

When experts feel threatened: Strategies of depoliticisation in participatory river restoration projects

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This paper explores how experts involved in river management projects in Switzerland consider public participation. It reflects on the consequences that these considerations have on the potential for participation to become a political space. Public participation has become a standard practice in river management at the European level since the 1990s. In Switzerland, the federal government incentivises public participation in river-work projects through guidelines and additional subsidies for projects planned in a participatory way, with the goal of avoiding costly conflicts. Based on an analysis of expert discourses, we examine how experts activate three different arguments to depoliticise participation: that participation should be implemented to ensure acceptance of the project; that the exclusion of some actors is justified based on assumptions about the type of knowledge required for participation; and that disagreement should not be expressed within participatory processes but through representative politics. We conclude that the consistent motivation of experts to depoliticise also indicates a potential for participation to become political, which is worth exploring with new perspectives for engaging the public.

KEYWORDS

depoliticisation, discourse analysis, experts, public participation, river management, Switzerland

1 | INTRODUCTION

Public participation has become an integral part of EU and national river management policies since the mid-1990s (Chal- lies et al., 2016; Maynard, 2013; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2011). At the same time, river management has become a contested public policy area and embroiled in partisan politics. In the UK, Eurosceptics claimed that EU policies caused the 2015 floods (Drury & Tozer, 2015). In the Canton of Valais in Switzerland, the far-right called for a referendum against the Third Rhone Correction, a project subsidised by the federal government (ATS, 2015). These types of campaigns build on resentment against what is perceived as expert-led policies formulated elsewhere, without consideration for local specificities. Why does such opposition arise, despite the wide diffusion of participation in river management?

Some human geographers argue that participation is an archetypical example of post-politics that “reduces political terrain to the sphere of consensual governing and policy-making centered on technical, managerial and consensual administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains” (Swyngedouw, 2015, p. 138). In their view, participation on technical issues such as river management negates politics and is a mere tool to reassert expert power.

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However, another strand of literature focusing on environmental knowledge controversies (EKC) suggests that participatory processes can become political spaces when concerned publics question expertise (Whatmore, 2009). Both strands have been influential on the analysis of participation in river management (Anderson et al., 2016; Graefe, 2011; Landström et al., 2011).

Given the importance placed on participation in river management, it is crucial to examine these apparently diverging claims. The literature on post-politics points towards the role of experts or “environmental administrators” in depoliticising participatory spaces (Anderson et al., 2016; Graefe, 2011). We consider that if some experts actively work to depoliticise participation, this might signal that there is potential for participation to become a political space. Thus, rather than debating whether participation is post-political in itself, we ask “what justifies the depoliticisation of participation” for experts.

We answer this question by analysing expert discourses on participation in a restoration project that took place in Lugano, Switzerland. On 5 June 2011, the people of Lugano voted in favour of the Cassarate river restoration project, “La Foce.” Opponents to the project had called for a municipal referendum against the project. After a heated campaign, 50.55% of voters approved the project, by a margin of 106 votes. The absence of any public participation during the planning of the project motivated the referendum.

What happened in Lugano is rather at odds with Swiss river management policies that strongly incentivise participation (OFEV, 2019). Participation in Swiss river management is now a standard procedure. Although they sometimes see participation as a constraint, Swiss public officers in charge of river works largely regard such processes as a means to foster project acceptance (Buletti et al., 2014). The La Foce case provided an opportunity to ask experts in a river management project why they refused to use participation, thus revealing how they regard such procedures.

In the following sections, we review ongoing debates about the politics of participation and then provide details about the La Foce case study. We conclude with a reflection on what experts' opposition to participation reveals about its political potential.

2 | PARTICIPATION: EMPOWERING OR CONTESTING EXPERTS?

The current understanding of participation includes a range of definitions and practices that go from informing the public to giving participants the possibility to shape decisions (Chilvers et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2018). What constitutes “good” participation is contested both from an academic point of view and in practice (Chilvers, 2009; Thaler & Levin-Keitel, 2016).

