

# Six controversies in search of an epistemology

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## ***Abstract***

Public engagement in planning and siting policy has been a political priority for some time, and there are various arguments as to why successful participation consistently proves to be an elusive goal. Emphasis is often laid on the incompatibility of local knowledge and technical knowledge, on the failure to invite ‘public’ involvement at an early stage, and so on. In this paper, we examine a set of controversies about the siting of an upgraded railway line and associated stations in six neighbouring municipalities in western Sweden. Using parallel focus group discussions with different parties to the process, we draw two main conclusions. Firstly, local knowledge may equally be techno-rational, yet the positioning of actors determines when and how alternative arguments may emerge. This suggests that arguments over the necessity of social capital for successful participation may be a red herring. Secondly, policy processes are long and drawn-out, and new participants appear all the way through these processes. The category of ‘the public’ is a fictional remainder category which undermines participative approaches. We suggest that opposition should be understood as an eternal factor in participative democratic policy processes, rather than a preliminary obstacle which can be alleviated early on. Hence we challenge assumptions about the rightful temporal positioning of participative practices and query the notion that early participation leads to ‘public ownership’ of plans.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Engaging the public directly in planning and policy making has become extremely fashionable among European governments. The term ‘public participation’, however, covers a multitude of sins, being used to refer to everything from cursory consultation to partnership management, or delegation of responsibilities, as Sherry Arnstein famously pointed out many years ago (Arnstein 1969, Sharp and Connelly 2001). Its aims may include empowering disaffected populations, avoiding mistakes based on ignorance of local conditions, pacifying protest or fulfilling funding conditions (Odpm 2004), and various benefits are claimed, from increased ‘ownership’ of outcomes, increased ‘efficiency’ of projects, and reduced protest, as well as the creation of goodwill and enhanced democracy (Detr 1998). Indeed, some authors suggest that prioritizing ‘bottom-up’ planning and policy making over strategic ‘top-down’ politics may lead to the reinvigoration of local government more generally. Young, for example, suggests that ‘bottom-up empowerment programs can be developed as a means of tackling social exclusion, alienation, and loss of faith in the capacity of local government to deliver: ‘...(T)his will help to build up social capital and strengthen the weakened links between the local state and civil society’ (Young 2000).

Despite governmental enthusiasm and the abundance of ‘how to’ guides (Edwards and Gaventa 2001, Gibson 1979, Gibson and Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation. 1998), critical literature appears not to be widely read in practice. Accounts of the difficulty for even well-educated and resourced people of having any noticeable influence over planning processes have barely changed from the 1960s. A key feature of the increasing discourse of public participation is the lack of proper integration of participative activities into decision-making processes more broadly, such that even broadly participative processes rarely lead to outcomes which appear to reflect the participative action. The results of participative or consultative processes are often sidelined once they reach the routine political decision-making rituals of local or even central government. At the very least, one can say that in political arenas, the outcomes of participative exercises usually become ‘one voice’ among a range of lobbying parties. In other words, there is as yet still restricted emphasis on the ways in which ‘best practice’ can be incorporated into existing political and administrative processes, and few attempts to situate participative

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practices into broader societal conflicts and institutionalized representation, that is, to address the question of whether this is an appropriate status for participative outputs. Our own experience of participative policy making has suggested that the outcomes of such processes rarely reflect the effects they are credited with (Cooke and Kothari 2001), a view supported by the anthropological literature on participative development (Abram and Waldren 1998, Peace 1993) and some geographical literature (Davies 2001). From this empirical perspective, it appears that including people in public processes who are not situated within formal state-sanctioned organizations can equally be described as leading to conflict, confusion, distress, anxiety and ineffective decision-making processes (see Simone Abram, 2005). In other words, people's emotional relationships with governance processes are not as simple as the literature suggests (Sara Skodbo). It is our argument that these affective outcomes are tightly linked to the epistemologies of development, environment, benefit, and also democracy itself, that the various actors bring to participative processes at different stages in the process.

In this paper, we therefore make two key points about public engagement in planning and decision-making processes. Firstly, we recognize that actors in such processes have different epistemologies of development, democracy, technology, indeed different forms of knowledge which are often irreconcilable. This problem can be discerned from a debate about the nature of public interest, and the basis of different actors' claims to it. It point has parallels in the literature of science, technology and society studies, since it is usually claims to knowledge which define participatory strategies and outcomes. However, we also show that even where epistemologies and discourses are shared, dialogue may be avoided. We suggest, therefore, that rational argument gains its authority from ownership, rather than content. Secondly, time-lines of participative processes are complex, repetitive and iterative. Within the literature on public participation in policy making and planning, the value of incorporating citizens in local project planning at an early stage is frequently stated (Odpm 2004). However, given the heterogeneity and inconstancy of the many people included under the rubric of 'the public', we would argue that new participants will inevitably continue to emerge throughout the lifetime of any public political process. Given this rather more subtle premise, we are able to examine the consequences of the constant arrival at participatory processes of 'new' participants, and the difficulty of making hierarchical and sequential decisions which include all participants.

Something of this problem is discernable in Chantal Mouffe's outline of 'the democratic paradox. This paradox consists in the irreconcilability of equality and liberty,

for which Mouffe argues there can only be ‘contingent hegemonic forms of stabilization of their conflict’ (Mouffe, 5). The current emphasis on participative processes aiding consensus, in opposition to conflictual or confrontational politics would tend to fall into the pattern Mouffe describes, when she states that ‘once the very idea of an alternative to the existing configuration of power disappears, what disappears also is the very possibility of a legitimate form of expression for the resistances against the dominant power relations’ (Ibid.). Mouffe is referring specifically to cross-party alliances or public-private partnerships, where political opposition is ruled out as unsporting. In partnership or inclusive politics, opposition thus comes to be defined as irresponsible or irrelevant (Neveu 2002). What can this mean in the present context? In this paper we will consider a string of democratic debates over the same problem, which is the siting of new tracks and stations along the renovated West Coast Railway Line in south-western Sweden. It is our contention that the opposition to agreements made within the established, ostensibly consensual democratic fora (municipalities, in negotiation with the Railway Administration), was a systematic production of the governmental system and should, in fact, be welcomed, rather than dismissed as a sort of petty nimbyism which is roundly despised. In fact, the invitation to join an open governmental decision-making process required closure in order to proceed from decision to action, but that apparent openness generated expectations on behalf of participants that they would be fully heard, even once processes were closed. That is, participative approaches to governance fail to resolve the contest between equality of representation and liberty of access to power. Hence, for each side of an argument that was disappointed, protest groups appeared to attempt to reverse decisions that had been achieved. Given the impossibility of finding a satisfactory response to this situation, we find participants in different roles within these processes adopting alternative ways to manage conflict and difficult arguments. Rather than continually being open to new facts and rationalities, the discomfort generated by continual challenge is displaced through categorizing and situating of other actors in order to de-legitimize their claims to creditable information. We show this by examining the status, rather than the detailed content, of the technological, environmental and economic arguments brought to a number of parallel debates. The structural similarities of the cases we consider allow us to demonstrate how such ‘arguments’ based on ‘evidence’ were displaced. The political consequences can be defined as the alienation of independent participants; affective consequences include severe frustration and exasperation of participants, while the economic and environmental consequences, while not yet fully known, are potentially devastating.

