vs Relativism**” dichotomy. For Latour, this dichotomy, that more and more authors in Sustainable Sciences try to overcome<sup>10</sup>, is based on the same will of domination and finally of exclusion of Democracy and Politics. Thus,

“one sees in the Absolutists the urge to maintain the dominance of the (superior) discursive grouping ‘object–right–knowledge–reason,’ whilst one sees in the Relativists the urge to establish the dominance of the (inferior) discursive grouping ‘subject–might–power–force’” (*in* (Everett, 2004)).

Following Latour, **the definition of** what is an object **must reflect the articulation of this object with the other actors or actants**. In order to obtain such a definition, Latour claims that we cannot have recourse to prevailing or relativist ontologies. According to him, the only way to **obtain such ontology is to collectively and deliberately**<sup>11</sup> “**talk with this object**” in order to bring out the articulations of this object with the other entities. But how to talk with an object? According to Latour,

“in politics, there is a very useful term for designating the whole gamut of intermediaries between someone who speaks and someone else who speaks in that person's place, between doubt and uncertainty: “**spokesperson**”” (*in* (Latour, 2004)).

We cannot develop here the real meaning of this notion but we can stress that a spokesperson “*is precisely the one who does not permit an assured answer to the question “Who is speaking?”*” (*in* (Latour, 2004)). Furthermore, “*we must learn to be sceptical of spokespersons, whether these represent human or non-human actors.*” (*in* (Jensen, 2006)).

### III.1 Ontology of firms

Firms are concerned by these ontological issues. As Banerjee explains in (Banerjee, 2007), the ontology of an object (what is this object and what does that mean for this object to exist) has great influences on what we know about it and on how to behave with it. Thus, “**ontology precedes ethics**” (*in* (Zimmerman, 1997)) and epistemology. In these conditions, “**ontology is needed to imagine a radically different role for corporations to enable them to become agents for positive social change**” (*in* (Banerjee, 2007)).

10 A typical example of this attempt is given by the Ecological-Symbolic Approach (ESA), which “*aims to resolve the overheated debate between realist and constructivist environmental sociologists by avoiding a relativistic view threatening strong constructivist or postmodern perspectives. It also avoids the deterministic view typical of pure realist approaches.*” (*in* (Vandermoere, 2008))

11 *i.e.* what we could call “in a democratic and political way”, in contrast to imposition of the domination of the object or the subject, as mentioned above.

In the literature, we can distinguish three main theories of the ontology of firms: the **concession/fiction theory**, the **corporate realism** and the **corporate nominalism** (*cf.* (Phillips, 1993), (Vizenor, 2006), (Dejnozka, 2007)). The concession/fiction theory “*takes the view that the law simply treats the corporation as if it were a person. It may be a subject of rights and duties, but it is in no way a real person*” (*in* (Vizenor, 2006)). For corporate realism, firms are real entities, distinct from their members, and are also genuine agents (contrary to concession/fiction theory assumptions). For corporate nominalism, firms are only aggregates: “*this position is closely linked to the ontological view, which is sometimes referred to as methodological individualism, that society is no more than the various assortments of individuals [...]*” (*in* (Vizenor, 2006)). Now, from these general conceptions of corporate ontologies, is it possible to discuss the ontology of firms in a Latourian way? Recently, Krarup and Blok proposed an adaptation of the concept of Latour's **black-box**, *i.e.* a comprehensive network of concrete relations (*cf.* (Callon & Latour, 1981)). They propose to introduce the notion of **quasi-actant** in order to conceptualize social entities like firms. The ontology of firms as black-boxes is close to corporate nominalism. But, as Krarup and Blok explains,

“the social world cannot be completely reduced to its genealogy of concrete associations (at least not by the sociologist trying to reconstruct it), and that ‘responsible description’ thus requires a modified set of concepts” (*in* (Krarup & Blok, 2011))

like the introduction of quasi-actants. They illustrate their proposal by using the example of a firm studied by Callon and Latour in (Callon & Latour, 1981), Renault. For them,

“Renault as a quasi-actant seems much more adequate than the black-box metaphor. In other words, it is exactly Renault-as-symbolically-enacted – that is, as quasi-actant – which investors and financial speculators on the stock exchange refer to in their work and talk.” (*in* (Krarup & Blok, 2011)).

