



Mechanisms of power in participatory rural planning



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the specific mechanisms of power in participatory rural planning projects. It follows up on suggestions in planning literature about directing focus at the relational level in the assessment of power, rather than on who has power and who doesn't. The paper argues that in such an assessment of power it is needed also to draw in the social context because different social contexts will be more or less vulnerable to different mechanisms of power. The paper takes the stand the rural settings are especially vulnerable to dis-engagement of local citizens, sub-ordination of the rural by the urban privilege to define the rural qualities and creation of local conflicts and that mechanisms of power that cause such unintended outcomes of rural planning projects should be uncovered. Inspired by Foucault's interpretation of power the paper carries out a grounded theory inspired analysis of a Danish rural participatory planning project. The paper concludes that rural planning literature and analysis will benefit from paying attention to the three – in rural participatory planning projects – specific mechanisms of power 'Institutionalising knowledge and competencies'; 'Structuring of criticism' and 'Undermining the objectives of the others'

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1. Introduction

The very popular TV series on Netflix 'House of Cards' has the micro politics of power as a pivotal point. The thrilling excitement and shameless use of a number of specific mechanisms of power keeps the viewer on the edge of the chair, waiting for new and even more power driven political actions carried out within the apparently democratic and dialogue based political context. Likewise, in this article the micro processes and specific mechanism of power in an apparently democratic and dialogue-based context is the pivotal point, however we have no intention to compete with Frank and the TV series in the extremeness of politic action. We use the TV series as an example only to make the point that in all dialogues and institutional settings, there are micro level politics and that these involve mechanisms of power, which – if they remain uncovered – may cause unexpected and non-intentional outcomes with respect to macro political decisions they pursue. We argue that regarding rural participatory planning projects there is a need to uncover such power mechanisms.

Within most of the planning literature, which also lays the ground for the rural development and planning projects, the use of

participatory processes is based on communicative planning theory (Fischer, 1993; Forester, 1982; Innes and Booher, 2004; Healey, 1992; Healey, 2006). These perspectives focus on how to engage local citizens in the development of their community and the assessment and counteracting of power among the committed citizens (Forester, 1982). Healey (1992) suggests that Habermas's argument of a communicative rationality and the 'Universalization Principle' are central in modernity's perspective on civil society and participation, as she claims that a new form of planning practice and planning theory is being developed, namely a respectful argumentative form of planning through debate based on reasoned inter-subjective arguments among free citizens. The Universalization Principle of discourse ethics is to be understood as the principle of validity, which Habermas defines as consensus without force: "a contested norm cannot meet with the consents of the participants in practical discourse unless all affected can *freely* [Zvanglos] accept the consequences and the side effects that the *general* observance of a controversial norm can have for the satisfaction of the interests of each *individual*" (Habermas, 1990: 93 cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001: 90). The communicative consensus seeking approach influences the methods of planning and policy research by moving the role of the researcher and other project facilitating parts, from being the providers of intellectual answers to social problems towards the participatory projects aiming at 'coaching' and empowering civic society agents to be able to solve

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wicked problems associated to a planned project (Fischer, 1993). The Habermasian argument has been criticised by several social science scholars and disciplines for being naïve in its understanding of power. For example, Healey (2006) – although with underlying Habermasian assumptions of legitimacy through participation and dialogue – recognises the problem of power on a micro level in her criticism of a generally weakly developed relational understanding and narrow definitions of the involved actors; Flyvbjerg (2001) suggests that Habermas has a top-down perspective on bottom-up processes and that he acts within an established institutional framework; and Kothari (2001) has a specific emphasis on rural settings and the problem of assessment of power pointing at the risk that participatory planning projects marginalise local knowledge if this does not fit the overarching power-knowledge structure. The paper suggests that these general recognitions of the assessment of power on a micro-level focussing on the relational rather than who has and who does not have power in participatory planning projects, should be followed up by pointing to specific mechanisms of power characterising rural development projects.

By such an argument we turn attention to some of the contemporary discussions in the rural planning literature. One is the current argument about the new subordination of the rural by the urban privilege to define the qualities of the rural, whilst rural areas are vulnerable to loss of local knowledge, because the local development in rural settings is grounded in this knowledge (Bell et al., 2010; Urry, 2002). Facilitators of participatory processes in rural settings are consultants, researchers, policymakers, planners and architects all of whom are often not locals and are trained in rural an academic understanding of rural qualities as they are seen from an academic and often urban perspective.

