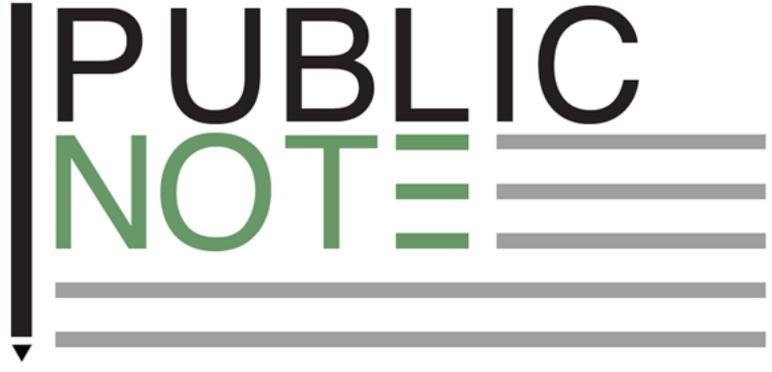


Organizing adaptation: how can irony serve experimental modes of governance for sustainable urban living?

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This paper explores how a political ironic attitude can strengthen experimental modes of governance. It was written for the master course ‘Core themes in public administration’ at the University of Utrecht. Political irony as coined by Jessop (2003) emphasizes administrators’ capacity to adapt means and modes of governance through reflexivity, learning and intervening. As such, it holds specific potential for public administrators seeking to align policies within the broader interests of networks outside their administration. The paper explores the ironic attitude among participants in two projects located in the city of Amsterdam, both aimed to improve sustainable urban living. Findings suggest that it is especially through reflexivity, that participants come to adapt their mode of governance.

Key words: experimental governance, irony, sustainable urban living

Introduction

Since 2005, experimental modes of governance feature urban sustainability projects among cities all over the world (Bulkeley & Broto, 2013). Experimentation brings together policy makers, researchers, businesses and communities to form new alliances in order to build sustainable cities (Evans, 2011). Environmental governance can benefit from such diverse alliances, as participation and deliberation of actors outside public institutions are expected to create a better basis for environmental decisions (Beck, 1997).

Experimental modes of governance require public administrators to constantly iterate between doing and reflecting on the means of governance; an attitude expressed in what Jessop calls political irony (2003). These can be considered to form a fair pair: the experimental mode might threaten any good old fashioned bureaucrat, but become a virtuous tool in the hands of the ironic practitioner. In this paper, I explore exactly how the art of political irony can become a virtuous practice by answering the following research question: *how does the ironic attitude strengthen the experimentalist mode of governance among public administrators within community projects aiming to improve sustainable urban living?*

Governing sustainable urban living projects

Experimental governance includes iterative policy cycles, in each of which a provisional framework for action is typically revised to better serve implementation goals to local contexts (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). This experimentalist mode of governance contrasts with more traditional governance instruments of public administration, which have a linear, vertical integrated nature (Osborne, 2006). There are three distinctive elements to this governing strategy, being 1.) the acknowledgement of the complexity and ambiguity of

frontline issues; 2.) the monitoring of implementation reports; and finally, 3.) dynamic mechanisms of accountability (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). In this paper it is argued the success of experimental modes of governance depends on the ability of practitioners to develop adequate revisions by adopting ironic strategies.

Jessop (2003) argues the first main quality of the ironic attitude is to cultivate reflexivity towards the repertoire of governance strategies. If strategies do not adhere to common goal, they should be changed. Second, changing governance strategies should not be considered a failure, but change that comes from 'lessons learned'. However, acknowledging practical failure as part of the practice does not mean that actors are not to be held accountable for decisions made. Accountability is however more subtle. The ironic attitude relies on a willingness of the administration to disclose and discuss the reasoning behind decisions (which perhaps also requires the 'public' to relax its fixation on output delivery and value the rationale behind policies, but that is another paper).

Contrary to Jessop's usage of the word, irony typically refers to a rhetoric of pretence: enveloped in the discrepancy between the delivery and the message a well-attuned listener is expected to 'get' the actual meaning. The root of the English word irony comes from the Greek *eirōneía*, meaning: pretended ignorance. Classical irony was however not a virtue worthy of rulers. When Socrates is withholding his true knowledge from the public, Alcibiades accuses him of treating his public with disdain (Brittanica). But in its contemporary usage, irony is not necessarily a vice. It can be used to identify discrepancies between for example our ecological ambitions and unsustainable behaviour, making it an ally in honest communication about the heart of an issue (Szerszynski, 2007).

