Agreeing to Differ? A Response to Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden

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What is the purpose of criticism? Is it to challenge and provoke, to establish new kinds of dialogue and mutual learning, to silence or to give voice? And what happens when we do not agree? Is disagreement an impediment or a driver to change? Is it a way of testing out arguments and building a mutually-enlightening dialectic? Or is open disagreement a fundamental problem which makes further discussion impossible?

I should quickly say that I do not write in these terms because I feel criticized or especially disagreed with by Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden’s very fine and reflective paper—nor do I have devastating criticisms and disagreements to offer them. But I am struck by the parallels between writing a critical response to academic colleagues and the handling of criticism and disagreement within public participatory exercises. To move to the main theme of these comments, should agreement be the purpose of academic/public debate or does this imply a stepping away from difficult issues, a failure of nerve or even a form of manipulation? Should one focus on what we share or on what divides us?

The Value of Disagreement

With inevitable irony, I think one important area of agreement between myself and these two authors is that we all value disagreement and have a suspicion of public participatory processes which seek to push this aside or to conceal the existence of contradictory views. As I read Jeroen Van Bouwel and Michiel Van Oudheusden, there is a basic problem with many participatory formats which seek agreement (or what they call ‘consensus’) and serve to delegitimize conflict and disagreement. In a careful analysis, they present different models of democracy but also critically (that word again) reflect upon the ‘consensual-deliberative model of public participation in technoscience’.

From their perspective, ‘consensus is enacted as an epistemic and political ideal that, implicitly or explicitly, renders undesirable the prospect of protracted conflict and the unfeasibility of conflict resolution. Nonconsensual conceptions and possibilities of change, conflict and democracy are thereby mostly left out of the equation.’ (Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden 2017, 3) Instead, they are drawn to more agonistic ways of thinking. They also challenge the current ‘meta-consensus’ around public engagement ie the consensus over the ways such exercises are theorized and invoked—or perhaps the ‘consensus over consensus’ (my awkward formulation not theirs).

There is much more to say about Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden’s thoughtful discussion than I can summarize here, including the presentation of two cases, a reflection on different models of democracy and an important inter-connection of STS and political theory. I strongly invite the reader to read their paper on these and other points. Certainly, I think the authors succeed in bringing new perspectives to what has often been a rather stale discussion of ‘public engagement—democracy or disappointment?’ within the academic literature (on this see Irwin et al 2012).
In critical response, I will—in the most constructive interpretation of ‘criticism’—focus on the relationship Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden present between disagreement and consensus-seeking within participatory exercises. To bring in one further aspect of their discussion, how should we think about the role of ‘closure’ in this context and also their proposed notion of ‘disclosure’? In line with the positive valuation of disagreement and conflict, ‘disclosure’ is seen as opening up a fresh perspective on participation: ‘disclosure does not imply a begrudging acceptance of the impossibility of actors to reach a shared solution for a social problem; rather, conflict between them is valued positively as the guarantor of political struggle.’ (Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden 2017, 10) Their argument, as I see it, is not necessarily in favour of disclosure over closure, but rather that we need to augment our ways of thinking and acknowledge the possibility of protracted conflict as well as agreement.

So how does the constructively-minded critic react to all this? My response—apart from the previous appreciative summary—is to point to three issues which I think deserve to be discussed in greater depth. It may be that my comments are more normatively-inclined than Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden’s rather balanced paper. Instead, my thoughts are best read as reflections stimulated by their text rather than disagreements with it. All are intended to move the field of ‘public engagement: studies and practice’ further forward.

