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Unravelling the concept of social transformation in planning: Inclusion, power changes, and political subjectification in the Oosterweel link road conflict
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Introduction

In March 2017, the Flemish government proudly proclaimed that it reached a ‘historic agreement’ with three Antwerp citizen movements and the Antwerp municipal government. At stake was the completion of the city’s ring road, a project that led to one of Belgium’s most notorious planning conflicts in recent decades. For years, the necessity of this connection road, its physical positioning (closer or further away from the city centre), its material form (by means of a series of tunnels or a combination of a tunnel and viaduct), and the non-transparent character of the decision-making process were heavily contested. The 2017 agreement marked the beginning of a public-civic collaborative process previously unseen in the Flemish planning context, sparking international interest, for example, Antwerp won the Eurocities ‘Cooperation in physical transformation’ award in November 2019.

In the aftermath of the agreement, the spokesperson for one of the citizen movements and several experts argued that the transformative potential of this planning conflict is situated in the creation of a collaborative ‘safe space’ safeguarded by a mediator whose main task consisted of bringing together the opposing parties. While it is clear that a collaborative planning approach is at work in this case, the article intends to provide a deeper and more nuanced analysis of the transformative dynamics apparent in the conflict by working with a polysemic understanding of ‘social transformation’.

Over the past half-century, transformative planning scholars have discussed what ‘social transformation’ entails. For example, in a Plurimondi special issue on insurgent and radical
planning practices, Leonie Sandercock hints at the relevance and difficulty of defining ‘social transformation’:

Most of us would agree that the aim of ‘radical planning’ is social transformation in the interests of greater social, economic and environmental justice. But what precisely does that mean? Social transformation can imply changes in dominant values and institutions, shifts in relationships of power, and ultimately a transformation of the state apparatus. But do changes which fall short of a transformation of the state (to use the language of structuralists) still qualify as social transformation? [We] have agreed only to disagree on this question.

(Sandercock, 1999, p. 41)

We begin from the premise that defining social transformation is a contingent act and accept that different transformative planning traditions will work with their own definitions of what social transformation is. Rather than problematising the polysemic nature of the concept, we argue that these definitions do not need to be seen as mutually exclusive but rather can help to capture multiple aspects of the complex processes of social transformation.

In what follows, we first examine, both substantively and procedurally, three interpretations of social transformation that are present in planning theory. A first conceptualisation sees transformation as the inclusion of multiple interests in the decision-making process (i.e., inclusion-oriented). A second interpretation understands transformation as changes in power relations through the struggle of counter-hegemonic movements (i.e., power-oriented), and the third interpretation links social transformation to the emergence of new political subjects that change the symbolic order of society (i.e., subjectification-oriented). In the second part of this article, we illustrate how a polysemic understanding of social transformation, in which inclusion-, power-, and subjectification-oriented approaches to social transformation are all taken into account, better captures different aspects of the complex
processes of social transformation, hence providing a deeper and more nuanced analysis of the transformative dynamics in the Oosterweel link road conflict.

**Planning theory and social transformation**

To determine whether transformative dynamics occurred during the Oosterweel link road conflict, we must first consider the question of what ‘social transformation’ entails. Since the late 1960s, planning theorists have focused on planning as ancillary to broader social change, examining how planning practices can contribute to a more equal and just society (e.g. Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2012; Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 2012). Advocacy (Davidoff, 1965), transactive (Friedmann, 2011 [1973]), radical (Grabow & Heskin, 1973), collaborative (Healey, 2003), agonistic pluralistic (Mouat, Legacy, & March, 2013), and insurgent planning theory (Miraftab, 2009) all come from an urge to democratise planning or to undo perceived forms of oppression and social injustice through planning practice. While the differences between these transformative planning traditions are not always clear-cut, each tradition starts from its own substantive perspective on what social transformation is (Faludi, 1973; Yiftachel, 1989) and on which procedural steps need to be taken to get there. In what follows, we discern three ways of looking at social transformation that we identified within the several traditions in this field (see Table 1 for an overview).

**Transformation as inclusion**

A first method of conceiving social transformation is found in planning traditions such as advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965), transactive planning (Friedmann, 2011 [1973]), and the collaborative planning wave that began in the 1990s (Forester, 2009; Healey, 2003; Innes & Booher, 1999; Ozawa, 1993; Susskind & Ozawa, 1984). While the differences between these traditions are substantial, for all three, social transformation lays in the inclusion of plural narratives in the decision-making process, especially those of minority or oppressed groups.
This inclusion can occur either by representing their proposals in the political arena (Heskin, 1980, p. 57) (i.e., advocacy planning) or by inviting all stakeholders—including marginalised groups—to the decision-making table to represent themselves or their community or organisation (i.e., transactive and collaborative planning). Through the inclusion of (people with) different interests at the negotiation table—through dialogue, social learning, and ‘making sense together’—changes in practices, cultures, and outcomes of ‘place governance’ can occur (Healey, 2003, pp. 107-108). An inclusive deliberation process makes social transformation possible, as dialogue with actors holding different views allows participants to rethink their positions, interests, and even values (Innes & Booher, 2013, p. 3). This process changes the players, what they know, and what they are likely to do.

