The Revival of Strategic Spatial Planning

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Transnational Networks as Transnational Policy discourse: Some observations on the Politics of Spatial Development in Europe

By introducing the concept of 'transnational policy discourse' this article analyses the politics of spatial development in the European Union. It is argued that there is a conceptual language, shared by policy makers at different levels of government, that predetermines the spatial futures that turn up in EU policy. This discourse, here called *Europe of Flows*, is illustrated using the case of the Common Transport Policy.

Transnational Policy Discourses

When it comes to the analysis of strategic planning in the European Union, policy analysts can follow two distinct routes. One can either search for a policy program on strategic spatial planning and analyze it, or one can analyze existing policy programs that do not claim to be about strategic planning but may nevertheless have powerful spatial effects. This article follows the second route. Hence it does not focus on the European Spatial Development Plan (ESDP) but looks for strategic motives in other EU programs, most notably the Common Transport Policy (CTP) and its policy for the development of a Trans-European Network. Using the tools of interpretive policy analysis (Fischer 1998; Yanow 1996) the article studies the emerging *transnational policy discourses*. Drawing on earlier definitions of discourse (1995: p. 44) transnational policy discourse is defined as:

> '... an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities and which permeates regional, national and supranational policy making circuits'.

We can investigate such transnational policy discourses in policy documents or via in-depth interviews using the tools of discourse analysis, hermeneutics or literary criticism. Apart from such a 'content analysis' one could include the analysis of the institutional 'practices' in which particular policy discourses get reproduced and transformed (cf. Hajer 1995). Given the scope of this paper, only a non-dynamic content analysis of policy texts will be presented here.

Trans-European Networks

Since the Treaty of Maastricht the initiative for the realization of a set of Trans-European networks (TENs) has been seen as a cornerstone in the overall integration process. The networks comprise highways, waterways, (high-speed) rail links and energy and information networks. The TENs program is perceived to be directly related to the achievement of the key goals of the EU: it is argued that the TENs will facilitate a smooth functioning of the internal market, and will strengthen both economic and social cohesion (goals as defined in the Treaty of Maastricht, cf. article 2 of decision No. 1692/96/EC, July 23, 1996). What is more, TENs can be subsumed under the concept of 'sustainable mobility' that has been defined as the key objective of the general Community Transport Policy (CTP) since 1992. TENs was formulated as a 'win/win policy' suggesting it will allow for enhanced mobility, but also enhance sustainability, general transport safety, and transport efficiency. Moreover, it is argued that TENs will facilitate both social and economic cohesion and will be of strategic importance for the creation of new jobs.

Trans-European Networks for Transport and Energy
'From Patchwork to Network'
Foreword

The frontiers between the Member States of the European Union have been fully open since the completion of the internal market. People, goods, services and capital can now move freely throughout the Union.
Increased trade across former frontiers and growing private and business travel require efficient and environmentally sensitive transport systems inter-linking Europe's regions. This improves their development prospects and makes for greater integration in Europe.
Our aim is to establish by the year 2010 the transport networks that Europe needs for the 21st century. This means:

- extensive, Europe-wide transport axes and corridors linking the national networks to form Trans-European networks (TENs),
- efficient air and sea ports as well as energy transport networks linking us with world markets and major energy producers.

This requires large-scale investment and significant efforts to make existing infrastructure work better.
These will pay off in several ways in leading to a long-term improvement in our international competitiveness and creating jobs.

- Better transport links will make it easier for our citizens to travel and get to know their European neighbors and cultures, and strengthen the feeling of European unity.

Transnational Networks as Transnational Policy discourses

The transportation network fulfills a special role. As Tim Richardson observes, TENs is a program that can hardly be differentiated from the overall project of European integration. 'Key Commission documents, from the Maastricht Treaty to the Delors White Paper, entwine European integration, the Single Market, and transport infrastructure, fueling the seemingly unstoppable momentum of the Trans-European transport network' (1997: p. 333).

TENs might have a strong institutional position but this is not accounted for by supporting scientific evidence. It is highly questionable whether the transformation of a 'patchwork' into a 'network', the filling of the 'missing links' and the development of an integrated 'multi-modal' transport network using the 'telematic' technologies will actually help achieve the goals as set out in the Treaty of Maastricht (Spiekermann & Wegener 1996; Swyngedouw 1992; Owens 1997). Similarly, it is unclear why it is assumed that 'new opportunities to move people and goods on combined transport systems will reduce congestion, economic inefficiencies and environmental pollution' (CEC 1994b), contrary to arguments that suggested that new capacities will create new demands (Owens 1997). The insight that mobility is not a solution to uneven geographical development, but is itself *part and parcel* to the reproduction of such uneven developments (Swyngedouw 1992) or perhaps the production of new patterns of uneven development (Zonneveld & Faludi 1998) raises questions that go to the core of the functionality of TENs as means to reach the defined policy goals. Why would the further economic development of remote regions be facilitated by the installment of the same infrastructure that dominates the central region of Europe? Is economic success a function of being connected or having the same physical infrastructure or are there perhaps other ways to enhance the economic and social development of remote regions? Below, I will try to explain the role of TENs by using discourse analysis.

