Connected Communities

Public participation as a process of de-politicization

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Executive Summary
The notion of ‘post-politics’ which has gained currency in social science circles in recent decades forms part of a left critique of global capitalism and (neo)liberal thought. One of the central premises of post-political discourse is that politics proper - politics as a process of opening-out issues to conflict, disagreement, and alternative framings of socio-political relations - is increasingly foreclosed by managerial, technocratic, expert-led, and consensus-seeking approaches and procedures. Public participation is seen as one such procedure in this discourse and interpreted as a strategy of de-politicization. The AHRC-scoping study on which this discussion paper is based surveyed key texts in the post-political literature and carefully examined their claims made in relation to politics and public participation. It considered these claims in the light of relevant literatures in the disciplines of political theory, Social Studies of Science (STS), and human geography. Creating a correspondence between these literatures proved insightful and confirmed that processes of de-politicization are indeed perceived as a widespread phenomenon although they are not always interpreted in the same ways. This urges for a (public?) re-evaluation of the role of ‘politics’ and ‘publics’ in present-day societies in general, and in the UK, their role in relation to the governments’ vision of a ‘Big Society’ in particular.

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1. Introduction

This discussion paper is based on an AHRC-funded scoping study conducted in 2011 entitled "Producing and performing ‘communities’: looking at the paradox of public participation and de-politicization". This study focused on writings on the notion of ‘post-politics’ and on the argument that public participation has become no more than a strategy of de-politicization. The latter claim stems from the view that the ways in which ‘communities’, ‘publics’, and ‘citizens’ are conceptualized as ‘problem-solvers’ by governments- and government-agencies and the very technical and scientific ways in which ‘problems’ are framed both dis-empowers people and de-politicises issues of
 concern. The scoping study compared literatures on these issues from three different disciplinary realms: political theory, Social Studies of Science (STS), and human geography. It also drew on findings from a three-year Rural Economy and Land-Use (RELU) program funded project (carried out between 2007-2010) which experimented with a new participatory mechanism in Loweswater, Cumbria (the Loweswater Care Project, LCP). The scoping study encompassed two workshops with scholars working in this field, one held before the study commenced to identify crucial questions and important textual sources in the area, and the other held after the completion of the study to consider results and identify future research priorities. This discussion paper, firstly, situates the notion of post-politics in its historical, geographical and philosophical contexts. Secondly, it outlines prominent meanings of the notion of post-politics. Thirdly, it considers critiques of public participation in the post-political literature and compares them to evaluations of public participation in other disciplinary fields. Results are then briefly discussed and future research recommendations made.

2. Historical, geographical and philosophical contexts of the idea of ‘post-politics’

‘Today... we are dealing with another form of the degeneration of the political, postmodern post-politics, which no longer merely ‘represses’ the political [...] but much more effectively ‘forecloses’ it [...]. In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats [...] via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus’. (Žižek, 1999:198ff).

The above definition of post-politics comes from the work of Slavoj Žižek, who first advanced the notion in his book ‘The Ticklish Subject’ in 1999. It conveys a sense of the trends that have shaped its development: the rise of postmodern post-politics, the demise of party-politics and their replacement by technocratic approaches; and the spread of consensus-seeking procedures. Below, we briefly consider the historical, geographical and philosophical contexts that have influenced post-political discourse in more detail and survey the tendencies it speaks against. A comprehensive discussion of these aspects is not possible in a paper of this length, but we shall try and sketch out the most important elements.
Post-political discourse is a discourse of the political left. It grapples with events that have occurred since the end of the Cold War period and provides a critique of processes and practices associated with the rise of global capitalism in general and (neo)liberal thinking in particular. As such, many of its key texts convey a sense of coming to terms with defeat (Badiou, 2006; Rancière, 1999, 2005, 2007, 2009; Žižek, 1999, 2008a, 2008b). As Dean (2009:16) observes, the notion of ‘post-politics’ elaborated by Žižek is a helpful device ‘in identifying the failure of the contemporary left’. Key questions of post-political theoreticians thus are: what constitutes the political? What kind of a political system should we strive for? For Žižek (1999:199), an authentic political act is transformative; it does not simply work ‘well within the framework of existing relations, but [...] changes the very framework that determines how things work’. Rancière, too, speaks about proper political events or acts, defined as acts that subvert the mechanisms of hegemony. The ‘end of politics’ implies a politics ‘synchronous with the rhythms of the world, with the buzz of things, with the circulation of energies, information and desires: a politics exercised altogether in the present, with the future being nothing but an expansion of the present, paid for, of course, by requisite austerities and cutbacks’ (Rancière, 2007:6). How, Žižek (1999:222) asks, can we ‘reinvent the political space in today’s conditions of globalization’.