Where does honesty reside within Jessop's conceptualization of political irony? Perhaps 'honest' policy-making is not revealed within rhetoric. The irony does not lie in pointing out the discrepancies between a policy stating one thing but actually 'doing' (Yanow, 1996) another. Political irony is revealed within the 'polis': it relies on politics (as a mechanism) to reflect on the impact of policies. When policies fail, Jessop argues policy makers should respect the 'law of requisite irony' (2003:17); not resorting to cynicism, stoicism, fatalism or denial in the face of failure. The irony lies in proceeding to work towards 'success' in the face of inevitable incompleteness (2003).

TABLE 1 OVERVIEW OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICAL IRONIC STRATEGIES FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS AND EXPERIMENTAL MODES OF GOVERNANCES

Key characteristics of experimental governance	Key characteristics of political irony
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledging complexity and ambiguity of frontline issues Monitoring and reporting on progress towards realizing the goal Dynamic mechanisms of accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflexive repertoire of governance responses Bringing about conditions for reflexive learning Actors can, and are willing to, change the mode of governance if appropriate

Method

This explorative paper draws on literature and two empirical cases. A case study approach is especially valuable for gaining insight into the causal mechanism (Gerring, 2009). This study compares an experimental case with a bureaucratic one on the attitude of its members. It is expected that in the experimental case, actors have a more ironic attitude, and in the bureaucratic case, less so.

Case selection

To be able to draw inferences on the relationship between the attitude of members and the experimental mode of governance cases, a similar setting on all other context variables can help to limit the influence of rival explanations (Blatter & Haverland, 2012:41; Frensdreis 1983). Therefore, both cases coordinate environmental governance challenges within the city of Amsterdam. Urban Air Q is located in a neighborhood in the city's center, in the 'Nieuwmarkt district; Living Lab'. Buiksloterham is located in a former industrial area close to the city centre.

Data collection

Data is gathered from policy documents and four interviews (see table II). In the Living Lab case, also their manifesto was used. Furthermore, several documents from the municipality were used (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2007; 2015), as well as a report on the governance aspect of the project, by Amsterdam Circular Cities (2016). From Urban Air Q, a report on citizen science was used. Data was gathered between October and November 2016.

TABLE 2 RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

	Case	Demo-graphics	Role
R. I	Living Lab	67, male	Strategist sustainable energy
R.II	Living Lab	50, male	Senior researcher
R. III	Urban Air Q	32, male	Project manager
R. IV	Urban Air Q	68, female	Participating citizen (volunteer)

Analysis

Analysis

The following section describes the project setting among the two cases and continues to discuss the ironic attitude; focusing on the reflexivity of actors regarding governance tools and their willingness to change modes of governance.

Living Lab, Buiksloterham

The Living Lab case ticks all boxes regarding the experimental mode of governance. First of all, in their manifesto, the consortium partners argue that sustainable city development is a complex issue, especially because there are so many (conflicting) interests involved. This manifesto has been signed by a myriad of stakeholders, who all take stake in the same neighbourhood. Buiksloterham was previously an industrial terrain within Amsterdam, but it is now being redeveloped for commercial and residential functions as well (Buiksloterham Manifest, 2015:15). Furthermore, the manifesto highlights the fact that all partners develop their own Action Plans, to reach the common goal of a sustainable, circular neighbourhood. Finally, there is no formal ‘logic of consequence’ formulated in the manifesto that would keep partners accountable (Buiksloterham Manifest, 2015).

On the question ‘what strengthens the experimentalist mode of governance’ both respondents agreed that it provides space to shape alliances and interventions unthought of beforehand. Consortium partners come together in ‘tables’. „*One of the main organizations on the topic will take the lead. The energy table is for example lead by Alliander and Nuon*”, one respondent says. He says the tables emerged spontaneously: „*Spontaneity means that actors see an opportunity, and they take it*” (Respondent I). The energy table comes together three to four times a year. Participants exchange ideas, challenges and developments. „*Tables are a very informal cooperative structures,*

with room for a lot of cross-pollination.” At the end of this year, the energy table will come together to evaluate the past year, but mostly to formulate future plans (Respondent I). There is no formal ¹initiator and „*whoever takes the lead is not the leader*” (Respondent I).

The willingness to change the modes of governance is driven by a desire to scale up successes within the test case. Common legal restrictions regarding the redevelopment of areas into residential places (for instance, the obligation of the sewerage company to put sewerage everywhere) are negotiable in the test case. Buiksloterham (Respondent II) „*The knowledge gathered through these experiments should be collected and codified; successful pilots should be scaled in size and copied*” (Manifest, 2015:50).

Participants’ expectation that successful strategies can be copy-pasted into future project may be interpreted as ‘learning’ about what works; at the same time it contradicts the ironic quality of being receptive to change. In the governance advice report, the importance of standardizing is repeatedly emphasized, and very concrete instructions for standardizing the development of the area are formulated (ACC, 2016:32). When standardizing gets this much emphasis, there is little reason to assume participants are committed to keep a reflexive attitude towards the mode of governance after the pilot ends.