_Transformation as changes in power relations_

A second common understanding of social transformation focuses on changes in power relations and power structures. It is found in planning approaches such as agonistic pluralistic planning (e.g. Mouat et al., 2013; Pløger, 2004), radical planning (Friedmann, 2011 [1987]; Grabow & Heskin, 1973), and insurgent planning (Miraftab, 2009; Sandercock, 1998, 1999).

There are planning theorists that believe that planning practices are transformative when they are performed by small non-hierarchical groups that make themselves less dependent on the state and capital (i.e., Friedmann’s radical planning approach). Others argue that planning practices are transformative when they are performed by a group of people who use ‘passion’ (i.e., the affective dimension at play in collective forms of identification (Martin & Mouffe, 2013)) to create a chain among all who feel equivalently disadvantaged by existing power relations; such a ‘chain of equivalence’ can become a strong counter-hegemonic force as Mouffe and (ant)agonistic pluralistic planning adherents would have it (Purcell, 2009). In both situations, though, transformation is inherently linked to creating (temporarily) new power
relations. The same is true for certain forms of insurgent planning. In her account of insurgent planning, Sandercock (1999, p. 39; 41) argues that existing power relations can be challenged by progressive and bottom-up radical planning practices by communities, activists, or marginalised groups who—through social struggle—act as planners for themselves and go beyond state-led participation (1999, pp. 41-42). These ‘thousand tiny empowerments’, Sandercock argues, are the path towards enduring social change. Insurgent planning scholar Faranak Miraftab (2009) highlights the role of similar bottom-up planning practices as counter-hegemonic responses to the depoliticising and neoliberal specifics of dominance through inclusion (p. 32).

This is not to say that the issue of power is undiscussed within inclusion-oriented approaches. Collaborative planners such as Healey (2003) and Forester (2009) do recognise the importance of power relations in their analysis of planning conflicts. However, for collaborative planning scholars in general, power plays a less prominent role in their theory of change when compared to dialogue, inclusion, and joint sense-making. When power is discussed as a driving force for social change, it is explicitly linked to the acts of inclusion and communication (i.e., ‘How can power differences be overcome through, and in acts of, participatory and collaborative planning?’).

[Table 1 near here]

**Transformation as the emergence of new political subjects**

The third and final interpretation of social transformation found in transformative planning literature revolves around a reordering of the *symbolic* order of society engendered by the emergence of new political actors. This interpretation begins with the observation that every society is built on certain dominant ideas of what reality is, who is seen as a legitimate speaker in that reality, which arguments and narratives are considered acceptable or reasonable to use,
and which instruments and channels can be used to express claims. Transformation, according to this interpretation, resides in people rejecting the ‘place’ they were assigned to in this symbolic order, hence, they become political subjects. Such political subjects are not yet established but emerge through their dis-identification with an allocated position in the symbolic order and through the redefinition of the question, ‘Who is in a position to speak and act legitimately in which context?’

Some of the most explicit references in planning theory to this interpretation of social transformation are found within the insurgent planning tradition (e.g. Miraftab, 2009; Miraftab & Wills, 2005; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015) and rely on James Holston’s (1998) definition of ‘insurgency’: ‘new metropolitan forms of the social [that are] not yet liquidated by or absorbed into the old’ (p. 39). To Holston, an act is insurgent when it introduces new identities and practices into the city that ‘disturb established histories,’ and ‘disrupt the normative and assumed categories of social life’ (p. 48; 50). It is ‘a counter-politics that destabilizes the dominant regime of citizenship, renders it vulnerable, and defamiliarizes the coherence with which it usually presents itself to us’ (Holston, 2009, p. 15).

Urban (planning) theorists such as Legacy (2016), Metzger, Allmendinger, and Oosterlynck (2015), Gualini (2015), and Dikeç (2012) employ a similar interpretation of social transformation but explicitly refer to the political thought of Jacques Rancière. To Dikeç, social transformation is disruptive and ‘inaugurative’ by nature and depends on acts that introduce something new and interrupt the established order of things (2017, p. 50). While certainly interconnected with some inclusion- and power-oriented traditions in planning, the subjectification-oriented interpretation of transformation is distinct in its focus on the symbolic dimensions of transformation and the establishment of new political subjects through disagreement. In reaction to the inclusion-oriented interpretation, in which transformation is obtained merely by including multiple and often competing interests and values in the decision-
making process, Rancière insists that social transformation is about the possibility of being included on one’s own terms and as an equal, which requires a transformation of societal arrangements:

Before any confrontation of interests and values, before any assertions are submitted to demands for validation between established partners, there is the dispute over the object of the dispute, the dispute over the existence of the dispute and the parties confronting each other on it.

(Rancière, 1999, p. 55)

To Rancière, social transformation occurs with the dis-identification of individuals with the name, place, and function given to them in society and in the formation of new subjects that claim equality by speaking in a time and a place that they are not expected to speak (Lie & Rancière, 2006). This interpretation of equality can also be found in the assertion of both radical and insurgent planning approaches that anyone can equally function as a planner regardless of whether he or she is recognised as such by the dominant system.

