

# **The End of Public Participation? Stories of the Transformation of an Old Notion**

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## **1 Introduction**

Why should members of the public participate in planning processes? They are only laymen. Leave special work to the professionals. In any case, decisions are ultimately policy-driven.

A few centuries ago, this view was uncontested. Today, nobody would dare to voice this opinion loudly. Citizens are now courted as never before; anything that is not communicable to the “general public” has poor cards. Why, therefore, talk of “the end of public participation”?

Closer examination reveals that the old concept of “public participation” has little in common with today’s reality. Almost everything has changed – circumstances, structures, notions of planning and development, as well as practices on the ground. It is this transformation that is examined here – not in the form of a systematic discourse, but through a series of stories<sup>1</sup>. Observations and complexities are juxtaposed, thereby illustrating the need to rethink the “old” notion of public participation – without any preconception of what might emerge.

I start with a success story (2), with the seemingly unstoppable march to the power of public participation in politics and public planning. Yet even this success story has its flaws and failings. If one passes these in review (3), it becomes clear that public participation today is of a very different ilk to that of old.

Following a short recapitulation (4), we turn to stories without endings, stories which provoke and question. They examine obscurities (5), erosion from without and within (6-8)- yet also new methods and approaches (9). But storytellers must also be prepared to question the “moral of the story” (10). Thus, by way of conclusion to this small essay, some key issues are identified – though of course, rather than conclusions, these take the form of questions and stimuli, even utopias (11), in order to provoke further insight into the transformation of the concept of public participation ...

## **2 Success, or: The Story of the March to Power of Public Participation**

Once upon a time – as all stories begin – a powerful state steered the fortunes of society, receiving legitimacy from that society every four years by election.

Politics and civic administration acted in isolation. The “masses”, the “citizens of the country”, were excluded; at best, their wishes permeated through to the ruling classes only as indistinct murmurs.

It was clear to the people that:

- All effective control over planning and development was firmly in the hands of the state;
- Strict hierarchies and spheres of responsibility were the backdrop for:
- Incontestable decision-making and implementation processes.

But the world was not to remain thus arranged. There were disagreements – over environmental policies, nuclear power, proliferation, the destruction of towns and cities through heavy traffic and urban development, and other issues. These conflicts were the product of rigid societal division into “those at the top” and “those at the bottom”.

The prevailing direction was from the top downwards. But then this was challenged by calls for “grass-roots change”. The electorate demanded a voice, and soon relations began to change: Doors opened, barriers thawed and processes became more transparent. On occasion, forums were even set up in the anterooms of power to create a context for open discussion... What happened next has often been discussed<sup>2</sup>. Let us therefore skip this chapter in order to concentrate on the here and now. Today, all doors and windows seem to stand wide open... Direct democracy has celebrated unhoped-for success with the introduction of public petitions and public involvement in decision-making<sup>3</sup> at the level of municipal and regional government. The slogan “we are the people”, with which citizens took to the streets in the late 1980s in Leipzig and other cities of the former GDR, even proved capable of bringing entire systems to their knees.

Even on less radical occasions, public authorities have found themselves compelled to orientate their policies and working practices around the interests and needs of their citizens. Politicians have handed many significant issues over to public debate, for example in the case of genetic engineering or euthanasia. And wherever solutions for urgent problems may be found germinating, the magic words “public society” are never far behind. It seems that the once-distant electorate has become a partner to reckon with, and whose participation is naturally expected in a variety of affairs.

This development did not stop at issues of town planning and urban development, as the following example illustrates. In May 2004 the second national town-planning convention took place in Bonn. In a paper presented by a minister for urban development entitled: “New Forms of Cooperation Required in Town Planning”, the following statement was forthcoming: “Over the past few years, the nature and methods of urban and regional planning have changed radically – both parallel to and in conjunction with the changing face of our cities. [...] The public funds available for financing infrastructure and implementing lasting urban development strategies are dwindling. Current available means must be used more effectively than they have been in the past. This means that there must be better correlation between various public investments, and better coordination with private investors. After all, the role of partners in public planning and urban development has changed – both as far as citizens and businesses are concerned. In the 1980s and 1990s, urban and regional planning departments extensively examined possibilities for including residents in the planning process as far as possible. This has led to considerably greater acceptance and a fundamental improvement in final results. In consequence, the public is now demanding a greater level of participation. This shows that citizens are also prepared to assume greater responsibility for their immediate environment”.

Citizens are improving planning results; citizens are assuming responsibility for urban development; – “public commitment is”, as one minister has stated, “the key to successful

civic policies”...<sup>4</sup> Much has changed since those far-off days when “public participation” was still a foreign concept.

Changes to agenda and practice have been accompanied by a new theoretical approach: In planning circles there has long been talk of the “communicative turn”, while “cooperation” and “partnership”<sup>5</sup> are oft-repeated buzzwords. If, before, the attempt had been to optimise the relationship between the means and the end, and to illustrate “external” realities using complex information systems, now the focus was suddenly shifted to the relations between the protagonists; their interaction and communication seemed to cast more light on the world, its problems and possible approaches for solutions than the models and calculations of the experts.