Concluding, in Buiksloterham actors seem to acknowledge that changing the mode of governance repertoire is inevitable on the way to standardizing governance in urban projects for sustainable living.

TABLE 3 OVERVIEW OF ACTORS' ATTITUDES IN LIVING LAB, BUIKSLOTERHAM

Ironic attitude	
• Reflexive towards the governance repertoire	++
• Learning	+-
• Change	+-

Urban Air Q

Urban Air Q is a project developed by the Waag Society, a non-profit organization from Amsterdam, devoted to socio-technical solutions for urban development. It is a European project, funded by the European commission (making-sense.eu). The Commission has formulated the rules and regulations by which the consortium partners are organized. The Commission is on top of the hierarchy. Partners have to report back to the Commission, and sanctions apply when partners do not behave according to their role. In the worst case, the partners have to give back all subsidy money to the Commission. Finally, within this project the role of stakeholder is also formalized. Citizens and corporations are involved, but they are not receiving any formal decision-making authority. The 'rules' of the game are developed by De Waag, and players play accordingly (Respondents, III; making-sense.eu).

Also in this case, a willingness to change the means of governance does not seem to be the general attitude. Change is inevitable at this stage of the project, because the project has just begun (Respondent III). With insights from the first pilot, the second pilot will work less with citizen sourcing through sophisticated technologies, and instead focus more on citizens' co-creating tools to collect the data on air quality (Respondent II). The third pilot tests citizens' tools of preference, and then selects one tool central to the common European approach to improve air quality in cities (Respondent III).

When it comes to the actual policy development about citizen sciences or air pollution, a more ironic attitude is present. „All pilots are evaluated, both between partners and internally in our own organizations. We chose to work with partners in this project, because we learn much more about which other approaches are out there. The

partnerships help us to improve our own expertise, and to improve the quality of our outcomes” (Respondent III). Learning from past experiences provides input for future plans.

At the same time, the aim of the project is to find a method that can be 'standardized' – which indicates a willingness to change modes of governance. The report on the first pilot even reads: „*Many more iterations and experiments will be required to improve this new research paradigm so that it becomes more pervasive and relevant within the urban context*” (De Waag, 2016:78). At the same time, given the formal requirements from the European Commission, radical change on how the project is organized is not possible.

Concluding, the meta-governance structure of the project, organized by the European Commission, is rather bureaucratic; but members still develop a reflexive attitude and focus on improving through learning from experiences.

Reflexivity means learning from 'small failures' in the arrangements, like the failing to 'control' for example the sustainable outcomes in the Living Lab (Respondent I, II).

TABLE 4 OVERVIEW OF THE ACTORS' ATTITUDES IN URBAN AIR Q

Ironic attitude

• Reflexive repertoire	++
• Learning	+-
• Change	+-

To what extent does the ironic attitude strengthen the experimental mode of governance?

On the basis of studying the two cases, it can be argued political irony is most prominently expressed through a reflexive attitude towards the mode of governance. Reflexivity means learning from 'small failures' in the arrangements, like, for example, the failure to 'control' the sustainable outcomes in the Living Lab (Respondent I, II). Respondents are also willing to change the governance

arrangement itself: while the experimental arrangement come in handy in the start-up stages of the project, respondents anticipate it is better to change into a more bureaucratic mode in more mature phases, in order to increase continuity, efficiency and accountability (Respondent I,II, III). Actors focus on learning, trying-out, adjusting and reflecting on their workings, expecting this will benefit the project's outcomes (Respondent III).

Conclusion

This paper explores the strength of an ironic attitude in experimental governance arrangements, where partners aim to improve sustainable urban living. Jessop proposes an ironic attitude strengthens humbleness and perseverance in the face of continuously unfolding complexity and policy failure (2003). Even though based on a very small number of interviews reflexivity comes up as the most dominant characteristic of political irony among respondents. Reflexivity means participants continuously reflect on practical failures within the project, and adapt the means and/or modes of governance when it seems fit. Ironically, respondents legitimize changing the mode of governance by arguing that the project is 'an experiment', or still in the pilot stage. In that sense, the assumption made in this paper – that experimental governance forms a fair pair with political irony– is not convincingly confirmed through the interviews. An explanation for this could be that in a late-modernity individuals ought to be self-reflexive (Giddens, 2002). As such reflexivity has become naturally interwoven with the fabric of social life. Participants therefore rely less on support from a specific form of organization, to maintain a reflexive attitude. Self-reflexive forms of governance are considered 'both an art form and a life form' (Jessop, 2003). Further research could especially focus on the intersection between political irony and reflexivity, and personal and professional attitudes.

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