PLANNING LOCAL RESPONSES TO THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN: RHETORIC AND PRACTICE IN A SMALL PORTUGUESE MUNICIPALITY

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Abstract

This paper analyses the planning of the local responses to the global crisis, giving particular emphasis to the relationship between rhetoric and practice. As such, it pays particular attention to the ways the planning process and outcomes are being affected by a planning-inspiring discourse that imports and, enthusiastically in the case of Águeda, uses the whole set of buzzwords wrapping up European development policy. The analytical focus is placed on the discursive line based on the Triple Helix Model. The paper argues that, despite the mismatch between the local conditions and the requirements of a true THM-based development path, the associated discourse and rhetoric is contribution to positively transform the territory.

Introduction

Águeda is a small municipality located in the Centro region of Portugal. The local economy, heavily dependent on an industrial basis made of SMEs operating in the so- called traditional, low technological content sectors, is suffering the effects of the current period of economic downturn. The local government is playing a prominent role in the attempt to mitigate those effects and the inherent planning effort is being directed at the design and delivery of a broad range of economic, environmental, cultural and social initiatives, which, in a way or another, are aimed at contributing to alleviating or even reverting the situation. This paper analyses the planning of the local responses to the global crisis, giving particular emphasis to the relationship between rhetoric and practice. As such, it pays particular attention to the ways the planning process and outcomes are being affected by a planning-inspiring discourse that imports and, enthusiastically in the case of Águeda, uses the whole set of buzzwords wrapping up European development policy – e.g., the green economy, smart growth, sustainable and inclusive development, energy efficiency, and climate change.

The paper draws heavily on experience, as the author has been actively involved in the planning effort that is taking place in Águeda. The views resulting from a (privileged) observation point are considered against the theoretical developments that are tackling the role discourse and rhetoric play in the design and delivery of territorial development policies. In this sense, by offering insights on how a globally-defined prevalent discourse influences the way a small municipality of a Southern

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European country is responding to the crisis, the paper is an attempt to give a contribution to empirically enrich that burgeoning planning theory literature.

The state of the art (briefly taken...)

The use of language and communication in planning has been the subject of a prolific and controversial scholar work in the last decades (e.g. Tett and Wolfe, 1991; Throgmorton, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Jessop, 1997; Innes, 1998; Gunder and Hillier, 2009). Discourse, rhetoric, argumentation and so forth, have been placed under the spotlight by planning theorists, mirroring, in a way, the linguistic turn occurred within the social sciences (Rydin, 1998). Even planning *technical* tools, such as computer modelling, forecasting and survey research were studied as "*rhetorical tropes*" (Throgmorton, 1993, p. 334). However, the recognition that language and communication has a role in the planning endeavour can be regarded as a major reason for that interest, namely after the so-called argumentative turn (Fischer and Forester, 1993) and the rise of communicative (Sager, 1994; Innes, 1995) and collaborative (Healey, 1997, 2003) planning paradigms. As emblematic as it can be, Judith Innes's suggestion that "w*hat planners do most of the time is talk and interact*" (Innes, 1998, p. 52).

In this context, the emphasis placed by planning theory on language can be associated to the motivations underpinning the rising of the argumentative turn. Using the words of Fischer and Gottweis (2012, pp. 7/8), that emphasis stems from, on the one hand, "*the realization that public policy, constructed through language, is the product of argumentation*" and, on the other hand, "*the recognition that language does more than reflect what we take to be reality, [...] it is constituent of reality, shaping –and at times literally determining – what we understand to be reality*". This equates Maarten Hajer's idea that language can *create* the world, besides describing it (Hajer, 1993). Accordingly, language can be regarded as endowed with transformative power. The basic argument here is that it may change material conditions and even power relations (Khakee, 2000). Moreover, the argumentative turn in planning theory wrecked the positivist tradition according to which discourse was as a neutral means for describing the world (Hajer, 1993). In fact, the Habermasian communicative rationality empowering action, at the core of the new planning paradigms, turns language into a political, thus non-neutral, system of meaning which, in the words of Healey (1997, p. 277), is "*embodied in a strategy for action*". This political nature accommodates the claim for democratic, value-laden planning (Healey, 1997; Innes, 1998). Language, as such, emerges as a means to democratize the policy making process (Torgerson, 2003).