## **Epistemologies of democratically organized development**

We are not aiming to directly assess the uses of research knowledge in policy making (C.f. Sarah Michaels), nor are we proposing a normative solution to local siting controversies<sup>2</sup>, but rather examining the use of particular discourses and epistemologies as persuasive powers by similar actors in roughly similar organizational structures. This leads us to an examination of the problems of incorporating external participative elements into broadly representative democratic practice. Mouffe suggests that these two elements provide a constant and constitutive paradox in modern democracy which cannot be resolved into a static end-state. On the contrary, she asserts that forms of pluralism which claim to enable the resolution of difference ignore the way in which ‘certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination’ (Mouffe, 20), leading to ‘the typical liberal illusion of a pluralism without antagonism’ (Ibid), an illusion which certain Habermasian-inspired planning theorists could be thought to encourage (Forester 1999, Healey 1997)).

One of the classic forms of subordination is manifested in the appropriation of epistemologies and discourses. That is, it is often argued that certain types of discourse appear more authoritative than others, in particular that scientific and/or technological discourses have attracted significant transactional power in political domains. Archetypal in this respect are the technological discourses of numeracy, particularly statistical constructs.<sup>3</sup> It is undeniable that statistical representations of the world dominate both the everyday negotiation of citizenship and the preparation of almost any policy area, in that mundane or specialist issues are often numericised in some way before they are incorporated into policy debates. In the case of railways, these representations include numbers of passengers, traveling times, values of freight transported, distances, speeds, etc., often further translated into financial factors, and usually to the exclusion of values less easily translated into numbers (Boholm 2000). The term ‘translated’ refers both to the translation of the complex world into simple numerical factors, but also to the notion that these transformations operate to enroll actors into knowledge-networks and discourse worlds, in the way that Michael Callon, for example, suggests. Translation becomes an act of persuasion and inclusion, of enrolment of actors with sometimes conflicting notions into a particular realm of argumentation.

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<sup>2</sup> I.e., controversies over where to site infrastructure

<sup>3</sup> A point raised by Weber, discussed by Foucault, elaborated on by Hacking and demonstrated by Miller, Rose, Robson, among others.

However, whilst we acknowledge that there is force in the argument that ‘discourse is power’, we are also acutely aware that the effectiveness of discourse (its ability to enroll, the ‘persuasiveness’ of arguments) is situated. Put crudely, it is not just what is said (or how), but who says it, when and where. Our case study demonstrates, among other things, that arguments may be made in an appropriate language (Robertson 1984), but if they are made by the ‘wrong’ actor, they will not engender action or change among other actors (Murdoch and Abram 2002). A striking finding of this case study, therefore, was the extraordinary richness of the technical and legal competence and knowledge of non-state actors (‘members of the public’), and their alienation from the arena of governmental decision-making despite a growing rhetoric of governmental transparency and the inclusion of citizens in ‘governance’ (Stoker 2000). Rational technical argument is surprisingly easily discredited.

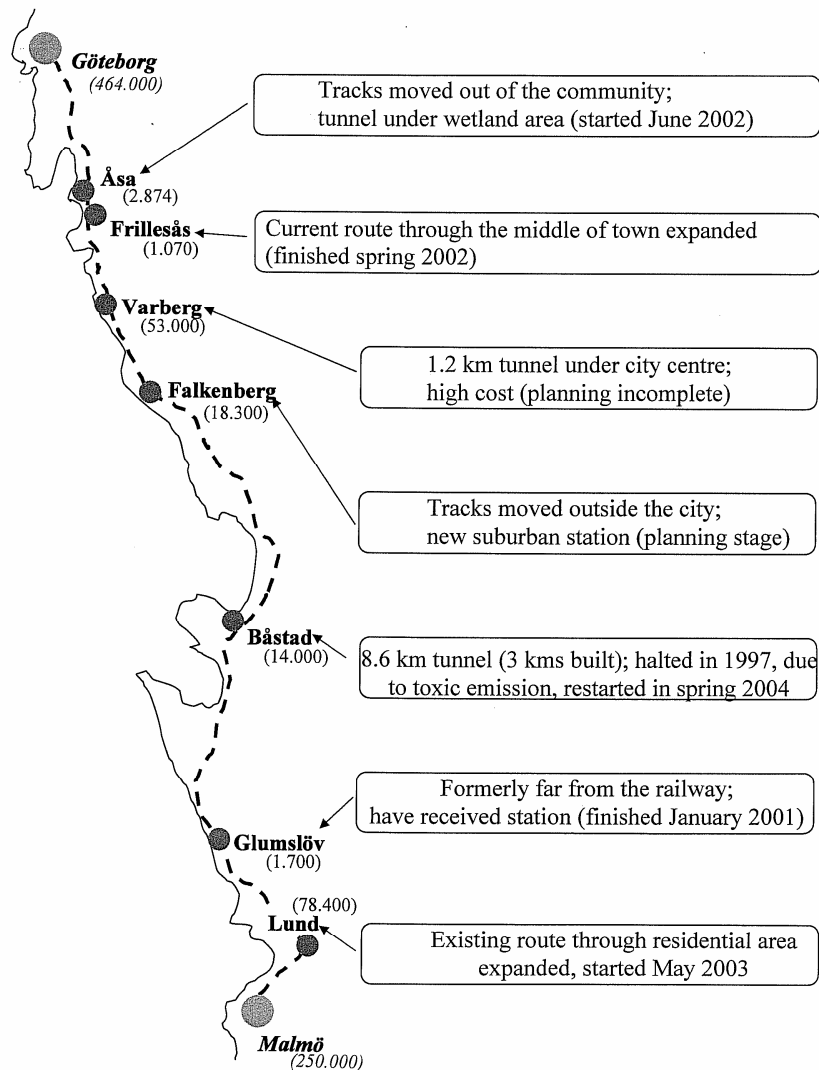
### **The Case – Railway Modernization in South-western Sweden**

The case we present is of railway expansion in south-western Sweden (Boholm 2000). In brief, the National Rail Administration, *Banverket*, undertook a project for the Swedish government to double the (single track) railway line between Gothenburg and Lund along the south-western coast of Sweden, through numerous areas of attractive landscape and some sites of special scientific interest. What provides the interest for us here is that the project was administered in parallel negotiations with a string of local municipalities along the route of the railway line. In each case, the Railway Administration approached the municipality with a proposal for the stretch of rail through that municipality, including the main station. The municipalities then considered the proposals, discussed them and consulted on them. In each case, one or several protest groups appeared with some objection to the proposals, and in each case this led to a broader debate, in some cases protests, and in some cases legal action, public enquiries and even EU environmental court cases.

In each of the municipalities discussed here, we can summarize the key issues in debates over rail expansion as follows. Among various central questions, the most significant were questions of safety of running high speed express and freight trains through narrow urban corridors close to residential buildings (where at present there are low-speed single rails with level crossings). There were also a number of locations outside town centers where tunnels were proposed in areas with special ecological features such as sensitive water tables. The latter were particularly significant as the West Coast line is nationally infamous for the Hallandsås site of ecological disaster, where

poisonous chemicals were used to seal a tunnel, leading to large scale environmental damage and consequent legal action, a series of events described by the director of the Swedish Nature Conservation Council as ‘the biggest issue in Sweden since Chernobyl’ (personal communication). Important debates also concerned the locating of railway stations, specifically over whether they should remain in town centers, be sunk into underground tunnels, or be moved out of town centers to satellite commuter-interchanges. In other words, there were family resemblances between the experiences of each municipality. These different cases are summarized in figure 1, where their significance in terms of the relative positions of the different groups is identified.

