

Local Democracy in Practice

The Alternating Dynamics of Institutional and Situational Forms of Democracy

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WORK IN PROGRESS

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Abstract

Citizens may try to relate to democracy in different ways. Important to us is that they can relate to public spaces and collective actions in ways that are meaningful to them. In order to explore this from a dynamic point of view, we selected a number of special moments, moments which we entitled 'Kodak moments of democracy'. During these moments, institutional forms of democracy and situational forms of democracy alternate. The result was changing power relationships between citizens, city councillors, and/or public officials.

Introduction

Since 1999, we have been engaged in the development of a network of Dutch cities. The network helps to organize the exchange of experiences and knowledge of neighborhood approaches to policy-making. At this moment, more than ten cities participate in this network. As members of a team of public administration scholars and researchers, we conduct research into related themes, such as the relationships between social policy and the restructuring of the physical surroundings, or the re-organization of local bureaucracy in order to include a neighborhood-oriented approach. In addition, we organize special meetings for councilors, public officials, professionals, and/or citizens to meet and exchange experiences. The topics of these meetings are, for instance, the extent to which public policy may enter the private area of the home, or the diversity in society and how this relates to general policies. Finally, we maintain a website (<http://rechten.kub.nl/stedennetwerk/>). So far, most of the links, the reports, and the news are in Dutch.

In this paper, we wish to elaborate on one of the recurrent themes in the city network. One idea is becoming increasingly clear. On the one hand, city hall makes a great effort to engage citizens in policy making processes for reasons of effectiveness and political legitimacy. On the other hand, a majority of the rules, laws, standardized practices, and views from city hall are the point of departure for the action to be taken. It seems to be rather hard to make genuine room for the input from various citizens and their specific living conditions. Somehow, this situational thinking and acting gets shaped to fit into the institutionalized way of doing things. Since we are interested in issues of local policy, politics, and democracy, we wish to explore the relationships between -what we call- situational and institutional forms of local democracy. Is it really necessary for institutional thinking and acting to dominate situational thinking and acting, or may the first learn from the latter, or the other way around? Can these two logics add to one another, or is fair competition between the two possible?

In order to explore these questions, we will first recapitulate a little history about citizen participation and local democracy in the Netherlands. Next, we will elaborate on the concepts with which we will try to make sense of a number of special moments of democracy. Finally, we will mention some issues for discussion.

A little history

Neighborhood approaches of policy making were perhaps first introduced in the Netherlands in the 1970s. Then the renovation of houses from before the Second World War became a large-scale project. In the cities that participated in this project, each old neighborhood was taken as a special case. The plans for the different neighborhoods could turn out rather differently. This partly depended on the quality of the houses, but for the greater part, it depended upon the negotiations of the actors involved.

In many cities, residents did not accept ready-made plans. They wanted to have a say in the development of the plans. They were supported in this by community workers who, in the Netherlands, are not public officials since they are employed by voluntary organizations (although financed by the government). Therefore, apart from actors such as the responsible city councillors, the Minister of Housing, public officials, and the owners of the houses (some houses were owned by the municipality and other by private corporations), residents and community workers were also taking part in these negotiations.

From a policy point of view, city renewal taught the importance of renovating or rebuilding houses for the well-being of a city's inhabitants and the quality of their living conditions. However, after a short while, it became apparent that, without special care for maintenance, the positive effects of the renewal were short-lived. In addition, good living conditions depended not only on the quality of the physical surroundings, but also on having a job and on a good relationship with the neighbors. Social policy was introduced as an important part of a neighborhood approach of policy making. At the end of the 1980s, this view was formulated as social renewal.

Social renewal stimulated local actors – from councillors, professionals, and business entrepreneurs to citizens - to work together in order to be able to take action based upon views from citizens. The idea was that citizens did not think in terms of either physical or social problems. Instead, citizens think about themselves as whole persons who have related social, physical, and economic needs. For local governments, the task then became to take the needs, wishes, and demands of the citizen as a point of departure. Councillors, public officials, and professionals had to leave their desks and get into the city's streets and community centers in order to get into conversation with citizens.