Political scientists recognised that various levels of government – municipal, provincial and regional – could not go it alone in determining the direction of policies. The term “governance” was coined, thereby promulgating the view that “governance [is] far more than that which is carried out by the government”<sup>6</sup>. If the fate of society is able to be steered at all, then only if many communal affairs are successfully coordinated and interconnected. Thus the state assumes the role of facilitator and chairman of debate.

The discipline has found new paradigms. Planning and politics seem to have undergone a fundamental transformation. So is it all good news?

The situation is as follows. It is time for the veterans of public participation, who are going grey even as they debate political conflicts at round tables, to retire in satisfaction at their considerable achievements. Thanks to them, society has become more open, democracy more animated and urban and rural development a matter for public participation.

### **3 Flaws and Failings, or: The Story of Lost Innocence**

If only it were that simple. If only progress could be described in terms of a linear progression. Unfortunately, progress tends to take a haphazard course. What is gained at one point is lost elsewhere. And any improvement is counteracted by new risks.

By such limitations I do not mean, for example, the incensed exclamation of a citizen who sees no progress because of a bridge-building project nearby. (Although nobody wants the bridge, the decision is being pushed through by “those on high” in the face of public protest.) This would imply a full reversion the old authoritarian state.

Objections such as this are based at once on two misconceptions: In the first instance, increased openness and public participation does not mean that conflicts of interest disappear. In the best case, there is simply a new approach to dealing with them. Secondly, there are still majorities and subordinate minorities. A functioning democracy and civic-minded policies are not about ensuring that the interests of the individual will prevail, but rather those of the majority.

Nor do I mean the fact that there are still communal authorities who govern their municipality as if they were barons of old, or politicians who prefer to close ranks and maintain that the call for more public participation is based on a false understanding of the concept of democracy. These belong to yesteryear. But because transformations such as those, which we are discussing here take decades to occur, there still remain those who are decades behind the times.

This is not what I mean.

The setbacks and risks, flaws and lost innocence are due to those who continually pay lip service to the “public”, who style themselves as advocates of citizens’ rights in the media, and who are proud of their sophisticated understanding of the art of governance. Three examples:

**Sandpit participation:** An urban development program forum here, a children’s parliament there, and on the Internet you can, of course, state your view on the new housing estates. Except: there is no follow-up. The locations debated on the Internet have long been a foregone conclusion. The children’s parliament provides nice photos for the press, as well as paying lip service to “child-friendly” policies. The urban development program consists of consensus platitudes, while the few truly heated discussions serve primarily to allow the combatants to profile themselves.

**Functionalisation:** There are politicians and civil servants who are virtuosos on the instrument of public participation – using this to “provide” their own legitimacy. There are parties that mobilise the “masses” through petitions, in order to harness the momentum of public opinion for their own ends. And there are the media who present themselves as tribunes for the people, thereby securing their market share and viewing quotas. In short: public participation is exploited for many different ends.

**Populism:** It pays to listen to what the people say. It avoids dissension; it endears one to public opinion and contemporary society, and secures votes and a loyal client base. It is no longer even a source of irritation to see politicians start at unexpected signs of resistance. As long as they are on the “right” (usually “important”) side, aims and intentions may be jettisoned, for example, that had only recently been volubly apprised as necessities. And vice-versa: even timidly-voiced wishes can be yoked to a cause if, and as long as there is no personal cost involved. Opposition parties and the media are thus constantly tempted to function as megaphones for the masses – to the cost of their own agenda and critical discussion of private interests.

Yet it would be inaccurate to lay the blame for the lost innocence of public participation at the feet of politicians and the media. The participants themselves are also responsible. The keywords here are: St. Florian and NIMBY (not in my back yard).

In principle, both of these terms describe the same phenomenon: I don’t mind what you plan and implement - just don’t show me any problems - anywhere else, just not here.

Such behaviour has provoked the criticism that the larger picture gets lost in the melee of private interests<sup>7</sup>. I do not subscribe to this criticism – it is not the task of individuals to act in the interests of the common good. It is their prerogative to represent their private interests. It is public authorities that must guarantee the comparison and fair evaluation of these interests.

But the guards against misuse are conveniently malleable. There are many small “citizens’ action groups” comprising just three or four people that manage, through petitions and skilful public relations campaigns, to create the impression that there is a horde of people out there uniting together to resist unjustified plans. But campaigns for endangered animals, standards of drinking water, and the value of leisure space are often just a means of staving off a decline in the value of one’s own private real estate. And so on ...

There are even cases where authorisation of private or public planning permission is sold as a commodity – the price having first been expediently inflated through a token show of resistance.