The use of the terminology of quasi-actant doesn't inhibit from thinking firms as black-boxes. Rather, we argue here that firms can be seen in the same time as black-boxes and as quasi-actants, depending on the place we adopt. More precisely, firms could be a **quasi-actant from the outside** and a **black-box from the inside**. In the same way, humans are whole entities when they act, talk with other humans, etc... But, humans are also black-boxes: for instance, for phlebologists, humans are a network of blood vessels. Let us stress the point that inside and outside are interconnected: the behaviour of a quasi-actant notably depends on the behaviour of the inside black-box and this behaviour is also influenced by the outside.

Let us go back to the case of Bersimis. In part II, we clearly saw that for the Laurentian Protective Forest Association, **Hydro-Québec was viewed as a quasi-actant**, with whom it was possible to talk and to cooperate. Furthermore, this cooperation had an impact on the internal organisation of Hydro-Québec (notably through the use of the short film), which finally changed the articulations between Hydro-Québec (as a whole entity) and the forest (as an actant).

Now we are able to ask for the following question: as quasi-actants, are firms risk-free objects or tangled? The prevailing ontology of firms is based on a predetermined and fixed view of them. Indeed,

“two types of theories of the firm have emerged in scholarship. Economic theories [...]: under an economic theory, a firm is a group of assets under common ownership. Legal theories [...]: under a legal theory, each firm is a legal person.” (*in* (Iacobucci & Triantis, 2007)).

As mentioned in part II, the standard ontology of Hydro-Québec was an example of this predetermined juridico-economic view. Firms-as-a-nexus-of-contract is another typical example of this exercise of ontological stabilization. But “*even casual observation suggests limitations to this dominant view.*” (*in* (Koza & Thoenig, 2003)). So thinkers tend to conceptualize firms as risk-free objects, and so to repeat the “Absolutism vs Relativism” dichotomy.

However, Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause points out that because of the persistence of this dichotomy in organizational science, this one

“embraces only a portion of reality. The organic, biotic, and intersubjective moral bases of organizational existence [...] have been neglected or repressed in the greater portion of modern management theory. This exclusion has resulted in theory which is at best limited and at worst pathological. By disassociating human organization from the biosphere and the full human community, it is possible that our theories have tacitly encouraged organizations to behave in ways that ultimately destroy their natural and social life-support systems.” (*in* (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995)).

These authors emphasize a key point: the conception of **firms as risk-free objects**, not well articulated with other actants and actors, has an **impact on the level of sustainability** of these corporations. For them,

“management scholars [have to] reconceive their domain as one of organization-in-full community, both social and ecological [...] This integration may be the primary transformational challenge for management theorists as they strive for relevance in the new millenium [...] if sustainability matters.” (*in* (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995))

So let us now examine the links between these ontological issues and sustainability.

### III.2 Sustainability in a risk-free or tangled world?

Sustainability and Sustainable Development are polysemous words that official reports and scholars didn't manage to completely disambiguate. Thus, *“unfortunately, the sustainability defined by Brundtland, or as refined by subsequent writers, can be interpreted in many ways.”* (in (Petrucci, 2002)) Even the values and the framework of Sustainable Development are not completely clear. Indeed, we can notice that *“a critical review of the multidisciplinary literature on sustainable development reveals a lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding sustainable development and its complexities.”* (in (Jabareen, 2008)). In these conditions, authors try to highlight some fundamental issues which define some specific interpretations of Sustainable Development. One of the best known distinction is the concept of “weak vs strong sustainability” (cf. (Neumayer, 2004)). Some taxonomies of Sustainable Development orientations has been also established. Recently, from a review of literature, D. Clifton determined three main orientations of Sustainability, based on moral centres (another classical distinction in Sustainable Development):