An important strand of the literature on participation in river management deals with the design of participatory processes to implement projects, tackling issues such as stakeholder identification or effective project communication (Hassenforder et al., 2019; Junker et al., 2007). Another significant body of work focuses on how to integrate stakeholders' perceptions and representations through participatory measures (Buchecker et al., 2013; Heldt et al., 2016; Le Lay et al., 2013; Tunstall et al., 1999).

More recently, attention has shifted to the politics of expertise, with work on post-politics focusing on how expertise tames the disruptive aspect of participation and its politics. Following another path, an emerging body of work on EKC examines controversies as a potential catalyst for politics within participatory processes.

The concept of post-politics describes situations in which the public is given no voice to express disagreement; contestation is negated at all costs. In post-political situations, reaching consensus is seen as the only desirable option, either because it is considered fundamental to good decision-making or because the problem to be solved is framed in such a way as to rule out alternative solutions (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2015).

Participatory processes are seen as archetypal of post-politics for their ability to silence dissent (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Korf, 2010; Kothari, 2005). In post-political settings, those defined as “competent” can settle struggles or negotiations about an issue, either because of their knowledge or because of their ability to comply with formalised rules and decision-making procedures (Neo, 2010). Experts thus do not occupy a position of authority merely because of their skills, but because of systemic conditions related to institutional decision processes. Such approaches have informed critiques of participation in river management projects (Anderson et al., 2016; Graefe, 2011; Parés, 2011).

Approaches to analysing EKC also question the political role of experts by looking at their practices within controversies related to river management projects (Landström et al., 2011; Tsouvalis & Waterton, 2012; Whatmore, 2009). EKC are defined as “those events in which the knowledge claims and technologies of environmental science, and the regulatory and policy practices of government agencies that they inform, become subject to public interrogation and dispute” (Whatmore, 2009, p. 588). Interrogating expert knowledge and practices implies questioning the regulatory instruments and norms drawn on by experts.

While these two theoretical strands share their diagnosis of expertise as a depoliticising force, they differ considerably in their view of how depoliticisation can be challenged (Tsouvalis, 2016). Hence, while scholars of the post-political regard public engagement activities with suspicion, EKC scholars perceive them as opportunities for controversies (Donaldson et al., 2013).

Both approaches have a specific understanding of the political and of politics. The political in the post-politics literature constitutes a distinctive moment of defiance defined by disruption and is understood as the uprising of those excluded from the dominant social order, with the aim of radically transforming it (Swyngedouw, 2015). EKC accounts, on the other hand, consider the political as a space generated by disagreement (Donaldson et al., 2013; Landström et al., 2011; Tsouvalis & Waterton, 2012; Whatmore, 2009). They view disruption as one of the modalities – though not the only one – that make politics visible. Donaldson et al. (2013) assert that actors constructing an agreement or a government enforcing a decision to close a space of conflict are also political acts. Following this conception, participatory processes are potential political spaces because they can spark controversies. Identifying this potential requires not only considering disruptive aspects of a controversy but also paying attention to the work undertaken by different parties to maintain the politicisation of an issue or to close the political space down (Donaldson et al., 2013).

With our contribution, we focus on experts' discourses as a way to explore their depoliticising force. The La Foce project is interesting in this respect because the experts who designed it were trying to prevent disagreement and debate by avoiding public participation. They actively foreclosed this eventual political space. Our case study offers relevant material for discussing the depoliticising force of experts and their knowledge within post-politics and EKC. These differences have been previously explored conceptually (Tsouvalis, 2016); here, we examine them empirically.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a discourse analysis of 14 unstructured interviews conducted between autumn 2012 and 2014 with public officers, planners, municipal politicians, stakeholders, and citizens involved in the project. We asked the interviewees for their role in the project planning or during the referendum campaign. We prompted them with questions about participation because the topic had been explicitly addressed during the campaign. We analysed project documentation, local news articles, minutes from the municipal council, and notes taken during a site visit with officers and planners in 2016.

We coded all materials to identify statements in which participants elaborate on knowledge or decision-making, or justify their position within relations of power (Dittmer, 2010). Our narrative of the planning process and the referendum campaign is based primarily on the written sources we analysed. In this paper, the term “experts” refers to officers and the planning team.

