

The politics of innovation in public transport. Issues, settings and displacements

Roel Nahuis, dissertation, March 2007 at Utrecht University, Copernicus Institute for Sustainable Development and Innovation, ISBN: 978-90-6809-398-8.

The politics of innovation is one of displacements. Debates and decision-making about controversial aspects of new technology typically displace between different settings for decision-making, like design departments, negotiation structures, sites for demonstration of innovative technology, forums for debate, political institutions, protest actions, etc. Relatively small decisions only accumulate into mature plans and solid matter after a sequence of displacements.

‘The politics of innovation in public transport’ investigates the conditions and consequences of this phenomenon in detail. The book builds on characterisations of technological innovation as a political process – the interactions, power distribution, negotiations, and contingencies at work in technological innovation processes – and delves into the normative consequences of this characterisation. It develops a conceptual framework centred on the notion of ‘displacement’ in order to gain understanding in both the dynamics of displacements and the way such displacements contribute to the democratic quality of the politics of innovation.

The book reviews relevant STS literature about technology, politics and democracy and invites the reader to take a performative perspective on the politics of innovation. In accordance with translation theory it defines techno-political issues as the clash between action and antiprograms. From a performative perspective these issues do not appear as free-floating entities, but as situated and contextualised ones. The contexts of clashes are referred to as ‘settings’. Because settings are conceived as inevitably biasing the politics of innovation, displacements are appreciated for their potential to overcome such biases. If settings bias the political performance, then such biases can only be neutralised by displacing issues to differently biased settings. Displacements thus potentially contribute to techno-political democracy and creativity. They, for example, allow for the invitation of other stakeholders, for new opportunities for action, for new perspectives, for new solutions, for the persuasion of a broader audience, etc. Displacements can, however, also contribute to power centralisation and perverse technological effects if certain voices are systematically excluded. Especially in the latter case is the question of democracy is very pressing.

The conceptual framework links the notions of issues, settings and displacements to each other and to a conception of democratic quality. The framework is applied in three case studies from the field of public transport in the Netherlands, because decision-making in such cases has begged for democratic legitimacy ever since national and regional governments got involved in issues like market regulation, (inter)regional coordination, infrastructural requirements, accessibility, and connectedness of regions, notwithstanding recent attempts to get rid of some of these putatively private or market responsibilities. Public transport is therefore an interesting empirical field to theorise the democratic implications of displacements.

In all cases the public interest is at stake, including ideas about what the ‘public interest’ actually entails. The first case study, about the introduction of self-service in the Amsterdam trams (1965-1973), analyses the substitution of a system in which conductors sold and inspected tickets with a system in which passengers ought to buy tickets from

ticket vending machines and stamp them in stamping machines within the tram. This study focuses on the notion of 'issues'. The second case, the introduction of a flexible public transport system in and around Hooegeveen between 1999 and 2004, is characterized by the large variety of settings where decision-making took place. Therefore, this case is of particular interest for the exploration of the notion of 'settings' from a performative perspective. The third case is the introduction of High-quality Public Transport (HOV) in Utrecht between 1990 and 1999, an innovation that has been debated during more than two decades. Because of recurring debates about the legitimacy of the decision-making process related to the putative exclusion of certain stakeholders, this case is of key interest for the study of the effects of displacements on democratic quality. While the theoretical focus shifts from case study to case study the viability of the conceptual framework is gradually demonstrated. Yet, despite these different foci the question about the relation between displacements and democratic quality remains in the centre of analysis. Among other things, the studies show that governmental bodies play a pivotal part in each case, though hardly ever an uncontested one. Displacements appear to be orchestrated either to articulate or to silence such contestation. The most important results are, however, on a theoretical level. The studies reveal a typology of displacements, which appears to cover all displacements observed in the case studies. This typology distinguishes between five types:

- Delegation – the realisation of an action program on the base of a broadly supported mandate.
- Articulation – the public demonstration against (part of) an action program.
- Politicisation – the discussion of controversial parts of an action program in its wider context.
- Authorisation – the solution for a conflict on the base of acknowledged authority.
- (Partial) depoliticisation – the bracketing and disappearance of antiprograms.

The studies show how these types of displacements are related and in what configuration they enhance or deteriorate democratic quality. Especially articulation and politicisation appear to assure a broad debate about controversial issues, while delegation is a necessary condition for decisions to take effect. When consensual decisions are not within reach, authorisation is yet another way of decision-making on the base of acknowledged claims and interests. Depoliticisation, finally, tends to be a continuous threat for democratic decision-making.

'The politics of innovation in public transport' addresses a subject of high societal relevance in a conceptually creative way. One of its main contributions to the literature is that it shows how democracy, especially in relation to innovation processes, is a distributed phenomenon that is not easily captured with concepts and theories from classical political theory. But it also has a compelling normative appeal: if stakeholders are not able to negotiate more democratic procedures for decision-making about controversial issues, they can at least engage in their displacements.