

Performative participation in envisioning future geographies.

A case study on Environmental Strategy design in Brabant, the Netherlands

Envisioning and anticipating future geographies in governance increasingly becomes a participatory endeavour. Fundamental premise in these processes is often the alleged need to increase the legitimacy of the governance process and on the recognition that such processes should involve those actors that are affected by them (Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts, 2010). Research on participation in this context is not a novel terrain. Much research has been conducted over the last decades into the functioning of participation in spatial planning and governance practice, examining the intended and unintended consequences of participation, and scrutinizing whether the various ideals of participation, including consensus, better decisions, legitimacy, and support are actually met (Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts, 2010). Yet very few studies have explicitly questioned the performative role of ‘the future’ in participatory visioning processes on spatial development (Felt, 2015).

The idea of public participation in visioning reaffirms the belief in a future which is open to human shaping and transformation and for which we need to take collective human responsibility to anticipate the future we want (Granjou, Walker, & Salazar, 2017). In this capacity the locus on participation inhibits a tacit promise (Ruben, 1972), that is (1) an epistemological promise to accumulate, mobilize and direct all knowledge and know-how to secure the *probability* of shaping our desired future and, interrelated, (2) a moral promise implicating our *obligation* to anticipate these futures in a fundamentally democratic way taking responsibility for both present and futures needs and values. Visions, therefore, should not be perceived as an end goal or an end product, but as futures-in-the-making (Adam & Groves, 2007). Visions are performative. They provide a discourse of future-orientation (Kinsley, 2012) which renders real and material consequences in the present and the future as it emerges.

In this paper we present findings of a case study conducted into the extensive participatory visioning process adopted by the provincial government of Brabant, the Netherlands, for the development of the Environmental Strategy [*Omgevingsvisie*]. The Environmental Strategy is a key strategic and integral visioning instrument under the new Dutch Environment and Planning Act [*Omgevingswet*], directing policy and program development on the physical environment. Within this case we have studied how the explicit participatory approach contributed to the construction, articulation and legitimation of particular future geographies. The participatory processes rendered a vision encompassing both a ‘panorama on the future’ and a ‘mobilizing strategy to enact the future’, with an emphasis on the latter. Moreover, the strategy was articulated as an integrated narrative connecting frames on future geographies such as ‘energy transition’, ‘climate proofing’ and ‘smart connected cities’ to an explicit claim for situated and deliberative approach in both time and space. Illustrative to this novel

participatory approach, both in the process and in output, was the complete absence of geo maps, in stark contrast to previous, technocratic, spatial government visions. This change of course affirms the tacit promise of participation and the idea of a human-made future.

However, beyond this affirmation we observe an ambivalence in this dual future-orientation that could manifest in serious tensions as the future unfolds. As a mobilizing strategy the vision ‘opens up’ the future explicitly urging for situational and deliberative strategies and action in both time and space. However, as a panorama or a future cause, it renders and legitimizes the future as more or less inevitable and unquestionable, significantly closing down on alternative future geographies to emerge over time and direct the course of action. Since both are premised on the same participatory process and therefore might put a legit claim on the ‘tacit promise’ made, subsequent strategies including policies, plans and actions will inevitably be subject to the overarching politics of the real. Like in most government visions and visioning processes these politics are not explicit, nor reflected upon. Yet the move towards public involvement in these processes makes the need for such reiterative reflection even more critical (Maze, 2019).

In order to expose the performative effects of such visions and reflect on the tacit promise of participation, two questions need to be addressed in further research. First, research needs to direct to the dependency on the particular framing of future causes such as ‘energy transition’ and ‘smart connected cities’ and their performative effects on situational strategies, in particular how they shape participation or citizenship in programs, projects and practices. Second, the ‘shared values’ and subsequent restrictions, assumptions, and expectations that are implicitly scripted into a vision and the extent to which they provide a moral entitlement to take for granted the future behaviour of actors based on performances in the past (Ruben, 1972) should be subjected to scrutiny.

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