While the previous sections risk creating the impression that inclusion-oriented, power-oriented and subjectification-oriented interpretations of social transformation are in opposition to one another, it is crucial to note that several transformative planning traditions do not perceive these interpretations to be mutually exclusive. For example, the insurgent planning tradition clearly combines power-oriented and subjectification-oriented interpretations of social transformation, as this tradition focuses not only on shifting the power dynamics among stakeholders but also on bringing in new stakeholders and actors that were previously never recognised or identified as such. In real-life planning practices, different interpretations of social transformation reinforce each other and intertwine. Scholars such as Kenis and Lievens (2015) argue that while acts of political subjectification in a Rancièrean sense are crucial for
opening up the symbolic order, on their own, these acts remain limited in their effects: ‘It merely opens a space where something new can be imagined’ (p. 153). For a transformative dynamic to be effective, this dynamic has to go further. Alliances and chains of equivalences that can challenge existing hegemonic relations of power have to be constructed. Similarly, Silver et al. (2010) argue that both struggle and deliberation could be apparent in the same process, each having transformative potential. To these observations, we add that while both power-oriented and inclusion-oriented transformative processes could be at work simultaneously, this is unlikely to be the case with inclusion-oriented and subjectification-oriented processes. With the acts of deliberation and consensus-building, political subjects tend to disappear through their re-incorporation and identification with social groups or imaginary bodies (Rancière, 2004, p. 7).

The transformative potentialities in the Oosterweel link road conflict

Having surveyed the main interpretations of social transformation in transformative planning literature, we now turn to a case that illustrates how applying these different understandings contributes to an in-depth analysis of the transformative dynamics in contentious cases of urban development.

As a long-standing, complex, and divisive conflict, the Oosterweel link road struggle is appropriate to explore the added value of a polysemic approach to social transformation. While this case is well-documented in newspaper articles and opinion pieces, as well as in academic studies (e.g. Coppens, Van Dooren, & Thijssen, 2018; Van Brussel, Boelens, & Lauwers, 2016) and reflections by involved activists and interested followers (Claeys, 2013; Leysen, Noels, Nonneman, & Saverys, 2017; Wolf & Van Dooren, 2017a), almost all existing analyses of the Oosterweel conflict focus on the causes of conflict escalation (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2017b). Some activists (Claeys, 2018) reflect on the transformative potential but do so mainly from an
inclusion-oriented perspective on social transformation which, we argue, leaves out important parts of the transformative dynamics at work in this case. In our analysis, we broaden the analytical perspective by starting from a polysemic understanding of the concept of ‘social transformation’ and by examining the fit between the procedural and substantive sides of the different interpretations of social transformation apparent in transformative planning.

To reconstruct the conflict and to examine which interpretation(s) of social transformation help(s) best to grasp the transformative dynamics in this land use conflict, the research draws on data collected from interviews with three activists; observations made at meetings of the citizen movements between September and December 2016; and a document analysis of relevant newspaper articles published between 2005 and 2017, published memoranda, and other promotional material by action groups, and governmental policy documents.

We first introduce the history of the Oosterweel conflict and its most important evolutions and actors. Next, we analyse the transformative dynamics at work in the Oosterweel case. We examine which of the procedures described in the different transformative planning traditions as carrying transformative potential occurred during this conflict and whether they brought forth the expected (i.e., inclusion-, power-, or subjectification-oriented) social transformation. In other words, we scrutinise the interrelation between the procedural and substantive sides of social transformation as proposed by the different transformative planning strands.

*From ‘bridge’ to ‘bridge too far’ to ‘tunnelling together’*

The idea to complete Antwerp’s ring road originated in the 1990s and was seen by the Flemish government as a key solution to deal with Antwerp’s intractable mobility problem. As home to the second-largest seaport of Europe and situated on one of Europe’s busiest traffic routes,
Antwerp copes with a constant flow of traffic, making it the most congested city in Belgium in 2017 (HLN, 2017).

Decades have passed since policymakers first feared that Antwerp would turn into a city of perpetual gridlock. In 1996, Antwerp’s provincial governor began advocating the completion of Antwerp’s ring road to prevent congestion. Half a decade later, in April 2000, the governor took initiative on behalf of the Flemish government and organised a ‘Staten-Generaal’, a gathering with local politicians and representatives of the Port Authority, the Province of Antwerp, and the Flemish administration to discuss the ‘mobility problem’, and to find consensus among selected stakeholders. In the same period, the Flemish government launched a ‘Masterplan Mobility Antwerp’ to further deal with the problem and legitimised the plan by stating that the civil society members, businesspeople, and politicians who attended the second Staten-Generaal in 2001 backed the proposal. In 2003, the Flemish government created a management company (a public limited liability company named BAM)\(^1\) to implement the Masterplan, and decided to build a connection between the two unconnected parts of the Antwerp ring road, as agreed upon in the previous Staten-Generaal. The link road became known as the Oosterweel link road (see Figure 1, connection d) and included a ‘landmark’ viaduct called the ‘Lange Wapper’. A high-profile local member of the Green Party lauded the proposal:

> Everywhere in Europe, you see bridges that are a real added value to the cities. Why would the Lange Wapper bridge not do the same for Antwerp?