The problem, again, is: functionalisation – this time “from below”. In combination with populism and functionalisation “from above”, this often leads to obscure relationships, in which the legitimacy and legitimating authority of positions and plans become increasingly unclear. The only certainty is that, under such conditions, those who are the most assertive and articulate will in doubt win, while those who are not prepared to sing to the tune of particular interests will suffer defeat.

There is one further aspect worthy of mention –one which cannot be located as being “above” or “below”, but which is prevalent throughout society: where is it not possible to voice one’s opinion nowadays? On a daily basis one hears: “Tell us your opinion!”, “Give us a call – your opinion matters!”, “Your voice counts”, “We need your vote” ... Nowadays we are able to vote on such issues as: superstars; the worst word of the year; the best-dressed politician; or the most important tasks for the decade ahead. Everywhere there are possibilities for participation. This threatens to create a particularly insidious enemy - banality.

The cabaret satirist Georg Schramm, commenting upon the way in which critical debate has descended into plain parody, complains: “The word is at an end, but it is no heroic end. The word is dead, pitifully dead. Not beaten to death by tyrants, nor strangled by censors, but washed up as an empty shell in the brackish water of indistinction. Debate is dead; long live entertainment”. Applying this analogy to public participation, we ask: Is this to be the end of public participation? Not beaten to death by tyrants, nor strangled by censors, but washed up as an empty shell in the brackish water of indistinction. Public participation is dead; long live phone-in votes<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4 Recapitulation: Regarding the Transformation of a “Shared Mental Model”**

In an essay on the problems of political reform, the philosopher and economist Birger Priddat<sup>9</sup> makes use of a term from political psychology: “shared mental model”. This refers to opinions and assessments, which are intensified through metaphors and ascribed attributes to the point that they influence actual behaviour. For example, challenges to the federal chancellor to “take matters into his own hands” are based on a “shared mental model”. In this case, the model is: a determined steersman is able to steer not only political processes, but also the entire state apparatus. As this example shows, such models can become divorced from reality. But when this discrepancy becomes too large for too long a period of time, a transformation occurs.

Such a transformation can be observed, in my view, in the area of public participation. For a large part of always associated with slogans as: “dare to exercise your democratic rights”; “even the weak can make their voice heard”; “Siegfried versus the dragon”; or “David and Goliath” ... it was all about “just” and special causes.

Today, this characteristic is sometimes no longer discernable - the frontier is unclear, the occasions for voicing opinions too cheaply available, and the view that public opinion might have some substantial influence is bleak ... it is clear that public participation is an

extremely plastic instrument, able to serve many different causes – even dubious ones – and, indeed, primarily serves to assist its exponents. In this context, the “transformation of an old concept” refers to this change in the nature of the “shared mental model”.

This is not as dramatic as it sounds – it is just that the ambivalences inherent in public participation are now recognised. Also, it shows the importance of close examination of the nature and methods of anything that falls under the term public participation, particularly amidst today’s surplus of communication.

But these are not the only changes worthy of report. There are more far-reaching ones – those which “get to the heart of the matter” and which may lead to lasting changes in the function and potential of public participation. This is the subject of the following stories.

## **5 Hunger Strikes, or: The Story of the Old and New Obscurity**

Once upon a time – to begin in the manner of a story again – in the 1970s<sup>10</sup>, the coal and steel industry began to put their real estate on the market. In the Ruhr region, for example, some 1000 workers’ tenements were earmarked for capital gains. By the by, this process is still continuing today. Meanwhile, entire steel and coking plants were dismantled and sold off to China. The aim at that time, as today, was to free up capital from real estate in order to invest in other plants elsewhere in the world.

In this case, the real estate was, as mentioned, workers’ tenements. Many were demolished in order to sell off the land. But in this case, the landowners were not prepared to do the “dirty work” themselves. Instead, the real-estate was sold to what we would now term a “property developer”. This developer purchased the land with money borrowed from banks, and speculated that the two-floor miners’ cottages could profitably be replaced by twenty-storey tower blocks. The proposed increased residential concentration was in line with existing regional development plans for building up the area. Thus the project promised to be lucrative. But, to make a long story short, the developer miscalculated and the company went bust. However, the demolition of the tenements had already begun and looked set to continue – the plans for the new residential area had already been drawn up.

When the tenants saw that the new housing development did not promise a quality of life remotely similar to what they had known previously, signs of resistance began to emerge. Meetings, demonstrations, even hunger-strikes were organised. But against whom? Who was responsible for the demolition? Who had the power to halt it? The mining company? The debtor? The municipal or regional authorities? The banks?

The civil action group had no clear opponent. There was no way to determine who was responsible. In consequence, they took the unusual step of protesting to all parties – they demonstrated both at the town hall and at the regional parliament offices. Even the banks in far-off Frankfurt were not forgotten.

