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# Going Local? Public Participation and Future Mobility in Ireland

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## ABSTRACT:

Recent changes in Ireland's economic and socio-political fabric have coincided with an increase in physical mobility, car dependency and long-distance commuting. National transport policies, prevailing land use patterns and trends in spatial planning before, during and after the economic boom of the 1990s have all contributed to the development and 'locking-in' of car-based mobility. Recent government initiatives for fast-tracking infrastructural projects such as motorways and the persistent weakness of local government regarding infrastructural decisions such as transport initiatives are seen by some to further exacerbate unsustainable mobility patterns.

The socio-economic and cultural consequences of hypermobility and car dependency for Irish society have attracted much attention from the media, academics and policy-makers of late. Yet few studies have been carried out to date to investigate public opinions about transport and mobility and explore possibilities for participatory decision-making that would help promote more sustainable mobility patterns and reduce car dependency. This paper will present qualitative data from ongoing interdisciplinary research at NUI, Galway to show how transport planning in Ireland offers limited opportunities for active participation. In addition, the paper will offer some suggestions for culturally sensitive decision-making structures that could increase the sustainability of future mobility patterns in Ireland.

KEY WORDS: mobility ● car dependency ● transport planning ● public participation

## 1. Introduction

In recent years social scientists have repeatedly highlighted the inability of representative democracies to legitimately represent their citizens. Voter apathy, low levels of public participation and a decline in social capital have been identified as problematic outcomes of current democratic practices in Ireland and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Explanations for this apparent decline in democratic participation range from fundamental changes in human social interaction brought about by various physical and virtual mobilities to the growing complexity of late modern, globalised societies. Yet others have identified the

post-Enlightenment hegemony of rational-instrumental rationality and objectivism as increasingly problematic aspect of Western democracy, suppressing deliberative alternatives.<sup>2</sup> As a result, prevailing policy-making practices that largely exclude members of the public and their practical and cultural knowledge have increasingly come under pressure.<sup>3</sup> Lack of public support and waning levels of trust in scientific arguments have also brought about a “legitimation crisis”, with more and more people either actively challenging or withdrawing from prevailing decision-making processes.<sup>4</sup>

Active and inclusive public participation is now advocated by some as essential to successful environmental decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Yet others acknowledge the potential benefits of public involvement but simultaneously criticise its drawbacks such as erosion of state institutions, exclusion of dissenting voices and cooption of more radical elements.<sup>6</sup> Despite these complexities, inclusive, future-oriented participation which facilitates collaboration and creates ‘decision spaces’ for power sharing and joined decision-making is seen by some as crucial to successful policy design and implementation.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere does this become more evident than in the context of environmental policies in general, and transport planning in particular, which inevitably transform people’s physical and social environment and their socio-cultural, political and economic practices.<sup>8</sup>

The spatial planning and development system in Ireland offers opportunities for public involvement, however, these are mostly confined to development processes such as planning applications rather than initial forward planning and long-term, future-oriented environmental decision-making.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, public involvement in Ireland often involves traditional forms of consultation such as written submissions and highly formalised oral hearings that limit opportunities for active and collaborative participation. This apparent lack of effective participation and the associated democratic deficit, in particular with regard to large-scale (transport) infrastructure projects, is of great concern to local groups and activists who wish to change their design or prevent them all together.<sup>10</sup> Nowhere does this become more evident than in the context of oral hearings facilitated by An Bord Pleanála (ABP), the Irish planning appeals board, whose functional and spatial arrangements frequently resemble formal court hearings rather than settings for open and inclusive deliberation.<sup>11</sup>

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This paper addresses the issue of public participation in Irish transport planning. It starts off with a brief assessment of current provisions for consultation. Subsequently, the paper will consider the effectiveness of oral hearings as important component of public involvement in Irish (transport) planning. Based on documents covering the controversial oral hearing on the Ballinasloe-Galway motorway in 2004/5 (henceforth BGOH), section 3 of the paper will then identify some of the reasons why this particular oral hearing (as well as others recently discussed in the literature) failed to create a forum for open and fair deliberation. In section 4, claims made by proponents of deliberative democracy that active participation promotes more inclusive environmental decision-making will be critically assessed. Finally, some tentative suggestions will be made regarding future participatory solutions to transport problems in Ireland. Here it will be argued that participatory approaches must be culturally sensitive to accommodate members of different mobility cultures. Throughout the paper, more general suggestions will be supported with empirical evidence drawn from official documents such as the An Bord Pleanála inspector's report for the Ballinasloe-Galway oral hearing, the authors' ethnographic fieldnotes, and focus group material.<sup>12</sup> All primary data was collected in Galway City and its environs as part of the NUI, Galway Transport Study 2004-6, an interdisciplinary project bringing together sociological and geographical approaches to transport research.