(Mieke Vogels as cited in JVE, 2005)

Although not every expert agreed on the solution, protest against the initial development plans for the Oosterweel link road and its Lange Wapper viaduct was virtually non-existent. When a
model of the proposed viaduct was presented to the City Council in 2005, the action group *stRaten-generaal* began to question the desirability of a viaduct crossing the city. This led to an increasingly polarised debate between advocates for the government’s Oosterweel trajectory close to the city by means of a tunnel and the Lange Wapper viaduct on the one hand, and advocates for a connection further away from the city and/or only utilising tunnels on the other.

At the end of 2007, a group of elderly neighbours created the action group *Ademloos* (‘Breathless’) to raise awareness of the health risks of this new link road, and the viaduct in particular. This action group enforced and won a public referendum against the proposed Oosterweel link road in October 2009, providing proof that many people living in Antwerp did not want the Lange Wapper viaduct to cross their city. While this referendum was not binding, one year later, the Flemish government decided to drop the Lange Wapper viaduct and replace it with a tunnel. The BAM/Oosterweel trajectory, however, remained untouched.

With this new proposition, the Flemish government was obliged to order a new strategic environmental assessment (SEA) investigating not only the Oosterweel trajectory but also the alternative trajectory proposed by *stRaten-generaal*. In February 2014, this new SEA concluded that the Oosterweel trajectory scored best for mobility, prompting the Flemish government to make a definitive choice for the trajectory. As a response, *stRaten-generaal* and *Ademloos* filed a notice of objection to the Council of State in the summer of 2015. They claimed that the SEA did not study properly their proposal and they demanded that the government puts its decision in favour of the Oosterweel trajectory on hold.

At the time of the SEA announcements, a group of Antwerp citizens, urbanists, and academics founded *Ringland*, a new citizen movement that mobilised for the complete tunnelling of the existing ring road along with a traffic system that would separate local traffic
from through traffic. With its public actions, Ringland popularised the idea of tunnelling the entire ring road among the citizens of Antwerp.

By the end of 2015, the Flemish government decided to examine the practical feasibility of tunnelling the ring road. It appointed a ‘liveability mediator’, a consultant responsible for examining all tunnelling possibilities and forging a compromise among the action groups, the BAM management company, and the Flemish government. In the summer of 2016, the mediator negotiated with the action groups and other stakeholders, examining the possibility of tunnelling the southern part of the ring road (see Figure 1, section e). The trajectory of the link road, however, remained contested, with the Flemish government and BAM continuing to insist on a full Oosterweel trajectory and the opposing organisations aiming for a trajectory further away from the city (see Figure 1, trajectory c). To maintain pressure on the negotiation process, the three main action groups—Ademloos, stRaten-generaal, and Ringland—collaborated and collected another 75,000 signatures in favour of a second referendum on the Oosterweel trajectory.

In January 2017, stRaten-generaal and Ademloos received an answer on their objection at the Council of State. The auditors agreed with the action committees’ objections and advised the government to annul the zoning plan based on the SEA (hence, implicitly advising that the SEA had to be redone as well). The necessity for the Flemish government to reach an agreement with the action groups thus became more pressing. In March 2017, the Flemish government, the City of Antwerp, and the three action groups made a pact, called the ‘Pact of the Future’. The action groups dropped their juridical claims at the Council of State and did no longer demand a second referendum. In return, if possible, the entire ring road would be covered, the Oosterweel link road would become a light version of the original one, and an additional ‘radical port trajectory’ (see Figure 1, trajectory b) would be built to keep through traffic away from the city. The pact also included the objective of achieving a modal shift towards more
public transport and non-motorised vehicles, and on some parts of the ring road, local and through traffic were to be separated in different tunnels. Alongside the infrastructural promises, the pact laid the foundation for a ‘work community’, a collaborative forum in which the involved governments, government administrations, experts, action groups, citizen movements, and a selection of social actors would be brought together to set up a co-operative forum to formulate, review, discuss, and develop proposals and projects to improve mobility, quality of life, health, and urban structure (D’Hooghe, 2017).

The preparatory work for the construction of the Oosterweel link road began in the summer of 2019, and the tunnelling of this part of the ring road has been approved. The ‘Pact of the Future’, however, also promised developments such as the full tunnelling of the ring road and the construction of the ‘radical port trajectory’; both require further political and financial guarantees before they can be realised.iv

**Opening up space for collaboration through power-building**

Inclusion-oriented transformation, as perceived by collaborative planning traditions, marks the late years of the Oosterweel link road conflict, both on the procedural and substantive level. In the aftermath of the 2017 ‘Pact of the Future’, the spokesperson of stRaten-generaal and several experts have claimed that the appointment of a mediator and the establishment of new decision-making fora are democratic innovations that allow for joint sense-making and mutual learning. In their analysis of the conflict, the transformative potential of the conflict is situated in the creation of a collaborative ‘safe space’ (Claeys, 2018, p. 171).