Several intellectual drivers guide the language related research in the planning field: from post-structuralism, such as the Foucault inspired studies (e.g., Richardson, 1996) or the Lacanian approaches (e.g., Gunder and Hillier, 2009), to neo-Gramscian appreciation of hegemonic discourses (e.g., Jessop, 1997). Within these approaches, many assume a critical stance towards what Khakee (2000, p. 122) would call the "*postmodernism´s requirement of a multitude of discourses that form the future*". In

fact, planning language is full of buzzwords, many more than the ten contestable words that make the "*game of buzzword bingo*" placed under the spotlight by Gunder and Hillier (2009).

Buzzwords pullulating in planning hegemonic discourses often shape the formulation and bear the legitimacy of ideas about what developmental action should be. They provide ammunition to the rhetorical devices (Throgmorton, 1993) that ground an arguably apparent mitigation of uncertainty about the future and the expression of desirable states of well-being (Gunder and Hillier, 2009). This can be associated with the deployment of an unquestionable '*truth*' about what should be aimed and done. Empty signifiers (Laclau, 1996) are instrumental here, since they have the power to lift buzzwords up to a state beyond question and critical enquiry (Swyngedouw, 2007).

Sustainability, as it would be revealed by a broad-brush literature survey (e.g., Gunder, 2006; Gunder and Hillier, 2009; Davidson, 2010; Swingedouw, 2010), stands out as illustration of something that, as a praiseworthy planning final goal, is beyond dispute and, above all, disallows dissensus or disagreement (Swyngedouw, 2010). Krueger and Gibbs (2007, p. 1) make the quantitative account: "[...] *over 6,000 local governments from 113 countries have adopted sustainability initiatives since the early 1990s*". Gunder and Hillier (2009, p. 20) associate this dominant planning narrative to the empty signifiers ability to act as a "*foil to give the appearance of doing something about global warming and the environment, when in effect it is largely deployed to maintain the priority on economic growth for achievement of global competitiveness*". This gives ground to the assertion that buzzwords like sustainability enter a hegemonic discourse meant to perpetuate the neoliberal *status quo* (Swyngedouw, 2007), in which market forces and concomitant focus on growth override a broader approach to societal development (ironically at the core of the sustainability '*triangular*' conceptualization).

To this argumentative line follows a critical stance towards communicative planning and its democratic ideal based on consensus building processes leading to collective action (e.g. Bengs, 2005; Purcell, 2009). The argument that the communicative planning paradigm favours the neo-liberal '*plan*' is attached to the ways academic ideas are traded on the intellectual marketplace, where they are subjected, in the words of Bengs (2005, p. 9), "*to the laws of rhetoric as are all other kinds of discourses*". The problem of unequal power distribution is also brought over (Purcell, 2009), originating the labelling of communicative planning as naïve, due to the impossibility of neutralizing power imbalances, i.e., of establishing the "*ideal speech situation*" (Habermas, 2001, p.102, cited in Purcell 2009). Allmendiger and Haughton (2012, p. 90) add to the critical ground by averring that the planning system "*gives the superficial appearance of engagement and legitimacy, whilst focusing on delivering growth*". This manipulative stance, according the same authors (ibid.), bears on "*some carefully choreographed processes for participation which minimise the potential for those with conflicting views to be given a meaningful hearing*". Language, obviously, is a central piece in the choreography...

This debate, though nurturing a burgeoning academic literature, is still poor in what concerns the *praxis* effects of the widespread planning language, that is, what is happening in the terrain[2]. This paper aims to humbly contribute to fill in this gap and, in a way, to know more about the power of discourse and rhetoric to brighten the dark side of planning that can be knitted together with the popular saying that *the hell is full of good intentions*.

The method and the research context

Following Winton (2012, p. 4), rhetorical analysis provides a method for knowing "*how arguments are constructed to persuade audiences to accept and support particular constructions of reality, truth, and courses of action*". In the context of this paper, the focus was placed on the construction of reality, truth and courses of action that took place at Águeda, a small Portuguese city of approximately 50 thousand inhabitants. Rather than using a formal method of discourse and/or rhetorical analysis, the research was heavily based on direct observation, made possible by the active participation of the author in the local policy making and delivery process, combined with the analysis of documental sources, namely policy documents, institutional WWW sites and newspaper reports.

The information gathered from these sources was analysed against the perception that discourse, namely if marked by incompletion, ambiguity, and contradiction, has the power, as put by Phillips and Hardy (2002, p. 1), '*to produce a reality that we experience as solid and real*'. The subsequent research step drew on an approximation to the three elements which, following Leach (2000), need to be considered when dealing with rhetorical analysis: exigency, audience and persuasive discourse. The final research stage was dedicated to appreciate the results of the discursive and rhetorical framework for action developed in the city under scrutiny.