## **2. Towards Individualised Mobility: Public Participation and Transport Planning in Ireland**

The rapid economic and social transformation of Irish society in the 1990s has seen a rise in car dependency and commuting.<sup>13</sup> This focus on the motorcar as the key mode of transport is mirrored in Irish transport policies and their implementation. Subsequent transport budgets by the Irish government have prioritised road construction over public and others modes of transport. Initial responsibility for planning for transport projects lies with the local authorities, subject to funding, and local planning decisions can be appealed through An Bord Pleanála (the Irish Planning Appeals Board). At present, the public can inspect and comment on planning applications at the local level and make submissions to An Bord Pleanála to appeal planning decisions and request an oral hearing. Finally, decisions made by the Planning Appeals Board can be legally challenged at national and supranational level

(EU), though the threat of high costs can deter individuals, smaller pressure groups and NGOs from seeking judicial review.

Transport planning in Ireland thus provides only limited opportunity for active and future-oriented participation and is instead restricted to conventional forms of consultation and negotiations between key interest groups.<sup>14</sup> Public involvement is largely confined to the advanced stages of the planning process, with few opportunities available to members of the public to contribute to initial planning decisions and future-oriented development plans.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that inclusive planning remains an aspiration and that certain groups continue to be excluded from the planning process because their views and experiences are not being heard:

I do wonder sometimes [...] especially in terms of planning, do they ever walk around [...] to see what it's gonna be like from a pedestrian's point of view, or is it totally geared towards traffic?<sup>16</sup>

Overall, objections to already established plans are often the only way for members of the public to voice their concerns while opportunities for a priori involvement in the planning process largely depend on the good will of the proponents of the project. The planning process for many transport infrastructure projects thus offers only limited opportunity for active public participation. Instead, traditional approaches to consultation such as formal oral hearings are deployed which tend to solidify existing power gradients. Moreover, the relative rigidity of the process largely eliminates any possibility for adjustments to changes in circumstances, institutional learning and socio-economic and cultural transformation, thereby essentially 'time-locking' the initial decision, sometimes over decades. These issues became particularly evident in high-profile cases of conflict over transport infrastructure in Ireland such as Glen of the Downs, Carrickmines/M50, Sligo Inner Relief Road and the Ballinasloe-Galway section of the Dublin-Galway motorway (see section 3 below).<sup>17</sup>

The Irish government is currently seeking to exempt large infrastructural projects such as motorways from the regular planning process. The Strategic Infrastructure Bill 2006 aims to extend the list of developments that will be dealt with exclusively by An Bord Pleanála. Some provisions

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have been made in the bill to allow environmental NGOs to seek judicial review and its proponents claim that it will transpose into Irish law supranational attempts at increasing public participation in environmental decision-making.<sup>18</sup> However, those opposed to the bill have criticised that rather than providing a legislative framework for more inclusive participation, the bill would in fact reduce opportunities for citizen involvement. This has been disputed by its supporters.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the outcome of this debate, the authors of this paper would argue that the bill promotes the continued use of established consultation practices that do not meet the needs of modern Irish (transport) planning while ignoring the potential of more active and collaborative participation for preventing conflicts over infrastructural projects. This is not to suggest that increased participation alone could necessarily resolve transport-related conflicts – the perils of political inclusion such as the cooption of more radical groups serve as a caution against the uncritical adoption of participatory practices.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, this paper argues that the potential of some culturally sensitive forms of public participation to resolve seemingly intractable disputes and overcome democratic deficits within Irish transport planning must be explored.

The following section – section 3 - will focus on a particular instance of public involvement in transport planning in Ireland – the ABP oral hearing on the Ballinasloe-Galway dual carriageway - to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Sections four and five will address the question whether inclusive public participation can help solve existing conflicts between groups with different stakes in the transport planning process, some of which are related to the specific cultural values and practices of their group members. Furthermore, some suggestions will be made how to move beyond the current system of oral hearings, ‘reluctant consultation’ and consensus-driven governance and what a novel system of culturally sensitive, collaborative participation could look like.