Some illustrative institutional changes connected to this development were:

- within local bureaucracy, (small or big) departments for neighborhood development were set up (re-organizations of bureaucracy),
- neighborhood development plans were made,
- interactive policy making was introduced in almost every thinkable policy field,
- intensive professional cooperation in neighborhoods (discussion on a case to case basis) became standard practice.

This new way of working - working together with citizens and with professionals from other policy fields - meant an enormous change for all those involved. Actually, in many Dutch cities and towns, they are still figuring out how to organize this. How can they translate the logic of citizens and their specific living conditions into practices of representative democracy, professional organizations, and bureaucratic procedures? How can they connect the 'logic' of the situational forms of democracy with the

logic of the institutional forms of democracy? Does situational democracy have a logic which is not that of (institutional) logic, to paraphrase Bourdieu?

“Democracy”

Democracy means many things. It may be understood, for instance,

- as the willingness to put one’s own individual needs and wishes in a broader context (referring to a general interest);
- as the opportunity to create counter-discourses and sites of resistance to, and transformation of, predominant powers;
- as a procedural ordering of public decision making;
- as full access to power by everyone;
- as a way of living.

We are interested in all these and other meanings of democracy in as far as they show us something of the ways in which people relate to democracy, make democracy their own. In order to investigate the different ways in which people do this, we have - in a figurative way of speaking - taken a number of snap-shots out of a series on democracy in practice. Actually, we did not take any snap-shots, but selected some special moments. In the USA, they have a nice expression for this. There they are called Kodak moments. During these Kodak moments of democracy, something changes for the better in the power relationship between those involved. We label a change ‘for the better’ when it allows people to relate to democracy in ways that makes sense to them.

We look at these Kodak moments of democracy with two concepts in mind, viz., situational forms of democracy and institutional forms of democracy. Institutional forms of democracy operate according to general rules, norms, and procedures that have been ‘officially’ established and accepted as constituting democratic governance. They are general in the sense that they are context-independent. Situational forms of democracy, on the other hand, are context-dependent. They operate on the basis of rules, norms, and procedures that are constructed (or detected) in concrete situations. They follow the (democratic) logic of the situation.

The best way to explain the meaning of the concepts we have just introduced is to try to use them in concrete cases.

Kodak moments of democracy

When we first started to think about citizen participation and democracy, we thought that it made a difference whether relationships between citizens, councillors, and public officials were organized in more formal ways or in less formal ways. Community platforms, citizen organizations, user boards, and advisory committees are expressions of institutionalized ways of organizing citizen participation in local democracy, while network-like relationships that are for short periods of time, for certain encounters and for when it so happens, are among the less institutionalized ways of involving citizens directly in democracy.

It helped that we had two cities in mind, each representing one typical way of involving citizens. In the city of Amersfoort, public officials and city councillors who wanted to work with a neighborhood approach had taken the initiative to organize a neighborhood council in each of the ten districts of the city. These neighborhood councils consisted of inhabitants who had responded positively to the invitation to take part in discussing local matters. Whenever town hall wanted something, it made sense to inform the neighborhood councils or to ask them for advice. Citizens not participating in these neighborhood councils were not consulted other than in the formal ways prescribed by law.

In the city of Tilburg, on the other hand, a team of public officials was especially appointed for a certain district; they knew their territory and the people who live and work there. We saw how this team made use of the potentials in the district. The team members organized citizens and professionals on a project basis. When town hall wanted something, the public officials went around in their district to find out who would be interested in being involved and who should be invited for a particular project.

Both these forms of democracy have their advantages and disadvantages. In Amersfoort, it seems very difficult to do anything without the neighborhood councils, to go around them and to get into touch with other citizens than those active in the neighborhood councils. In addition, whether they wanted this or not, the way the neighborhood councils functioned is rather bureaucratic. There are formal meetings once a month, the meetings are chaired, there are agendas, and there are certain rules prescribing how many years a citizen may be active in a neighborhood council. For instance, one neighborhood council went on strike for several months because of a disagreement about a community worker (the conflict was about the number of hours per week she could be available for the neighborhood). During these months, not much (of development) happened in this neighborhood, apart from the regular maintenance activities.

