COMMENTARY

Neither revolution, nor resignation: (re)democratizing contemporary planning praxis – a commentary on Allmendinger & Haughton's *Spatial planning, devolution, and new planning spaces*

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Pre-proof submitted final draft, please check published text in Environment & Planning C for final version!

Introduction: Governance as the death of politics, and spatial planning as its handmaid… or?

In his unsettling critique of contemporary humanism Peter Sloterdijk notes that Plato, still the ultimate genealogical foundation of so much political thinking in the western world, defined the art of political leadership as the pastoral art of herding 'hornless animals', and that the task of the Platonic 'expert-king' was to "bring together free but suggestible people in order to bring out the characteristics that are most advantageous to the whole, so that under his direction the *human zoo* can achieve optimum homeostasis" (Sloterdijk, 2010:26, emphasis added). Reading Allmendinger & Haughton's (2010) both lucid and highly pertinent account of the emerging role

of spatial planning (and planners) in contemporary metagovernantial policy regimes and networks generates discomforting resonances with Sloterdijk's recount of Plato's 'benevolent dictator', the *basileus* – resonances which are hard to shake off. Discussing the notion that spatial planning today to a large extent might be a vehicle for 'postideological' policy production, heralding in a (supposed) 'postpolitical' condition, Allmendinger & Haughton argue that much of contemporary spatial planning practice "far from being strategic and steering" instead can be portrayed as "supine and subservient to powerful vested interests in the development process" (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010:809), and further that spatial planning thereby to some degrees appears to be developing into a "legitimating apparatus of the state, used to rein in dissident voices behind the broad political project of reregulation in favour of particular interests" (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009:808).

Relating to the writings of postpolitical theorists such as Swyngedouw and Raco, Allmedinger & Haughton argue in a somewhat different vein that instead of reading the emergence of new metagovernantial planning practices as heralding in a postpolitical era, we might instead see what is happening in spatial planning practice in the present, especially the proliferation of new spatial entities in the guise of 'soft spaces with fuzzy boundaries', as a new politics of spatial form and a way of doing 'politics by other means' (cf. Clausewitz, [1832]/2009; Latour, 1988) through the "short circuiting some of the formal democratic processes of statutory planning processes" (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010: 813). Hence, not *less politics*, but rather *more politics* – albeit by other means than those commonly and traditionally recognized as legitimately political in liberal-democratic parliamentary systems of representative democracy. Thus, in accordance with this insight, perhaps we should not claim that what we are currently witnessing is the practice of spatial planning after 'the death of politics', but rather spatial planning as a

displacement and delegation of politics into other realms of society than the formal spaces of politics. A displacement which in turn generates a need for a radical reconstitution of our ideas regarding the democratic legitimacy and accountability of planning work – and further, the democratic-ethical responsibilities of the contemporary spatial planner in a situation where planning practice is all the more seldomly guided by formal statues, guidelines or frameworks for democratic accountability, transparency and legitimacy. It is a matter of debate whether planning has ever been truly comfortable with the idea of more direct democratic involvement, control and steering. Rather, it could perhaps be argued that in many instances more traditional planning enterprises also constituted nothing else than a vehicle of doing politics by other means, short-circuiting the 'due democratic process' by appeals to a supposedly value-neutral Science, capital 'S' (cf. Latour, 1993; forthcoming). What is obvious, though, is that spatial planning – as it plays out in the present – is in need of a radical democratic(izing) make-over. The question regarding how we can begin to approach this monumental and critical task is the thread I aim to pursue in the remaining sections of this commentary. In the next section I will proceed to discuss how recent developments in planning theory has interplayed with the emergence of spatial planning practice as metagovernance, as observed by Allmendinger & Haughton. Thereafter I will shortly touch upon the democratic deficits of emergent metagovernantial policy regimes, and the role of spatial planning within these assemblages. In the third and final section, I will give some hints regarding what I see as potential means to sketch some theoretical foundations from which a challenge can be launched against those emerging and deeply problematic tendencies within contemporary spatial planning practice which are so clearly illuminated and discussed in Allmendinger & Haughton's paper.