As a philosophical endeavour, post-political discourse is influenced by Continental Philosophy (especially the thought of Hegel and Marx) and, in regard to the idea of ‘democracy’, ancient Greek philosophy. Žižek, for example, works in the traditions of Hegelianism, Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. As a psychoanalyst, he believes that the post-political foreclosure of politics leads to excessive and irrational violence (1999:198), a view echoed by left political theorist Chantal Mouffe (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe 2005). For her, the prevention of disagreement and the denial of discontent of liberalism inspires excessive violence and terrorism, and to avoid such excessive antagonism she urges for an agonistic politics which posits ‘others’ not as enemies but as adversaries with whom we can passionately disagree (2005).

Another aspect of post-political discourse is that it speaks out against postmodernist theory with its emphasis on ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘identity politics’. Žižek (1999:209) argues that identity politics forecloses politics proper by trying to allocate every individual a place in the system of social relations and account for them properly. This attempt at all-inclusiveness pre-empt resistance and political conflict and reinforces
hegemonic power relations. Here, he echoes Ranciére’s definition of democracy as something brought into being by those ‘who have no voice’; those, who according to ancient Greek philosophy, ‘constitute the demos that brings about a rupture in the order of social space’ (1999:208). It is interesting to consider these definitions of ‘demos’ and ‘democracy’ in relation to a criticism made of the British Conservative Government’s vision of a ‘Big Society’ by Cote from the Green Alliance. Cote observes that ‘There is nothing in the plans for a Big Society to ensure the inclusion of outsiders and marginal groups, to break down barriers created by wealth and privilege, to promote collaboration rather than competition between local organisations, or to prevent those that are already better off and better connected from gaining more than others’ (Cote, 2010). Perhaps this lack of a plan of how to create an all-inclusive system of social relations in the Big Society’s vision should be welcomed here as it holds the promise of the possibility of the emergence of politics proper as understood by post-political theorists. However, although the promise is there, other processes are at work to counteract its fulfilment. A brief look at common meanings associated with the notion of post-politics will give us a clearer idea of what post-political theorists consider to be at stake in the post-political era.

3. Common Meanings of ‘Post-Politics’

Just as the notion of post-democracy ‘does not designate a period of history after the “end of democracy”’ (Ranciére, 2009:116) ‘post-politics’ does not hold that we live in a time after the end of politics. Rather, post-political discourse critically responds to the negative effects wrought by global capitalism and the (neo)liberal political belief-system that supports it. It takes issue with the emphasis of the later on individualism and the devaluation of collective ties, its views on consensus and rational dialogue, and the idea that globalization and the universalization of liberalism will lead to a Cosmopolitan future of peace and prosperity (Mouffe, 2007).

In practice, these processes combined have, according to post-political theorists, perpetuated:

- The disappearance of democratic agonistic struggles over the content and direction of socio-ecological life;
- Consensual governing and policy-making;
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- A rejection of ideological divisions;
- The universalization of particular political demands in a non-committal, conflict-avoiding, consensus-seeking way;
- Technocratic, expert-led, managerial problem-solving;
- The replacement of political struggle with cultural struggle.

In the next section of this paper we consider what post-political thinking means for public participation and discuss whether it has merely become a strategy of de-politicization as the post-political literature claims.

4. Post-Political and Wider Critiques of Public Participation

According to Žižek, de-politicization reasserts community, local democracy and active citizenship as the only politically relevant answer to ‘the all-pervasive predominance of ‘instrumental Reason’, of the bureaucratization and instrumentalization of our life-world’ (1999:221). This reassertion of community is characteristic of the Conservative Party’s general election manifesto which states that the aim of the Big Society is ‘to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a society that will take power away from politicians and give it to people’ through ‘encouraging people to take an active role in their communities’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2010).

The role of ‘communities’ and ‘publics’ and thus public participation in the tackling of complex environmental and societal problems has been under a critical spotlight for some time, not only in post-political theory but in the broader social science literature. Žižek believes that public participation is an impotent effort to effect change in a dominant system of social relations; rather, he argues, it helps keep such relations in place. A ‘situation becomes political when [a] particular demand (e.g. stop exploiting natural resources) starts to function as a metaphoric condensation of the global opposition against Them, those in power, so that the protest is no longer actually just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand...’ (1999:204) Politics proper is thus not about reaching consensus (as is the objective of many public participation exercises), but about the reconfiguring of social space and the transformation of the power relations that uphold it.
Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2011a, 2011b), who has looked at public participation in the areas of water politics, urban planning, and climate change from a post-political perspective concludes that while public disagreement is permitted, it is only allowed to occur ‘with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organizational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation, not with respect to the socio-political framing of present and future natures’ (2011a:267).