4 | THE CASSARATE RIVER RESTORATION PROJECT

In Switzerland, the federal government formulates the legal framework for river management. The subnational level (i.e., the cantons) is responsible for the implementation. Cantons can delegate the implementation of river management projects to municipalities. The federal administration in charge of rivers strongly incentivises participation through guidelines and subsidies (OFEV, 2019). Two reasons explain this strong reliance on participation. First, direct democratic instruments such as referenda and initiatives enable citizens to oppose governmental decisions at all state levels. This right to opposition is extended by legal and administrative procedures that allow residents to contest planning projects. Authorities see participation as a way to avoid lengthy legal or political processes with uncertain outcomes (Buletti et al., 2014; Kübler, 1999). Second, Swiss direct democracy is characterised by a so-called “culture of consensus.” Because members of cantonal and municipal executive bodies are directly elected by citizens, this often results in coalitions of parties situated on different sides of the left–right political spectrum who need to negotiate agreements in order to take decisions (Ladner, 2010).

At the time of the project, the city of Lugano was governed by such a coalition of right-wing and centre-left parties. In such a setting, the absence of participation of stakeholders and the public is rather unusual. Other river restoration projects in the canton, including an upstream part of the Cassarate River, were conducted participatively and did not provoke such opposition.

The La Foce project planned to restore the last 500 m of the Cassarate River and its delta. This final stretch of the river flows between a public park on the right bank (the Parco Civico-Ciani) and the facilities of a boat club on the left bank (Figure 1). After preliminary hydrological studies in 2002, the Waterways Office of the Canton of Ticino delegated the project to the town council of Lugano, the executive body of the city. After a call for project proposals in 2005, the town council selected the La Foce project. In March 2008, the municipal council, the legislative body, unanimously approved the