### **3. New Decision Spaces or Business as Usual? The Practice of Oral Hearings in Irish Transport Planning**

As suggested in previous sections, the design and implementation of Irish transport projects are characterised by traditional forms of public consultation and are often dominated by technical-legalistic arguments and managerial rhetoric. This dominant discourse frequently disregards or even suppresses

local people's social, cultural and environmental concerns and alternative decision-making cultures and their discursive manifestations. Oral hearings as the key form of face-to-face public involvement in transport planning in Ireland frequently exemplify and perpetuate the hegemony of the technical-legalistic stance over alternative views of mobility as an important socio-cultural practice.<sup>21</sup> It thus appears useful to consider one particular case - the ABP oral hearing 2004/5 on the Ballinasloe-Galway dual carriageway (BGOH) - to illustrate how technical-legalistic arguments come to dominate through the hearing process itself as well as the value system that underpins it, thereby marginalising communicative and interpretative alternatives.

#### A. The BGOH - Success Story or Missed Opportunity?

The ABP inspector's report for the oral hearing on the Ballinasloe-Galway dual carriageway illustrates the formalisation and bureaucratisation of transport planning problems and the inherent potential for further conflict that emanates from this.<sup>22</sup> Both officials and objectors reacted to an already existing conflict over the routing of the road and deployed various strategies to validate and legitimise their claims. In some cases, both parties deployed similar techniques such as the use of expert advice. At other times, officials and objectors relied on contrasting discursive and behavioural practices, some of which presented direct challenges to the officially sanctioned *modus operandi* of the BGOH. Interactions between officials and members of the public revolved around three key rhetorical strategies - 1) quantification, 2) legalistic and instrumental reasoning, and 3) uncertainty reduction - used initially by official experts to legitimise their line of argumentation and later adopted by some objectors to further their own cause. BGOH documents suggest that whenever officials and objectors resorted to *different* argumentative strategies, their behaviour seemed to conform to the 'rules of the game', not causing much friction. However, objectors who spoke or reasoned in ways *similar* to rhetoric used by officials became the target of attempts to discredit and invalidate their arguments. This confirms Garavan's argument that oral hearings do not allow for any real debate but impose a rather rigid framework of roles and expectations on those involved in the process.<sup>23</sup>

Firstly, *quantification* dominated the line of argumentation pursued by officials during the BGOH and was also imposed on submissions made by

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members of the public during the initial consultation period. Comments and submissions by members of the public were counted and presented in a highly condensed format, thereby removing any specific meanings or relational connections between arguments presented:

A formal public consultation process was undertaken commencing in April 2000. Over 5,000 people attended the various sessions. Submission were received which were largely concerned about impacts on properties, communities and community facilities. Statutory Bodies and Non-Government Organisations (N.G.O.) were also consulted.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, arguments in favour or against specific aspects of the Ballinasloe-Galway road project were summarised and expressed numerically rather than being presented in the entirety. For example, the report includes a reference to the routing of the Ballinasloe bypass which states that 57% of the people in the vicinity of the town who took part in the consultation process favoured a southerly bypass.<sup>25</sup> However, no comments were made regarding those who opposed the southerly option, their motives and arguments. Schwarze observes similar trends in US forest services rhetorics and suggests that the quantification of public involvement “helps make the process transparent, both in the sense of making the process clear to the reader and emptying it of substantive content.”<sup>26</sup>

Some objectors repeatedly criticised the quantification of the social, environmental and archaeological implications of the road. They presented detailed arguments related to the actual content of the E.I.S. (Environmental Impact Statement) and argued for a more holistic assessment of the complex environmental and social problems at hand. Direct criticism of the assessment procedures used by the authorities, the nature of the consultation process, and the structure of the oral hearing itself emerged during the course of the BGOH, some of which related to what some members of the public saw as the reductionist quantification of complex socio-environmental problems. Restrictions regarding the format in which members of the public could present their arguments were also heavily criticised. They particularly objected to the imposition of rigid time limits:

[*Submission made by*] M/S B. [Ohlig] Schaefer and Messers Hession and Grealish [*state that they*] have been impeded in relation to the presentation of their cases. This arises in relation to various rulings which were made and are ultra vires the powers of the Inspector. Issues sought to be raised were prevented from being addressed. The Inspector's function is primarily as a fact gatherer so that the Board may take the appropriate decision. A significant example was the application of time limits within which issues could be raised. This was unfair and prejudicial to the interests of the parties represented. The rulings were made time after time.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, the inspector's report showed the persistent use of *legalistic and instrumental* arguments through council and board officials which effectively excluded both voices of dissent that emerged during the initial consultation process, and alternative strands of debate favoured by some members of the public who participated in the oral hearing. This "rhetoric of instrumentalism" prevailed on many occasions during the BGOH and coincided with a strong emphasis on specialised expertise, as is evident from the following excerpt:<sup>28</sup>