**Figure 1: Case Study Communities**





These controversies raised a number of points associated with the fact that what was at stake was not simply the particular solution appropriate for the location, but the means by which a solution was found: what kind of decision-making process could be considered legitimate? Central to this question was the way in which various kinds of knowledge were made instrumental during debates, and most interesting for us was the way in which protest groups attempted to be included in debates. One could reformulate the central question as follows: is protest group participation in municipal development debates dependent on their self-presentation and epistemology, or is it entirely associated with their political and social position? How are these two dimensions related? In relation to a number of debates which associate social and political exclusion with economic and educational factors (in short, class), we can ask the extent to which exclusion may rather be a function of the political system in its structure and form. By bringing together actors in similar positions from different locations, we were able to ascertain the extent to which particular discourses were available to actors in particular positions, and what the significance of those positions was.

In what follows, by the use of focus groups, we examine firstly claims to represent the public interest, as a key form of legitimization for public action, and secondly the problem of time and timing within political decision-making.

### **Focus groups**

Based on the prior work of the Centre for Public Sector Research at Gothenburg University (see Boholm, op. Cit.), we conducted a series of focus group interviews with different actors from each of the municipalities along the line (see figure 1). Rather than focusing on site by site analysis (already available in Boholm, op Cit), we chose to bring together all those in ostensibly similar roles from each site. We interviewed chairs of planning committees together, senior municipal planners/architects, and chairs of municipal councils, protest action group leaders, and district rail administration managers. By this method, we were able to confront the positionality of the participants as well as exploring the kinds of knowledge they brought to each local dispute. In particular, this method allowed us to explore the ways in which groups conceptualized each other and the limits to knowledge- or evidence- based argument. In each case, we contacted the relevant individuals, and invited them to a discussion at a conference centre where we encouraged them to discuss key issues for them concerning their experiences of the railway expansion process. As provided by the focus group's methodological basis, we mostly allowed the discussion to twist and turn in its own pace and direction. When

convenient, though, we tried to draw the discussants' attention to particular issues. Active intervention and moderation of the discussion was motivated either by our interest in furthering a particular issue which spontaneously emerged, or to encourage commonality between the themes discussed by each group.

With the participants' permission, these discussions that lasted two and a half hours on average were recorded and later transcribed, and participants were invited to comment on the transcriptions, adding corrections, clarifications and further thoughts.<sup>4</sup> We also invited participants to lunch, where discussions tended to flow into a wide range of further issues. We were keen to make the experience as pleasant and interesting for the participants as possible, mainly to encourage them to attend the meetings, but also to allow them to feel comfortable in speaking about their views. In fact, attendance was good<sup>5</sup>, and participants suggested that the meetings had been useful for them, as many had not met 'colleagues' from other sites previously.

### **Who defines the public interest?**

The claim to be acting out of public interest is a powerful political and discursive tool to legitimize public action, and it is not surprising, therefore, that actors make claims to it. However, the form that interest takes must be transformed in order for such legitimacy to be claimed. Generally, decision-making about infrastructure projects relies on the notion that the overall broader benefits of a project must be conceptualized as 'worth' any local disbenefits. This pits broader –national, regional or perhaps global - benefits for one population with disbenefits which will be visited on a few. So much is well known, but in common with many such debates, our case demonstrates participants defining costs and benefits in different ways. Whereas early governmental claims for the project were connected to reduced costs derived from faster travel and freight-transport times, costs, particularly since the disaster at Hallandsås, have increased to the extent where there is no feasible economic justification for the redevelopment of the line (Boholm, op. cit.). Whereas these economic questions were considered in the broader debate over whether or not the line should be rebuilt, in our focus groups we were more interested in discussions over the local siting of particular segments of the new line. This was partly a function of

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<sup>4</sup> The transcriptions embraced forty pages on average and the person who transcribed was instructed to do a verbatim transcription, including accentuations. In the quotations in this text, accentuations are indicated by underlining.

<sup>5</sup> Five out of six chairs of planning committees attended; three out of six senior municipal planners/architects attended; five out of six chairs of municipal councils attended; four out of six protest action group leaders attended; five out of six district rail authority managers attended. Each focus group interview lasted on average two and a half hours.

the policy structure in Sweden, which allows large infrastructure projects to be decided at national level without consideration of detailed implementation plans. This model, (which was also proposed in the UK Green paper 'Delivering Fundamental Change' (DTLR), but later removed from the bill presented to parliament (Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill 2003)), supposes that the general argument for infrastructure can be decided in principle before its location is considered, enabling argument about the actual impact of development to be reduced to what Ragnar Löfstedt and Åsa Boholm have called a 'siting controversy' (Boholm and Löfstedt 2004). Claims about public interest at the local level therefore had to be reformulated and this was evident in our focus group discussions.

Within the groups, this was played out in efforts on the part of each group of actors to claim public interest for themselves, while attributing private interests to opponents. Formally, the ownership of decisions over public interest was laid out by one of the planners, as exclusively the domain of municipalities: 'In what we call the municipal planning monopoly in Sweden, municipalities have responsibility for planning within their borders. And the whole legal apparatus is built on the principle that, quite simply, the local society decides over conflicts' (Senior municipal planners/architects, 25).

This rather simple formulation disguises a world of complexity in defining 'local society'. This 'local society' is electorally represented by local politicians who, themselves, claim an ability to see holistically in a way which is not possible for individuals, thus allowing politicians to claim responsibility for public interest issues. This was particularly the case for the leaders, or Chairs of councils, who in Sweden are employed on a full-time basis. One council chair summarized this privileged position in contrast to the fleeting interests of other citizens: 'Lots of people...young families, they look to child care and schools, that's important, and only that's important. Later it's other things; it'll be care for the elderly which is the only thing one looks to. So it is up to us politicians to try to take account of the whole, for society, and for the consequences' (Chairs of municipal councils, 20).

Even for them, though, it is difficult to see the world holistically, as another argued: 'In such a complex society we live in today, it's extremely difficult for ordinary people to gain a holistic view, and they, to find them, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack among ordinary people' (Ibid, 21). So difficult, they suggested, that all politicians would need to work full time if they were really to soak up the necessary knowledge and experience required to take decisions in a holistic and far-sighted perspective. Worse, however, the politician argued that all sorts of opinions can influence

a municipality, and many politicians, especially the elected representatives that exercise their mission in leisure hours, adopt sectoral views rather than holistic ones.

Of course, actors are aware that the public interest, the holistic view, or the far-sighted perspectives are not simple matters over which particular groups have a monopoly. Indeed, politicians themselves suggested that a democracy which gives politicians rights to take decisions for four years (between elections) is barely democratic. On the contrary, a wider participation than merely the council chamber is required for an effective democracy. Despite this, others argued that it is difficult to get ordinary people ('laymen') to think holistically and far-sightedly, saying that it is impossible to express ambivalence or dilemmas in the local political arena: 'It can't be the case that we're elected just to be megaphones for local opinion...we have a responsibility for some kind of leadership' (Ibid, 29). Or as another stressed: 'Our role is to be builders of society...to look forward, plan for the future, what's best from a social development perspective. And we also have the responsibility, which I'm sometimes not too good at, which is to communicate and justify why we have to do this or that' (Ibid, 29).

