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Deepening urban democracy? Functional networks, political equality and local elites

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Participatory and deliberative forms of policy-making are on the rise in Europe today. The paper presents a project of such networks in Sweden and proposes European multidisciplinary comparative research.

A reoccurring idea in debates on public policy is that governing has become a more complex task, demanding broad mobilization of resources and competence. When a single authority and hierarchical decision-making fail, solutions are sought for across formal divisions of authority, across sectors in the public sphere, and often in co-operation with private actors. Such organizations may be called functional networks. Thus, citizen participation is increasingly called upon to serve as a democratic anchorage in functional networks. Such networks, however, are not easily reconciled with representative democracy. It is difficult to exercise political control over more or less independent actors who work in co-operation with each other.

My presentation has two targets. One is to present a newly started research project about such functional networks in the Stockholm metropolitan area. The other is to invite anthropologists to discuss a European multidisciplinary comparative study of functional networks in a number of European cities.

The Swedish study combines an anthropological understanding of culture with a political science focus on strategic actors. These new forms of governance have few formal rules and the fieldwork focuses therefore on the ways working rules are subject to negotiations and re-negotiations together with participants' efforts to make sense of the interaction and their positions. In order to understand the interactions and new (political) identities emerging in the networks, the participants' negotiations and the interaction are situated and examined in the context of the surrounding world of formal and informal relations.

Deepening urban democracy?

A reoccurring idea in debates on public policy is that governing has become a more complex task, demanding broad mobilization of resources and competence. When single authorities and hierarchical decision-making fail, solutions are sought for across formal divisions of authority, across organizations and sectors in the public sphere, and often in co-operation with private actors. Such organizations may be called functional governance networks or functional networks. Ranging from psychiatry to local environmental care or integration, the list of examples in which co-operation and co-ordination are seen as remedies for different public failings is long. Such solutions are not least called for in urban contexts (cf. Stoker 2000).

Functional networks, however, are not easily reconciled with representative democracy. Exercising political control over more or less independent actors working in co-operation is difficult. Thus, particularly in urban contexts, developing and “deepening” democracy has become as important as efficient resource mobilization in arguments for network governance. Thus, citizen participation is increasingly called for to serve as democratic anchorage in functional networks.

In this project, we propose to study such urban functional networks, in which citizens participate in interactive decision-making together with public officials and other local actors to tackle integration and environmental issues – that is, aspects of social and ecological sustainability. Can citizens in such network arrangements be expected to fulfill democratic functions, rendering legitimacy and giving locals influence over local matters? How should these arrangements, more specifically, be valued in terms of democracy and political equality? To begin answering such questions, we find it useful to focus on what we call “local participatory elites” and their role as facilitators or potential hindrances in efforts to democratize urban governance.

The project will combine an anthropological understanding of culture with a political science focus on strategic actors. It has recently been claimed that understanding such new forms of governance, in which formal rules are few and working rules are subject to negotiations and re-negotiations, calls for micro-analysis and ethnographic approaches (Rhodes 2000, Bevir & Rhodes 2007). At the same time, we find it important to link our understanding of these processes to an analysis of formal positions and models of strategic action. The latter is important if we wish to hold on to the idea that democracy can be promoted through collectively informed and reasoned public decisions. Thus, we propose to combine a political science perspective with an anthropological one, which implies combining deductive with inductive approaches, and rational choice institutionalism with ethnographic research on the rules in use.

Research problem and previous research

Metropolitan areas are, and have been, experimental grounds for the development of new forms of governance, including various participatory complements to representative democracy (Stoker 2000, Healy et al. 2003). In recent years in Sweden, attempts to ensure citizen influence by involving the public in organized dialogue have been common. These attempts have been inspired by theories of deliberative democracy (Hosseini-Kaladjhi 2002, Lahti-Edmark 2002). When, as is frequent, such attempts to develop urban local democracy go hand-in-hand with attempts to develop public problem-solving capacity, the very same institutional arrangement is expected to fulfill both tasks at the same

time (cf. Fung & Wright 2001, Hertting 2006). However, earlier research has shown that the necessary openness and flexibility of such institutional arrangements tend to obscure who is responsible, and accountable, for what (Pierre & Peters 2000, Sørensen 2004, Danielsson & Hertting 2007). This implies that the answers to questions about how these networks work, and how they affect urban democracy, boil down to an empirical question about for *whom* they work.