One of the advantages of organizing citizen's involvement in this way is stability. The citizens get to know the municipal procedures, they may become very skilled in dealing with councillors and public officials and their ways of doing. The reverse is also true. The councillors and public officials know who to go to and who to talk to. In addition, the rules of how to relate to one another do not need to be discussed much, since they are organized pretty much along well known representative democratic lines. Finally, since a limited number of citizens commits themselves to being involved, certain agreements can be made. These citizens do take a certain responsibility and those from the city hall can remind them if necessary.

The Amersfoort way of organizing citizen involvement, in particular in comparison with the Tilburg way of doing this, seems very organized,

bureaucratic, non-political, instrumental, and exclusive. However, when taking a closer look, a number of deviations from this pattern could be detected. Also in Tilburg, particular groups of organized citizens were active and these groups got an important say in most things. Therefore, we wondered whether the extent to which citizen involvement was institutionalized was the most influential factor for making democracy work. In order to move away from a static approach to democracy, we started to think in terms of moments. Were there moments in the daily practices of democracy that were special in a way? Moments of which we could say: these are 'Kodak moments of democracy' since something special happens in the relationships between politicians, public officials, and citizens. These moments mean something because a dynamic is set into motion that could not have been planned on beforehand, but that makes room for some sort of quality leap. For instance, those involved may be empowered, or the deliberation may become better informed.

Having thought for a few minutes, a number of Kodak moments of democracy sprang to mind.

“Street prostitutes speak with female city councillors”

A city councillor, especially responsible for care for drug addicts, presents a plan in city council proposing to create, in a designated area, special places where street prostitutes can take their clients. City council does not accept the plan. There is not enough support for creating so called 'process places' in the city of Arnhem.

The responsible city councillor is disappointed. She is convinced that creating 'process places' would both restrict the burden for citizens who are involuntarily confronted with street prostitution and limit the dangers for the street prostitutes themselves. However, in order to convince the other city councillors, she needs more and/or other arguments than those employed so far. She then decides to invite herself to a center for streets prostitutes in order to find new arguments for her plan.

Even though this action is already remarkable from an institutional point of view, since it would be more according to institutional practices to either send a civil servant to the center or to talk to the professionals working with the street prostitutes, it still fits practices of institutional democracy. For instance, the city councillor had asked one of her civil servants to arrange a meeting. In addition, as citizen gatherings always start at 8:00 p.m., this meeting was also scheduled for that time. However, this is also a good business hour for the street prostitutes. So, when the city councillor arrived at the center at 8:00 p.m., she was surprised not to find one single lady waiting for her.

The city councillor could have done two things then: walk away (perhaps even a bit hurt) or wait and see what would happen. She decided to do the latter. After half an hour or so, a number of women entered the center and they said in rather loud and angry voices: 'So you are the city councillor. Well, we like a word with you'. The city councillor then had to listen (she did not really have much of a choice) to the raw, real life stories of the women.

Afterwards, the city councillor found it impossible to translate these stories into neat arguments that were suitable for the city council. By arranging a meeting between the women and the female city councillors, she found a situationally intelligent way to communicate the stories of the women to the city council. According to the city councillor, this was a very special meeting, appreciated by all those involved. It somehow moved them.

Both meetings were Kodak moment of democracy since something changed in the relationship between the women. The street prostitutes could speak for themselves to policy makers for a change, and they could do so in

their own way: telling their life stories instead of giving arguments for one of the city councillors projects. Furthermore, the female city councillors showed they were able and prepared to adjust to the situation at hand. They participated in extraordinary meetings during which they had to listen to often harsh stories. This changed their view of the women who see no other option to their problems than to walk the streets.

“Neighborhood councils take initiative”

In Amersfoort, the city councillor responsible for neighborhood approaches of policy making came up with the idea to decentralize a sum of money to the neighborhood councils. This city councillor believed that citizens would be better equipped than public officials to decide on the special needs of a neighborhood and that they would be able to spend the money in more creative ways. In order to inform the citizens active in the neighborhood councils about his plan, the city councillor visited the regular meetings of the councils one by one during a three-month period. As part of the city network research, Sandra Kensen, followed the city councillor on his tour.