Located in the Centro Region of Portugal, in between the two major national cities, Porto, up North (70km), and Lisbon, down South (250 km) Águeda presents as distinctive mark a long industrial tradition. Its economic structure is dominated by manufacturing industries (ca. 56% of total employment). The metal processing industry is the most important sector of activity, representing 41% of the total number of manufacturing firms and 33% of industrial employment. In addition, the sectors of ceramics for construction and articles of stoneware and earthenware, the manufacture of components and accessories for motor vehicles, and the production of furniture (mainly metallic) are significant for Águeda in terms of the employment structure.

The weight of SMEs is overwhelming. In fact, the number of firms with more than 250 workers is marginal and more than 92% of the total firms have less than 10 workers. Most of these firms are family-owned, with a business model centred on the

[2] Though, for instance, Raco (2005).

supply of standard products with a relatively low technological content. However, the capacity of these companies to compete in both national and international markets is fairly high (e.g. the municipality ranks third in the Baixo Vouga sub-region in terms of exports, being only superseded by Aveiro, the main city in the region, and Ovar, where several large multinationals operate), taking advantage from a variety of competitive factors, which range from low-skilled, low-cost labour force, to more innovation-related factors.

Águeda's endogenous entrepreneurial capability has highly contributed to the local economic success during the last century. A number of firms in various sectors of activity have been able to swiftly adapting to changes of international market demand. For instance, the metal furniture sector found a competitive advantage in developing areas such as design and marketing, and the lighting industry evolved towards more sophisticated products based on innovative design and technologies. This explains why Águeda was able to maintain a high employment level until the turn of the century. In fact, after decades of almost full employment, from 2001 onwards, the unemployment rate has substantially increased, trend that has been strengthened by the economic crisis. Manufacturing was the major responsible for this development. Between 2000 and 2009, for instance, there was a reduction of approximately 7000 jobs in manufacturing firms. According to the most recent data, the unemployment rate amounts to ca. 9% (against the national 15% mark).

Going beyond good intentions...

These recent developments in unemployment, as well as the crisis effects on firms' performance, as one could expect, have drawn the local government attention. They configure what can be regarded as the *exigency*, that is, the *defective* situation to be addressed (Leach, 2000). Local development policy has gained a new perspective, the one of fighting the impacts of the downturn. Nevertheless, the changing dynamics had already started with the election of a new political leadership in 2005. At the time, SMEs' competitiveness and innovation capacity were lifted up to the policy (discursive) core. Since then, as reported by Rodrigues and Melo (2012), a process of '*Europeanization*' of Águeda's policy environment held ground. In other words, the competitiveness and innovation discourse found shelter in the *plentiful* basket of buzzwords that wrap up the European policy context and started serving as inspiration for the local policy response to the economic downturn: the omnipresent concept of sustainable development, the green economy, the zero carbon goals, climate change mitigation, and, with the recent Europe 2020 framework, the hegemonic '*smart*' qualifier (CEC, 2010).

> "*Águeda assumes itself as an emerging smart city, because by developing triple helix partnerships aimed at looking at the territory in intelligent manners and placing ICT at the service of governance, mobility, economy and the environment, it is contributing to improve the quality of life of its citizens*".

This statement[3], taken from a speech made by Águeda's Mayor in 2011, provides a good illustration of the ways the local approach to development policy is being influenced by the hegemonic discourse emanated from Brussels, in which empty signifiers abound. To the Mayor's words one can add up a diversity of initiatives ranging from the association to international organizations and events with sustainability at their core (e.g., ICLEI- Local Governments for Sustainability and Energycities), to the Local Agenda 21. In sum, the green colour of the green-yellow city flag gained a new meaning, the one of a quest for sustainability in every government sphere, recurrently mirrored by the political discourse as the (only) way to fight and even revert the downturn effects.

It is at the level of industrial development through innovation that the aims pursued by the research reported by this paper find the most effective ground for evidence collection. Having the vast *audience* of local and regional actors determinant of and/or affected by economic development, the rhetoric adopted the deployment of triple helix partnerships, heralded by the Mayor's speech reproduced above, as a major reason for Águeda's '*smartness*'. The triple helix model (THM) (e.g., Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1998), in brief, depicts the development of innovation systems with basis on relationships between and functional overlapping of university, industry and government. The THM discourse gained ground in Águeda through a EU project financed from 2008 to 2011 by the URBACT programme[4]. It was specifically aimed at generating several triple helices based on local clusters of economic activity and thus developing university-government-industry relations.
The local government states as major development objective the promotion of a strong local economy through entrepreneurship and the renewing and strengthening of the existing productive fabric (CMA, 2010). The government reserves for itself a leadership role in serving as a "*development agent*" contributing to develop new technology and innovation-based industries, create jobs and better future prospects for university graduates, and retain and attract population. Still, sound collaborative dynamics between the local political and production worlds and between these and academia is regarded as a crucial development.