Therefore, there is good reason to be wary of elites when democracy is thus reorganized. If political equality is the linchpin of democracy (Giljam & Hermansson 2003), then the extent to which political elites coincide with social and economic elites is a matter of concern. On the other hand, it cannot be presupposed that the mere existence of elites implies political inequality. Political elites may be seen as performing important functions *for* the people, being entrusted with power because they have certain qualities for the task at hand (Etzioni-Halevy 1993, Lewin 2003). The most essential question then becomes what the relation is between political elites in the governing networks and people and groups outside these networks.

Research questions

Our objects of study are urban projects, in which citizen participation is seen as a means toward democratizing functional networks, and networks are seen as important arenas for an expanding local democracy. A fundamental assumption is that actors in such urban networks – politicians, officials, associations of citizens and individual citizens – are assigned new and partially conflicting roles. This is because the promotion of open, unregulated and flexible network institutions involves a fundamental democratic dilemma. On the one hand, functional networks are promoted as vehicles for efficient problem-solving among professional actors. On the other hand, these actors shall encourage and provide scope for citizen influence or at least participation. Furthermore, at the same time, these processes are expected to remain under the supervision and ultimate control of representative democracy.

In such a situation, openness and few formal rules do not necessarily signify freedom from demands and lack of norms, but can be seen as a solution to a situation in which several partially conflicting norms cannot easily be reconciled, or any of them abandoned. For individual actors, in specified situations, the lack of rules and wealth of norms may give rise to difficult decisions and dilemmas: Which norms prevail under what circumstances, and what kind of political culture will evolve in these networks, is uncertain.

Starting with such a problem formulation, our research questions are:

- How can urban functional governance networks be described and valued in terms of their democratic anchorage?
- How can the processes through which rules, norms and practices in these functional networks are reproduced be described and understood?

Answering the first research question includes describing and valuing actual practices and working rules by comparing them to the different democratic models – deliberative democracy, participatory democracy and of course representative democracy. We will also use a less structured and anthropological approach to investigate “democracy at work” from the participant point of view. Both these approaches aim at uncovering which norms and discourses actors actually choose to act on.

An important task is to unravel *who* among the citizens actually participates. Based on previous research, we expect that only some citizens will participate. If such participation affords influence, then those who do participate actually become a new local participatory elite. Furthermore, the demands of participation will work as a threshold many citizens will not be willing or able to cross (Wohlgemuth 2006, Danielsson & Hertting 2007). Thus, it is essential to know which citizens are willing and able. By examining their connections with, likeness to and potential function for those who do *not* participate, we wish to discuss when and to what extent their participation is able to afford democratic legitimacy and enhance political equality.

The second proposed research question focuses on the negotiations and re-negotiations of the explicit and implicit working rules of functional networks. This includes questions about the stability of and change in these rules, norms and expectations, and about the extent to which actors agree on what kind of democratic anchorage is called for in trying to solve different problems. Based on previous research, we expect disagreement as to the rules of the game (Hertting 2003). Thus, we not only have to understand the views of the participants, but also how they connect to surrounding institutions, agents and societal discourses.

One basic idea of this project is that, in order to address the questions above, we need tools to describe patterns of collective action and institutional arrangements as well as tools to understand how individuals make sense of these patterns and rules. The combination of rational choice institutionalism and an anthropological understanding of how meaning is created and disputed in interaction should provide us with such tools.