The Kafkaesque world of contemporary networked governance

Within contemporary movements in planning theory, especially within the communicative/collaborative/deliberative strand, one can find recurring conceptualizations of spatial planning as a vehicle for facilitating functioning structures for spatial 'governance' through the development of spaces for non-adversarial dialogue, what Healey (1997) following Bryson & Crosby calls "forums" and "arenas". Healey and other authors in this tradition during the 1990's (rightfully) pointed out that traditional, regulatory planning system lacked adequate spaces for such non-adversarial dialogue. As a result of this, the only way for many interests to contest technocratic domination was through pursuing obstructive and confrontational tactics that generated unnecessary and unfruitful confrontations.

Now, though, it appears as if the pendulum has swung the other way. The emerging, amorphous networks of multi-level spatial (meta)governance that are taking form in Europe often have a very limited degree of transparency and questionable levels of democratic accountability (Swyngedouw, 2005; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010; Haughton et al, 2010). The building of such semi-formal or informal networks are celebrated by many practitioners and some academics as potent methods of circumscribing and avoiding "administrative clutter" and a way of really "getting things done" (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009:619). Still, if someone wishes to challenge decisions made within these networks, what court of appeal can she turn to, when it is sometimes even difficult to figure out who are responsible for the decision, or if any decision formally *even has been made* or if some loose consensus to 'go ahead in a certain direction' just appears to have taken form and taken on a life of its own, within this emerging truly Kafkaesque landscape of planning and spatial policy development? For as Swyngedouw (2005:1999) notes, even if the democratic lacunae of pluralist liberal democracy are well known, at least the procedures of democratic governing are formally codified, transparent and easily legible –

whereas the emerging “proliferating maze of opaque networks, fuzzy institutional arrangements, ill-defined responsibilities and ambiguous political objectives and priorities” of many ‘joined-up’ policy networks most-often lack “explicit lines of accountability” (Swyngedouw, 2005:1999-2000).

So, does this mean that the new practices of spatial planning ‘neutralize politics’? Do they serve to herald in a ‘postpolitical’ condition whereby radical political alternatives are crowded-out and marginalized (cf. Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010: 804)? What I would like to suggest here is that we, taking the same tack as Allmendinger & Haughton (although they do not use this specific term) and following Marres (2005), more gainfully might analyze the present condition of spatial planning as a pertinent contemporary illustration of some of the mechanisms whereby politics is *displaced* into other spheres of society than the formal spaces of politics. The displacement of politics into other spheres than the formalized spaces of parliamentary democracy is according to Marres a fundamental component of political practice, and not – as some would argue, a specific historical condition related to the emergence of a late-modern (pseudo-)global information society. Thus, there is nothing ‘postpolitical’ about what is going on when highly political issues that often affect the life situation of large and diverse groups of both humans and non-humans are displaced from parliamentary procedures or formalized bureaucracy into more amorphous spaces, such as those of public opinion formation or informal policy networks. Rather, Marres argues that in political processes, actors constantly attempt to displace the burning issues at hand into settings which allow for a framing of the specific issue in a way that reformulates the issue into terms that increases the likeliness of the outcome being in their favor (the power of frame setting is also an ongoing discussion in planning literature, see Hoch, 2009; Healey 1996, 2007; Schön & Rein, 1994). Thus, from this perspective, the displacement of

political issues between different settings where actors attempt to place the issue in a forum that will allow its settlements on terms that are as favorable as possible to the interests of said actor, is an ever-present and central component of political action in general. The struggles between competing definitions of who the relevant democratic subjects in a particular instance really are, who is to be qualified to be a legitimately concerned party, and which the appropriate democratic forms for settling a particular issue really should be, are all constantly up for grabs.