This initiative had a certain amount of success. But there are many disputes over planning or urban development issues that get trapped in a merry-go-round of unclear responsibilities. Anyone who has examined large projects such as the EXPO World Exhibition in Hanover will know that no single party may be discerned as being ultimately responsible for the project. Instead, separate areas of responsibility were established for specific areas of the project – e.g. for the running of the exhibition, for the contracts with the participating countries, for the construction of new roads, for financing the building of

accommodation, for finding creditors, etc. And, to add to the confusion, many who had no official responsibility for any aspect of the project nevertheless played an important role in the decision-making process.

But such situations are not just confined to large-scale projects ... Even routine town-planning tasks, such as the redesign of a town square, quickly amass fifteen, twenty or even more partakers – from municipal authorities and regional ministries to property-owners, lease-holders and property developers etc. ...

The old idea of public participation was centred around the existence of a clear opponent. On the one side there was the state (public authorities), responsible for the decisions; on the other side there were the citizens, demanding reception of their arguments by those responsible. This bi-polarity was often unrealistic, even in former times. Today, it is in most cases wholly extraneous.

## **6 A Monarch without Power? Or: The Story of Limited Executive Power**

There is a further issue worthy of report, one which was conceived in the early years, but which was possibly out of step with reality even then – today it certainly requires adjustment. In this case it is the idea of all-encompassing state control over planning issues. In the case of urban and regional development, it used to be thought that state programs and projects were instrumental in deciding the course the development would take. Consequently, citizens demanded to be involved in the creation of programs and projects. It was thought that the state was in charge, therefore influence could best be exerted at this level.

However, anyone who investigates the actual influence of the state on planning and development will soon reach the conclusion that its executive power is only extant when its public planning decisions are sure to create conditions conducive to market and society<sup>11</sup>. The essence of this situation is depicted in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's story *The Little Prince*. On our journey through the stars, we encounter a king who has learned the art of governance. He issues an order – and the order is obeyed. Thus he orders the sun to rise, and the sun rises. The secret of his authority lies in ordering that which will happen anyway. The king has no subjects – he is the sole inhabitant of his star. This makes this form of rule easier. When he attempts to give orders to the little prince, he is foiled by the latter's incomprehension – and ensuing disinclination. The little prince, perplexed, abandons the small star. The king is left alone with his authority.

The analogy is appropriate: regulative attempts from above to influence planning decisions often bring planning and development authorities into the predicament of Saint-Exupéry's king. The only things that are accomplished are those, which would have happened anyway. The state and municipal authorities do not have enough resources to achieve anything more than this. They are dependant on external cooperation to achieve results. Hence the prevalence, since the 1990s, of buzzwords such as “partnerships” and “collaborative action”. Private co-financiers, corporate alliances and diverse partnerships are today a major feature of urban development projects. These cooperative executives have not replaced traditional apparatuses, but have succeeded in incorporating these

apparatuses into processes in which public representatives tend to play a collaborative, rather than a leading role.

This therefore is the correction to the old notion of public participation. But this is not all. Erosion of executive power, in particular of the municipal authorities, is proceeding at such a rate that even the municipal authorities themselves are already talking of an “exit strategy”<sup>12</sup>. What is happening? Here some highlights:

- Fields of authority are being vertically arranged:
- While, for example, at the European level, more decision-making power is being gained in the field of planning, the rights of municipal authorities especially are being increasingly eroded. Furthermore, the liberalisation policies of the European Union are threatening the traditional provision of amenities (such as water, waste, energy, housing, municipal banks etc.) by municipal authorities through public-welfare orientated organisational structures.
- A growing number of local authorities are subject to state budget control. The proportion of cities that never reach the required level and which are financed solely through so-called emergency budgets is also rising. Observers agree that these problems are not temporary, but rather of a structural nature.
- In the throes of budgetary crises, an increasing number of what were once municipal responsibilities are now being handed over to the open market, or at least being placed in the hands of spin-off companies. This is increasingly eroding the concept of a political-democratic municipal administration. At the same time, these privatisation processes are leading to a growing decline in municipal power in the field of planning. One local authority head of department recently described this state of affairs in simple terms: “We are no longer masters of our own homes”.

The consequences of this development for public participation are manifold. In first instance, there is the problem of confusion and lack of clearly definable areas of responsibility resulting from the complex division of tasks and cooperative practices. Secondly, private, commercial enterprises are gaining so much influence that they have become almost sacrosanct – in any case, they are inaccessible to lobby groups. Citizens who attempt to oppose them must run the risk of being held responsible for the potential economic collapse of the area – with challenges such as: “In an area such as ours, we cannot afford to endanger such a significant enterprise”; or: “Surely you do not want to put hundreds of jobs at risk!” In some places, politics and planning are suffering from emaciation to such an extent one cannot help but ask how much decision-making power actually remains to them.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger has made similar observations regarding the nature of the state, and draws the following conclusion: “It has become impossible to discern a central authority from which a political, economic and social direction emanates. ... This primarily applies to the state. It is not so long ago that the state’s pride and joy was its sovereignty – its more astute representatives now avoid the word “sovereign” with good reason<sup>13</sup>.”