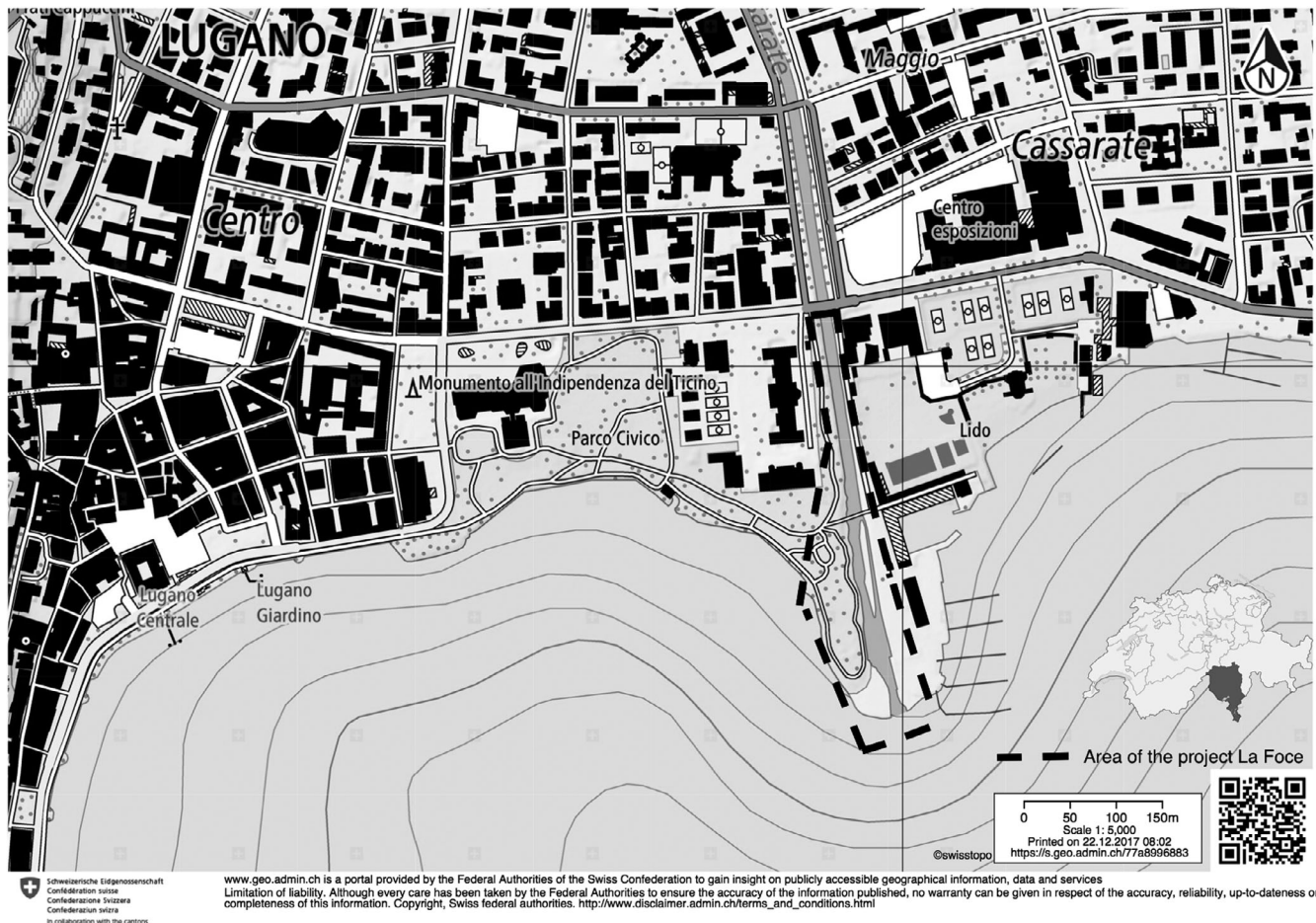


FIGURE 1 Map of the Cassarate Delta.

Source: Swisstopo.ch, adapted by Buletti

budget for the planning of the project (Municipio di Lugano, 2010). The project involved the removal of a concrete bank (Figure 2) to restore the riparian ecosystem and dismantling of a popular recreational area known as the rotunda (Figure 3).

Cantonal officers urged the municipal authorities to inform the public and involve stakeholders in the decision process. However, the municipality and the planners never organised public information or consultation events. Municipal authorities considered that integrating external demands would undermine the coherence of the project. They argued that the planners' expertise was sufficient to address both ecological aspects and social aspects such as project aesthetics and recreational use. As the municipality was fully funding the project, cantonal authorities could not impose any procedures that went beyond the minimum legal requirement of publishing the project plan, once completed.

This plan was published in November 2010 in the official bulletin of the city. It was the first time the public was informed about the project. Nobody appealed against it during the legal public inquiry that followed. On 20 December 2010, the municipal council approved a budget of SF 6 million (Municipio di Lugano, 2010). Four days later, a cross-partisan group of municipal councillors (including members of centre-left and right-wing parties in the government) who opposed the project called for a referendum. They contested the dismantling of the rotunda and the transformation of the riverbank. They argued that people were attached to those features because the rotunda was a place that permitted leisure activities and encounters for people of all ages.

After collecting enough signatures, the referendum campaign started. Opponents and supporters of the project organised several information events. Supporters highlighted ecological benefits and improved access to the river (Figure 4). This was the first time that the project was discussed publicly. The goal of those events was to convince people to vote for or against the project, not to debate the project's content. The referendum was held in June 2011, and voters approved the budget.

The project was inaugurated in June 2014 (Figure 4). The work carried out followed the initial plan drafted by the planning team to the letter; the experts took no heed of the concerns expressed and did not modify their original plan in any way.



FIGURE 2 The Cassarate before restoration.

Source: Marazzi, 2012

5 | PATTERNS OF EXPERT DISCOURSES IN THE CASSARATE PROJECT

In this part, we discuss how public officers and planners involved in the project justified the absence of public engagement. We identify three discursive patterns that highlight depoliticised conceptions of participation: (1) participation should create acceptance; (2) the exclusion of some actors is justified based on assumptions about the type of knowledge necessary for participation; and (3) disagreement should not be settled within participatory processes but through representative politics. We present and discuss these patterns of argumentation using example quotes from the interviews.