In Denmark as well as in other European countries it is part of the rural politics, that rural planning projects should engage with participatory planning methods involving local citizens in the forming and implementation of physical changes in the villages. A general argument for this policy is that rural communities have a strong community spirit on which the local development should be build (Shucksmith et al., 2009; Brennan et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2005; Terluin, 2003; OECD, 2001; Murdoch, 2000; Ray, 1998). In Denmark many rural communities are already very active and visionary with dedicated local citizens working on how to improve their community for the people already living their everyday life in the villages, as well as for attracting newcomers and increasing the entrepreneurial performance (Johansen and Thuesen, 2011; Svendsen and Sørensen, 2007; Svendsen and Svendsen, 2004). When such active rural communities are enrolled in participatory planning projects the facilitating processes for engaging local citizens may not only seem redundant and lay the ground for local conflicts and disengagement because the locals are not willing or able to live up to the underlying urban (trained) discourse on qualities of rural community spirit and capability to organise and mobilise committed citizens. Both regarding the urban privilege to define the rural (natural and physical) qualities and the discourse on the qualities of community spirit points to the need in rural participatory planning projects to direct attention towards the specific mechanisms of power in and between the institutional settings and the facilitating parts and to their relations to the rural communities they are engaged with. With the respect to such concerns about how democratic anchored politics on rural development may cause unintended outcomes on a micro level, the research question in this paper is: 'What micro practices of power exist in rural participatory planning projects facilitated by planners, researchers, architects and policymakers and how do such mechanisms relate to urban subordination of the rural, local engagement and conflicts? The aim of the paper is to contribute to the rural planning literature with suggestions on the specific mechanisms of

power in participatory planning projects in rural settings. A study of a Danish participatory rural development project serves as the case.

2. Theory

Following the arguments put forward by Healey (2006), Flyvbjerg (2001, 2012) and Kothari (2001) about the need for a relational perspective on power with a focus on the mechanisms in the assessment of power, the paper positions itself within the Foucauldian interpretation of power. While Habermas in his understanding of power works inside the perspective of law and sovereignty, the understanding of power put forward by Foucault seeks to free power from the juristic system and from the sovereignty perspective (Kelly, 1994). Disclaiming the idea that power may be given, exchanged and recovered (Foucault, 1994) and moving the focus from the institutional to the relational level, the question of power becomes a matter of practicing rather than possessing. Foucault (1994) argues that a noneconomic analysis of power would first have to make the assertion that: "power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised and that it only exists in action" (Foucault, 1994: 28). In his lecture from January 7th 1976 he ponders, "If power is exercised, what sort of exercise does it involve? In what does it consist? What are the mechanisms?" He continues by arguing that power has become the organ of repression and claims that therefore the relevant analysis should concentrate on the mechanism of power (Foucault, 1994: 28). Foucault (1982) provides an example of mechanisms of power in his suggestion that in modern times the most widespread mode of exercising power is through the technique 'pastoral power'. Pastoral power he explains as being a form of power, which; 1) in opposition to political power is oriented at salvation; 2) in opposition to sovereignty is oblativ; 3) in opposition to legal power is individualising. Also the pastoral technique is "coextensive and continuous with life; it is linked with a production of truth – the truth of the individual itself" (Foucault, 1982: 783). This technique of power (like all techniques of power) includes an objectification of the individual into subjects, which implies power relations. Foucault comes up with examples on oppositions like power of men over women and of administration over the ways people lives. One action such struggles have in common is that they are "immediate" struggles in terms of people are criticising the instances of power which are the closest to them and those which exercise their power action on individuals. Also they have in common that they question the status of the individual; whether being truly individual whilst additionally a part of a community. A third thing is that they question the way in which knowledge functions and how this relates to power. Also, the struggles are about refusing abstraction like economics and ideological and scientific violence ignoring who we are individually (Foucault, 1982:780–781). Summing up; Foucault (1982) suggests that what is needed is to understand what power relations are about and what the mechanism of power are in the everyday life and to do so it is needed to investigate forms of resistance and attempts to dissociate such relations.

3. Methods

The rural development planning project, serving as a case study, is a winning architect project on facilitating development in two declining rural villages in Denmark. The background for choosing this case is that one of the authors was invited in 2010 by an architect firm as a researcher and expert in rural development to be part of a team bid, which was eventually the winning project. During the pre-qualification process it was decided to use the project as a critical case study of mechanisms of power in a participatory planning project involving a broad range of rural and

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