

Questioning Regimes of Exception in Urban Governance

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In this paper, I propose to use the concept of ‘*regime of exception*’ to theorize about governance innovations. A ‘regime of exception’ is broadly defined as a system of governance established by extraordinary measures that enforce an alternative set of procedural rules and structures to deliver a policy, program or project. I first advance the hypothesis that every novel governing practice that seeks to improve governance capacity operates as an *exception* to existing patterns of governance. Building on the concept of ‘state of exception’ (Agamben 2007), I then scrutinize this hypothesis by deconstructing the appeal and implications of embedding novel governing practices in existing patterns of governance.

The field of urban studies provides a prolific range of cases through which an examination of the practices, patterns and mechanisms of governance innovations are possible. In fact, despite the increasing calls for more efficient, effective, flexible and inclusive forms of urban governance, many scholars show skepticism about the actual changes (and improvements) in governing capacity that specific novel governance arrangements achieve. This has been the case particularly in efforts to improve the quality of city spaces through large-scale urban projects, where calls for strategic partnerships among relevant stakeholders seemingly fall short of the standards they are held up to. Salet and Gualini (2007) analyzed different strategic urban projects in European cities and assessed the innovative practices of democracy developed in different cases. The authors noted that, while the dimension and scope of the projects would, in principle, require the “commitment to addressing targeted, *ad hoc* experiments in local democracy,” the reality was “unfortunately different,” as “innovative forms of democratic legitimation [are] still the most embryonic dimension in current practices ... of large-scale urban projects” (Salet and Gualini 2007, 273-4). Swyngedouw *et al.* (2003, 20) noted that large-scale urban projects are often delivered by resorting to “‘exceptional’ procedures and institutional arrangements.” The authors found these exceptional measures problematic, because the alternative arrangements thus created possessed “considerable decision-making and developmental powers [and] operate[d] in a shady political arena with little accountability and only limited forms of democratic control” (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2003, 20-21).

This paper takes on a specific case of urban governance innovation in Portugal to explore how the concept of ‘regime of exception’ can be deployed to theorize about governance innovations in general terms and to explore how the use of exceptions to existing practices changes the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions of the culture and practice of urban governance.

References

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