On a procedural level, the decision-making process has changed qualitatively since the early years of the conflict. While it was initially a predominantly closed and expert-driven process, since 2017, the Flemish government, BAM, and the mediator have focused more on civic-public cooperation, deliberation, expert mediation, and transparency. The spokesperson
of *stRaten-generaal*, for example, criticised the early decision-making process for being de-politicising, arguing that outsiders faced a *fait accompli*:

> The BAM undoubtedly performs a lot of useful work, but it remains unclear which criteria determine its composition and modus operandi, how public its activities are and to whom accountability must be given. In the case of major project developments, the government continues to opt for closed participation processes. By discouraging substantive debate, they hardly have to pay any attention to urban development, medical, social or environmental criteria. As such, the government can hide behind technical and financial scenarios that are put forward by Limited Liability Companies and temporary associations as the only possibility.

(Claeys, 2005, p. 28)

By 2018, the spokesperson of *stRaten-generaal* was more enthusiastic about the participation process, praising its inclusion- and consensus-oriented turn:

> The case of the Oosterweel link road became a symbol. With the consent and cooperation of the executive powers, we finally took a different approach: together, we opened up the policy preparation process and developed decision-making methods in which the expertise of citizens, civil servants and experts was combined. Participation replaced competition, involvement was no longer about winning.

(Claeys, 2018, pp. 18-19)

The ‘Pact of the Future’ paved the way for the creation of a new participation instrument bringing civil society stakeholders, civil servants, and experts together in workshops. In these workshops, the stakeholders debate the various themes linked to the redevelopment of the Antwerp ring road, from the tunnelling of the ring road to the development of the Oosterweel trajectory and the Port trajectory. In line with the communicative planning approach, the mediator perceived the collaboration platform as inclusive and dynamic since mobility and
liveability goals are reconciled in consensual, joint decisions by all stakeholders (D'Hooghe et al., 2016). Furthermore, during six months of workshops, ‘walkshops’, focus groups, and debate nights, the Antwerp citizens were asked to provide input concerning priority projects in the tunnelling of the ring road. Finally, representatives of the citizen movements were invited to seats in public institutions. In October 2018, the spokesperson of stRaten-generaal became part of the board of directors of BAM, the management company he previously opposed. The spokesperson of Ringland similarly joined the coordination committee of the ‘work community’, showing how deliberation with civil society groups and citizens was institutionalised. The above-described evolutions also demonstrate a growing willingness to listen to opposing parties, making mutual understanding and agreed-upon solutions easier to reach.

This inclusion-oriented turn in the procedural side of the planning practices evolved into inclusion-oriented social transformation on a substantive level as well. Through mediation, BAM and the Flemish government recognised that quality of life and health need to be focal points in transport planning. They cancelled their plans to fell a forest during the development of the link road, promised a ‘modal shift’ towards more public and non-motorised transport, and promised to tunnel the ring road. The citizen movements acknowledged that a new crossing of the river Scheldt was necessary, accepting a light version of the Oosterweel link road. The spokesperson of stRaten-generaal argues that this evolution was possible through the inclusion of different stakeholders and through dialogue and joint sense-making. The participants rethought their own positions and opinions (e.g. Innes & Booher, 2013), making different solutions possible:

In [the] period [that] the mediator Alexander D'Hooghe was […] appointed[,] [w]e were allowed to bring in experts. They dared to let go of their premise - "Oosterweel and nothing
else”. Taboos were killed, also on our side. That is how we found each other, even though it remained a dime on its side until the last days.

(Manu Claeys as cited in Renson & Winckelmans, 2017)

However, deliberation and participation—and the way these processes changed how mobility problems and solutions are perceived by both sides—are only one part of the transformative dynamics at play. A power-oriented approach to social transformation must be taken into account to fully comprehend what is occurring.

Currently, the unfolding events are mainly portrayed as a win-win situation in which the different actors have come to a shared and improved understanding of the mobility problems and how these are best solved. When analysing the transformative dynamics and outcome of the conflict, however, an equally valid frame would be a victory of one actor over the other. Given the long neglect and marginalisation of the citizen movements by BAM and the various governments in charge of the Oosterweel link, signing the ‘Pact for the Future’ also signified a transformation in relations of (hegemonic) power, despite the pact being framed in conciliatory and collaborative terms. Indeed, 15 years of contention passed before this collaborative way of working became possible. Collaborative planning only became conceivable once the government encountered citizen movements that wielded sufficient power to form a threat.

This threat was ‘constructed’ through years of building power through citizen organising. Opposition to the link road plans existed but was hardly effective before 2008. While the counter-arguments of *stRaten-generaal* were technically and juridically sound and supported by a number of important managers of port companies, as well as the Green Party, the arguments fell on deaf ears in the Flemish government (Leysen et al., 2017). We argue that this is because *stRaten-generaal* could not set up a counter-hegemonic movement on its own, as it lacked visible public support for its position. For inclusion to matter to citizens, the
concerns that are addressed should be widened to concerns that touch, and hence mobilise, broad sections of the population in their everyday life.

When the action committee Ademloos entered the scene, the balance of power began to shift. Ademloos was able to mobilise thousands of protesters in a march in the fall of 2009, demonstrating against the perceived health risks of the Lange Wapper viaduct. Ademloos enforced the referendum by collecting signatures of 10 percent of the people living in Antwerp: an endeavor that is seldom undertaken in Belgian cities because of the effort it takes to collect such numbers. During the 2009 public referendum, about 135,000 voters turned up, and 79,000 voted against the governmental link road plans. Crucial in this shift is how Ademloos reframed the discussion from urban planning to air pollution and associated health risks, which appealed to a much broader section of the population. This reframing of the topic being contested also introduced more passion into what had been a rather technical debate, making room for feelings and ‘common affects’ (Oppelt, 2014).