**On Consensus**

First of all, I think the authors do well to portray consensus not simply in the common ‘Anglo-Saxon’ sense of a rather weak state of agreement but also as a faith in the common good and a commitment to building a shared culture. In fact, it is one of my own publications (with Maja Horst) that is drawn upon here so it is hard for me to differ (Horst and Irwin 2010). However, and in contrast to the approach taken in Van Bouwel and Van Oudheusden’s paper, the Danish ideal of consensus (at least from our perspective) does involve the acceptance both of fundamental disagreement and of the inability to achieve resolution on every issue (see Horst 2010). It asks what are for me some key questions: ‘how do we proceed when we are not in agreement?’, ‘how do we live together with conflict?’, and, not least in current troubled times, ‘how can we face disagreement directly and without fear of negative consequences?’. This is of course an ideal and not necessarily what one sees at a daily level within the Danish state—although notice the relative stability in that country of multi-party governments whose internal disagreements are at least as important as what they have in common. My point is that an orientation to consensus-seeking does not have to mean a ‘begrudging acceptance’ of disagreement. It can be that it starts with this acceptance and builds from there.

The authors’ approach to these issues is to put forward new conceptions and ideals that contrast with ‘consensus discourse’. My own argument is, firstly, to acknowledge that ‘consensus’ can take several different forms but, secondly, to suggest that we may have much more to learn from previous experience of ‘consensual’ conflict handling than the authors’ approach implies. For me, concepts like dissensus, disclosure, conflictual consensus and agonism are valuable—but they should be seen as part of the consensual ideal rather than a
contrast to it. Of course, here I also reveal my own commitment both to vigorous (dis)agreement and to finding collective ways of handling conflict—and even being made stronger by it.

**On Institutional and Political Contexts**

This takes me to my second point of discussion. If we accept the argument that official approaches to public engagement around the world often back away from disagreement and conflict, then it is also necessary for us as ‘critical’ scholars to consider the institutional and political contexts within which such assumptions are generated and performed. Why this persistent pattern? Is it caused by a culture of ‘scientism’ whereby complex socio-technical issues are reduced to a reductionist matrix of risk? Is it due to a deeper institutional urge for control, and resistance to the troublesome uncertainties often emphasized within public discussion? Is it because issues such as nanotechnologies and new approaches to healthcare have the potential to become ‘wicked problems’ for government institutions in particular: crossing departmental jurisdictions, spinning in several directions at once, easy to open up but hard to close down? Or is it because there are economic pressures at work which make it difficult even to imagine that the answer to any proposed innovation will be ‘no thanks’?

Having observed civil servants struggling both to ‘make space’ for participation activities in the face of sceptical ministers and suspicious stakeholders, and to move forward with what are often ‘hot’ issues in a distinctly ‘cold’ environment, it seems to me vital that we understand the institutional and cultural forces at work. We should also ask why, after so much criticism from all sides, initiatives in public participation actually persist. Without examining the relevant organizational and political contexts, it seems to me that we are doomed to a not very subtle revision of the old deficit model: why don’t policy makers understand? What if they understand more than we acknowledge, but simply find that our concepts and models miss the point as they see it?

**On Opening and Closing**

My third observation is the most general of all. And I have to say that it is influenced by a mood of pessimism concerning the current state of world politics (I am hoping this will pass—both the politics and my mood). I too share the enthusiasm for opening problems up rather than closing them prematurely down (Stirling 2008), for challenging the manner in which issues are framed for debate, and for bringing criticism and disagreement forward more visibly, directly and vigorously. Our critical training as social scientists and humanities scholars encourages this and (although I can’t speak for everyone here) our own political sensibilities have often been sharpened by critique of the orthodoxy, the closed agreement and the establishment stitch-up.

But does this lead us to under-value the art of closure, the process of finding ways to make agreements, understandings and policies stick even when the disagreements persist and the uncertainties show no sign of dissipating? To take an obvious example, does the world need more ‘disclosure’ right now around climate change or is it actually more interesting (and
challenging) to imagine the kinds of closure which might be fruitfully established—and the acknowledgements of dispute and difference upon which these should be built? In the era of Brexit, starkly-polarized US politics and global warming, certain consensual ideals seem more important and powerful than ever.

Should we focus on what we share or what divides us? The answer for me can only be ‘both’. I am grateful to Jeroen Van Bouwel and Michiel Van Oudheusden for providing us with the foundation for doing exactly that.

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References