Galway County Council presented twenty four (24) expert witnesses in support of the scheme. A wide range of topics was addressed including the compulsory acquisition of lands, environmental impacts etc. Each witness presented a summary of evidence in relation to an identified topic relating to the relevant section of the scheme. Witnesses were questioned by the objectors and/or their representatives.<sup>29</sup>

Instrumental rhetoric also dominated comments on risk and risk assessment throughout the BGOH report. Concerns raised by members of the public regarding the potential risk of damages to their homes from blasting were replied to in terms of technical data and expert terminology:

There is little risk to house being damaged once the peak particle velocity is kept to the specified standards. The vibration velocity

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has to be less than 8mm/sec at a frequency of 10 hertz at the closest part of any sensitive property to the blast.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, individual people's storylines and concerns were treated as subordinate to issues concerning the greater good of society (i.e. the road). Again, members of the expert team attempted to exert power over members of the public through the use of technical language and the bureaucratisation of personal concerns such as health and safety:

No assessment was made in the E.I.S. in relation to the impact of the road and the health of individuals including Mrs. Gre[al]ish (Parcel No. 19, Chainage 350).<sup>31</sup>

Finally and closely related to quantification strategies and the use of instrumental and legalistic rhetoric, experts and officials attempted to *reduce and possibly eliminate uncertainty* through the use of scientific and technical language and insisted on what they saw as rational and objective course of action. They did so through the *a priori* establishment of rules regarding the course and set-up of the oral hearing, the use of empirical evidence, managerial-instrumental lines of argumentation and, where possible, the suppression of queries that were likely to introduce uncertainty into their argumentative framework. Even so, the inspector's report appears to contain a number of contradictory arguments and assumptions put forward by technical experts, such as statements which illustrate the uncertainty of estimates of future traffic volumes and their consequences for people and environment:

The proposed road is likely to result in induced traffic. The volume is not possible to predict [...] The impacts of the projected traffic were taken into account in assessing air quality and noise.<sup>32</sup>

On occasion, members of the public attempted a challenge to the officials' discourse by questioning these apparent certainties but also by presenting 'alternative certainties'. For example, a heated argument erupted between members of the public, in particular An Taisce's representative and officials over the historical significance of the Battle of Aughrim (1691) site to be traversed by the road. The relative severity of this particular dispute may seem

surprising at first but becomes much more understandable if placed in its political-historical context. The Battle of Aughrim site is of particular interest to the Orange Order in Northern Ireland and the impact of the proposed road on the site had already been discussed at the highest political level both in the Republic and Northern Ireland prior to the BGOH. As a result, some objectors attempted to utilise the prominence of this issue to further their causes, and attempts were made, albeit unsuccessfully, to present an alternative interpretation of the historical events to prevent the building of the dual carriageway, or least achieve its re-routing.

Overall, the BGOH clearly illustrates how different interest groups utilise key strategies such as quantification, technical-instrumental reasoning and uncertainty reduction to validate their arguments and legitimise their causes. This trend becomes further exacerbated through the presence of considerable power gradients between (local) government representatives and objectors which affected both the nature and content of the oral hearing. As a result, the BGOH did not offer a real opportunity for exchange of information and fair and open deliberation but presented itself as intense struggle for power and legitimacy. Hence, we must now assess the potential of alternative participatory approaches to Irish transport planning for solving existing conflicts and mitigating some of these negative effects of current consultation practices.

#### **4. Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making: A Critical View**

Collaborative public participation is hailed by some commentators as an opportunity for greater democratic co-determination that creates a counterweight to technocratic and politically elitist approaches. “Public participation is best understood as a challenge to the traditional management of government policy by experts in administrative agencies.”<sup>33</sup> But how effective are participatory alternatives in transforming existing top-down decision-making structures and do they really offer a more sustainable pathway to social-ecological democracy? It is argued here that some forms of participation have the capacity to challenge the hegemony of technocratic, positivist-empiricist approaches to environmental decision-making, and that conflicts over more contentious environmental legislation can be avoided, or at least mitigated, through them. Fischer suggests that environmental decision-

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making frequently throws up “wicked problems” that require political solutions, including participatory approaches.<sup>34</sup> Others argue that full collaboration between stakeholders can increase public support for controversial projects while helping to detect and mitigate potentially negative effects on the environment and society. However, the effectiveness of participatory processes depends on many social, political and historical factors that deserve due consideration (see section 5 for a discussion of such intervening factors in Irish transport planning).