## 7 Mr. S. Spends a Day in the Country, or: The Story of Contempt of Politics

The former head of IG-Metall [industrial union] recently recounted his experiences with people “in the country”. He was clearly disturbed by what he had to report: “I encountered suppressed anger. This upset me, because anger is so difficult to judge. No one knows where it will be discharged. But you may be sure that it will be discharged. ... The political parties, all of them, are held in such contempt as to be disturbing. I am no pessimist, but I believe it to be the greatest danger to our democracy since Weimar. Politicians have failed to connect with the people. The people no longer believe anything they say.”<sup>14</sup>

We are long past the stage of party apathy. And political apathy appears to be turning into contempt for politics in general. The difference is that the entire system is being called into question. Thus the minister of the State of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck is not exaggerating when he maintains that “... democracy is fast losing legitimacy”, while former chancellor Helmut Schmidt argued similarly, though more reservedly, that: “the political class in our fatherland is beginning to gamble away the trust that its citizens used to place in it”<sup>15</sup>.

Both statements were made in the context of protests over changes in social legislation. Unarguably, the loss of trust, the frustration and the ultimately resulting contempt for politics began long before current disagreements over necessary transformations to the social system; now, however, it is being refuelled.

## 8 Recapitulation: Internal and External Erosion

Let us be clear - there is much at stake. The politics at which public petitions were once aimed is being eroded both from within and without; diminishing substance is accompanied by lessening ability to shape decisions. In addition, there is a growing lack of legitimacy: election turnout is declining, there are less active party campaigners and many citizens of the BRD hold anything connected with “politics” in contempt.

The consequences for public participation are evident – why involve oneself in such politics?

The fear is that these consequences are more far-reaching. Is it not the case that the very prerequisites for a functioning democracy are being eroded? More is changing here than notions, or “shared mental models.” The transformations seem to penetrate the heart of the matter – democracy.

Just as progress proceeds in a linear direction, decline may be described in terms of continuous downwards momentum. Yet even here there are counter-tendencies and unexpected twists. This is the subject of the last story.

## 9 Let's Go Swimming, or: The Story of Renovated Entrepreneurial Spirit

The story begins in the 1930s. An industrialist had the idea of building an outdoor swimming pool in a small town in the Ruhr region. Another industrialist saw potential in the proposal and joined in, as did both the municipal authorities and a neighbouring community. Thus, in the fields surrounding the town, a beautiful swimming pool was built - the fruit of what we would now term a "public-private partnership". The swimming pool was enjoyed by the public right up until the 1990s. But then values began to change, and there was talk of building a new type of swimming pool - a leisure complex complete with indoor pool and wellness and entertainments features, such as were springing up all around the country. In order to finance this expensive enterprise, the old swimming pool was closed with a view to using the land for property development. This angered the inhabitants in the surrounding areas, who were not prepared to lose their old pool in this manner. They organised a petition and made use of opportunities afforded by the new municipal constitution. For the first time ever in North-Rhine Westphalia, a public petition was implemented. The results were conclusive, and the town council was forced to take up the matter. Finally, it was agreed that the old swimming pool could be saved provided that a private investor could be found who was prepared to refurbish the by then dilapidated pool and run it with the help of a small subsidy (ca. €50,000), as well as fulfilling a number of other criteria.

Inspired by their success and determined to take the situation into their own hands, the citizens founded the fundraising association "Bürgerbad Elsetal" [Elsetal Bath of Citizens]. A business plan for the renovation and running of the pool was worked out and a charitable organisation was registered that took over the running of the pool - despite opposition from political and municipal circles. It took two years to renovate the pool - it was finally reopened in 1998. Since then, it has proved to be a commercial success and is never short of business ideas. More people than ever before now visit the renovated old pool<sup>16</sup>.

An exception to the rule?

Not at all. A public arts centre has just opened in the very same town - conceived and run by a citizens' association that also managed the conversion of the old *Rohrmeisterei* [Pumphouse] into a concert venue with exhibition rooms and eateries<sup>17</sup>. An unusual place? Perhaps. But that is irrelevant here. It seems that citizens in many places are prepared to commit themselves to a variety of causes - even if not as spectacularly as in the above example. This is confirmed by research - there is a great public willingness to become involved<sup>18</sup>. And wherever this will is matched with subsidies and support from municipal or regional authorities, much can be set in motion - examples are the "public-orientated communes", or the program "take the initiative" in North-Rhine Westphalia<sup>19</sup>.

The potential of the civil society is a recent discovery. This does not mean that it is anything "new". Rather, this potential has been obscured by state-hierarchical perspectives. It seemed as though everything was in the hands of the state. People lost sight of the fact that local communities could and should take matters into their own hands and manage their own communal affairs - just as the tradition of self-help, cooperative commerce and alternative management had also been forgotten<sup>20</sup>.

