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Looking North and South: Ideals and realities of inclusive environmental governance

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the dynamics of real processes of inclusive environmental governance by looking at the decision-maker/expert/lay person interplay. Specifically, we present a comparative ethnographic study that leads to a critical examination of Marteen Hajer's concept of technological citizenship and its role in normative models of so-called inclusive environmental governance. First, we present the *Bionatur* project of MST (Movimento Sem Terra/Landless People's Movement), the largest rural movement in Latin America. The project explicitly attempts to include lay/traditional knowledge into the processes of defining and protecting a regulatory space for "Creole seeds". Second, we describe the formally open and inclusive environmental management of polluted sediments during harbour dredging in Norway. In both cases the actors are confronted with difficult problems bound by contradictory constraints of the institutional and cultural contexts. In complex relationships, trust, dependency, responsibility and opposition, encompass the decision-maker/expert/lay interplay. Embedded in these contexts, it is not always clear that non-experts want full autonomy and responsibility. In complex relationships, trust, dependency, responsibility and opposition, encompass the decision-maker/expert/lay person interplay. The results suggest that ideals, if instantiated, are reshaped within concrete contexts of action. Participatory ideals such as "technological citizenship", inclusiveness, transparency and accountability need not be relativised, but they would better be expressed as regulative norms for practice rather than ideals from which an acontextual model or structure may be deduced.

1. Introduction: the call for "Real Inclusion" in environmental governance

In this paper, we argue that ideals of environmental governance such as inclusiveness should be seen in light of particular cases and situations. Those ideals should be used as regulative norms for practice rather than elements from which an acontextual model or structure may be deduced. We develop our argument by analyzing the dynamics of the decision-maker/expert/lay person interplay in a comparative fashion, looking "North" and "South". We present empirical material that has led us to a critical examination of a particular normative concept of citizenship – "technological citizenship" (Hajer, 1997) and its role in normative models of so-called inclusive environmental governance. We will first introduce the key concepts of ecological modernization, inclusive governance and technological citizenship.

The theoretical point of departure for this paper is that of *ecological modernization*, in which the main question is how modern societies are, will be and can be transformed in order to achieve a sustainable use of natural resources (Spaargaren and Mol, 1992; Mol, 1996; Fisher and Freudenburg, 2001; Jepson et al., 2005). While some authors (and actors) emphasize the role of technology and the market, there is also in this literature a strong call for real changes in public management (Buttel, 2000) towards good governance, and notably *inclusive* environmental governance, in which citizens take part and may even influence the development of policies (Hajer, 1995). The usages of the term "governance" (and of "environmental governance") are many and diverse. Most of them entail a contrast with "government". Governance sometimes signifies inter- or supranational forms of steersmanship that correspond to political challenges that transcend the state level. At other times, governance is used as a general analytical concept to expand the study of government, including the sum of governmental and non-governmental actors, institutions and processes that influence public decision-making. Finally, governance is frequently used as a (partly) normative concept of certain modes of organizing these actors, institutions and processes, closely linked to the notion of "good governance". Much-cited "good" values of governance are openness, accountability, transparency and inclusiveness, all referring to the mode of action of governmental actors and institutions in their relations to citizens, non-governmental organizations and civil society.

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The calls for "good governance" come with different reasons. While some see "good governance" as a step in the development of modern societies towards true deliberative democracy, others have seen it as a possible remedy to specific deficiencies of modern societies: a revitalization of democracy in the apparent decline of political engagement among the citizens (European Commission, 2001), or a remedy to an increasing distance and alienation citizens' concerns from scientific and political elites. Furthermore, in the context of large and urgent environmental problems, the active participation of the public at large has been advocated (Brundtland Commission, 1987; UNEP, 1992a).

Processes of ecological modernization have entailed policy reforms in the direction of decentralization and inclusion. Notably, inclusiveness was a key feature in the spirit of the Brundtland (1987) Report and the Rio Summit. This feature was kept in global policy frames such as the Convention on Biological Diversity. However, actual policies and processes have been accused of lacking "real" inclusion. Representatively, Maarten Hajer claimed that the ecological modernization taking place in Europe was not the reflexive and deliberative process it should be (Hajer, 1995, see also Togerson, 1999). Hajer's (1995) critique focused on the role of scientific expertise in environmental governance. He argued that while science is given a privileged role in the framing of problems and solutions, there is no real inclusion of citizens in governance (see also Wynne, 2003). According to Irwin (2006), European attempts at inclusive governance still rely on an old assumption: that controversies stem from a fundamental deficit of knowledge among the public, so that citizens have to be informed or educated.[1] Citizens' inclusion is eventually portrayed as an institutional attempt to restore the lost public trust in expert institutions (Wynne, 2006; Irwin, 2006), embedded in and reproducing old power relations (see also Irwin, 2001; Horlick-Jones et al., 2007).[2]