Here, a crucial distinction is being made between the weight of responsibility on the shoulders of hard-working responsible politicians, and the difficulties they have in communicating their motives. This suggests that if only communication were better, then the 'public' would understand not only why politicians took particular decisions, but, by implication, that they would therefore accept the outcomes. As well as attributing some rather magical qualities to politicians, this sort of argument underplays the extent of the differences of opinion and value, in short, the political differences amongst the population and the strength and depth of opposition to certain infrastructure proposals. One council chair even suggested that respect can be earned from residents by 'taking a decision and visibly sticking to it' (Ibid, 32), an argument heavily criticized by Anna Coote, who claims that this implies a parent-child-like relationship between electors and politicians.

Others, however, argued that it is not, in fact, possible to smooth over basically different standpoints, with one suggesting that the process had taught them that solutions cannot always be reached through discussion, as some interests are irreconcilable: 'At first, I thought we could talk our way through to a solution somehow. That should always be possible. But I've learned that you can't, without dropping some interests, some interests are irreconcilable, so then you have to say, okay, we drop them. But that's hard...That's a pedagogical issue that isn't easy' (Ibid, 32).

The over-riding message from our discussions with council chairs was that the responsibility of local politicians was to make informed, far-reaching and far-sighted

decisions that were generally out of the range of most of the electorate, since full-time employed politicians were in a position to be well informed by experts, and experienced with large-scale social questions. And the council chairs' self-imposed duties and self-confident approach to political problems is clearly visible in the leaders' lack of confidence in ordinary unpaid elected representatives who, although better informed than the general citizenry, were still liable to be partial in their public interest. This demand for holistic management was not a responsibility which the leaders took lightly; on the contrary they discussed the many dilemmas associated with this difficult position, and the weight of responsibility it placed upon them. However, they were agreed that society was sufficiently complex, and the infrastructure questions so far-reaching that simplistic arguments were not appropriate. Consequently, communication was a problem which many of them struggled with. A particularly risky form of communication had been suggested during the debates in one municipality where the council was faced with a straight choice between two alternatives: a referendum. However, the council leader in this case argued that only when both those alternatives were realistic would it be possible to put them to a public referendum, where they would have to be presented fairly simply. It could later become extremely difficult for politicians to turn away from the outcome of such a vote even if it became clear that the referendum outcome had favored the 'worse' solution. Putting choices out to referendum was, quite simply, 'playing with fire' (Ibid, 10f). This view could sometimes spill over into a low estimation of the commitment of citizens to 'deep thought' about complex questions, e.g.: 'In complex issues, which will affect the future colossally, if you send the question out to people who haven't got stuck into them, who just think about it over a coffee break and then spontaneously choose something, well that's to build infrastructure in a way which I don't think is particularly good, and not one for an insightful politician' (Ibid, 10).

It was more important to hold out for a decision that was good for the future, even if one found oneself 'very lonely' (Ibid, 15). On the whole, though, politicians were careful to stress the extent to which they have positive dialogue with citizens, and particularly with protest groups, even if there were occasionally heated exchanges. Lack of protest, on the other hand, they took mostly for tacit approval: 'surveys are very much based on opinions, but it's clearly gruesomely easy to create an opinion against, and there's never an opinion for' (Ibid, 13). In short, the council chairs represented themselves as having a unique position in being able to appreciate the long-term interests of the general public, with the appropriate expert advice to assist them. The 'problem', in

their view, was one of communication with a diverse, ill-informed public without the time or the expertise to evaluate alternatives in sufficient depth.

## Challenges

Perhaps not surprisingly, the protest group representatives we met cast doubt on the politicians' claims to sole ownership of the public interest. On the contrary, where politicians defined their role in terms of overall problems, at a general level, the protesters had alternative claims to knowledge, both local and scientific. The clearest claim is that to local knowledge, but not one constructed in opposition to state or scientific knowledge, but intrinsically enmeshed and justified by them. In this account of the setting up of a local protest group, the discursive approach weaves between local, national and global knowledge, in stark contrast to the impression given by politicians of naïve or superficial local residents. One municipal planner claimed, for example, that 'most of the opinion against this stretch, it's just those people who are directly affected by it' (Senior municipal planners/architects, 6). However, local protest group representatives were at pains to point out that much of their activity was in opposition to their private interests: 'I live in the city centre. In my own interest, I should want the station to stay because I can walk there in ten minutes. It's perfect! But that's not what I'm after. I'm working for holistic solutions, to take care of nature, people, goods, economy, and not least safety' (Protest action group leaders, 31).

A belief in democratic practice sustained the protest groups, but this was severely challenged by the activities of the various authorities. Seeing apparently authoritative organizations contradict one another and work around the law, rather than following it, protesters had learned to be more daring in their own practices, and used a range of local knowledge and broad principles to justify their stance. This was illustrated in their own self-descriptions of their *raison d'être*, for example:

(our organization) was founded in 1992 when the Hallandsås tunnel and the West Coast line became a reality. And the people who set up the organization had a great deal of knowledge about the area's setup, and they said this will never do... the organization's aims include to try to ensure that the national interest is preserved, and that the West Coast line is developed in an optimal way (Ibid, 4).

Local knowledge, in this instance, is being presented as contributory towards national interest, as it will inform the optimal process of building infrastructure. This group could not be described as anti-development per se, but on the contrary wished to be seen as

technically progressive and knowledgeable. Their knowledge of the history of the railway was also detailed, but begins to display skepticism over the scientific or technical credibility of official organizations:

(originally the station should be moved eastwards into a travel centre), and this was the municipality's own plan from the beginning. It's been part of their overall plan for a long time, since at least the 1950s and 60s anyway. But then quite suddenly, and surprisingly, for us, the municipality decided that the line should be built on the existing track, which goes through our recreation area, the coast zone, through a small boat harbour, through the town and actually through the hospital area. Lots of people reacted to that, especially in opposition to dangerous goods traffic. The National Rescue Services Agency thought it was madness (Ibid, 4).

This skepticism was further translated into a challenge to the legal status of agreements, though described in colloquial terms:

...they locked themselves in their room with the Railway Administration and took decisions. And all the time, whatever we said, when we've opposed details in the plans or the consultation meetings etc., we've heard 'you can't talk about the law, the environmental legislation; it's the agreement that remains in force. But that isn't right...An agreement must comply with the legislation. If the law is changed, the agreement must be looked into and maybe also be altered (Ibid, 4).

Partial successes in what appear to be 'common sense', that agreements between state agencies and local authorities are subordinate to environmental law, support the organization's position that their role is to hold public bodies to account. One could argue that they are acting as proxy-regulators by constantly challenging the validity of agreements and decisions. As this organization's representative continued:

So now we've appealed against all the detailed plans, referring to the new legislation, particularly the law on the introduction of environmental codes. Especially the decisions in chapter 16 and 17, which actually negate the previous decisions and force the municipality to renegotiate their previous decisions, giving residents an opportunity to put the democratic process into practice, which is absolutely vital in this case (Ibid, 5).

Given this credibility, their claims to the discourse of sustainable development which resonate through the conclusion to this narrative appear credible:

...we realize that this is one of the biggest decisions for (the municipality). For this century, at least. And that it will affect future generations and (the municipality's) development and (the region's) development. And directly for development where (the municipality) has a leading role, with the airport, the railway and the motorway, which has a superb infrastructural layer. Which they're now frittering away (Ibid, 5).