Proponents of participatory schemes do not always acknowledge that participation in environmental decision-making remains a contentious issue and that there are negative aspects too. In contrast, some activists and social movement theorists argue that time- and resource-intensive participatory processes undermine the capacity of interest groups and movements to sustain themselves into the future. Yet others see collaborative participation as a form of cooption that helps legitimise unsustainable projects and solidifies existing power relationships, thereby preventing more radical reform.<sup>35</sup> Some environmental movements, specifically those committed to direct action, may view political inclusion as an attempt by powerful elites to weaken environmentalist counterarguments and ‘green wash’ their unsustainable practices. These objections to the uncritical introduction of participatory processes into the policy process indicate the importance of power in democratic decision-making.<sup>36</sup>

Real and perceived power gradients frequently lie at the heart of conflicts between local people’s concerns and the interests of powerful economic players and political and ‘official’ elites. In this context, rhetorical strategies deployed by more powerful agents to garner legitimacy and persuade others that they act in their interest deserve attention, particularly in situations where these strategies remain underdeveloped or fail altogether, thereby causing a legitimacy crisis.<sup>37</sup> However, dichotomies of powerful state and economic institutions on the one hand and powerless local people on the other cannot accurately capture the complexity of emerging governance networks. More importantly, they gloss over the fact that power relations are constantly changing rather than ‘frozen in time’ and that nobody ‘has power’ but that power circulates and is enacted through the social practices of human actors.<sup>38</sup>

To conclude, the extent to which public participation could help address democratic deficits remains subject to debate. It is suggested here that both local and national transport planning decisions in Ireland can be major sources of conflict between stakeholders and that collaborative participation and the utilisation of differences in mobility culture could help prevent such conflicts, at least to some extent. Current forms of public involvement in Ireland remain insufficient both in terms of inclusiveness and with regard to their potential for coopting dissenting voices. Consultation processes such as BGOH and other oral hearings are often (not always) dominated by experts and resource-rich groups and do not represent a fair and equitable process. Instead, they highlight the need for more collaboration in transport planning from design to implementation and the inclusion of previously marginalised groups such as users of alternative modes of transport.<sup>39</sup>

### **5. Public Participation and Future Mobility: Some Tentative Suggestions**

This paper has shown that collaborative public participation may in some cases assist sound environmental decision-making but that current consultation practices in Ireland often fail to prevent or mitigate disputes over major transport projects such as the construction of the Ballinasloe-Galway dual carriageway. In fact, most consultative practices presently in use in Ireland such as oral hearings seem to reinforce prevailing assertions held by participants and highlight the unequal power relationships between different interest groups.<sup>40</sup> This raises the question can public participation processes in Ireland be reformed to facilitate more inclusive and collaborative transport planning and, if so, how can this be achieved? It is suggested here that environmental decisions with considerable potential for conflict and irreversible environmental damage, such as the routing of motorways through ecologically and archeologically significant areas, could benefit from a fully developed, culturally sensitive approach to participation. Moreover, maximum transparency and inclusion from the beginning of the planning/policy-making process could present a more sustainable alternative to the current practice of limited stakeholder involvement and consultation at a late stage of the planning process.

It is important to note that some features of the Irish political system and aspects of everyday culture appear to lend themselves to alternatives

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participatory practices such as community-based decision-making while others seem to prevent them. The list of reasons for the emergence and relative stability of the current system of limited consultation, at least until recently, cannot be dealt with in detail here. However, at least *four* political and cultural particularities of the Irish state and civil society deserve to be mentioned, together with proposals to either change or utilise them in participatory transport planning.

Firstly, the *centralisation* of state power, public expenditure and administrative functions in the Greater Dublin Area appears to promote a particular political culture that adversely affects small-scale, regional and local decision-making structures. Moreover, in recent years local government has been gradually weakened, though this has not happened without significant resistance from those campaigning for devolution. As mentioned above, the Strategic Infrastructure Bill, if passed, would further reduce the powers of local government with regard to infrastructural projects such as roads and public transport. Reform of local government structures and genuine decentralisation through devolved responsibilities for transport solutions could thus assist the establishment of participatory transport planning.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, Ireland's *clientelist political culture* continues to shape people's perceptions of their influence on political decisions. Recent changes in the economic and social structure of Irish society have partially loosened these (perceived) ties between politicians and their voters, thereby reducing public confidence in the ability of individual parliamentarians to bring about change. Alternative governance networks could replace these seemingly disintegrating ties between politicians and their constituents and rekindle public interest in political decision-making, perhaps through the reinvigoration of communicative networks and the creation of local and regional alliances.