As will be evident from the references above, the core of the complaint of insufficient inclusiveness lies within science studies, and in particular its critique of the privileged role of science in technical and political decision-making. From these perspectives, global environmental problems should be understood as partly created by science and technology and not well-managed by a science-based technocracy that fails to recognize broader uncertainties, indeterminacies and social contexts (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993; Wynne, 1996). Accordingly, the new governance should be based on socially-embedded forms of accountability and reliability (Jasanoff, 2003; Nowotny et al., 2001). If citizens are emancipated from their blind trust in experts, they would exert their autonomy and rational judgment and thereby assume a greater responsibility for the benefit of the natural environment. We call this position "the call for real inclusion".

Although sympathizing with the normative position of the call for real inclusion, in this paper we critically discuss the ideals of citizenship and expertise that this normative position often presupposes. Significantly, it seems to put forward an ideal of citizens who are aware of their dependence on experts and actively want to contribute to knowledge production. Furthermore, experts and decision-makers are often characterized by their belief in science (see Wynne, 1996; Hajer, 1997; Fischer, 2003; Togerson, 2003). Particularly, for Marteen Hajer the ideal citizen-subject of a reflexive ecological modernization should exert a "technological citizenship", internalizing and recognizing his or her "individual responsibility for monitoring the social consequences of actions and behaviors" (Hajer, 1997, p. 572).

The obvious criticism to the concept of technological citizenship is that it demands too much of citizens, and that citizens are incapable or unwilling to assume such a high level of responsibility and agency. In this paper, we shall build upon and go beyond that criticism. We have been interested in asking how real actors of environmental governance engage with their roles as experts, decision-makers or citizens when provided with a framework of inclusive environmental governance. In particular, while the idea of "technological citizenship" implies a specific normative view on citizens' responsibility, autonomy and trust in experts, we present two cases where citizens' agency appeared to be quite different.

The two empirical cases come from Brazil and Norway, the home countries of the Rio Summit and of Gro Brundtland. First, we present what we see as an attempt at developing inclusive environmental governance within MST (Movimento Sem Terra/Landless People's Movement) in Brazil. The inclusiveness is in part due to the bottom-up, activist identity of MST, the largest rural movement in Latin America, and in part due to the nature of the issue at stake, which connected it to some degree to the Convention on Biological Diversity conservation. Brazil being a main partner of this Convention, it endorses a regulatory frame in which local people appear as potential collaborators in knowledge production (UNEP, 1992b, Art. 8). Next, we turn to Norway and a public decision on the dredging – deepening by the removal of material – of a polluted harbour. In this case, citizens were given the role of stakeholders rather than knowledge co-producers. Nonetheless, Norway is a country known for its egalitarian and non-conflictive culture, with an ideal of a public space where citizens may openly discuss content matter with the authorities.

2. Method

The two empirical studies build upon ethnographic work performed during the years 2004–2006, as well as the systematic collection of relevant documents. The ethnographic work was performed with a variety of qualitative approaches, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with citizens, experts, technicians, managers and policy-makers (49 interviews in Brazil and six in Norway). In the Norwegian case, three focus groups with citizens were performed. Two of the focus groups were heterogeneous, with a balanced representation of both men and women, distribution of age, profession, etc. Concerning the other group, profession was the main criterion of selection. The group was composed by fishermen and people working in the fishing industry and shipyard (all men). Recruitment took place with the help of a local "youth and sports association", the major voluntary organization in the community. In Brazil, the first author of this paper carried out two periods of participant observation for a total of 9 months, which resulted in detailed field notes including notes from informal conversations. Parts of the underlying empirical studies, although partly on other aspects and without the comparison, are documented elsewhere (Delgado, 2008, 2009; Cañellas Boltà, 2004; Cañellas-Boltà et al., 2005). In the quite limited Norwegian case, all principal actors of the public decision-making process were among the informants, and all public correspondence was included in the collection of documents. In the Brazilian case, the group of informants included several principal actors at each organizational level of MST (national, regional and local). MST and ANA (National Network for Agroecology) documents on biodiversity and/or property rights were included in the analysis. The analysis was structured around two identified aspects of the expert/lay/decision-maker relationship:

[1] For a further discussion on the so called "deficit model" see Irwin, 1995; Irwin and Wynne, 1996; Wright and Nerlich, 2006.

[2] A similar critique of participation can be found in the development studies literature (see Cooke and Kothari, 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). A conceptual discussion about participation goes beyond the scope of this paper. Here we focus on the role of science in environmental issues and its implications for inclusive scientific governance.