Institutional design and democratic governance: a political science perspective

From a political science perspective, it seems fruitful to analyze functional governance networks as *institutional arrangements* to coordinate and legitimate operative policymaking and/or implementation (Scharpf 1997). Starting from rational choice analysis, such institutional arrangements are interpreted as the result of varyingly successful attempts by interdependent actors – politicians, civil servants, citizens, etc. – to fulfill their aims or the aims of the social groups they represent (Tsebelis 1991, Ostrom 2005). Somewhat paradoxically, analytically treating actors as rational seems most productive for understanding their strategic dilemmas and collective failures (Hertting 2006a). Thus, we propose to unravel the patterns of interaction taking place in functional networks – described above as torn between demands of representative hierarchy, citizen participation, and co-operation for efficiency – using institutional rational choice.

Horizontal, functionally oriented cooperation seems to provide not only a need for, but also new opportunities for democratic anchoring of governance (Sørensen & Torfing 2006). Recent Swedish research shows that local knowledge and democratic legitimacy become important resources in network governance (Hertting 2006b). In order to work as efficient and legitimate arrangements for solving specific problems, it seems that functional networks may benefit from involving the ordinary people affected by these problems.

However, the *potential* for democratic network governance must not make us naïve or blue-eyed. Politicians, civil servants, association leaders and individual citizens act in different roles, different arenas and at different levels simultaneously. Hence, we should expect that collective action to institutionalize democratic governance networks will not be an easy task. In earlier research, we have

found that the whole idea of democratizing functional networks within the realm of the traditional structures of representative democracy induces a number of strategic dilemmas (Danielsson & Hertting 2007). “Nested games” along horizontal and vertical dimensions tend to turn functional networks into unstable *ad hoc* arrangements.

If this is true, then there is no specific moment or decision that marks when a specific democratic model of the network is chosen. The democratic order of the network – or lack thereof – is *de facto* produced over time by the games taking place between actors with strategic positions. Hence, we need an institutional analysis framework with a strategic perspective on such *de facto* rules.

Here we will define institutions as *rules in use*, that is, the shared understanding of prescriptions that actors refer to when they are asked to explain and justify their actions in a specific situation (Ostrom 2005). By analyzing the working rules of functional networks, we should be able to understand and evaluate *whether*, and if so *how*, they are democratically anchored. Such an analysis will try to grasp the shared understanding among network actors of such aspects as: What positions exist in the network (do all participants take part in the same position as “affected” or are there specific positions as “professionals”, “citizens”, “politicians”, “activist leaders” etc.)? Who is entitled to enter the network and hold what position? What kinds of skills, resources and alliances are valued? What actions (choices or strategies) are allowed in the network? How must information be communicated within the network and to outsiders? How are decisions made or, if not at all, how are participants’ actions coordinated (cf. Ostrom 2005)?

We will then use models of representative democracy, participatory democracy and deliberative democracy to make sense of our observations, describing the nature of the democratic anchorage in the networks. A *deliberative* functional network, for example, will have a rule configuration distinct from a *participatory* functional network, or a governance network that is conceived primarily as an instrument for the representative democratic system. In a deliberative network, participants will have positions as “affected” and be allowed to enter if they have arguments to enrich the discussion within the group; disputes will be solved by arguing.

Institutional rational choice is a *perspective* with strengths, but also distinct limits. It is fruitful when it comes to understanding strategic dilemmas in specific situations, but falls short when we are trying to understand *why* actors perceive the situation the way they do (cf. Elster 1989).

Understanding complex negotiations: an anthropological approach

Using an anthropological perspective, we examine functional networks from a different point of view. Here participants’ efforts to make sense of the interaction and their positions are in focus together with the emerging identities embedded in these social relations and wider discourses. Thus, in order to understand the interactions and new (political) identities emerging in the networks, the participants’ negotiations and the interaction must be situated and examined in the context of the surrounding world of formal and informal relations. In contrast to the political science approach, we should expect these processes to differ widely from one individual to another. Hence, an anthropological approach may provide several overlapping and even conflicting stories constructed by participants trying to make sense of their network practices.