A Discourse Analysis of TENs

Discourse theory suggests that discourses should not be seen simply as 'debates' or 'discussions'. Discourse as an analytical term is better reserved for an underlying structure or pattern that the analyst can discern in a particular debate. A first rule is that a transnational policy discourse *is to be defined by the analyst him/herself* in

terms of the key ideas, concepts and categorizations that the analyst finds in a particular discussion. In that way we might find, for instance, that the TENs program *shares* some key concepts or ideas with other policy initiatives with other discursive practices (e.g. the European Commission's *Agenda 2000+*, sectoral plans with spatial effects such as the Cohesion Funds or papers presented by lobby groups etc.). In so doing, discourse analysis avoids the reification of particular policy initiatives. In discourse analytical terms TENs is better seen as *a set of particular discursive practices* within which a particular policy discourse is reproduced and transformed.

Discourse analysis requires a careful choice of the domain within which one wants to conduct the analysis. To simply follow the existing institutional structures would not allow for an analysis of the overlaps and rivalries between different interpretations of what the European debate on spatial development is about (e.g. do core ideas of the European Spatial Development Policy feature in Agenda 2000+? And how does the Agenda 2000+ relate to the Common Transport Policy and its program for a Trans-European Network?). In this broad-brush analysis we focus on the initiatives within the sphere of policy making in Europe that have determinable effects on the socio-economic organization of space within the European Union.

The analysis of transnational policy discourses facilitates the investigation of the way in which shared meanings are created in different domains and at different levels of government interaction. It thus opens new possibilities for the analysis of 'fusion': the increased interaction because of the European Unification (Wessels 1997). Rather than analyzing fusion in quantitative and institutional terms (Wessels 1997; Wessels & Rometsch 1996) the search would be for shared concepts and ideas that *inform* the actions of policy makers at various levels of government as well as of stakeholders in society. The question is whether we can find a conceptual pattern in the way in which the spatial development of the European Union is taken on.

The TENs program can be understood in terms of a broader policy discourse that could be called 'Infrastructure Europe' or, as we will define it here, of *Europe of Flows*. It has some characteristic features:

1. It is committed to market integration as the primary goal of the European Union and sees the creation of a 'level playing field' for business as a precondition for the integration process;
2. It conceives of the strategic challenge for Europe in terms of global competition;
3. It conceives of the European Union primarily in terms of a 'facilitory state' or 'enabling state' aiming to increase competitiveness while at the same time continuing to fulfill a role as 'welfare state' (e.g. the promotion of social cohesion);
4. It sees infrastructure as the prime policy instrument to achieve these goals;
5. In line with the commitment to market integration, it identifies both physical and institutional barriers as problems. Alternatively, it suggests that enhanced *mobility* and *connectivity* are both ways to strengthen the global competitiveness of Europe and ease out uneven geographical development within Europe;
6. As it is cognitively committed to a common Europe, it reconceptualizes infrastructure in terms of an 'transnational network' thus identifying 'missing links' between integrated national systems;

7. Its conceptual vocabulary comprises many modernist commitments such as a belief in integration and an even distribution, the easing out of social conflict by technological means (integrated 'multi-modal' systems, telematic traffic *management*);
8. In terms of the relationship between economic development and the environment it is committed to 'ecological modernization' (cf. Hajer 1995);
9. In terms of transport, it essentially *anticipates* more international demand whereas existing transport statistics suggest international links account for only a marginal portion of traffic.