In retrospect and review of the range of civil action groups and projects, perspectives emerge that are by no means as bleak as could be inferred from examination of the

development of public participation. Against the backdrop of such lively public spirit at a local level, it is apparent that a new method of examination is required, a new approach to an old subject.

## 10 And the Moral of the Story?

The stories related here have no clear conclusions. It remains to be seen how they will end – whether in a struggle of private interests, in the social and economic “survival of the fittest”, or in a new understanding of “good governance” and communal decision-making on communal affairs.

One thing is clear – public participation is not what it once was. Let us analyse the main aspects:

*1. Use and misuse of a plastic instrument:* The legend of “public participation” has faded, yet it has become clear that it can serve many aims – on both sides of the equation. It is right, therefore, to discard the reflex by which any citizen’s opinion voiced outside of parliament must *a priori* be important and right. Similarly, not every invitation to discuss and participate is *per se* the expression of a mature political culture and “good governance”. It is important to examine exactly what is being articulated and how, and who is pursuing which interests and creating which opportunities.

*2. Beyond the illusion of omnipotence:* “The state” cannot manage everything. The image of its all-pervading power, of a “father state” that can steer the fortunes of society does not correspond to reality. Further, not only has the ability of public authorities to influence planning decisions declined over past decades, it is also continuing to fade. At the municipal level especially, erosion of the very substance of local politics is clearly apparent.

In conjunction with a strong sense of scepticism towards the political classes and their rituals, this is leading to diminishing motivation among large parts of society to take an interest and participate in the political process.

*3. Diversity, confusion and the loss of “top” and “bottom”.* When many protagonists influence urban development (for example), when larger projects can only be implemented when there are a large number of participants, then the consequences are ambivalent. A variety of collaborations and partnerships are then necessary. At the same time, new possibilities for confusion arise. Who is responsible for what? Who is the point of contact for criticism or demands? Who decides who can or should participate? This affects the old notion of public participation in the following manner: The traditional “frontier” – in this case between the state and its citizens – no longer applies. Furthermore, the comfortable old belief in the division between those “at the top” and those “at the bottom” must be cast off in most cases. Where there were once “hierarchies”, now there are “heterarchies” – network structures which cause confusion, while at the same time creating new roles and possibilities for influencing the decision-making process<sup>21</sup>.

4. *Public spirit and initiative for the common good*: The insight that public authorities have only limited power to influence decisions has opened the door for others to participate in town planning and urban development. “The future of the town is again in your hands” – this is the challenge of the North-Rhine Westphalian minister for town planning<sup>22</sup>, both to citizens and the commercial sector. The “again” in his statement is, historically viewed, completely justified. The manifold community-orientated activities of local public society have, after all, a lively tradition. This tradition must be restored, and translated into contemporary new forms. Work on this has just begun<sup>23</sup>.

## 11 Open Endings

Even if much remains open, there are two possible course of action. Either one leans back and watches as history runs its course, or one seizes the situation as a chance to act. In the latter case, orientation is required – which goals should one work towards?

In answer to this question some initial conclusions may be drawn:

- The quality of processes whereby various individual interests are noted, disputes are resolved and alternatives are compared becomes considerably more significant. Fairness and transparency become indispensable fundamental criteria – and the public is responsible for ensuring that these standards are met.
- In view of the emaciation of traditional politics, all activities, which promote “small-scale democracy” and community-driven specifications and decision-making in everyday life become more important. Where else can the basic principles of democratic rule (in contrast to the disfiguration it seems to have undergone in the sphere of “greater politics”) still be seen to be relevant and beneficial?

These are, as already stated, initial conclusions. Imagination is also required, however, in order to determine what should occur above and beyond these conclusions. Birger Priddat gives us a hint: citizens should become “... involved the complexity of politics, which would then be the product of their own actions. All mistakes and problems, but also all solutions would then no longer be a subject of complaint, but rather “our own thing”, or in antiquated terms: *res publica*.”

The talk of a common goal might seem utopic to some people. Those who scoff imply that the difficulties of the “here and now” will be transformed into empty wishes that will never escape the confines of a fictitious ideal world. Others, remembering Bloch, understand “utopia” as an orientation. Nobody has expressed this more pertinently than the Swiss author Urs Widmer<sup>24</sup>, to whom the last word falls:

“Yes. I see. Of course that is a utopia. But utopias do not exist in order to become reality in the blink of an eye – immediately, now and exactly in that form. In truth, they serve to bring consideration to bear on distant hopes and possibilities, so that we might, in real life, tread that path, however tiring it may be and however small the steps we take. At least then we are not travelling in the opposite direction.”