This account, therefore, displays a number of important layers. Firstly, a familiarity with national (and international) laws, both on infrastructure development and environmental protection, secondly on the status of legal agreements, thirdly a broad perspective of local planning and development, and fourthly a level of local knowledge on which the organization's legitimacy rests. A fifth layer is the protesters' tremendous feeling of frustration, stemming from their continuing efforts to influence the formal decision-making. Metaphorically speaking, the Establishment is perceived as potentially an inexorable steamroller, kept in check only by constant alertness. However, what is also shown is skepticism about 'official' discourses, particularly statistical calculations of risk which do not fall within common sense or intuitive appreciations of potential risk in the local context. The account stresses organizational contradictions and apparent irrationalities which appear incompatible with the seriousness of the planned development. On the contrary, it is the protest group itself which has not only the municipality's best interests, but the whole region's, and even the nation's interests in mind, and, one might argue, both local and global interests in the form of the conservation of the natural environment.

The relation between the protesters and the 'Establishment' could also be conceptualized as potentially symbiotic. All large-scale technical projects (as for all human activities) are grounded in an imperfect knowledge of nature, technology and human organization. In spite of this, Establishment organizations insist on characterizing their objectives as 'rational'. As protesters find only limited success in influencing localization processes through conventional political means, they pursue the notion that knowledge-based rationalities should define the process. Debate over the correct way forward therefore takes the form of contested epistemologies. Despite the breadth of their interests, the level of knowledge and experience available to the protest groups was in some cases equivalent, or occasionally superior to that available to the official organizations, both amongst members and their contacts. Within one town, for example, a number of professional resource people were available, of whom some were internationally experienced: 'Even though we are only two and a half thousand people,



among them there are extremely knowledgeable people. ...there are also civil engineers in the village who can take a look, and it's quite an advantage to have some who are retired so they have a bit more time...' (Ibid, 13). And one of the representatives, himself, was a highly experienced retired engineer. In other words, they had claims to legitimate technical knowledge and competence themselves, but also to wider authoritative forms, which they referred to, not simply as authenticated sources, but sources with combined local and scientific knowledge:

Actually, we had a summer visitor who was an expert in, what's it called, he's a Reader at Stockholm University...He's a very smart geologist, and it happens that his professor, when he was an undergraduate in Stockholm, lived (here) in the summer..., not far from us, and he identified that area for (him) to do his dissertation, just a kilometer from the tunnel. And we regard him as an expert on the tunnel. He did the safety assessment for the stakeholder solicitor, and found four critical crack zones...which were completely ignored [by the Railway Administration] (Ibid, 17-18).

Where experts were not already available, groups commissioned studies as appropriate: 'We asked two students at Chalmers University of Technology to look into how much property prices would change (in this area), and they calculated that there could be up to a 25% reduction' (Ibid, 9). However, expert knowledge was not used to gain personal or sectoral advantage. Indeed, each of the protest group members stressed that, contrary to the way they are portrayed in municipal debates, none of them were acting out of self-interest. Instead, explicitly in contrast to supposedly unruly protesters such as tree huggers, they saw themselves as the responsible guardians of a democratically and truly "enlightened" process of social change, constantly striving to ensure that democratic practice was adhered to, and striving to obtain appropriate information at each stage, according to a number of principles which they readily outlined (Ibid, 37). And while they had sympathy for the heavy responsibilities taken by local politicians, they were critical to the ways in which they failed to live up to the ideal of a rational juridical political decision-making process, characterizing what we might term the '*realpolitik*' as provoking righteous protest: '...if they [local politicians] don't decide in your favor, well you just have to put up with it, in a democracy. But when you feel that they won't listen, that they avoid the question, that they change the agenda or act on prior parameters to get the result they first wanted, I react against that' (Ibid, 37).

The authorities, they claimed, were not willing, or perhaps even able to listen properly, in some cases the authorities actually failed to attend meetings (Ibid, 36) and/or simply failed to send a proper reply to a call for a meeting, a failure characterized as both incompetent and irresponsible (Ibid, 37). All of the groups reported occasions where their technical arguments or best efforts to present information had been ignored or rebutted, and each expressed exasperation at the refusal of other parties to take into account the scientific or technical arguments they presented.

The politicians' and Rail Administration's inability to listen to criticism or take on information from the protest groups and their expert knowledge brought problems for them later on. We were thus told a story about how a profound knowledge in geology was embedded in the Railway Administrations' organization and planning earlier in the twentieth century, but that both the knowledge - still highly relevant - and, worse, the awareness of its importance, had been lost, weakening the basis of planning processes (Ibid, 15f). The protesters simply expected that the authorities would pursue this depth of historical knowledge in order to plan properly. When the authorities ignored them, or displayed ignorance about them, the protesters suggested that it was the Railway Administration which lacked technical knowledge, not themselves. Further, the protesters substantiated their criticism by observing that during the past 70 years, the Railway Administration had not built any new lines, but had only carried out repair work on existing lines (Ibid, 16). In this respect, the municipality's planners were also skeptical about the railway administrations' level of expertise, suggesting: 'There's been nothing like it since the end of the 1800s in Skåne. So their knowledge about this kind of project had to be built up as they went along, quite simply. Not least the questions of risk and so forth' (Senior municipal planners/architects, 14).

The council chairs actually demonstrated some degree of sympathy with the suspicions of the protest groups, in a collective skepticism to the Railway Administrations' competence, as one remarked: 'At the beginning the Railway Administration came with some detailed plans that were really badly done from the environmental point of view and of poor quality technically. And that creates mistrust from the very beginning over whether they really had the knowledge' (Chairs of municipal councils, 17).

Lack of confidence in the Railway Administration has been found more widely, as documented in the results of two surveys sent to inhabitants in the seven communities along the route, in 1999 and 2001. However, while many inhabitants were certainly critical of the Rail Administration's lack of interaction with the local community, the

general level of confidence in their competence and technical knowledge was satisfactory (See Marcia Grimes; Urban Strandberg). Thus, it is possible that criticism of their technical competence was likely to be a feature of the claim for legitimacy between elite members of governing forums.

While there was clearly ambivalence and variation about the level of legitimacy which protests attained, a great many comments from the decision-makers nevertheless downplayed the status of protest. At least in their own view, the protest groups did not fit the picture of interest-groups or political extremists. Some of them were also members of mainstream parties themselves. Nor did they lack technical knowledge, resources, or the ability to corral expert knowledge, as outlined above. Moreover, they were able to bring locally specific knowledge and information to broader or principled discussions of a political or technical character. From their perspective, the politicians appeared unable to make open decisions, as they did not listen equally to all their citizens, hearing who speaks instead of what is said. Similarly, for them, the Railway Administrations lacks competence and appears deaf to appeals on technical specificities. Their scientific knowledge, in contrast, is grounded, literally, in the specifics of local geological formations, for example, and is therefore doubly valuable. In fact, from their perspectives, they were the only actors, who were *disinterested*, as their concerns were with the wider environmental and social questions rather than any economic or electoral advantage they might hope to obtain from the project, one way or another (C.f. Eeva Berglund).

### **Technical knowledge – definitive or dubious?**

These arguments appear to reflect badly on the Railway Administration. It was, therefore, particularly important for us to speak directly to the Administration's project managers, to understand how they had perceived debates and why they had chosen not to address certain apparently legitimate technical arguments. In fact, the status of technical knowledge varied. In some instances it was presented as definitive and outside the realm of negotiation, but certain technological information, or certain framings of knowledge was less effective in gaining leverage. One could argue that all scientific or technical knowledge has the status of debate, rather than consisting of a set of facts, but what seemed to be at stake here was the source of technical knowledge and its legitimacy, evidenced in its relationship with the 'public interest'.