The anthropological approach relates to ongoing anthropological policy research about new regimes of governance and power. Of particular interest in our study is the anthropological research on political processes and social change in Europe that focuses on the emergence of new social positions and political agents. The proposed study aims at examining new political positions constructed through changing relations between local politics, public bureaucracy and citizens. A topic of great interest to us is the research that examines the emergence of new social positions created by the transference of public welfare institutions to the market and the changing relations between the state, politics and the market. A common direction in this approach is to use a thorough empirical investigation of a particular event in order to understand larger processes of societal transformations. In one project, about a new health care policy in Wales, the ways in which neoliberal economic theory materializes in institutional practices and transforms citizens into customers with altered responsibilities are investigated (Catey 2006). The implementation of a new university reform in Denmark is examined in another research project (Nielsen 2006). The reform has given the principles of market economy larger influence, and the study focuses on chains of related events and negotiations between old and new views on the position of universities that have gradually transformed foreign students into paying costumers. A third research project examines the implementation of a new pension system in Sweden (Nyqvist 2006). In focus here are the political process, the political and bureaucratic agents and how the policy informs the meaning of citizenship and individual citizen's strategies.

Anthropological policy research focuses on the interaction between discourses, agents and systems of governance and the way they shape each other in different contexts, time and space. An important contribution of this research is the contextualization of political processes through empirical research on the complex and interconnected relations between agents on different levels in society, bureaucratic and political institutions and structures and political goals (Shore & Wright 1997). When, for example, a new law, a political reform, or a protest movement is examined, the surrounding context of related events and phenomena is brought up and scrutinized in a hermeneutic approach by moving back and forth from part to whole, from micro-processes to macro-processes. This approach enables us to investigate single events as keys to understanding larger processes of social change in society.

In the proposed study, this means, on the one hand, that we investigate the meaning that participants ascribe functional networks and their own position as well as other participants and how the positions are institutionalized and changed over time. Although this is the focus of the proposed research project, whether or not these meanings are formulated in terms of democracy is an open question. On the other hand, the anthropological approach also means that we examine whether and how the positions of participants are informed through ongoing interaction with surrounding political institutions, public bureaucracy, citizens and political discourses.

In an ongoing research project on ethnic organizations and political integration, Clarissa Kugelberg has followed a local collaboration group over time. Her study unravels the complex negotiations about direction and organization taking place between participants who represent different ethnic and bureaucratic organizations (Kugelberg 2007). The study is relevant to the proposed project because it suggests that we need to understand the context within which the network participants maneuver, including the participants' mother organizations, if we are to understand the role of the functional network.

Research design: comparative process analysis and participant surveys

In the proposed project, we will describe and evaluate democratic practices in functional networks (research question 1). We will also analyze the prerequisites for their emergence and reproduction (research question 2). To address these questions, the project will include two types of empirical studies: qualitative case studies and a quantitative (follow-up) survey. Close case studies are necessary if we wish to derive hypotheses about new phenomena from “contextualized comparison” (George & Bennett 2004). Moreover, with our case study design, we respond to an urgent need for comparative research on urban governance. Such studies are largely lacking, studies making comparisons between functional networks in different cities within Sweden, between networks in different national contexts, and between networks in different policy areas. Hence, our study design includes a threefold comparative perspective.

First, we intend to study networks in two cities: Stockholm and Botkyrka. Compared to the changing majorities in Stockholm, Botkyrka has a long history of Social Democratic rule. Botkyrka also has a long tradition of experiments into new forms of local governance (Hosseini-Kaladjahi 2002, Velásquez 2005). Here we expect ongoing attempts to continue. In a previous research project, we analyzed how collaboration groups and networks have been organized as part of the local integration policy in Stockholm (Danielsson & Hertting 2007). Selecting one of these networks would also allow us to follow up what happens not only when formal political and financial support end, but also when the political regime of the city is changing. Comparison between cities with different “regime stability” is informative for our investigations of the processes and their prerequisites [Q 2].