## 12 Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the aspects relevant here have been examined more systematically in two, more detailed publications: In my book “Was? Wer? Wie? Warum?“ [What? Who? How? Why?] (Dortmund 2000) the conditions and possibilities for an effective communication are identified. In my recently-published book “Planen, Steuern, Entwickeln. Über den Beitrag öffentlicher Akteure zur Entwicklung von Stadt und Land” (Dortmund 2005), theoretical aspects of planning are examined – both the necessary preconditions for public action (chapters 4-5), and the issue of the role of communication in planning and development processes (chapters 10-15).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Paul von Kodolitsch (2002): Die Debatten um Bürger und Kommunalverwaltung - eine ‘endlose Geschichte’? [The debate over citizens and municipal government – a „never-ending story?]. In: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kommunalwissenschaften, Bd.II/2002. In my own works there are representations of developments, e.g. in Selle 2000, chapter 3, and in Selle 2005 chapter 11 (Footnote 1).

<sup>3</sup> This legal ruling grants citizens the opportunity, should they acquire enough signatures, to place certain issues back on the municipal agenda and, if necessary, to compel a municipal vote.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Michael Vesper, minister for town planning, housing, culture and sport in North-Rhine Westphalia, in a speech on 1st February 2001, URL: [www.mbw.nrw.de/staedtebau/staedtebau.htm](http://www.mbw.nrw.de/staedtebau/staedtebau.htm)

<sup>5</sup> As early as the 1970s in Germany, when the prevailing belief was that aims and measures could be derived and formulated, Horst W. Rittel highlighted the limitations of such a rationality in the face of the “malignant” problems present in society (cf. the collection of Rittel’s essays “Planen, Entwerfen, Design. Ausgewählte Schriften zu Theorie und Methodik” [Plans, blueprints, designs. Selected writings on theory and methods], edited by Wolf D. Reuter, from the series Facility Management, Nr.5, Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln [Kohlhammer] 1992. Authors associated with the term “communicative turn” in English-language specialist literature are: Patsy Healey, Judith Innes und John Friedmann. Cf. e.g. Patsy Healey (1992): Planning Through Debate. The Communicative Turn in Planning Theory. In: Town Planning Review Vol. 63, No. 2: 143-162; Judith Innes (1995): Planning theory’s emerging paradigm: Communicative action and interactive practice. In: Journal of Planning Education and Research, 14. Jg., H. 3: 183-189. An early example of correlation of planning processes with social / communicative action is found in: John Friedmann (1987): Planning in the Public Domain. From Knowledge to Action. New Jersey/Princeton [Princeton University Press]

<sup>6</sup> Adalbert Evers (2004): Zivilgesellschaft und aktivierender Staat [Public society and the activating state]. A lecture held at the convention: “Bürger machen Stadt” [Citizens make cities] in Düsseldorf on 18/06/2004. Lord Ralf Dahrendorf (In: Die Zeit from 27/01/2005:

39) even opines that the term “governance” could be understood as “being governed without a government”.

<sup>7</sup> When the mayor of Leipzig Wolfgang Tiefensee laments that “Germany is suffering from private interests” (FAZ from 24/08/2004: 4), he is not criticising the fact that individual interests exist (this is inevitable and always true of protagonists in a joint enterprise), but instead the failure to overcome them in central social issues. This calls into question the ability of the state to act, as well as the state of political culture and the consensus-building process which is based upon it. To interpret this criticism as a moral reproach aimed at certain groups would be too simplistic.

<sup>8</sup> In the Wikipedia [<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/TED>] the following definition is given: „Tele-dialogue (TED) is a tele-voting process (uni-directional communication process using the telephone as a feedback channel) developed by ZDF in collaboration with the Deutsche Bundespost especially for television shows where non-representative surveys or votes are conducted. The results collected via phone-in votes can be presented live during the broadcast. The tele-dialogue system was first introduced in 1979 at the IFA: In the live broadcast “Show Berlin”, viewers cast TED votes for the first time. The first TED survey was: “Will Hertha BSC win the football league championships this year?” The term TED is now used for almost all forms of voting or survey.

<sup>9</sup> Birger Priddat: Signals from the black hole. In: Die Zeit No. 24 from 03/06/2004: 13.

<sup>10</sup> More information on this subject can be found in: Klaus Selle (1986) “Bestandspolitik” [The politics of continuation], Essen/Dortmund, chapter 8-10, esp. pp. 415 ff.

The example of the EXPO with its many resulting intrigues and confusions has been analysed in detail in: Heidi Müller & Klaus Selle (Eds.) (2002): EXPOst. Großprojekte und Festivalisierung als Mittel der Stadt- und Regionalentwicklung: Lernen von Hannover [Large-scale projects and the festivalisation as a means for urban and regional development: Learning from Hannover]. Werkberichte der AGB, Bd. 48, Dortmund [Dortmunder Vertrieb].

<sup>11</sup> Thus it may be concluded that plans arising from private interests, and which create their own legal justification, have become more significant.