Interestingly, of the five focus groups, the project managers expressed the firmest and most unambiguous view on the 'public interest'. Like the chairs of municipal councils, the project managers used a kind of antithesis to define and demonstrate the

public interest. By describing the actions taken and arguments put forth by protesters as excessive, unreasonable, and as indeed demonstrating biased self-interest the project managers thus defined the public interest as the opposite. Also and significantly for their general attitude, a lack of social studies was used as an explanation for the presence of special interests:

...there is a lack of elementary knowledge in social studies, and one should maybe devote some resources to explaining what the societal processes are about. Not only how you make an appeal but also, by way of example, that individual interests must be pushed into the background by public interests and that the public interest should be thus represented. And also why the County and the local authorities look after the public interest. I have a feeling that some people don't understand this (District rail administration managers, 20).

Were the above quotation representative for all the project managers' opinions on the citizenry, one might conclude that they were rather contemptuous, but this was not the case. Firstly, they were fully aware of the heterogeneous nature of the category 'public'. They had each experienced several general meetings (in actual fact, the railway managers more than any of the other formal actors meet ordinary inhabitants and organized protesters on a daily basis, both formally and informally) and they perceived that only a minority questioned their intentions as being within the 'public interest', as suggested here:

I also think that one experiences this quite commonly at these general meetings, where there are 100 people and even more on many occasions, that there is often a tiny group that are opponents and they organize themselves in some way and plead their case. There are plenty of others that just sit there, that maybe have a positive attitude that get tongue-tied and don't dare to tackle the negative group (Ibid, 6).

This is a common discourse about protest in planning debates, which often serves to reassure technical staff that their position is broadly acceptable, and allows them to play down the potential validity of the arguments used by opponents (see also Simone Abram, 2005). As well as minimizing the strength of opposition, the managers also expressed sympathy for individuals who were directly affected by the railway rebuilding process. In the following quotation we find that this sympathy is framed by an argument comprising four broad factors: information, anxiety, powerlessness, and trust.

Of course one sympathizes with the people that live next to this kind of project, that they are anxious, because I would have felt the same. I get anxious about things that I see can have an influence on me, where I can't get hold of what it is they are doing. I need this information, to know that I can trust what they are doing (District rail administration managers, 18).

Illustrative for the managers' attitude to the people who are immediately affected is also the following narrative about how to meet peoples' anxiety with real action.

You need to listen to your surroundings. If, for example, one notices trouble in an area, say, where we have had blasting. One becomes aware that people start to boil over, so to speak. So you invite this group to sit down one evening with a cup of coffee and go through the matter. Talk about what we are doing, open out, openly give account of what we are doing, and then it becomes apparent that most people take in this (Ibid, 18).

The idea that openness through increased information will help to untie societal Gordian knots is certainly put into use by the managers. Not only could one expect to foster an unambiguous sense of public interest, but also entertain hopes of bringing about a consensus on the rationale behind rebuilding railways: '...if we manage to include in the thinking people who are not utilizing the railway too, then we can spread our message, everyone will understand why we are building railways. Then the question isn't only about the small action group which get the railway through its garden, but this is an interest that affects everyone' (Ibid, 45).

However, the project managers were also unexpectedly self-critical at their own poor contribution to the marketing of the railway rebuilding project. They too felt it was unreasonable to expect to have support from all inhabitants in a single community simply by pointing out that re-routing a section of the line will result in a 2 minute reduction in travel times. In their view, the Railway Administration needed to be less anonymous and also advertise the fact that the effectiveness of the entire line was at stake, and thus the prospect for achieving greater and more general objectives (e.g. exchanging long-distant trucks for goods trains) (Ibid, 45). They also considered that effective railway rebuilding was greatly assisted by result-orientated local authorities. One might therefore criticize them for a rather utilitarian understanding of local democracy. The project managers differentiated local politicians according to their effectiveness. Most effective, thus, was the rebuilding process when the project managers could co-operate with politicians

holding forceful personalities: ‘various detailed plans have been stuck with different committees but as soon as he came along, he got the municipality together and made them result-orientated’ (Ibid, 26). The project managers also discussed what they perceived as procedural inertia within the political system, which obstructed the railway rebuilding process. In so doing, they indirectly articulated perceptions of the ‘public interest’ and its realization. For example, each of the schemes led by the managers included tunnel construction, and since all tunnel construction in Sweden is subject to scrutiny by the Water-rights court, the managers had experience of the court’s judgments. These courts were not amenable to the managers’ own construction timetables and deadlines, as one indicated, ‘We cannot have an influence on them, so to speak, as far as I can understand, either on time or outcome; on the contrary they live their own life’ (Ibid, 41). From their point of view, the water-rights judgments counteracted their rebuilding objectives due to the court’s excessive attention to the political climate. This weakened their ability to hold with the more ‘stable’ public interest.

Additionally, they were frustrated about the tendency of different state agencies to pull in different directions: ‘does the whole social apparatus go the same way, or are some counteracting the others?’ (Ibid, 41). Formally, different departments, boards and ministries are assigned specific tasks with corresponding protocols, and as each works according to strict divisions of labor, the project can be delayed significantly while conflicting outcomes from the different departments are slowly resolved through painstaking step-by-step negotiations. Not only will formalism lead to delays in the project, but the managers also suggested that the absence of informal dialogue causes unnecessary disputes over simple facts. For managers’ working in an environment where problem-solving is highly valued, this appears to be unnecessary bureaucratic formalism: ‘we could get the same result considerably more promptly by bringing together the different departments, if we arranged one meeting and went through the matter, adjourned one or two weeks and arranged a new meeting so we could get to a common understanding on the matter’ (Ibid, 9).

The managers’ view on the workings of the decision-making procedures contrasts starkly with the view held by the protesters. Their views could be considered as opposites, leading inevitably to disputes over procedural democratic values. The protesters set out from a procedural ideal of having checks and balances within the political system and calls for distinct boundary lines between different bodies, to maintain a robust technical rationality and to render discussion on substantial disagreements possible within the political system. Informality and speedy decision-making processes,

as requested by the Railway Administration managers, are thus shunned by the protesters: 'The local authority lead, and the Rail Administration join, and the County Administration Board agree...so the 'Establishment', if I can use that expression, put their feet down, and possible opposition is in some way rather smartly moved aside' (Protest action group leaders, 6).

These different approaches toward the idea of society-wide levels of interest, or public good, demonstrate that the dislocation of decisions about the principles of infrastructure from locational decisions leads to discontinuities in the process of transforming decisions into actions. We have been concerned, here, to assess not only the justifications which different parties adopt for their participation in this long process, but the rather different approaches they bring to defining what the process itself consists of, what kinds of deliberations are and should be engaged in, and what constitutes a correct, democratic route towards good decisions. By examining contest over the definition of public interest, we see that arguments are not simply about who is right or wrong, but over the status of scientific and/or technical knowledge, the role of highly localized (but not necessarily 'lay') knowledge and by implication the importance of place to technical assessments. It is in the detailed and historical knowledge of place-specific science that the protest groups grounded their assessments of potential outcomes of building processes, whereas the general safety criteria which the Railway Administration based their proposals on were adopted into a discourse of holistic, balanced political practice by the local politicians. This, in effect, meant that the parties had talked past each other rather than engaging in direct debate, as the two different types of 'scientific' approach appeared incompatible.