Second, in each city we will follow one collaboration process with an integration agenda and one with an environmental agenda. Public attempts to develop democratic anchorage for functional networks seem most common in those areas of the city where signs of social and political exclusion are most apparent. We think it would be most useful to compare collaborative integration attempts in poor neighborhoods with the implementation of similar governance ideas in completely different political and social contexts. Therefore we plan to study functional networks working with environmental issues (cf. Rydin & Pennington 2000). We argue that this comparison between networks in different socio-economic contexts will enable us to reflect on the prerequisites of democratic anchorage in networks (Q 1).

Assuming that democratic anchorage in functional networks does not come about easily, within these four different contexts, we will set out to find ambitious attempts. Our aim is to throw light on what is possible, rather than on what is typical.

Third, in order to contextualize our Swedish cases, we will collaborate with Professor Jacob Torfing and his associates at the Centre for Democratic Network Governance at Roskilde University, Denmark. Through this research collaboration, we will have the opportunity to follow a research project on “local fora in Nye Holbaek Kommune outside Copenhagen. Through working seminars with the Danish research group, insights and knowledge from the Danish case will bring our respective cases into comparative *relief*.

Implementing the case studies will include interviews, document studies, and ethnographical fieldwork; observing the interaction and emerging negotiations. All of these methods will be used to describe and understand network practices in the chosen networks (Q 1, descriptive part), as well as to

describe the local participatory elite in terms of social, economic, ethnic and gender structures. The descriptions, in relation to corresponding traits of the demos they are supposed to represent, will inform our valuation of these practices (Q 1, evaluative part). Documents, interviews as well as practices may reveal how participants inside networks are connected to, or regard their connections to, “outsiders”. Such knowledge will also inform our valuation (Q 1, evaluative part). Participant observation and interviews will furthermore allow us to explore the ways in which participants experience and understand their positions and the role of the functional network. This will give us the opportunity to observe and examine the processes of institutionalization (Q 2).

We will use an open method that allows us to take the opportunities that arise during fieldwork to collect new empirical material. That is, we will follow up on observations made in meetings, interviewing actors who emerge as important or tracking questions on their way through local political and administrative institutions. All three researchers are to take part in the fieldwork in order to acquire shared empirical knowledge that then can be analyzed in a dialogue from the two perspectives.

Finally, in the *survey*, we will study individuals – ordinary citizens, local civil servants, association members, etc. – with previous experiences from participating in functional networks in Spånga-Tensta, Rinkeby and Farsta in Stockholm. At the end of year two of the project, we wish to conduct a follow-up survey of about 600 persons who participated in different collaboration groups between 2003 and 2006. The first survey was conducted in the spring of 2006 and includes questions on (1) the reasons for engagement, (2) general interest in politics and democracy, (3) experiences from specific collaboration groups, (4) perceived individual and societal results and outcomes, and finally (5) personal details. The response rate was between 68 and 72 percent in the three neighborhood council districts. The survey will add extensive data to our comparative case studies regarding the significance of a stable political environment for enduring democratic anchorage of networks (Q 2). All three researchers will take part in (re-)designing the survey.

Timetable: In 2007, specific cases will be chosen, the fieldwork will begin and the follow-up survey will be prepared. In 2008 and 2009, the fieldwork will continue and the survey will be conducted. Seminars with Danish colleagues in Roskilde will take place. In 2009-10, result will be written up. Seminar with Danish colleagues in Roskilde will take place.

Gender and ethnicity

Research has shown that gender as well as ethnic relations have an impact on the participation and influence of women and men in political organizations and decision-making processes (cf. Berqvist 1994, Dahlstedt 2005.). Women and men with a foreign background and women with a Swedish background are less likely to be nominated to political positions than Swedish men are. They are assumed to work with political issues of special concern for their social category and many also do this to a large extent. We presume that gender and ethnicity also have an impact on the development of functional networks and, therefore, we intend to examine how these relations are expressed in interaction and discourse and what this means for the participation of men and women, the organization of work and directions of the functional governance networks. When discussing for whom functional networks provide influence, and who actually forms the local participatory elite, neither sex nor ethnicity can be disregarded.

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