Primary Goal area of focus	<b>Reformist orientation</b>	<b>Weak anthropocentrism</b>  The focus of what is to be sustained is the flourishing of human life through the satisfaction of human Fulfilment Interests based on Considered Human Preferences. The non-human world is only (or mostly) of instrumental value to humans in meeting Considered Human Preferences.
	<b>Transformational orientation</b>	<b>Ecocentrism</b>  The focus of what is to be sustained is the flourishing of human and non-human life through the satisfaction of Fulfilment Interests. Both human and non-human interests given consideration – humans interests do not take automatic preference.
	<b>Inconsistent with both Reformist and Transformational approaches</b>	<b>Strong anthropocentrism</b>  The satisfaction of human interests, based on Felt Human Preferences, dominates.

(adapted from (Clifton, 2010))

In line with the categorization of D. Clifton, we generally find three orientations of Sustainable Development: a prevailing one based on mainstream economic theories (neo-classical and neo-liberal conceptions) and on strong technical assumptions (often called techno-centrism (cf. (Gladwin et al., 1995))); a second one refers to some “Deep Ecology” theories; and a third one which is not completely a

middle-way, and is treated in very different ways according to authors. This “third way” is for instance often linked to systems theory (*cf. (Ho & Ulanowicz, 2005)*) or to principles of management of life, as illustrated by Micoud and Bobbé:

“dans un nouveau contexte, où développement durable et biodiversité aidant, le principe suprême est celui de la gestion du vivant, c’est le paradigme pratique de la régulation qui est appelé à s’imposer logiquement.” (*in (Micoud & Bobbé, 2006)*).

Now, most of these approaches (especially the two first) rely again on the “Nature vs Society” dichotomy, which tends to determine some *a priori* static ontologies. For instance, “*deep ecology has at its heart an a priori position which privileges the preservation of nature over the human use of nature*” (*in (Barry, 1999)*). For the prevailing approach of Sustainable Development, environment is often seen as risk-free resources.

However, we argue here that **sustainability issues** come from a **dynamic entanglement between several orders, hierarchies, which are linked to risky and uncertain situations**. Thus, Godard explains that, in some crisis situations,

“l’environnement tenu pour donné et stable se trouve transformé et altéré par ces actions mêmes qui étaient dépendantes de lui [au niveau du système socio-économique] [...] En admettant [...] que biodiversité, paysages et climat appartiennent à l’environnement des sociétés humaines [...], on aurait par exemple affaire à cette classe de problèmes lorsque les prélèvements d’individus sont tels qu’ils menacent l’espèce naturelle [...] C’est là que se met en branle la structure de “**hiérarchie enchevêtrée**”.” (*in (Godard, 1997)*)

In (Billaudot, 2010), Billaudot introduces also an entanglement of hierarchies concerning the Right and the Good: according to him, “*il faut rompre avec le monopole de la « priorité du juste » pour que l’on ait une chance que le développement devienne durable.*” An other entanglement, close to this one, is illustrated by the pluralism issues (“*the fact of profound and irreconcilable differences in citizens’ reasonable comprehensive religious and philosophical conceptions of the world*” *in (Rawls, 2001)*)

One way to solve these sustainability issues consists in reasserting the domination of the object or of the subject, as explained above, and so in trying to freeze the ontologies of entities, in order to get back to well-known situations, well established “sustainable theories”. This category of **solutions often relies on technical and/or ethical measures, as a substitution to a genuine reflection** on “*what doing means [...] so obsessed have people been with these questions alone: what is it to do good or to do evil?*” Indeed, “*doing has not been thought because no one has attempted to think of anything other than two particular moments of doing, the ethical moment and the technical moment.*” (*in (Castoriadis, 1998)*)

Another way to think sustainability integrates that tangled objects are completely linked to sustainability issues and so have to be taken into account: “*la composition progressive du monde commun suppose des enquêtes méticuleuses qui ne partitionnent surtout pas d’avance le type d’être auquel on a affaire.*” (in (Latour, 2001)). Thus, as Latour explains, we have to implement democratic and political procedures as described above to explore the ontology of entities. Essences of things are not

“the beginning of the process of composition or articulation (the term “habit” is reserved for that), but its provisional conclusion; there are essences, but these are obtained by institution at the end of an explicit process that gives them **durability** and indisputability by attaching attributes to their substances.” (in (Latour, 2004)).