These different epistemologies adopted by the parties to development debates could be disguised by the more overtly political or procedural elements in the conduct of local planning for railway expansion. Perhaps the most significant of these concerned the ways in which information had been distributed, the extent of consultation and the willingness of the authorities to engage in citizen-participation. As we have indicated above, the politicians were quite clear that citizen-participation in planning was of limited value, but there had been efforts fairly early in the process to draw members of the public into discussions. Their management of this participation, however, was susceptible to a number of difficulties, not least the problem of timing. Whereas early public debate in many cases had been concluded with decisions, the constant arrival at the process of newly-interested participants disrupts orderly processes. In the next section, we consider the problem of time and timing within public-sector decision-making.

## **The long journey towards a decision**

In trying to establish the reasons behind difficulties in achieving dialogue between the parties involved in the various local debates, we have been concerned with the argument that public participation must be engaged right at the beginning of any planning process for it to be successful and satisfying for the participants. While we agree that this may be a necessary condition, we argue that it is certainly not sufficient for successful participative policy making, and our case exemplifies some of the reasons why things rarely go according to plan. This case represents a complex planning process, likely to raise conflicting positions within the various local communities. More importantly, it is a long-term and convoluted process, involving changing laws and varied jurisdictions, some with profound consequences. For instance, Sweden joined the EU part way through this planning process. EU environmental directives also changed, Swedish impact assessment laws changed, various legal cases were brought and judgments passed which altered the conditions in which the planning took place. In addition, following the ecological problems with tunnel constructions, the political climate altered, and people's attitudes, in particular "trust" in the Railway Administration, certainly altered. The membership of the planning and building committees and on the general municipal councils changed also during this long drawn-out process. Local representative groups who took a stance at the beginning of the process often found that either their position had to change, or that further opposition groups emerged to challenge them.

Furthermore, one would not expect that such a large scale planning process would begin with a public announcement before the local authorities had been consulted, as this would be understood as a betrayal of trust between, for example, the Railway Administration and the local municipalities. Nor were any of the participants all-powerful, but were, in fact, inter-dependent on one another, so that each needed to negotiate, and each attempted to negotiate from a strong position. Decisions taken very early in the process on a superficially rational technical basis began, over time, to appear to the outside world as vested interests or prejudices. Furthermore, if every small detail had been put out to public consultation (not even to full participative decision-making), then the timescale for technical planning would have become extremely long and economically unfeasible. The municipal planners articulated a tension between time, political expediency and technical solutions:

Probably the most important experience is that early discussions need plenty of time.  
It's essential, to raise different viewpoints and alternatives. And in some of those



earlier projects there was such a rush to get going, and I think that's really affected those projects. And there's a more general point, in terms of the role and significance of social planning: Democracy takes time (senior municipal planners/architects, 23).

More than this, though, the time required to discuss solutions was also time taken to legitimate them. As such, the participative process that led to a decision was key to the acceptability of the solution in the public realm. When the process was at fault, the outcome was less stable. This could be a problem with the relationship between politicians and administrators, as one planner suggested:

Partly it's also about trust between the planning organization and the politicians...If they approach us in the right way, they ask us for a proper background paper. Then on that basis they go and decide what makes the best political solution. And then one reaches the phase of realization where you go into detail to try and make it even better. If they go about it the wrong way, they just decide that's how it'll be (Ibid, 32).

But it could also be a problem in any situation where the process leading to a decision was not in the public realm, as another indicated:

...the Railway Administration just came along with a finished solution in detail, and so people started having a real close look. And later on there were quite general clarifications to objections. And there was an imbalance between the levels of the clarifications and the alternatives, and so conspiracy theories started to appear, because it's quite usual when the general public start to question a solution, that you see conspiracies. ...and you get a different process, there's a bad vibe...so if you then try to show that one alternative gives a worse outcome...then you're immediately found out (Ibid, 32).

Despite appearing to offer authenticity to the complaints and protests over the processes and solutions offered, the planners continued to represent the protest groups as motivated by self-interest. This was stated openly: 'there was always a group of people affected who argued there were better alternatives' (Ibid, 11), but also related to time and expectations of change. In particular, the absence of post-hoc complaint is used to neutralize prior concerns: planners argued that 'all that criticism has disappeared since the building's finished, no-one's complaining about noise now' (Ibid, 11). This is explained as a general problem of public resistance to change: 'it's also about how you get used to big changes,

quite simply' (Ibid, 11). Though indeed potentially offensive from specific democratic points of view, the interpretation that in the long run 'one gets used to everything' is theoretically elaborated and appears to be empirically supported by previous research (C.f. Maarten Wolsink).

As might have been expected, the Railway Administration managers also aired their opinions on the long journey towards bringing a new line into operation. With some irony, one questioned whether the drawn-out process is a necessary evil in a democratic society:

So it takes eight years to investigate everything, and two years to build, today that's approximately the relative times. So you have to wonder, what part could be reduced, if one wants to shorten it. Or is it an end in itself, to take such a long time so people have time to get used to the change that is on the way? (District rail administration manager, 43).

The managers were very much aware of the problems caused by a drawn-out state of doubt such as planning blight: 'They sort of get tired of it all; people don't know whether to sell their house or move' (Ibid, 43). In other words, while a democratic decision-making process might require an excess of time, this has costs for those most directly involved. This brings us back to the municipal planners that were critical of the apparently sudden complaints late in the process, by newcomers to the debate. In their commentaries, they began to explain, and "de-legitimize", the participation of protest groups at late stages in the process, insisting, for example, that 'there's been complete political unanimity in getting the West Coast Line, everyone has agreed on it right through the process' (Senior municipal planners/architects, 11-12). These arguments reinforce the notion that protest only appears from self-interest, despite the earlier point that a debate has a natural life-cycle, and that if a decision is taken which cuts short debate then conflict cannot be resolved and can take on a life of its own because of faults in the process rather than problems with the decision itself. The planners, in other words, were keen to rationalize public dissatisfaction with decisions as a problem inherent within the democratic process rather than any actual errors, whether substantial or procedural, in the decisions themselves. Therefore they were able to reason that problems lay in poor public understanding of complex issues, rather than public discovery of errors: 'I don't know, my general experience of this kind of big project is that people only start to concern themselves when it starts to affect their own back yard, quite simply' (Ibid, 20).

This last comment develops the usual ‘nimby’ accusation with the inference that self-interest emerges at late stages of a process. This relates to a widespread complaint amongst planners, more generally, that the ‘general public’ ‘doesn’t care’, a complaint which stems from a particular interpretation of the patterns of public engagement in planning processes (Muller and Kohutek 2002, Neveu 2002) and continues despite counter-evidence (Abram 2001). The problem with the public was therefore projected away from the (temporal aspects of) management of the decision-making process onto the lack of rationality amongst the public, as seen by the railway project-managers. For the municipal planners, the problem lay not with the overall project, but with the detail, and with the self-interest versus the national or general interest:

- Nearly everyone wants a better railway
- Yes, everyone wants it
- But not near them, right. ...people wanted a double line, but somewhere else. ...and I think that was the Railway Administration’s problem, that there was overall agreement, almost euphoria that there should be a new railway. It was so good that they didn’t see the problems and the risks (Senior municipal planners/architects, 20).

Difficulties in the process and the emergence of protest at awkward times was not, for them, a question of errors or shortcomings in the detailed planning of the infrastructure, but a general question of interest resolution. Yet again, they returned to the theme of public versus private interests, generally agreeing with the statement made by one of them that: ‘...this problem of the balance between general interest and the special interest. It’s the basic issue in planning that we are always confronting. It’s not unique to this situation’ (Ibid, 25).