As Marres argues, we cannot be ascertained that the displacement of politics will necessarily lead to democratic deficits, but if the result of the displacement of an issue leads to the issue being resolved or dealt with in a forum that either recasts the issue at hand to such an extent that important demands or claims are shed along the way, thus disqualifying the positions of certain interested parties whose voice is muted, or if certain subjects are completely disqualified from speaking, we can speak of concrete democratic deficits, as displacement of the issue appears to 'close down' rather than 'open up' the issue at hand as a public matter (Marres, 2005: 134-135, cf. also Latour, 2005). Thus, Marres states that "in the case of settlement of public affairs, attempts to short-cut displacements of the issues to sites where the antagonism among attachments can be made manifest must be persistently resisted" (Marres, 2005: 149). Thus, when political controversies become public affairs, according to Marres, this must not be seen as a "failure" of the political system of governance. Rather, these are events to be celebrated as "occasions of democracy" (Marres, 2005:136), whereby democratic politics is incarnated in practice. This perspective, which highlights both the ubiquity and the democratic importance of conflict, strife and opposition within policy processes also resonates with the work of planning theorists such as Jean Hillier (2002) and Jon Pløger (2004), who – building primarily upon the agonistic philosophy of Chantal Mouffe – have discussed the importance of planning actors to

sometimes consciously avoiding being drawn into ‘consensus-steering’, legitimizing processes of governance – and to instead opt to ‘go public’ with their grievances. Or as Marres notes, when a site of politics does not facilitate the articulation of issues in which actors are caught up, or even contribute to their disarticulation, it cannot be considered a matter of pathology when actors refuse to participate, “they are right to stay away” (Marres, 2005: 151; cf. also Swyngedouw, 2005: 2000).

Taking up the challenge of reforming spatial planning

Relating back to Marres’ discussion on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ issue displacements that either open-up issues for public contestation or close them down, it is quite obvious that the networked governance processes described by Allmendinger & Haughton most often would qualify in the second category. Surveying the present situation thus generates the question: what can be done about this troubling tendency towards growing democratic deficits within spatial planning processes (and policy development in general)? Swyngedouw’s later writings on the ‘postpolitical’ condition (cf. Swyngedouw, 2009) can sometimes convey a sense that we today live in a globally all-encompassing and fool-proof post-political, post-democratic, neo-liberal capitalist ‘System’ that can at best be ‘tickled’ but never truly changed, leaving as the only alternatives for reaction either whole-scale global revolution or complete resignation.

Painting such a bleak picture can be performative in itself in unfortunate ways, through conveying a disabling sense of overpowering structuring forces against which the individual policy maker or administrator cannot stand a chance of challenge. This defeatist way of framing policy situations is dangerous, since it alleviates responsibility from the individual: if nothing can be done – I do not have the responsibility to do anything. If I am up against the mechanics of all

of Capitalism (Capital ‘C’), History or the laws of the Universe – why bother even trying? I am relieved of responsibility to do anything. Fortunately, Allmendinger & Haughton wisely avoid to fall into this trap – but neither do they offer any suggestions as to how contemporary planning practices might come to be transformed in a more democratic and transparent manner. For, pace Swyngedouw, there are most probably many other planning practitioners, educators and scholars who worry about the emerging democratic deficits of an increasingly opaque and amorphous multi-level governance structure in Europe, but perhaps would not go as far as to argue that being uncompromising and striving for the “obliteration” of anyone is something to strive for (cf. Swyngedouw, 2009: 612). Rather, even if we prefer the less glorious wrangling, compromises and partial agreements of democratic politics before radicalist staunchness, we can still recognize that the right to take place, to voice dissent, and to have somewhere to take your dissent – is a crucial and foundational feature of any democratic system worthy of its name.