The case of Bersimis is remarkable to understand this approach of sustainability. Indeed, as mentioned above, Hydro-Québec was a typical example of a quasi-actant whose ontology was pre-determined and which had a frozen conception of its socio-natural environment (based on the concept of wilderness). Moreover, this firm faced up to an original situation where several hierarchies were entangled (natural and socio-economic orders; priority of the Right or of the Good - because of the presence of the State and of NGOs -, pluralism, etc...), in a risky and uncertain context (forest fires). We decided to call this type of situation, proto-sustainable: Hydro-Québec was confronted by *de facto* sustainability issues, as explained before but at a time where these ones were not identified.

Now, in this context, without the recourse to any theories and with no real anticipation, the protagonists create collectively and deliberatively new types of articulations between them, in order to adapt to the situation. More precisely, Hydro-Québec (represented by its spokespersons: notably the Bersimis' construction manager and Ludger-Eugène Potvin) and the forest (**represented by its spokespersons: the Laurentian Protective Forest Association**) accepted to talk together. At first, they start by understanding what they were: Hydro-Québec notably took into consideration that the **forest was a tangled object**. Finally the quasi-actant Hydro-Québec changed the way it articulated with the actant, forest. Doing so, this firm re-designed its own ontology: Hydro-Québec was not a pure juridico-economic entities but a juridico-economic entities which integrated in its essence **a specific hybridisation with the forest**.

#### IV. Conclusion

So the case of Bersimis is an illustration of the relevance of Latour's approach of sustainability issues and the importance of the ontological inquiry. Now, as mentioned before, all this process was not anticipated or planned by Hydro-Québec: it just appeared to be a “good” solution to adapt to this



original situation. In these conditions, at the present time, where sustainability is clearly recognized as a central issue for organizations and society, we speak in favour of the **implementation of this approach in a lucid and conscious way**, as in the Latour's Parliament of Things (*cf.* (Latour, 2004)). It means concretely the creation of areas of discussions where spokespersons which represent actors, actants and quasi-actants could carry out an “*ontological surgery*”<sup>12</sup>, in order to be able to collectively and deliberatively discuss how to live together. An illustration of what could be such areas is given by the “Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental” (CESE). Indeed, it is composed by representatives of several type of actors (employees, employers, associations, *etc.*); their goals are notably to

“conseiller le Gouvernement et le Parlement et participer à l’élaboration de la politique économique, sociale et environnementale [and] favoriser, à travers sa composition, le dialogue entre les catégories socioprofessionnelles [...]” (*in* (CESE, 2012)).

We finally stress the point that this lucid process has to be necessarily **dynamic** in the following sense. Let us suppose actors, actants and quasi-actants collectively and deliberatively examined their ontologies and that they defined new ways to articulate themselves together. By doing that, they solve **temporarily** some issues, as explained above. But if they decide not to implement an other “round” of this procedure, they finally get back to the classical way of tackling sustainability: ontologies tend to become stable, and these actants become progressively risk-free objects. Thus, U. Mäki explains that

“[ontological] redescription is a dynamical process, not a state of affairs, for example. It always involves, implicitly at least, a reference to an antecedent description and to a subsequent description, the latter following the former in time.” (*in* (Mäki, 1985))

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12 In the context of bioethics committees, which are close to the Parliaments of things, S. Jasanoff shows that “*bioethical deliberation in each country serves as a site of ontological surgery -that is, for deciding how to describe and characterize the problematic entities whose natures must be fixed as a prelude to ethical analysis.*” (*in* (Jasanoff, 2011))

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