This chimes with the suggestions made by protest groups that their arguments were not listened to, but categorized as irrelevant or out of context. It was, in fact, difficult for us to get the other parties to engage in the technical arguments of protesters, although the same technical details were raised by other parties as significant. Even though the protest groups framed their objections in terms of general environmental questions, regional economic solutions, and so on, in other words, despite using the discourse of government and general interest, it appears that the detail of their arguments was never scrutinized.

Given the limited legitimacy attributed to these contributions, they were perceived, instead, as posing problems for time-efficiency of planning processes. There was no

discussion of local protesters alerting the authorities to technical or environmental problems which might cause significant delays or costs for the overall project. This suggests that knowledge is perceived as incorporated into persons rather than existing independently. That is, it was impossible for the actors in the position of decision-making to extricate arguments from their embodied forms. Protesters were apportioned positioned identities by politicians and planners, as 'property owners', 'interested parties', and so on, even when their sympathies might have been with them, as in the following comment from a planning committee chair:

I think that there are property owners who've really been utterly abused because things haven't been settled. And I can see that at times it's not been right, absolutely not. But then there's another thing, there are interest groups everywhere, right, and I think also that one of the worries has been that we've been made suspect, both politicians and our officers. People think that we're in the Railway Administration's pocket, that they must be able to find links, and people have been searching for links...and searching for motives... and it's very difficult to defend yourself. ...the only thing is that we have a social interest, really (Chairs of planning committees, 16).

In fact, this devastating comment suggests that local authorities could only find credibility through their claim to the public interest, neither through technical debate nor through the rigor of publicly held political discussion. Perhaps this, then, explains most clearly their lack of enthusiasm for detailed technical discussions in the public arena. If nothing else, it demonstrates an extraordinary lack of confidence on technical issues, and a fear of an unruly public.

## **Conclusion**

It is tempting to argue here that the attempt to transform political contest over values and interests into political consensus is a misguided project, no matter how open and inclusive processes of deliberation and participation are. While it is, indeed, imperative in every democracy to try constantly to render democratic procedures more effective, democracy is not only about procedures. The urge to avoid conflicts in this Swedish infrastructure development program can be seen to result in an inability to address the substance of those conflicts, disagreements which, we would argue, are vital to societal decision-making in a democracy. Striving for greater inclusion of citizens in decision-making is

indeed praiseworthy, but ignoring or even trying to overcome genuine opposition risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

This is not to say that the decision-making procedures described could be thought of as completely successful. As might have been expected, we witnessed a great deal of frustration and disillusionment among the protesters at the functioning of the political system: the lack of checks and balances, inaccessible authorities and local politicians, and an unwillingness to reveal and discuss both factual matters regarding the rebuilding processes and the general objectives for the entire project. However, the formal actors also aired critical views on the functioning of the political system. In particular, the railway managers' opinions on supposed government inertia stand out.

All the groups, apart from the protesters, stressed the strength of political agreement at the local level regarding such large-scale technical projects as the expansion of the West Coast Rail. That the protesters tried to identify cracks in power alliances signifies the strategic and indeed political difficulties they faced in trying to influence the process. Building alliances is a natural strategy for all actors in political life. If institutionalized actors agree with one another, protesters lose potential allies. This in turn brings forth the typical mobilization of an action group. However, what is revealed through a closer examination of such processes is the importance of more subtle factors. Firstly, the difference in epistemologies and in the status of knowledge. This is not simply to argue that 'power' is more significant than 'knowledge', but to suggest that the forms of knowledge are not one-dimensional. We have indicated that different forms of knowledge were brought to this debate, local knowledge of geography, geology, history, social habits and patterns of land-use, i.e. localized scientific knowledge and localized social knowledge, but that these forms were hard to reconcile with generalized technical engineering knowledge, knowledge of project-management procedures, and legal and environmental specialist expertise.

Secondly, the point in time at which such forms of knowledge were brought to the debate had a significant influence on the extent to which they penetrated the socio-technical networks which supported the project. There are general points to be deduced here, for example about the question of timing in political decision-making, which are particularly significant for infrastructure planning. Long before planning alternatives are turned into public political options, they are negotiated informally without the awareness of 'ordinary' residents. In such processes, it is politicians, civil servants, business interests, and state authorities who take part. As we have seen, these preparatory discussions can be construed by non-participants as highly purposeful and homogenous

coalitions of elite groups that achieved agreements at a critical moment of time on the objectives of, and means for, societal change. An alternative narrative is one of elite groups' deliberations consisting of both genuine inquiry but also drawn-out bargaining of interests, fraught with conflict. In general, to achieve common understanding around, and support for, a definition of a given social problem, any coalition's constituents must be party to a process of give-and-take. Democratic models often imagine that the citizenry could be incorporated as one constituent part of the coalition, but it is clear that the category of 'the citizenry' does not correspond to heterogeneous and often disparate populations with significant differences and pre-existing conflicts of opinion. In democracies built on political representation and various forms of established interest group representation (ranging from corporatism to pluralism), societal negotiations build on institutionalized representations of 'the public', 'passengers', 'interest groups', and so on, and thus regularly exclude non-established individual or corporate actors.

This brings us to a common dilemma. Attitudes and opinions toward technological projects vary during the course of a localization process. As an abstract proposal becomes concrete, criticism begins to take shape (C.f. Wolsink; Anna R. Davies 1999). This journey from the abstract to the concrete often begins in the planning process when actual planning applications are submitted. In other words, confronted with an actual and visible building process, peoples' attitudes and opinions alter. As plans approach implementation, the project begins to appear more 'real', such that preferences are often most intense not during the decision-making process but in the implementation process. In the field of research around siting controversies, a common normative conclusion is that people should be involved earlier in the planning process in order to have a fairer chance to actually influence the process. But in the planning processes there is no actual application, only theoretical and indeed abstract (abstract both in time and space) plans. Consequently there are two great obstacles to overcome if citizen involvement in decision-making on localization is to be increased. Firstly, how can elected representatives, public authorities, and other institutionalized interests carry out their typically preliminary and informal negotiations around planning more openly and within reach of local inhabitants? This in itself is no easy task. Secondly, how can they attract general interest in the highly theoretical and abstract discussion that characterizes all processes of social planning? According to the local politicians and civil servants this is more or less impossible. In their view, inhabitants show an interest only for those kinds of questions that are short term, manifest and have an immediate personal relevance. Great technical projects must be planned on a long-term basis. One cannot start the actual

building process without thorough planning. And such a planning process involves technical, economic and social aspects. In the Swedish case, the existing environmental code significantly raises the demands on planning processes regarding environmental control and citizen involvement. How, then do project-managers and/or planners involve the public if local residents only take action in the implementation process and then act as if it were still a decision-making process?

In our opinion, this dilemma arises from the construction of public involvement and the lack of acknowledgement of the temporal aspect of planning processes. The long planning phase, initiated and carried out by the institutionalized actors, builds on introducing and legitimating a social problem. It is this social recognition which is the objective and characteristic of this first crucial phase. When opponents of localization voice criticism of implementation, this is often based on alternative definitions of the social problem itself. This brings a fundamental political and indeed substantial conflict in to the process of deliberation (C.f. Susan Owens), which in turn challenges the commonly held view (not least among social scientists) that deliberative and participatory processes would lead to value-based consensus.

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