<sup>12</sup> Hellmut Wollmann (2002): Die traditionelle deutsche kommunale Selbstverwaltung - ein ‚Auslaufmodell‘? [The traditional German municipal authorities – an ‘exit strategy‘?]. In: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kommunalwissenschaften H. I/2002: 24 ff. Comparison with this and other aspects of the transformation in communal ability to act - cf. also: Jens Libbe, Stephan Tomerius & Jan Hendrik Trapp (Eds.) (2002): Liberalisierung und Privatisierung kommunaler Aufgabenerfüllung. Soziale und umweltpolitische Perspektiven im Zeichen des Wettbewerbs [Liberalisation and privatisation of communal areas of responsibility. Social and environmental perspectives in the era of competition]. Berlin. Jörg Bogumil and Lars Holtkamp examine the consequences of the economic situation for citizens in: “Bürgerkommune unter Konsolidierungsdruck? Eine empirische Analyse von Erklärungsfaktoren zum Implementationsstand der Bürgerkommune” [Communes under pressure to consolidate? An empirical analysis of explanatory factors of the status of implementation of communal authority]. In: DfK I/2004.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1997): Zigzag. Essays. Frankfurt [Suhrkamp] : 71.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by Priddat (footnote 6)

<sup>15</sup> Platzeck in the Süddeutsche Zeitung from 18/08/ 2004, Schmidt: Die Zeit from 26/08/2004, P.1

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<sup>16</sup> More information on the Elsebad at <http://www.elsebad-schwerte.de/>

<sup>17</sup> URL <http://www.rohrmeisterei-schwerte.de>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g.: Enquete-Kommission des Deutschen Bundestages Bürgerschaftliches Engagement [Enquete Commission of the German Parliament for Civic Commitment] (2002): Schlussbericht [Final report]. Bundestagsdrucksache 14/8900 from 03/06/2002; Helmut Klages (2002): Freiwilliges bürgerschaftliches Engagement im kommunalen Raum [Voluntary civic commitment at a communal level]. In: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kommunalwissenschaften, H. II/2002

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Marga Pröhl, Heidi Sinning, Stefan Nährlich (Eds.) (2002): Bürgerorientierte Kommunen in Deutschland. Anforderungen und Qualitätsbausteine [Citizen-orientated communes in Germany. Requirements and quality elements]. Band 3: Ergebnisse und Perspektiven des Netzwerkes Civitas [Results and perspectives of the Civitas Network]. Gütersloh [Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung]; About taking the initiative: Joachim Boll et al. (Ed.): Bürger machen Stadt. Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement in der Stadterneuerung – Ein Projektbuch [Citizens create cities. Public commitment in urban regeneration – a project book]. Dortmund [Eigenverlag starkklar.projekt.kommunikation].

<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g.: Hellmut Wollmann (2002): Die Bürgergemeinde - ihr Doppelcharakter als politische Kommune und (zivil-) gesellschaftliche Gemeinde [Communal communities – their dual role as communal authority and citizens' association]. In: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Kommunalwissenschaften, H. II/2002; also Klaus Novy (1983): Genossenschaftsbewegung. Zur Geschichte und Zukunft der Wohnreform [The cooperative movement. On the history and future of residential reform]. Berlin [Transit] and Klaus Novy, Michael Prinz (1985): Illustrierte Geschichte der Gemeinwirtschaft [An illustrated history of cooperative commerce]. Berlin/Bonn [Dietz].

<sup>21</sup> To avoid misunderstanding: the use of the terms “heter-archies” and “networks” does not imply that power and dominion are extinct. Not all power structures become networks; participants do not all carry equal weight ... However, those who continue to think in the categories of “top-down” and “bottom-up” might find themselves out of step with reality in many cases.

<sup>22</sup> The full title of his office is: Ministry for town-planning, housing, culture and sport. Quoted from Boll 2004 (see footnote 19): 9.

<sup>23</sup> Adalbert Evers (2004): Staat und Zivilgesellschaft im Kontext neuer Formen des Regierens und Verwaltens [The state and society in the context of new forms of government and administration]. In: Boll et al. (2004) (see footnote 19): 13-18; Whether and to what extent companies should be involved is subject to rigorous discussion. While Vesper discusses the social responsibility of companies, the issue of “corporate social responsibility” is now being viewed with scepticism in the USA (cf. e.g. the lead article in the Economist from January 22nd – 28th 2005, P. 54 ff.). The view is that corporations should pursue their business interests appropriately, while the “public good” is a matter for the state. Whether there is common ground between the two camps is doubtful. Anyone who examines the history of the Elsebad will conclude that its founding companies were engaged in a commercial enterprise, and concerned with ensuring that they had loyal and obedient workers. There are similarities here to the broader-based “philanthropic” activities of the steel and coal barons in the Ruhr region.

<sup>24</sup> Urs Widmer: Das Geld, die Arbeit, die Angst, das Glück [Money, work, fear and happiness]. Zürich [Diogenes] 2002, P. 85