Thirdly, dependence on the *voluntary sector* remains a fundamental building block of Irish policy-making and implementation, though this is increasingly threatened by the decline in voluntarism. As regards public involvement in transport planning, the onus is often on voluntary organisations and individuals to commit their time to gathering information on proposed (transport) projects and act as watchdog where necessary. This is certainly not unique to Ireland, though the extent to which the Irish state relies on the voluntary sector to fulfil important monitoring functions and provide essential services often exceeds demands placed on such organisations elsewhere in

Europe. Improved state support for voluntary organisations such as regular and unconditional funding and greater promotion of voluntarism could strengthen and possibly expand current voluntary activity. It is expected that issues of mobility and transport in Irish society will become much more prominent in years to come, increasing the need for community-based voluntary mobility services, transport watchdog groups and mobility consultants.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the persistence of the current system of limited consultation is partially aided by continued influence of certain real or perceived *cultural values and practices* in Irish society. The existence of a specific Irish time culture which combines a preference for short-term planning and loosely structured time frames with a greater tolerance for uncertainty appears particularly important because of its influence on planning practices.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Ireland's transformation from a predominantly rural, agricultural society to a (post-) industrial, urbanised country has brought to the fore other cultural determinants to bear on environmental policy making. Attitudes towards authority, changing opinions on the role of the environment for the future sustainability of communities, increasingly complex insider-outsider relationships and the importance of local knowledge cultures and collective identities rooted in a specific locality all shape the policy process, at least to some degree.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that future sustainable transport planning depends largely on the identification and accommodation of such cultural specificities and the development of culturally sensitive forms of public participation.

But what would a culturally sensitive solution to problems of public participation in Ireland look like? This paper has shown that greater citizen involvement does not necessarily guarantee public support for projects, in particular if more powerful stakeholders use the consultation process to legitimise already established plans rather than construct solutions through open and collaborative deliberation. Giving the importance of cultural factors, it is argued here that future participatory processes in Irish transport planning must assign a much greater role to alternative mobility cultures and lay expertise and promote intercultural understanding as a form of conflict resolution. This clearly requires a departure from positivist-instrumental rationality, technical expertise and truth and objectivity claims that dominate democratic procedures today, including oral hearings such as the BGOH. The establishment of innovative local and regional decision-making structures

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could act as catalyst for more inclusive, culturally sensitive and future-oriented transport planning in Ireland. The establishment of local and regional roundtables, the improvement of existing Special Policy Committees (SPCs) to facilitate greater collaboration at local level and the fusion of local knowledge, socio-cultural expertise and technical know-how may also assist the transition to more sustainable planning practices.

Finally, it is believed that the *visualisation* and *normalisation* of existing conflicts over controversial project could aid the planning process too. Apparently intractable conflicts between stakeholders may become more open to resolution if they are made visible to participating parties, for example through constellation analysis.<sup>44</sup> Also, clashes between different (mobility) cultures could be further de-problematized if they were seen as ‘normal’ aspects of everyday life. This would also mean that actors may find it easier to detect similarities with conflicts they experienced in the past and for which they already have successful coping strategies. Here, Fischer’s distinction between technical expertise and lay people’s cultural rationality offers an interesting entry point.<sup>45</sup> It is suggested here that rather than pitching technical expertise against cultural competence, we must treat them as *different types of cultural competence* which become reflected in contrasting linguistic and deliberative practices. In other words, the observable hegemony of technical-managerial lingo during the BGOH could be re-framed as the dominance of a specific set of cultural conventions – the technical-instrumental world view. Future innovative approaches to public participation could thus be more successful by opening up decision spaces for alternative knowledge and mobility cultures. Local socio-ecological perspectives could then be placed in a more advantageous (though not necessarily equal) position to counterbalance prevailing technical-instrumental approaches and arguments.