The meetings with the city councillor followed approximately the same procedure. The city councillor explained to the neighborhood council his ideas and ended with asking whether the council wanted to take the responsibility for this sum of money. In response, the citizens expressed their doubts on whether they would wish this kind of responsibility. They asked the city councillor many questions and he then tried to answer these questions as well as he could.

So far, the relationship between the city councillor and the neighborhood councils developed in the ‘Amersfoort-ian’ institutionalized way. The city councillor presented his ideas and he expected the neighborhood councils to go along with them. In turn, the citizens active in the neighborhood council expected the city councillor to answer their questions regarding spending the budget.

In some meetings, some of the citizens made it clear they were not fully satisfied with the way things were going. They wanted to be better informed before they said yes to the neighborhood budget. The idea then arose to make use of the city network and to invite speakers from other cities in order to hear about their experiences with these kinds of neighborhood budgets. The citizens took the initiative for a change. They wished to be informed by ‘experts with experience’ from outside the municipality.

The community workers who supported the active citizens in the neighborhood councils thought this idea of the citizens was great. They asked the city-network researcher to help them organize one special meeting for all the neighborhood councils together. The city councillor was also invited and was asked to help in a financial way.

One evening, about 15 persons from four other cities came to Amersfoort to tell about the way in which neighborhood budgets were organized in their city and what they had learned so far. During this event, something special happened. There was a lot of laughter and the speakers received several ovations. Somehow the doubts and worries were balanced by perceived opportunities, including demands for more money and thus responsibilities. At first, the city councillor who came with the idea had to answer a lot of questions regarding how he wanted things and how things were going to be organized. During and after this event, the citizens found their own answers to their questions and were able to come up with ideas themselves.

To us, this event in Amersfoort presented a Kodak moment of democracy, since organizing it was an answer to a need that arose in the situation. Organizing the event was an situationally intelligent thing to do. Furthermore, because of taking a sign seriously and organizing a special event, something

changed in the relationship between the city councillor and the citizens active in the neighborhood councils. The citizens became more self-confident and could get into a discussion with the city councillor. The city councillor and the new institution of neighborhood budgets also gained from this change in relationship, since the citizens had become enthusiastic and had taken the initiative to enrich the discussion by inviting external speakers.

Such an event, eventhough as well-organized as possible, cannot guarantee that such a change will occur. The atmosphere cannot be created in advance; it is there or it is not. In addition, the community workers were very important in this case. In fact, they were the ones who 'saved' the plan. Had they not taken the request of the citizens seriously, perhaps the citizens would have rejected the responsibility of spending the neighborhood budgets altogether.

“Servants of the public”

On the Amersfoort evening of neighborhood budgets, people from the city of Breda had also told about their experiences. They have had experience with spending neighborhood budgets there for some years now. The following dialogue, that took place in Breda between a community worker and the leader of the neighborhood budget, to us represented a Kodak moment of democracy as well.

A part of the neighborhood budget had been spent on a certain project based on an idea of a group of citizens. When the project had been implemented, the community worker who had also been involved, was so enthusiastic that he suggested sending 'thank you' flowers to the citizens involved in the project. This made the leader of the neighborhood budget think for a moment for it did not feel right. Then he replied: 'It's not them who should get the flowers, but it is us. The citizens gave the orders and we were their servants, not the other way around'.

This answer throws light on a next step in thinking about citizen involvement. At the time of the city renewal (1970s and 1980s), citizens demanded a say in the plans. At the time of the social renewal (1990s), city councilors, public officials, and professionals rang at the doors of citizens to ask: 'please participate in the making of neighborhood plans'. In the example above, the community worker thought this was still the situation at hand. However, in this short moment, the leader of the neighborhood budget made it clear that, as far as he was concerned, citizens gave him an assignment. He did not ask them to do something for him; it was the other way around. Thus the relationship between citizens and professionals has changed again, partly due to the institution of neighborhood budgets.

“Not giving up”

Somewhere in the city of Tilburg, three big trees are ill and they need to be removed. Actually, the policy is to replant trees when they die because of illness. A citizen who liked the big trees in front of his house and who knew about this policy, phoned city hall in order to ask when he could watch new trees grow. The answer from city hall stupefied this citizen: 'Oh sir, we have already replanted these trees. No, not in front of your house but at the other end of town'. Although this answer was perfectly understandable from the point of view of the municipality, the institutional logic of it had beaten the situational logic of this citizen.