Furthermore, by introducing air pollution as an argument in the debate, Ademloos added public health as a major issue besides mobility and economy. In doing so, they enlarged the group of ‘actors with a right to speak’ from only politicians, traffic specialists, and urban developers (some of whom were already backing stRaten-generaal’s proposal) to include cardiologists, pulmonologists, physicians, and other health experts. Including these new actors in the debate further strengthened the chain of equivalences emerging around Ademloos and stRaten-generaal. When Ringland entered the debate in 2014, they further reinforced this system of equivalences by organising festivals, assembling experts and academics into a ‘Ringland Academy’, and bestowing more passion onto the conflict by making citizens enthusiastic about a possible future in which the ring road would be covered by greenery.
In the citizen movements’ struggle against the Flemish government’s plans, two elements in particular provided these movements with leverage: the (run-up to the) public referendum initiated by Ademloos in October 2009 and Ademloos and stRaten-generaal’s notice of objection at the Council of State in 2015.

Ademloos’ first successful power-building strategy in the run-up to the referendum proved to be the gathering of 500 health patients and staff members in front of Antwerp city hall. These patients’ institution was going to be drastically affected by the traffic on the Lange Wapper viaduct. By gathering these people, Ademloos put a face to those who would be affected by the abstract notion of traffic-generated particulate matter. A series of events was already eroding BAM’s legitimacy during that period, making the action groups’ position stronger: In March 2009, an independent research team asserted that the BAM route was perhaps 10.1% cheaper than the stRaten-generaal trajectory, but the stRaten-generaal trajectory scored better on all sustainability indicators (mobility, people, and the environment). During that period, several Antwerp and Flemish politicians showed increasing unease with the decision to build a viaduct. Additionally, several months later, the auditor of the Council of State concluded that there was a conflict of interest in the drafting of the environmental impact report and advised the government to repeal the relevant zoning plan. While not submitted by the citizen movements, the auditor’s advice affirmed the citizen movements’ claims of partiality during the decision-making process. All of these events resulted in a loss of public credit for BAM. With the public referendum indicating that a majority of the voting inhabitants rejected the Oosterweel link and the associated viaduct, the public support for the citizen movements and their considerations for ‘public health’ became more tangible.

The second area of leverage for the citizen movements was the notice of objection that they filed with the Council of State in July 2015 demanding to annul the zoning plan. When the auditor of the Council of State endorsed Ademloos’ and stRaten-generaal’s objections in
January 2017, the Flemish government was pressured to find a solution and the mediator was given more space for negotiation. The *straten-generaal* spokesperson maintained that:

The matter tilted after we filed a complaint with the Council of State in the summer of 2015. The Flemish government realized that there was no other option than to analyse the various scenarios scientifically, based on figures on traffic flows about which we all agreed.

(Manu Claeys as cited in Renson & Winckelmans, 2017)

As such, the inclusion-oriented approach to social transformation is important when analysing the transformative dynamics in this case. However, for joint sense-making through inclusive dialogue and rational argumentation to work, the existing power relations first needed to shift. On a procedural level, hegemonic conflict, the development of a chain of equivalence, and the use of passion were necessary to arrive at a point where deliberation became a possibility.

**Dis-identification and subjectification as forces for transformation**

An analysis focused on changes in the balance of power and the more inclusive process of joint sense-making still does not capture all transformative dimensions in this case. A shift in the symbolic order is reflected in statements made by academics and businesspeople when the ‘Pact of the Future’ was announced:

Politicians accept that elections are not the only source of legitimacy and recognize through direct negotiations that pressure groups equally contribute legitimacy. Both are new.

(Filip De Rynck, academic political analyst, 2017)

The most important achievement of the past process is that the government is aware that it must deal with its stakeholders differently. It is no longer conceivable to push a big infrastructure project down the throat of many stakeholders and whole communities.

(Christian Leysen, businessman in the Antwerp Port, 2017)
These statements reveal that actors who had not been seen as legitimate speakers were being recognised as legitimate in the process of designing space. The symbolic order which determines ‘who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it’ is altered, accepting citizen movements and citizens as legitimate decision-making partners next to the classical political powers.

This transformation began with the individual who later became the spokesperson of *stRaten-generaal*. Observing the decision-making procedures in the Oosterweel link road and other development projects in Antwerp, the spokesperson questioned citizens’ role in these projects. To him, the main problem with these projects was not merely related to infrastructure but about *who* should be able to decide what would be built and *how* it should be decided.

In case of the Oosterweel link road, various actors in our democracy are not only battling over a bridge or a tunnel, it is also a battle over territory. […] the classical political powers are losing power within our democracy. The Oosterweel struggle shows that it is not productive for those classical, elected powers to oppose it, but to deal with it as efficiently as possible when making political decisions.

