

The renewal of politics through co-creation: the analysis of the case of rainwater and biowaste in Brussels

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Abstract In 2015, The Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation (Innoviris) launched an innovative policy in Europe, inviting Brussels research consortia to propose participatory-action research (PAR) projects. PHOSPHORE and BRUSSEAU worked for three years *in and on* Brussels socio-technical systems, respectively on biowaste and water management. These research projects revealed many institutional (governance) tensions, and tackled many political issues which this paper analyses because they are still insufficiently explored in the literature.

The main contribution of the paper is the discussion of the reflexive learning between the two projects concerning the institutional tensions (reductive injunctions, black boxes, antagonisms, post-political) and moments of confluences (impacts on municipalities strategies and policies, rebalancing of distribution of power, removal of regulatory barriers, emergence of a multi-level and multi-technical approach) we encountered.

Keywords: Participatory-action research; co-creation ; political ecology ; post-political ; (ant) agonism

La renovación de la política a través de la co-creación: el análisis del caso del agua de lluvia y los biorresiduos en Bruselas

Resumen En 2015, el Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation (Innoviris) lanzó una política innovadora en Europa, invitando a los consorcios de investigación de Bruselas para proponer proyectos de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP). PHOSPHORE y BRUSSEAU trabajaron durante tres años en y sobre los sistemas sociotécnicos de Bruselas, respectivamente en la gestión de los biorresiduos y el agua. Estos proyectos de investigación revelaron muchas tensiones institucionales (de gobernanza) y abordaron muchos temas políticos que este artículo analiza porque aún no están suficientemente explorados en la literatura. El principal aporte del artículo es la discusión del aprendizaje reflexivo entre los dos proyectos en torno a las tensiones institucionales (mandatos reducidos, cajas negras, antagonismos, pos-política) y momentos de confluencia (impactos en las estrategias y políticas de los municipios, reequilibrio de la distribución de poder, eliminación de las barreras reglamentarias, aparición de un enfoque multinivel y multitécnico) que encontramos.

Palabras clave: Investigación acción participativa; co-creación; ecología política; post-política; (ant)agonismo

1. Introduction

Innoviris (The Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation) Co-create research policy call was initiated in Brussels in 2015. Primarily dedicated to sustainable food systems, this research policy then expanded its scope and was consolidated into three pillars: participatory research, social innovation and urban resilience. Within this framework, co-creation was defined as “*a participatory research emerging from users, creating transdisciplinary, cross-sectorial and co-learning spaces rooted in action research*” (Innoviris 2016, pp.3–4). The PHOSPHORE and BRUSSEAU participatory action-research (PAR) had the common intention of respectively transforming the biowaste and water socio-technical systems.

The fundamental hypothesis of this article is that the two PAR tackled many institutional (governance) tensions and political issues that are still insufficiently explored in the literature. In order to understand the tensions and strategies which generate consensual policies, we rely on a number of concepts from different disciplinary fields (Section 2) which is one of the major contributions of this paper.

Subsequent to this conceptual introduction, the concepts will be used to analyse the research trajectories of BRUSSEAU (Section 3) and PHOSPHORE (Section 4) in detail within three common subsections:

Genesis: describes the genesis of the ‘knowledge and research communities’ of our PAR and the shared objectives. We also describe the respective approaches towards the institutions.

Tensions: describes the institutional tensions revealed by the PAR and the post-political response provided by the institutions.

Confluences: describes the content of some of the proposals co-created by our PAR, the constructive political response that institutions have provided, and the impacts of our PAR on policies.

Then, Section 5 discusses the reflexive learning between our two projects concerning the institutional tensions and moments of confluences we encountered.

The concluding Section 6 shows how PAR processes can make a conceptual and operational contribution to policy, politics and PAR literature, and proposes pathways and areas of attention (refusing “black boxes”, proposing agonistic institutions and new hybrid parliaments) for future PAR, that struggle for more sustainable policies.

2. Conceptual section

In order to understand our working methodologies, it is important to understand what action-research and its participatory extension are all about.

Action-research is a scientific research methodology related to Kurt Lewin (1946) which aims to generate a transformation of reality through action/intervention, while producing knowledge about this transformation through an iterative cycle and/or reflexive approach: planning, acting, observing, and evaluating (Lewin 1946, 1952). The method has been progressively used in a very large number of disciplinary fields which have further developed and enriched it over time (such as psychology, sociology, psycho-sociology, socio-clinical, urban political ecology, social work, etc.). According to others, it is the advancement of knowledge

by, and also *for*, the action (Danley & Ellison 1999; Catroux 2002; Baron 2008). Moreover, action research has given rise to *Participatory action research (PAR)* methods and approaches (Chevalier & Buckles 2019). PAR considers the participants as co-researchers actively contributing to the action-research process, from the initial design to the final presentation of the results and discussion of the implications of their actions (Tandon, 1988; Whyte 1991) with a view to transformation of a system and democratisation of research (Aiken 2017). PAR aims to *collectively* choose research questions and reformulate them, develop hypotheses, define modes of data collection, analyse these data, formalise results and disseminate them. The ambition of PAR is to integrate rigorous designs with meaningful questions, respecting principles (McTaggart, 1991) and values (Danley & Ellison 1999) and using reflexivity, creativity and complex techniques (Chevalier & Buckles 2019).

In that sense, *Co-creation*, defined as “*a participatory research emerging from users, creating transdisciplinary, cross-sectorial and co-learning spaces rooted in action research*” (Innoviris 2016, pp.3–4) is here understood as a synonym of PAR.

In order to understand the institutional tensions we have been going through, we developed, as action-research coordinators of our PAR, reflexive learnings based on *institutional (governance) tensions* developed by Manganelli and Moulaert (2018), Manganelli, van den Broeck and Moulaert (2019) and Manganelli (2020). According to them, these tensions “*emerge through the building of relational networks between local (water and biowaste) initiatives and key governing agencies and institutions at different scales*” (Manganelli & Moulaert, 2018, p. 4).

In order to reveal the political dimensions and tensions of our PAR, we rely on the work of Rancières (2004), Mouffe (2004, 2010a, 2010b), Swyngedouw (2011), Wilson & Swyngedouw (2014) and Kenis, Bono & Mathijs (2016).

These authors distinguish between:

- “*the political*” (“*le*” politique), defined as “*a space of contestation and agonistic engagement*”(Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p.6) and as a “*discourse in which the existence of power, conflict, and contingency is recognised*” (Kenis, Bono & Mathijs, 2016).
- “*politic*” (“*la*” politique), defined as “*technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free markets economics and cosmopolitan liberalism*” (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p.6).
- “*policies*”, considered as strategic plans, roadmaps or sets of rules agreed by actors (administrations, business groups, political parties or a government).

This distinction between “the political” and the “politic” brings us to Mouffe’s fundamental distinction (2010a) between “*agonism*”, which recognises the opponent or the challenger to political community as an “*adversary*”, and “*antagonism*, which recognises the opponent as a political “*enemy*”. This resonates with Rancières’s work (2004) on disagreement, and with the notion of *post-political* defined by Wilson & Swyngedouw (2014, p.5) as “*a situation in which the political understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement is increasingly colonised by politics – understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free markets economics and cosmopolitan liberalism. In post politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance*”. Swyngedouw (2011) further clarifies, “*Although disagreement and debate are of course still*