## 6. Conclusions

Current forms of public participation in Irish transport planning such as written submissions and oral hearings appear to be subject to considerable limitations. Firstly, they offer a forum within which to deal with already existing conflicts over transport planning decisions but do little to prevent conflicts in the first place. Moreover, current consultation practices appear to perpetuate power gradients between different interest groups while excluding marginal and dissenting voices. This became particularly evident in the BGOH

case discussed in this paper which showed how rhetorical strategies such as quantification, the use of technical-legalistic argumentation and attempts at reducing uncertainty solidified conflicts between officials and objectors. Moreover, the analysis of the BGOH clearly illustrated how seemingly intractable disputes and differences between stakeholders often relate to their diverse cultural conventions and how resulting clashes between officials, technical experts and members of the public reflect their specific cultural values and competencies rather than their (lack of) technical expertise. This suggests that alternative forms of public participation in future mobility and transport planning would need to be sensitive to these cultural differences and include decision-making networks and deliberative practices that facilitate greater intercultural understanding between all parties involved.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lance W. Bennet, *The Governing Crisis: Media, Money, and Marketing in American Elections* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Frank Fischer, *Citizens, Experts and the Environment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Michael Laver, "Voting Behaviour," in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (London: Routledge, in association with PSAI Press, 2005), 183-210.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Enid Wistrich, *The Politics of Transport* (London: Longman, 1983); Brian Wynne, "May the Sheep Safely Graze: A Reflexive View of the Expert Lay Knowledge Divide." in *Risk, Environment and Modernity*, eds. Scott Lash, Bronislaw Szerszynski and Brian Wynne (London: Sage, 1996), 44-83; George Taylor, *Conserving the Emerald Tiger: The Politics of Environmental Regulation in Ireland* (Galway: Arlen House, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Fischer, "Citizens and Experts in Risk Assessment: Technical Knowledge in Practical Deliberation," *Technikfolgenabschätzung* 13(2004):90-

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98; Thomas C. Beierle and Jerry Cayford, *Democracy in Practice: Public Participation in Environmental Decisions* (Washington: RFF Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Amos Tevelow, "Global Governance and Social Capital: Mapping NGO Capacities in Different Institutional Contexts," in *Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making*, eds. Stephen P. Depoe, John W. Delicath and Marie-Frances Aepli Elsenbeer (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 223-233; Gregg B. Walker, "The Roadless Areas Initiative as National Policy: Is Public Participation an Oxymoron?" in *Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making*, eds. Stephen P. Depoe, John W. Delicath and Marie-Frances Aepli Elsenbeer (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 113-135; Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (Eds), *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Daly, "Governance and Social Policy," *Journal of Social Policy* 32 (2003):113-128; Walker.

<sup>8</sup> Beierle and Cayford.

<sup>9</sup> Paddy Prendergast and Krysia Rybaczuk, "Using Visualisation Techniques in Planning to Improve Collaborative Governance in Ireland," *Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Urban Planning and Spatial Development and Impacts of ICT on Physical Space*, Vienna, February 2005 (Vienna: CORP Geo-Multimedia, 2005), 235-243.

<sup>10</sup> The recent re-development of Eyre Square, a large civic space in the centre of Galway City in the West of Ireland, vividly illustrates the extent to which exclusionary planning practices are resisted by members of the public. Local environmentalists, concerned citizens and some members of the business community opposed the project which took more than two years to its completion in April 2006 and suffered from huge cost overruns. The Eyre Square project also brought about a number of unintended consequences including significant changes in power relations between city officials and elected representatives in Galway City Council and extensive public debates regarding greater transparency and accountability in local government.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Peace, "Environmental Protest, Bureaucratic Closure. The Politics of Discourse in Rural Ireland," in *Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology*, ed. Kay Milton (London: Routledge, 1993), 189-204; Mark

Garavan, "Seeking a Real Argument," in *Uncertain Ireland: A Sociological Chronicle 2003-4*, eds. Mary P. Corcoran and Michel Peillon (Dublin: IPA, 2006), 73-88.

<sup>12</sup> All three focus groups took place in April 2006 and involved both undergraduate and postgraduate students (F1, F2 and F3; n<sub>TOTAL</sub>=11).

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Morgenroth, "Commuting in Ireland: An Analysis of Inter-County Commuting Flows," *ESRI Working Papers* 144(2002):1-26; Kevin Leyden, "Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Public Health* 93(2003):1546-1551; Frank McDonald and James Nix, *Chaos at the Crossroads* (Dublin: Gandon, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> The recent controversy over the transposition into national law of the EU Nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC) in Ireland constitutes a prime example of a conflict-ridden bargaining process that involved a small number of key stakeholders, most of them from an agricultural/agribusiness background (Ethel Crowley, *Land Matters* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Prendergast and Kybaczuk

<sup>16</sup> Female undergraduate, FG1 2006

<sup>17</sup> Liam Leonard, *Green Nation* (Dublin: Green Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Both EU directive 2000/35 and the Aarhus Convention represent important supranational agreements aimed at increasing and regularising citizen participation. Ireland signed the Aarhus convention which constitutes an international legal document aimed at strengthening public participation. The Aarhus Convention's main tenets are based on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration (1992) that states that "Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level" (An Taisce Bi-annual Magazine, 12).