(Claeys & Verhaeghe, 2009)

Resembling Rancière’s notion of disagreement, this challenge cannot be reduced to a confrontation of interests and values between established partners. It is also a debate over the object of the dispute. The predominant majority of politicians and planners were unwilling to listen to the claims of the *stRaten-generaal* spokesperson and other opponents, negating their legitimacy. On the eve of the referendum, one planning professor, for example, stated:

> A viaduct is a drastic decision. […] I, therefore, assume that specialists have thought very carefully about this. I have full confidence in the people who have to decide. Let us certainly not organize a referendum. *This file is food for specialists* [italics added by the authors].
As a writer who studied Germanic languages, the *stRaten-generaal* spokesperson was in no position to interfere with planning processes. The spokesperson, however, disagreed with this classification, arguing:

I often hear the self-evaluation that one does not feel like a specialist in urbanism, and therefore remains cautious when expressing criticism. Because others will know more about it. I think this is a reflex to throw away as far as possible because in the area of urban planning and spatial planning we are all specialists until the opposite is proven. It's about our living environment, and *we know everything about it* [italics added by the authors].

(Manu Claeys, spokesperson of *stRaten-generaal*, as cited in Claeys, 2013)

Although officially not a planner, the spokesperson of *stRaten-generaal* acted as one throughout the conflict, presenting technically and legally founded alternative planning propositions and formulating rational counter-arguments. He presented himself, in other words, as a ‘citizen-planner’ (Beard, 2012) equal to professional planners. He acted as a radical or insurgent planner, in Friedmann’s and Sandercock’s terms, and demanded to be heard as such.

The spokesperson of *stRaten-generaal* did so using rational and technical arguments. As such, in a sense, he still responded to the image of the planner as an expert. Through his actions, however, he opened up the symbolic order for other citizens and action groups, who presented themselves not as expert planners. The spokesperson of *Ademloos* and a group of elderly neighbours, for example, became involved after attending and being inspired by a public presentation of *stRaten-generaal* (Van Hees & Avonts, 2018).

In sum, alongside changes in power relations and the sense-making process through the inclusion of various stakeholders, a third type of transformation is apparent in this case. The third interpretation defines transformation as the alteration of the symbolic order by the
emergence of a new political subject. By dis-identifying from the position given to him and by presenting himself as equal to professional planners, the individual who later became the spokesperson of stRaten-generaal disrupted the common method of looking at planning and who should be involved in planning practices.

Admittedly, the stRaten-generaal spokesperson can hardly be compared with, for example, the Anti-Eviction Campaign activists whose insurgent planning practices are described in the analyses of Miraftab and Wills (2005) and Miraftab (2009). However, we follow Jacques Rancière’s argument that there is no specific group in society destined to bring forth transformation (Chambers, 2013, pp. 16-17). The symbolic order can be disrupted and altered by anyone who does not feel represented.

By itself, however, political subjectification as a force of social transformation remained limited in its effects. Power-building through the development of alliances and chains of equivalence was necessary for the government to perceive the citizen movements as a significant enough threat to begin a deliberation process.

The case also shows how political subjectification as a transformative force is temporal. The eventual rapprochement between the citizen movements on one side and the Flemish government and BAM on the other, the institutionalisation of their collaboration in the ‘Pact of the Future’, and the incorporation of the stRaten-generaal spokesperson into the BAM board of directors resulted in the reformation of the symbolic order. Once incorporated and normalised in the symbolic order, a subject loses its transformative character when transformation is perceived as political subjectification. For example, by becoming a member of the BAM board, the stRaten-generaal spokesperson engaged in an extensive collaboration with BAM, the ‘work community’, and the involved administrations and politicians. In this position, he became an important defender of the policy pursued (Claeys, 2019), countering the critiques of activists.
and academics who believed that the citizen movements have given in too much to the Flemish government and BAM/Lantis (Boelens, 2018; Van Dooren, 2019).

Conclusion

This article argues that using a polysemic understanding of ‘social transformation’ provides a deeper analysis of the transformative dynamics at work in contentious planning cases. Inclusion-oriented, power-oriented, and subjectification-oriented social transformation can impact day-to-day planning. We have substantiated this claim by examining the transformative dynamics at play in one of Belgium’s most notorious planning conflicts in the past two decades, the Oosterweel link road conflict in Antwerp, focusing on these three forms of social transformation.

The first interpretation, the inclusion-oriented approach to social transformation, links the possibility of social transformation to the inclusion of multiple interests at the decision-making table and to the change in people’s conception of reality through inclusion. In the Oosterweel case, the appointment of a mediator to facilitate dialogue between opposing parties and the creation of a collaborative ‘work community’ resulted in shifts in stakeholders’ opinions; the spokesperson of one of the action groups that initially fought against the Oosterweel link road developments admitted that, through inclusion and dialogue, taboos were killed on both sides. In other words, inclusion-oriented procedures, such as the inclusion of plural narratives in the decision-making process, resulted in social transformation as defined in the inclusion-oriented interpretation (i.e., actors rethink their positions, interests, and values).

The second interpretation of social transformation, the power-oriented approach, associates the possibility of transformation with explicit counter-hegemonic struggles that aim to change power relations. We argue that in the case of the Oosterweel link road conflict, deliberation between the government and citizen movements was impossible until the citizen
movements gained enough power to form an actual threat to the government and its plans. The enormous public support for the citizen movements—mobilized by activating political passion about the subject—as well as the pending notice of objection at the Council of State, put pressure on the Flemish government to find a solution that could satisfy both parties.

