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# See no evil, hear no evil: The democratic potential of transition management



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### ABSTRACT

Various scholars have critically reflected upon transition management, some explicitly called for thinking beyond existing paradigms of institutional and deliberative democracy. Taking up this challenge, this paper seeks to explore inherent democratic tensions of managing (socio-technical) transitions. To this end, it presents a 'post-foundational' understanding of democratic politics, contrasting it to traditional notions of democracy that dominate transition approaches. To explore the relationship between transition management and post-foundational democracy, the paper first empirically explores how the democratic politics of an urban regeneration process play out in a Dutch delta city (Rotterdam's city ports). This case illustrates that contrary to traditional conceptions of democracy, a more 'extra-institutional' transition management process can create space for a different type of democratic governance. We argue that post-foundational democracy reframes our understanding of the politics of governing (socio-technical) transitions.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the democratic politics of transition management (TM) by exploring inherent democratic tensions of TM. Transition management (Loorbach, 2010; Rotmans et al., 2001), as a concept and a governance approach, has been adopted in the Netherlands and other countries in the last decade (e.g. Smith and Kern, 2009). This approach provides strategies and tools to reflectively address contemporary challenges (e.g. energy crisis) and develop alternatives at the margins of traditional institutions and incumbent regimes (e.g. by privileging frontrunners and change agents). Various scholars have picked up this concept and critically reflected upon the transition management approach, its practice and its broader political implications. In the broader debates around governance and democracy, as well as in critical discussions about the (lack of) democratic quality of TM, the central issue is the extent to which decision-making processes are inclusive and open or whether decision making processes suffer from a 'democratic deficit'. More specific, some contributions called for thinking *beyond* existing paradigms of democratic institutions and deliberative democracy (Walker and Shove, 2007; Hendriks and Grin, 2007; Hendriks, 2009; Voß et al., 2009).

In this paper we argue that all democratic decision making processes need to be selective and exclusive to some extent to be productive. But also that it should be possible, from a TM perspective, to be more transparent and thoughtful about the selection and exclusion, and to create more diverse and open processes and democratise dominant conception of decision-making itself. In doing so, we argue that TM can potentially be more democratic than institutionalised democracy, using insights from post-structuralist political theory (e.g. Laclau, Rancière, Lefort) and an illustrative empirical case of urban water transition management in Rotterdam's waterfront regeneration. In many cases of research on socio-technical transitions (e.g. urban water systems), traditional notions of democratic politics seem to be dominant, if they are addressed at all. This is unfortunate, because an alternative conception of democracy can enrich our understanding of socio-technical transitions and their governance. In this paper, we argue that the concept of post-foundational democracy addresses some of the pertinent challenges of the relationship between the management of (socio-technical) transitions and democracy, thereby offering an approach to TM that understands transformative change and radical alternatives in terms of democratic politics. So, instead of presenting transition management as undemocratic in one way or another (technocratic, non-transparent, etc.), we argue that transition management can potentially be highly democratic exactly because it is *not* firmly rooted in institutionalised democracy.

The article is structured as follows. After some general principles of transition management presented in Section 2, the paper zooms in on scholarly contributions that problematise the politics involved in transition management in Section 3. Section 4 discusses some scholarly work that particularly explore the democratic politics of transition management. Building on some suggestions articulated by these scholars and informed by literature on radical democratic theorists, Section 5 presents a post-foundational understanding of democracy that addresses some of the blind spots of traditional notions of democratic politics. Additionally, this section deconstructs an institutionalised conception of democratic politics in transition management scholarship, which opens up the conceptual field for an alternative conception of 'democratic transition management'. Section 6 presents an empirical case of how transition management ideas and practices were introduced and played out in recent activities to regenerate the Rotterdam harbour area (City Ports). The City Ports programme – which serves as a critical case (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006) – consists of five strategies aimed at strengthening regional economic structures and improving local working and living environments in a 1600 ha. area of Rotterdam's waterfront. We particularly focus on a strategy aimed at creating sustainable floating houses and working environments (the 'Floating Community strategy'). This empirical case is illustrative, as it expresses how transition management was employed at the intersection of democratic institutions on the one hand (i.e. local government and incumbent networks) and more informal networks and 'extra-institutional' knowledge, imaginaries and practices on the other hand. Section 7 reflects on the empirical case and explores some conceptual linkages between transition management and post-foundational democracy, sensitising transition management as being potentially more democratic than institutionalised democracy. To conclude, we raise some issues of this understanding of democratic transition management.

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