<sup>19</sup> The ABP Annual Report 2004 states that "the Board had responded positively to the announcement by the Minister of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government that he intends to introduce a Strategic Infrastructure Bill to streamline and speed-up the process of procuring planning approval for projects of national strategic importance. [...] The Board notes the Minister's assurance that the new legislation will not involve any diminution in the rigour of assessment of projects or in the degree of public participation in the process" (ABP Annual Report, 2-3).

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<sup>20</sup> Dryzek et al., *Green States and Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Please note that in the Irish case oral hearings are almost always initiated by individual objectors or pressure groups themselves and do not form a default aspect of the consultation process, though local authorities and other proponents of projects may on occasion decide to call an oral hearing to address issues of public concern.

<sup>22</sup> ABP Inspector's Report PL07.CH.2150

<sup>23</sup> Garavan

<sup>24</sup> ABP Inspector's Report PL07.CH.2150, 7

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 25

<sup>26</sup> Steve Schwarze, "Public Participation and (Failed) Legitimation: The Case of Forest Service Rhetorics in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area," in *Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making*, eds. Stephen P. Depoe, John W. Delicath and Marie-Frances Aepli Elsenbeer (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 141.

<sup>27</sup> ABP Inspector's Report PL07.CH.2150, 70

<sup>28</sup> Killingsworth and Palmer, 1992; cited in Schwarze, 140

<sup>29</sup> ABP Inspector's Report PL07.CH.2150, 5

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>33</sup> Beierle and Cayford, 2. The changing role of public participation in environmental policy making deserves particular attention here. According to Beierle and Cayford, participation in US environmental policy-making was intended to make policy makers more accountable and ensure public interests are met. However, pluralist and popular democratic alternatives and interest group bargaining about what the common good actually is and how it can be met soon replaced this narrow managerial approach to participation.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Fischer, "Citizen Participation and the Democratization of Policy Expertise: From Theoretical Inquiry to Practical Cases," *Policy Sciences* 26 (1993):165-187.

<sup>35</sup> Harry Taylor, "Insights into Participation from Critical Management and Labour Process Perspectives," in *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, eds. Bill

Cooked and Uma Kothari (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004), 122-138.

<sup>36</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, "Bringing Power to Planning Research," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 21(2002):353-366.

<sup>37</sup> Schwarze; Bent Flyvbjerg, *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Flyvbjerg, 2002; Bent Flyvbjerg, "Policy and Planning for Large Infrastructure Projects: Problems, Causes, Cures," *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* No.3781, December 2005.

<[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=873657](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=873657)> (6 August 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980); Mark Haugaard, *The Constitution of Power* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Uma Kothari, "Power, Knowledge and Social Control in Participatory Development," in *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, eds. Bill Cooked and Uma Kothari (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004), 139-152.

<sup>39</sup> The particularities of specific groups in Irish society who find themselves excluded from participatory and representative roles, or alternatively decide to abstain from any involvement, deserve a much more detailed analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper. For example, persistently low levels of female participation in public decision-making remain a considerable obstacle to more equitable and just policy making in Ireland.

<sup>40</sup> see also Peace; Garavan.

<sup>41</sup> James Wickham, *Gridlock: Dublin's Transport Crisis and the Future of the City* (Dublin: Tasc at New Island, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Henrike Rau, *Time Perspectives and Temporal Practices: A Cross-Cultural, Comparative Study of Time Cultures in Ireland and Germany* (NUI, Galway: Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Lisa M. Moran, "Negotiating Boundaries or Drawing the Line? Transcending 'Insider/Outsider' Distinctions in Connemara" *Irish Journal of Sociology*, Special Edition on Communities, to be published in Autumn 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Constellation analysis constitutes a innovative qualitative research technique that helps visualise and subsequently analyse both congruent and conflicting opinions held by stakeholders (Kruse, 2004; in conversation with H. Rau in

April 2006). Furthermore, constellation analysis can be utilised to effectively inform participating parties involved in the deliberation process about their own opinions as well as those of others.

<sup>45</sup> Fischer 2004.

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