This transnational policy discourse not only underpins TENs but can be traced at other levels of government as well. If we take the case of Dutch spatial politics, we can recognize the discourse of the *Europe of Flows* in the national 'mainport concept' of the Fourth Report (1988); it very obviously comes out in the meetings of the Dutch Cabinet in May 1996 as it sought to define its own 'Agenda 2000+' for the development of infrastructural works. Likewise the discourse is evident in the new role of the 'corridor concept' in the recent Green Paper on spatial planning (1999) as a preparation for the upcoming Fifth Report, and in the preceding – and very influential – publications on the Commission for the Enhancement of the Economic Structure (ICES) by the Dutch Cabinet or the various publications of the Dutch Ministry for Economic Affairs. The 1999 Green paper for instance speaks of the emergence of 'urban-economic development corridors' (p. 27) and concludes that 'a corridor is based on the Trans-European infrastructure networks and (fulfills) an important role for the transport of people and goods between metropolitan areas in Europe' (p. 42). Likewise, we can discern how regional provinces and cities reposition themselves in a wider European context by drawing on the concepts of the discourse of *Europe of Flows* (for a discussion, cf. WRR 1999).

Transnational Discourse-Coalitions

Multilevel governance now takes the form of *shared discursive principles* that permeate governance in Europe. Discourse analysis seeks to trace the concepts and ideas, but also tries to determine particular styles of argumentation that can be found in European public policy. Discourses consist of utterances that presume uttering subjects. In order to explain the emergence, persistence and influence of particular discourses, analysts often invoke the concept of 'alliances' or 'coalitions' of actors. Kohler-Koch, for instance, speaks of 'modernization coalitions' in European policy making (1997) without precisely defining them and other key analysts invoke coalition concepts as well. According to the discourse coalition approach, coalitions should be conceived as a primarily discursive phenomenon reproduced and transformed through a variety of actors that *do not necessarily meet but through their utterances reinforce a particular way of talking that is reproduced via an identifiable set of story lines and discursive practices in a given policy domain*. The concept of discourse coalition thus refers to three elements: (1) a set of story lines, (2) actors that utter particular story lines and

who operate through (3) identifiable institutional practices within which the discursive production takes place.

While a moderate version would argue that 'ideas, while affected by interests, are not simply determined by them'. (Singer 1990: p. 429), others would suggest that discourse here has a constitutive role and also determines the perception of interest. Hence the TENs program is interpreted as a 'cognitive space' in which a particular notion of the preferred socio-spatial organization of Europe can come to full fruition. Language is not seen as a neutral 'conveyer-belt' for preconceived meanings and interests but is regarded as constitutive for meaning and coalitions. Compared to more conventional understandings of coalitions it argues that a particular transnational policy discourse is not brought about by actors that meet and 'coordinate their activity to a non-trivial degree' (cf. Sabatier 1993: p. 25). Instead, it analyzes the variety of micro-powers (and sometimes epistemic notions that actors share without being aware of it) that together hold a particular discourse in play and explains how particular ways of seeing 'solidify' in policy documents and implementation. It may also analyze the confrontation between 'structured ways of seeing' and new story lines or anti-stories that challenge the prevailing commitments.

A key role is played by story lines and metaphors. Story lines are defined as (crisp) generative statements that bring together previously unrelated elements of discourse and thus allow for new understandings and create new meanings. Story lines often carry metaphors which are seen as linguistic devices that convey understanding through comparison. 'From Patchwork to Network' is of course a very imprecise statement since *any* system of roads constitutes a network. Yet apparently the present network lacks the particular internal structure that fits the perceived needs of European integration. The importance of story lines for coalition formation is in their essentially figurative or metaphorical nature which allows for a diversity of interpretations. This is why they help constitute a discourse coalition consisting of a variety of actors *that do not necessarily share a particular set of belief or normative commitment.* 'Trans-European network' is seen as a 'story line' that gives meaning to a spatial investment program on a European scale. Likewise I think that 'Network Europe' is emerging as a particular trope that starts to structure thinking in European policy making.

I previously showed that story lines do not presume a shared cognitive understanding. Discourse coalitions are constituted through story lines that bind because they 'sound right' to many different audiences, and not because people share a deep cognitive conviction. The effectiveness of story lines in this respect might thus be precisely in their multi-interpretability. Not shared beliefs but multi-interpretable story lines are the glue that hold together the coalitions behind transnational policy discourses. In the case of Europe of Flows and the program of TENs this might come out too. Here it would concern the differing interpretations that actors have of the contribution of TENs to their particular interests. The inclination of some analysts to question the rationality of TENs because it might not facilitate the economic development of remote regions, might not match the view of local policy makers and politicians in these regions. For them, the symbolic element of 'being part of the network' might be as least as important as concrete socio-spatial analyses of the possible spatial effects. Analysts might spot the friction between the discourse of cohesion and the

discourse of market integration (cf. Zonneveld 1999) yet 'networks' is the generative metaphor that blurs such discrepancies and creates political leverage.