The subjectification-oriented interpretation of social transformation, which revolves around the emergence of new political subjects changing the symbolic order of society, is a third interpretation relevant in the analysis of this case. Alongside the power struggles and inclusionary processes that took place, a disruption of the symbolic order of planning processes occurred and new subjects were created. Ordinary citizens such as the spokesperson of stRaten-generaal, who until then had not been seen as legitimate participants in planning processes and whose voice was ignored and treated as irrelevant, were able to break into the planning process. They established themselves as equals and legitimate participants, hence altering the symbolic order.

We have shown how different forces of transformation intertwine and can be mutually reinforcing in contentious planning processes. In this case, for example, political subjectification remained limited in its effects as a force of social transformation until it was accompanied by power-building. Similarly, the inclusion-oriented transformation we observed in stakeholders’ perspectives shifting through mediation and dialogue could only occur because the citizen movements gained enough power to form an actual threat to the government and its plans. But also, the combination of a shift in the balance of power with the emergence of new political subjects, the establishment of their equality of speaking and their eventual inclusion in the form decision-making process shows that there is more to social transformation than a shifting balance of power.
At the same time, however, certain forms of transformation can exclude others. Inclusion-oriented transformation and subjectification-oriented transformation are unlikely to occur simultaneously. With the act of deliberation and consensus-building, political subjects tend to lose their subjectification-oriented transformative character. In the Oosterweel case, for example, the spokesperson of *stRaten-generaal* became part of the symbolic order once accepted as a legitimate speaker.

What do these insights mean for the field of transformative planning practice and theory? We argue that if we accept the fundamentally political nature of planning, we also must accept that planning practices will always include and exclude certain actors and topics from the field of planning in its attempt to manage and control the socio-spatial order. While the degree of exclusion differs, planning processes exclude regardless whether a planning practitioner works with a rational comprehensive or collaborative state of mind.

The way actors challenge this exclusion will differ. Some professional planners will try to undo this exclusion through including relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process, action groups such as *Ademloos* build a strong grassroots movement to strengthen its power base, relevancy and legitimacy. Both transformative forces are equally important for planning theory and practice, regardless of whether they are performed by a professional planner. As such, planners with transformative ambitions that aim to use planning as ancillary to broader social change and as contributing to a more equal and just society, need to be aware of these different forms of social transformation. In fact, we argue that social transformation is most comprehensive when understood in a polysemic way, that is, when realised through inclusion-oriented, power-oriented, and subjectification-oriented transformative forces.

**References**


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### Table 1. Three interpretations of social transformation in transformative planning literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What? (substantive)</th>
<th>Power-oriented</th>
<th>Subjectification-oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformation as the inclusion of multiple interests in the decision-making process</td>
<td>Transformation as changes in power relations</td>
<td>Transformation as disruption and the emergence of new political subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation as changes in how people understand society</td>
<td>Transformation as changes in the symbolic order</td>
<td>Transformation as changes in the symbolic order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How? (procedural)</th>
<th>Inclusion-oriented</th>
<th>Power-oriented</th>
<th>Subjectification-oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy planning theory</td>
<td>Through the advocacy of different interests and values by planners</td>
<td>Through the use of passion</td>
<td>Through dis-identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative planning theory</td>
<td>Through including stakeholders in decision-making process</td>
<td>Through building chains of equivalence</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical &amp; Insurgent planning theory</td>
<td>Through self-development driven by small action-oriented groups bonded through dialogue and non-hierarchical relations (Friedmann)</td>
<td>Through acts of resistance by communities, activists or marginalized groups, operating in the interstices of power (Sandercock)</td>
<td>Through counter-hegemonic acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical antagonistic pluralism</td>
<td>Through the use of passion</td>
<td>Through building chains of equivalence</td>
<td>Through counter-hegemonic acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgent planning theory</td>
<td>Through defamiliarization</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical political urban theory</td>
<td>Through dis-identification</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through acts of resistance by communities, activists or marginalized groups, operating in the interstices of power (Sandercock)</td>
<td>Through counter-hegemonic acts</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through counter-hegemonic responses to the neoliberal specifics of dominance through inclusion (Miraftab)</td>
<td>Through counter-hegemonic acts</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
<td>Through claiming equality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This company changed its name in April 2019 from ‘BAM nv’ to ‘Lantis’.

The name *stRaten-generaal* is a pun referring to the *Staten-Generaal*. The ‘r’ turns *staten*—meaning states—into *straten*—meaning streets. The action committee *stRaten-generaal* argues that streets are democratic places where citizens come together and express themselves publicly.

The official question put forth in the referendum was: ‘Should the city of Antwerp give favourable advice for the urban development permit of the Oosterweel connection on the current planned route between Zwijndrecht / Linkeroever and Merksem / Deurne? Yes or no?’ Most residents voting ‘no’ declared they were against the viaduct.

The budget reserved is 1.25 billion euros, while the total project is estimated to cost 9 billion euros.

Some opposition groups did mention air and noise pollution in their objections, but in the larger debate, this argument remained rather marginal or situated at neighbourhood level.