5.1 | “You should inform the people affected”

A first discursive pattern visible in the interviews is that participation should contribute to project acceptance. This attitude was principally shared among cantonal officers in leadership and operational positions. Cantonal officers advised the municipal authorities to involve local constituents in the decision process, referring to federal guidelines and recommendations.

We see a tension within the cantonal officers' discourse between opening up planning to participation, controlling those who should participate, and the processes' output:

We said: ‘You should create a monitoring group, and you should inform the people affected. You have to know who the stakeholders are and how to involve them in redesigning the river environment. [...] You have to identify the right people and groups and present things in the right way.’ (Cantonal officer 1, 2012)



FIGURE 3 The rotunda before restoration.

Source: Marazzi, 2012

Here, the interviewee presents participation as the proper thing to do for local authorities. But it is a one-way relationship in which authorities “inform the people” and “present things in the right way.” Participation is also limited to “stakeholders” (in Italian: *portatori di interesse*). Those are “the right people and groups” that can be identified prior to any controversy. Implicitly, those without an identifiable stake are not entitled to participate. This denotes a depoliticised conception of participation: neither conceived as a space where disagreement is appropriate nor as a space generative of politics. Here, participation is a tool to exclude potentially “unruly publics” (de Saille, 2015) and to make sure that negotiations follow the line of the culture of consensus.

5.2 | “If tasks are entrusted to experts – professionals – everything is done well”

A second discursive mechanism consists of questioning participation by making assumptions about the “right” knowledge required to participate. The argument can also be found in statements of officers in favour of participation, such as among planners or municipal officers who did not wish to open up the planning process. These arguments are rooted in a Weberian understanding, where experts who place their technical knowledge in the service of rational politics are believed to best serve the common good (Weber, 2004). The following statement from another officer illustrates how technical knowledge is made equivalent to good decision-making:

One should not confuse an emotional aspect with a technical one. [...] If someone is not a professional, they do not understand the importance of certain actions. But if tasks are entrusted to experts – professionals – everything is done well. (Cantonal officer 2, 2012)



FIGURE 4 Former location of the rotunda after restoration.

Source: Ejderyan, 2016

Residents are considered not to have accurate knowledge: they are too “emotional” because of their attachment to some features of the place and thus do “not understand” their removal based on aesthetic or ecological principles. Consequently, a good decision-making process is said to exclude those who do not have the capacity to participate, for their own well-being. Whereas, in the previous line of argumentation, the “right” stakeholders could be channelled to make the right decisions, here, other potentially concerned individuals are a threat to rational decision-making. In this perspective, participation is framed in terms of what Cook et al. (2013) call “professionalisation.” It maintains knowledge hierarchies by excluding knowledge forms deemed inappropriate and thus produces asymmetrical exchanges (Cook et al., 2013). This, again, signals a desire for post-political forms of participation, where only those with technical knowledge are recognised as legitimate participants.

5.3 | “Trust us or don’t! And if you don’t, oppose the project or make recourse”

A third pattern consists of experts contesting the political legitimacy of participatory procedures by contrasting them with other institutionalised forms of opposition such as the referendum. Here, post-political discourse is manifest in the delegitimisation of procedures that are not part of the formal representational system. This line of argumentation hints at the political potential within participatory processes. In the following paragraphs, we highlight what we identify as constitutive of this potential.

By preventing the project from being opened up to public scrutiny, the developers thought to foreclose any controversy regarding its content. This suggests that experts saw substantive controversies about specific aspects of the project as threatening their legitimacy. The referendum opened a space for citizens to express their views on the project. Opponents organised public meetings and distributed leaflets. They expressed their attachment to the place by arguing that the removal of the stone wall and benches in the rotunda would make the banks of the Cassarate Delta less safe for elderly people and young children.

They also criticised the project's aesthetics. The absence of participation prior to the referendum was a recurring critique. The campaign also forced the promoters to defend the project by explaining its ecological benefits as well as the principles that informed their aesthetic choices. However, the format of the referendum, with its binary logic of a yes/no vote, prevented this controversy from fully unfolding and alternatives from being explored. The knowledge hierarchies remained.