So how can efforts that aim to ‘close down’ and obfuscate the potentially controversial issues of spatial development be challenged through processes and mechanisms that instead ‘open up’ these issues for democratic debate and transparency? Marres does not offer any cut-and-paste solution for what such mechanisms might look like, she only notes that they must be worked out on a case-to-case basis, as part of the ‘occasion’. An interesting venue of investigation, though, might be to actually revisit Healey’s *Collaborative Planning* from 1997. In her book, Healey sounds a warning that over-cozy informal relationships between key public and private stakeholders in spatial planning processes often will have a tendency to degenerate into the building of democratically problematic corporatist alliances, legitimated through sometimes quite shady consensus-building planning efforts (Healey, 1997:224-228). Re-reading Healey’s classic text it becomes obvious that what appears to have widely translated into planning practice

from the book is a focus on facilitating efficient ‘governance’ through the establishment of non-adversarial planning forums and arenas, while conveniently missing out on one of Healey’s absolutely central point in the book: the importance of designing ‘court’ institutions (not necessarily formal legal courts) within planning processes, which provide formalized forms through which the planning decisions worked out in forums and arenas can, and should be, continuously challenged (Healey, 1997: 279-280). Such court-like institutions, for instance public hearing procedures, can – in the best of cases – provide forums for the articulation of antagonistic interests within an agonistic framing, thus generating possibilities for opening up democratically crucial debates concerning core values and trajectories towards the future (cf. Asdal, 2008; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Mouffe, 2005).

But, relating back to Marres and the agonistic planning theorists, we must also realize that simply providing for institutionalized courts of appeal and similar procedures within planning and policy processes, although important, is not enough. In any democratic system worthy of its name, actors must also have an exercisable option to ‘go public’ with their grievances: through the media, internet opinion-raising activities or taking to the street in direct action or civil disobedience. Planners and other policy practitioners must learn to recognize that this type of displacement of politics or ‘doing politics by other means’ is a central component of functioning democratic societies. Policy practitioners simply must learn to see that what Bruno Latour discusses as the “Habermasian moment” of consensus-seeking deliberation is but one (potential) stage in the developmental trajectory of the public controversies that are so crucial for the functioning of democracy (Latour, 2007; see also Callon et al, 2009). Planners and other policy practitioners must therefore learn not only to appreciate, but also to actively facilitate those moments when crucial policy issues are opened up to public dispute, and not see these occasions

as ‘snags’ or hurdles to be avoided in carefully engineered and rigged policy processes, and instead come to value them as central components of democracy-in-practice.

The above injunctions must not be shrugged off as philosophical musings, for if we reject the defeatist position and see the policy practitioner as vested with both a capacity and perhaps a duty to make a difference to how policy formulation and implementation plays out in practice, we will often be able to identify a certain ‘margin of manoeuver’ for policy practitioners (cf. Callon, 1986), within which they actually have a real possibility to challenge established mechanisms and to tactically act in ways that facilitate the development of alternative types of planning methods and mechanisms. Thus, if we take our cue from Healey (cf. Healey, 2010:19) and choose to see the “twenty-first century ‘planning project’” as not only a set of expert skills, a *techné*, but also as a calling for justice, an *ethos* – it becomes a crucial task for planning scholars to proceed to attempt to define some of the potential content of this calling – for how this calling is articulated will decide how it is responded to: how it engenders *respons(e)ibility* among planners and policy practitioners.[1] As Allmendinger & Haughton’s paper shows us, a reinvigorated discussion on the transparency and accountability of planning decisions should form a pivotal point for such emergent discussions, and perhaps will also contribute to a widening of interest in the democratic merits of strife and conflict, not only in spatial planning and other policy theory, but also in practice. This might play out as a renewed interest in the facilitation of ‘court’ institutions within planning processes, that is, the provision of spaces where policy decisions might be challenged, but will hopefully also entail experimentation with new methods to accommodate fruitfully dissensus already at an early stage within the planning process where the ‘opening out’ of issues through the articulation of opposing value systems

[1] I wish to thank Gunnar Olsson for making this inspiring observation in a personal conversation.

might take place (cf. Brand & Gaffikin, 2007; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Metzger, 2011). Possibly, it could also entail a renewed interest in a rediscovery and reworking of advocacy planning theory to put it more in tune with the demands of contemporary society and the present challenge of confronting neo-corporatist governance structures in which spatial planning is reduced to little else than pseudo-democratic window-dressing of dominant corporatist interests.

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