However, the citizen learned that he had not been the only one calling city hall to ask about the trees. A neighbor had done exactly the same thing and had received exactly the same answer. These neighbors learned they had

taken the same action during a neighborhood gathering of a group of citizens. These citizens together discussed what they would like to do with the little square in front of their homes. In their opinion, this square could do with something special, such as a fountain, a park of sculptures or an art gallery. The square became even less attractive when the trees had been removed. So this group planned some collective action and wondered how to organize this. In any case, they decided to come with a more extended plan than the return of the three trees. Two actions were planned. Firstly, they asked city hall to inform them about their plans for the (direct surroundings of the) square. Secondly, they investigated how a big company, located just beside the square, could help to (financially) support their plans.

So the citizens did not give up. They engaged in the development of a public space and explored more than one option to get into dialogue with city hall about this. They were sort of overruled in the case of the trees, but they appropriated democracy in that they adopted another strategy in order to get a stronger position in relation to the city hall planners. In this case, we would say that a Kodak moment of democracy took place when the two neighbors learned they had taken the same action towards city hall and decided, together with their other neighbors, to make a more comprehensive plan for the square, including more than the three trees. Perhaps more Kodak moments will arise later in the process.

Discussion

This paper shows our work in progress. Different issues still need a lot of reading, thinking, and discussion. We would like to present a number of these issues here.

A Dutch analysis

In Denmark, for instance, there is a long tradition of participation, of debate and involvement at the local level, of being heard in important matters and of taking action when persons disagree with decisions. In the Netherlands, citizen initiatives somehow are quickly taken over by bureaucracy, literally or in a figurative way of speaking (neighborhood councils having meetings, agendas, contracts, chairmen, and so on). In Denmark the initiatives continue to be more a thing of the people. Perhaps it is for this reason that we are that interested in situational forms of democracy.

Good concepts

To us it is fruitful to think in terms of situational and institutional forms of democracy, although, at this stage, we find it rather difficult to exactly define these concepts and their connections. This is a delicate matter, since we do not wish to use either concept in a static way. How can we continue to approach these concepts as discourses and avoid the traps of dichotomies (either this or that (exclusive categories), value judgments (one discourse is better than the other one; hierarchical thinking), and exclusiveness: no diversity beyond the categories (are there forms of democracy beyond the two distinguished here)?

Methodological questions

Of course, several methodological questions may be raised in connection with Kodak moments of democracy. To mention a few, who decides what a Kodak moment is? Does everyone in the room need to agree that a particular moment is a Kodak moment? Does it matter from which angle the photo is taken? To whom are those snap-shots interesting? Is it the same as with holiday snap-shots, they are only interesting for those who were there?

Anti-Kodak moments of democracy

Since there are Kodak moments of democracy, we asked ourselves whether there are also moments that may be labeled anti-Kodak moments of democracy, moments during which certain voices are silenced, rules are excluded, ways of expressing are forbidden.

Perhaps we might as well call them 'Xerox-moments' of democracy: established rules, norms, and procedures are copied more or less automatically into situations in which they do not fit. Institutional forms of democracy dominate the more situational ones (perhaps the other way around is also possible).

Of course, we can easily come up with examples of those moments as well. For now, we only mention two of them shortly.

The community of Somalian refugees was supposed to talk with one voice to the responsible city councilor although they had made it clear to him that, within their 'community', there were disagreements about important issues.

During one of the meetings of a neighborhood council in Amersfoort, a public official presented a plan to restructure some garages and parking places.

However, the neighborhood council and I (SK) only found out that this was his plan after one of the volunteers had translated his jargon into ordinary Dutch. The discussion that followed his presentation and her translation was filled with personal anecdotes and examples that could be interpreted as improvements to the plan. While this was going on, I looked at the public official and could see that the discussion was going over his head because these people were not using his jargon. How could these anecdotes and examples be of any use to his plan? I went home that night in an atmosphere of loss.