Drawing on Rancière, Swyngedouw holds that environmental and other politics are reduced ‘to the domain of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures, within a given hierarchical distribution of places and functions’. Stakeholders are known in advance, which effectively reduces disruption and dissent and thus forecloses politics (Swyngedouw, 2011a:268). Public participation becomes nothing more than a de-politicizing strategy to uphold the dominant hegemonic order. These characteristics of public engagement exercises have also been criticized in the broader social science literature.

‘Participation’ is of course not one, unitary, process, but takes many different forms including tool-kit approaches, internet consultations, citizen juries, and many others (Callon, 1999; Carolan, 2008; Chilvers, 2008 a and b, 2010, 2011; Felt and Fochler, 2008; Lane et al., 2011; PAGANINI, 2007; Reed, 2008; Stirling, 2005, 2008). Focusing in on a broader range of critiques of public participation is useful in order to contextualize and examine the above arguments more critically.

STS scholars have contributed much to the understanding of public-science relations over the years. Since the late 1990s (which roughly overlaps with the rise of post-political discourse), Callon (1999) found that participatory efforts in the area of public-science relations were characterized by a co-production of knowledge where attempts were made not only to include new actors, ‘but also the things they know and the ways in which they know them’ (Ellis and Waterton, 2004). This led to many experiments of knowledge co-production (for a review see Chilvers, 2008 a; Felt et al., 2009; Paganini, 2007), which have come to be referred to as ‘hybrid collectives’ (Felt et al., 2009), and they often create long-term relationships between scientists and lay-persons where trust and mutual learning forms an important element (see Bickerstaff et al., 2010; Blackmore
et al., 2007; Callon, 1999; Chilvers, 2008 a; Collins et al., 2007; Higgins and Lockie, 2002; Lane et al. 2011; Lengwiler, 2008; Malo de Molina, 2005; Marris et al. 2009; Rabeharisoa and Callon 2004; Stirling, 2005, 2008; Stringer and Reed 2007; Tsouvalis, Waterton and Winfield 2011; Whatmore, 2009).

Yet inspite of this, power-imbalances remain and looking at the rise of public participation in different areas of life from a sociological, political science or STS perspective confirms that the participatory trend should be viewed as part of a deeper socio-political shift (see Tsouvalis and Waterton, forthcoming). Yaron Ezrahi, a political scientist, suggests that from the 1960s onwards in the ‘developed’ world context the primacy of science as a rational and legitimate underpinning for public actions began to falter (Ezrahi, 1990). Participatory processes became ‘intellectual attempts to redefine rationality’ in a world where the very idea of a singular rational ‘expert’ had lost legitimacy. Participatory processes could thus be interpreted as a search for new ways of defining expertise. This creates a tension between a reality where the majority of participatory practices have ‘instrumental’ rationales (as the post-political literature suggests) yet, at the same time, signal a ‘deeper’ socio-political trend whereby participation is symbolic of the loss of legitimacy of scientific authority as the sole basis for decision-making in matters of public policy. In the Loweswater Care Project we experimented with a new form of collective that from its inception aimed at levelling out hierarchies and valued expert and lay knowledges equally (see Tsouvalis and Waterton forthcoming). Within the LCP, critical questioning, debate, conflict, and disagreement were welcomed if not encouraged. Tackling a complex environmental issue (blue-green algae) in this way brought to light the challenges still ahead in the area of agonistic public participation; the difficulties of government agencies and structures to effectively engage with this form of participation became obvious. This in our opinion confirms that for public participation to become truly transformative fora, many changes have still to take place in governmentality.

Recommendations for Future Research

For a better understanding of how the post-political processes described in this discussion paper and observed widely in the social science literature are played out in
practice and what their effects are on real-world events and happenings urgently requires further research. There is a need for a better grasp of the micro-processes and micro-politics at work that shape our relations with each-other and with the non-human world. Such efforts could encompass studies of participatory endeavours in various spheres of human affairs (science, technology, environmental issues, etc.). However, there is also a need for studies of how they unfold within more ambitious macro set-ups in the sphere of governmentality. These should include investigations of how public participation is defined and allowed to emerge in practice in relation to these set-ups and how their creative potential in particular contexts is constrained or enabled by technocratic and bureaucratic arrangements. This would lead to more critical insights into the current workings, understandings and visions of ‘politics’ and ‘democracy’ in the specific geographical contexts that these studies would be carried out; insights that the meta-theoretical framework of post-politics cannot provide.
References and external links


The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

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