In this context, the THM was rapidly looked at as the tool that would nourish success. This was mirrored by the official discourse, in which the model gained prominence and a persistent presence in the local policy design and in the local development debate. This can be illustrated with basis on a diversity of pieces of evidence. For instance, the THM is being utilized by the political forces opposing to the Mayor's party as a means to give argumentative power to criticisms. In fact, a member of the local City Council, criticizing the allegedly excessive focus of public investment in the city centre in detriment of the rural surroundings, averred: "*the triple helix model states that in order to keep the competitiveness of a region, its different parts should be equally developed*" (AMA, 2010, p. 52[5]). For those familiar

[3] Translated from the Portuguese.
[4] **http://urbact.eu/en/projects/innovation-creativity/runup/the-role-of-universities-for-economic-development-in-urban-poles/**
[5] Translated from the original in Portuguese.

with the THM, this statement lacks accuracy because the model does not make explicit any requirement related to equal development levels among different parts of a given region.
Meanwhile, the discursive focus on the THM has permeated industry-related organizations. For example, in an international seminar on innovation held in Águeda, industry representatives pointed out "*the importance of the theme of triple helix and the fundamental role of the university to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship within this time of knowledge*"[6]. One can argue that the official discourse had the *persuasive* power needed to spread an enthusiastic perception towards the THM.

The use of the THM as policy inspiration can be regarded as problematic in the context of a small, traditional, and peripheral economy. In fact, significant barriers challenging the aim of putting in motion the kind of organizational and interactive arrangements predicted by the THM can be identified in Águeda (Rodrigues and Melo, 2012). Rather than analysing these barriers, it is seemingly more productive to shed light over the way the model permeates the policy making process and influences action. Nevertheless, a previous point should be made: local firms do not rely on academia or other formal knowledge centres to develop their innovation capabilities; the most important inputs are found in the chain of suppliers and customers that they integrate. As such, one can argue that the prospects for a full deployment of '*true*' (i.e., as described and/or predicted by the THM) and systematic triple helix based arrangements are far from brilliant. In fact, the THM- related objective of "*convergence of methodological and epistemological aims and norms between academy (industrialization of science) and industry (scientification of industry)*" (Viale and Etzkowitz, 2005, p. 9). The argument could, indeed, feed the frequent suggestion that, using the words of Edwards and Nicoll (2001, p. 104), "*the rhetoric, particularly that of policy, is not reflected in the reality*". Taking into account the mismatch between the model and the framework conditions, there is scope for an attempt to find out an explanation for the uncritical acceptance of the official rhetoric. Rodrigues and Melo (2012) provide an answer, suggesting that the plasticity characterising the fashion the THM is being used, because implying its conceptual emptying, offer local government officers the ideal basis sustaining an approach to local development susceptible of easier social legitimacy. In other words, the model assumed the status of an empty signifier and, as such, became a subject of consensus.

The local consensus on the THM-based path leading to enhanced innovation capacity and competitiveness can be seen as an example of how rhetoric, though established upon an unrealistic basis, may be instrumental in influencing an *audience* in its way of thinking. In addition, the research made in Águeda allows for an additional argument, configuring a perlocutionary act as in Austin (1962): the new ways of thinking have a nourishing effect on the willingness of local agents to act, or, maybe

[6] See **http://urbact.eu/en/projects/innovation-creativity/runup/the-role-of-universities-for-economic-development-in-urban-poles/**

more accurately, to act differently, that is, in innovative ways. In fact, there is evidence showing that the official discourse and rhetoric has been instrumental in the deployment of important initiatives marked by their **real** contribution to innovation and competitiveness of a number of local firms and to attract new businesses, thus creating jobs. This is the case of the recent prize-winning "*Águeda concept: from local to global*" initiative[7], based on a Municipality-led partnership including ca. 20 local firms and several other public and private organizations (ironically, despite the THM discourse, higher education, at least directly, does not participate). The partnership developed an innovative house model based on modular architecture which gathered the competences of a diversity of industrial sectors operating in the region and made appeal to the mobilization of innovation resources that, in isolation, would remain latent. In a traditionally unfavourable terrain as far as cooperation among firms is concerned, the successful effort underpinning the collaborative platform cannot be dissociated from the rhetoric-induced new ways of thinking. The Mayor himself helps to consolidate this view. In a recent speech about the '*Águeda concept*', he averred that the initiative was placed under the more encompassing will of transforming Águeda into "*an internationally recognised smart city*".