In the case of TENs, the key seems to be in the network metaphor as a symbol for European integration. The network metaphor allows one to avoid addressing existing imbalances in spatial development and basically proposes a general enhancement of the mobility-capacity of regions in Europe. In the words of Dvora Yanow, it serves as an 'organizational myth' that is 'created to accommodated incommensurable values, beliefs or points of view; by deflecting attention from the contradictions toward itself, it resolves, at least temporarily, the tension between them' (1993: p. 241). Such myth also gives structure to an organization by providing it with identity.

The language of the Trans-European Networks which is characteristic for *Europe of Flows* is not a sectoral policy language. It is a form of 'inter-discourse': something which draws links between previously unrelated and heterogeneous knowledge. TENs bring together neo-liberal commitments to a free market, programs for just spatial development (cohesion), and the commitment to sustainability. Discourse analysis shows that previously unrelated sets of knowledge and value commitments change as a result of the discursive context in which they are drawn upon. For instance, sustainable development is now suddenly seen in terms of enhancing 'intermodal traffic' and the installment of high-speed rail links, while the not insubstantial negative effects of the development of corridors in the remote regions that TENs characteristically suggest has to be taken for granted. Indeed, the metaphor of 'missing links' discredits local environmental protest as standing in the way of a sustainable European integration.

European policy making is a struggle to determine the legitimate way of framing issues of spatial development and environmental protection. A discourse analysis would focus on analyzing emerging 'styles of argumentation' (including the analysis of particular story lines therein) and would seek to illuminate the power effects that are inherent in particular styles of argumentation. After all, every policy discourse plays a role in an argumentative context and will exclude particular 'counterpositions'. The analysis of discursive practices should enable us to understand how these biases in policy discourses emerge, persist and are, eventually, altered. What is the power effect of the methodologies that were used to come to an assessment of the effects of a particular policy, or of the technologies that are employed, or the way in which a particular vision is presented as 'integrative' (thus denying its own 'situatedness' and hence imposing itself over other forms of knowledge that perhaps lack the direct transnational discursive connection), or the way in which the 'knowledge household' is managed?

Conclusion: Reflections on Strategic Planning in Europe

The above suggests the existence of a transnational policy discourse that prestructures many policy making debates. The TENs program is not interpreted as 'simply' a sectoral project but is seen as the expression of the discourse of *Europe of Flows*. This vision of Europe now determines spatial development policy in Europe. This is not

unproblematic. Considering the available scientific evidence, the prevalence of *Europe of Flows* is likely to enhance the creation of a 'multi-speed' Europe in which different 'Europes' are superimposed on one another. Following the analysis of the economy of global city economics and information flows as formulated by authors like Sassen (1991) and Castells (1997b), Europe too will become the scene of increased differentiation in terms of GNP, employment and investment rates. This prediction contradicts the legitimation of TENs as facilitating a more even distribution of investment and employment among the regions of Europe. In fact, extrapolations of the effects of investment in new networks in Europe point in the opposite direction (Spiekermann & Wegener 1996; Zonneveld & Faludi 1997). The market-oriented European policy instruments are likely to result in the formation of a 'core Europe' around which the rest of Europe shapes up.

What can discourse analysis suggest for the future of strategic planning in Europe? There are roughly two alternatives. One is that of 'hitching on to the dominant frame' of *Europe of Flows* (Rein & Schön 1994). Whether this is a good idea has to be doubted. The policy discourse of *Europe of Flows* operates from the commitment to the creation of a 'level playing field' which explains why the eradication of barriers is among its central concerns. This is quite distinct from the familiar concern of planners for the preservation of spatial diversity or the value of hierarchy. Moreover, the above raises questions about the functionality of 'networks' as a planning concept. First of all it seems to lack discriminatory power. Furthermore, it now seems as if the concept of 'network' has become loaded with meaning to such an extent that it is almost impossible to use it as an analytical device. The obvious alternative future for planning is the development of its own discourse. This might indeed be in developing the European 'oeuvre' (patchwork!) of cultural meanings and utterances, or in the 'grapes' concept suggested by Kunzmann and Wegener (1991). The Alps would no longer appear as a physical barrier but as a prime location ('place') of meaningful activity. Not the level playing field would be the starting point of policy deliberation but the identification and enhancement of the particular spatial qualities of places.

The advantage of the second alternative is more discursive control, but the obvious disadvantage is a lack of institutional power. Transnational policy discourses frame various social and physical realities, make some futures conceivable while others are suggested to be irrelevant. They come with a particular idea of rational action and present particular 'identity-offers'. To correct the dominance of one structured way of seeing strategic spatial development of Europe would benefit if alternative identity offers would be made available in one central forum. But this is not an institutional reality.