During the interviews and subsequent site visits, interviewees recognised that the project could have been rejected. One cantonal officer took this as a warning that future planning processes should be more inclusive. But for most experts, the narrow result raised no questions about the absence of participation during the planning process:

During the referendum, we saw everyone play at being a hydraulic engineer. Everyone became a landscape architect. That's all fine and good, but strangely enough, while one could solve one problem, then that person could not resolve ten others. A landscape architect, if he [sic] does his work well, can solve all the problems in a project; he is a professional. This is why I don't believe in public participation. (Planner 1, 2012)

Again, this illustrates a disqualification of non-experts based on a supposed "lack of knowledge." Instead of questioning the planning process, opponents criticise the project, thereby confirming what the interviewee considers an inability to properly understand a technical project. The interviewee does not use this knowledge hierarchy as an argument against the referendum, but against participation.

Even though experts might consider only their knowledge as legitimate for planning technical projects, they are uneasy about offering it to detailed scrutiny. A rejection is considered less problematic than having to accommodate other forms of knowledge. This attitude is not specific to the case presented here (Cook et al., 2013). We found similar patterns of argumentation during a survey on river management practices in Switzerland (Buletti et al., 2014). As put by a cantonal officer:

[Because people do not trust us], we often make reference to [our] expertise for basic knowledge issues about the project. Because we consider this to be our jurisdiction. I think one must be brave enough in a participatory setting to say: "You're not a specialist. We are! Trust us or not! And if you don't, oppose the project or make recourse." (Cantonal officer, in Buletti et al., 2014)

Experts do not see opposition sanctioned by a vote or by a court as questioning their prerogatives and position. In their view, such institutional procedures do not interfere with their work as they validate or reject the whole project once the plan is complete. Thus, they do not challenge experts' power in environmental decision-making.

6 | CONCLUSION

The three discursive patterns identified in the previous section highlight how a depoliticised conception of participation can contribute to reduce the space for disagreement by setting predetermined goals, excluding actors, or favouring formal procedures.

In the La Foce project, experts accepted disagreement as long as it was contained within the institutional boundaries of formal procedures, such as the referendum. The referendum constrained discussions by keeping them focused on the project as a whole and restricting public expression to a yes/no vote. This limited the possibility for controversy to unfold and eventually include new concerns that experts might have overlooked. The critiques voiced by opponents during the referendum campaign were disregarded. The space of disagreement opened up by the referendum was swiftly closed down by the vote (Donaldson et al., 2013). Experts preferred formal procedures typical of direct democracy rather than concerned people challenging their expertise on substantive grounds and thus questioning their authority.

These findings contribute to current debates on the politics of participation. They support writings on the post-political that suggest that the staging of opposition within institutionalised democratic processes limits the questioning of the social order and is therefore not politics "proper" (Swyngedouw, 2015). But by highlighting the reluctance of experts to see participatory processes opened to different knowledge forms and contents, our results also highlight the political potential of controversies as ways to question knowledge hierarchies and the order they produce (Cook et al., 2013).

The setting in which either participatory processes or formal procedures are embedded is crucial for the unfolding of such political potential. In Swiss river management, authorities usually initiate participatory processes, whereas in the literature on EKC participatory processes were often driven by partnerships between academic researchers and communities (Landström et al., 2011; Tsouvalis & Waterton, 2012). The relationship between different procedures, such as participation and the referendum, in the Swiss case, should be explored more systematically to identify the range of institutional logics that drive depoliticisation.

This paper highlights different rationales driving depoliticisation but also recognises that participation can offer room for politics to unfold. This calls for research that can help participants to (re-)politicise participatory processes in policy fields that require technical expertise. A first step requires identifying more instances of how not only experts but also other actors initiating – and, hence, framing – top-down participatory processes rationalise depoliticising practices. Making such rationales explicit could offer a venue for challenging depoliticised participatory processes from within. Asking why some actors are not invited or why some categories of statements are not relevant can contribute to subverting the bounded – and thus post-political – space imposed by the consensus-seeking participatory procedures.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Nora Buletti Mitchell. The data are not publicly available as the information contained could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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