Additional evidence is provided by the Lighting Living Lab[8] that has been the most tangible result of an innovation and competitiveness network financed by a regional innovation strategy developed by the Centro region authority. This network, actually, was a kind of launching ramp of the THM-centred discourse which today wraps up the local policy endeavour. The project aims at promoting R&D and innovation in the lighting industry sector, in which Águeda has a prominent position in the country, focussing on the concepts of smart and eco-sustainable lighting. Adding to the advantages ripped by the participating firms, there are strong indications that the community will also benefit from the initiative, namely from such developments as the public lighting master plan aiming energy efficiency.

The benefits accrued by the THM rhetoric go beyond enhanced firms' competitiveness and efficiency gains in public services. It has also brought over improvements to the policy-making process, which changed from a traditionally fragmented and atomistic approach into a more coherent fashion of designing development strategies and policies. In this sense, one can argue that the use of the THM as referential contributed to enable Águeda to better organize itself and start to create more favourable framework conditions to enhance the innovation capacity of the local productive fabric. Eventually, these improved framework conditions would also contribute to strengthen the ability of local firms to make use of the knowledge produced within academia, or, in other words, to diminish the gap between discourse and reality (Rodrigues and Melo, 2012).

Moreover, benefits can be extended to the enlistment of new resources to fight the crisis, namely financial ones, tapped from external sources. This is true both at the

[7] http://www.aguedaconcept.com
[8] http://www.lighting-living-lab.pt/

national and European levels. The THM ideal driving the policy-making process has, in fact, fostered new communication patterns between the local and the central government[9], facilitating the local access to national funding streams directed at industry development. It has also created the opportunity to internalise the discursive *spirit* of European programmes, very much focussed on such things like collaborative innovation, smartness and sustainability, thus placing the municipality, because perfectly tuned with the EU language, in a better position to access financial resources otherwise overwhelmingly reserved for larger cities. The participation in EU programmes like URBACT and INTERREG, supporting the argument above, put Águeda working together and learning from much bigger urban agglomerations such as, among others, Potsdam, Gateshead, Patras, Montpellier, Almeria, A Coruña and Lugo.

The unrealistic discursive line craving for emulating in Águeda innovation practices taking place in more advanced economies endowed with the critical mass to deploy THM-driven development strategies, is underpinning new forms of policy design and delivery. New and old ways of acting and deciding together with new and old development coalitions are being combined in ways that are provoking positive transformations in the territory. The THM, unfeasible to be put in motion in its true meaning and institutional structure, has endowed Águeda with better ability to enter what Sotarauta (2010) calls the *spirit of times*, that is a general atmosphere emerging from the general societal communication upon which development opportunities and paths are open and consolidated.

Concluding remarks

This paper shed light over the effects discourse and rhetoric can exert on planning and policy making and thus on the transformation of territories. By studying the case of a small Southern European city, it has shown that new ways of thinking and thus new forms of policy design and delivery can spring from discursive and rhetorical devices, even when these are made of buzzwords and '*buzzmodels*' many times inspired by events going on in specific places (e.g., the widespread techvalley syndrome ignited by the Silicon Valley) of impossible or at least very hard replication elsewhere. The analytical focus was placed on the discursive line based on the THM, which can easily enter the category of 'buzzmodel' of unfeasible materialisation in the specific case of a small peripheral economy like the one characterising Águeda. The THM as local development inspiring source incorporated a mismatch with local reality and a match with the global *spirit of times*. The former is being left for the satisfaction of those who, like Albert Einstein, think that imagination will take you everywhere (as opposed to logic which takes you only from A to B). The latter, though, can be associated to real processes of change that are making Águeda a *smarter* city, though not in the sense of the dominant discourse. In fact, Águeda is accumulating *smartness* because, under the inspiration of such

[9] This approximates the argument of Rydin (1998), who looks at rhetoric as a way to nourish new communicative patterns between local and central governments.

rhetorical devices like the THM, it is, firstly, forming new development coalitions where cooperative traditions were hard to find – a good example are the double helix configurations bringing together the local government and industry -, and, secondly, improving its capacity to access both national and European funding sources. In addition, the evolving change dynamics may produce benefits that go beyond the generation of increased profits in a number of local firms and thus are extended to the local society as a whole. Hitherto, the mitigation of an eventual Janus-faced effect (Swyngedouw, 2005) subjugating the collective good to segments of interest defined by market forces is being ensured by the clear positioning of the local government as the institutional sphere leading the change process.

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