

Governing for Sustainability: Between Post-political Participation and Apathy in an Argentinian Neighbourhood

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Abstract:

Despite the increased focus on sustainable urban development both within academia and in urban planning practices, authors seem to agree that we are mostly continuing business as usual and are not embarking on different socio-environmental trajectories. On the contrary, such urban sustainability practices can often lead to processes of displacement and gentrification, thus worsening the conditions for the already marginalised urban residents. Through this thesis I have therefore set out to critically examine how a decentralised municipal initiative for sustainability in a marginalised neighbourhood in Rosario, Argentina, is being governed, by investigating which forms of participation are encouraged and expected, in order to assess whether the initiative has an emancipation potential in a meaningful political dimension for the people of this neighbourhood. With especially Erik Swyngedouw's key understandings of the post-political condition, I argue that the initiative's use of post-political techniques of governing invokes particular forms of participation where the responsibility for sustainability is put upon the individual and becomes a moral act. This is played out in a consensual techno-managerial approach where radical dissent is being evicted from the political arena. I therefore argue, that these governance processes all work to draw awareness away from the properly political issue of unequal power relations in society; the structural mechanisms that produced the environmental 'bads' and the socio-economic exclusion in the neighbourhood to begin with. However, these participation strategies are dependent on the goodwill and voluntary actions of the people in the neighbourhood which has not been easy to gather. Instead, there is a widespread distrust, apathy and vandalism towards the sustainability initiative in particular and the municipality in general, which can be interpreted as a way to resist accession to the post-political nature of participation, in other words, as a form of antagonistic resistance.

“Without antagonism, there can never be any change in human societies. Species-thinking on climate change only induces paralysis. If everyone is to blame, then no one is.”

- Andreas Malm (2015)

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I. INTRODUCTION

*“The oil is coming to an end, we have to think of having to live differently”*¹. These words were repeated in safety from the stark December heat in the shadows of the austere entrances of three different residential buildings in the same evening in a peripheral neighbourhood of Argentina’s third largest city, Rosario. Global peak-oil scenarios and their possible impacts on people of this small and relatively poor neighbourhood², as well as ways to make sense of and relate these scenarios to their own lives, was laid out by a charismatic member of the municipality team, Ignacio, to the listening crowd of residential consortium members, curious residents, random passersby, playing children, and also, a human ecology graduate *in spe*. One way to start, they were told, is to install solar panels in the neighbourhood, an initiative that should be partly financed by the profit from recycling waste in each of the residential buildings. *“What we want to do is this,”* said Ignacio, *“you separate the waste, and that’s money in some way, which serves to employ the technology that we are going to use.”* Despite the informality of the gatherings, where most people attending had been summoned by knocking on doors, the municipal team was happy with the large turnout, who mostly showed support of this new recycling and solar panel project - a way of starting to live differently, and a part of an attempt to make the neighbourhood sustainable.

This project is part of an urban sustainability initiative called *Barrios Sustentables* (*Sustainable Neighbourhoods*) initiated in March 2014 by the municipality of Rosario. Since the Brundtland Commission’s definition of the concept ‘sustainability’ in 1987³, numerous versions and variations of the concept have taken off (Swyngedouw 2007: 20). One such variation is as a widely deployed strategy for urban and regional development (Krueger & Gibbs 2007: 6). The municipality of Rosario intends through their sustainability initiative to improve the conditions for the people of this marginalised neighbourhood while at the same time aiming for a social change through participation and decentralisation processes. During a period of three to four months in the Argentinean spring and summer of 2014-2015, I partook in the initiative’s projects, activities and meetings organised by the municipality aimed at the participation of the people in the neighbourhood. Ranging from the more formal settings of municipality or community meetings, to less formal practices of recycling and tree planting, my research centred on the empirical

¹ All translations from Spanish to English are my own.

² I do not disclose the name of the neighbourhood in order to protect my interlocutors anonymity. Instead it will be referred to as ‘the neighbourhood’ throughout the thesis.

³ Defined as: *“development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”* (unece.org)

phenomena of the governance process of the initiative. In face of the burgeoning number of sustainable cities being proposed, authors are increasingly arguing that these initiatives mostly have led to “*a great deal of discursive smoke but little in the way of empirical fire*” (Lafferty & Meadowcroft 2000: 2). In other words, despite these numerous sustainability strategies within urban planning, we are mostly continuing business as usual and are not embarking on different socio-environmental trajectories (Swyngedouw 2007: 20). This therefore calls for more rigorous engagement with the politics and governance processes of sustainability, including relating these to broader concepts and issues of social-environmental change.

Within this discussion, this thesis aims to critically investigate how or in which way the governance process of the sustainability initiative affects the people in the neighbourhood. Especially from a social justice perspective, this initiative can be seen as an important effort to address the issues of impoverishment and socio-spatial segregation that affect this neighbourhood (Rodríguez 2005: 42), while the initiative’s strong focus on decentralisation and participation strategies has the potential to contribute to a more egalitarian inclusion in political decision-making processes. In other words, against these ‘*discursive smoke*’ characteristic of many sustainability initiatives⁴, the governance of the initiative might be conducive to the possibility of a meaningful or proper political dimension in the neighbourhood, understood as the ability to radically criticise a given order (Mouffe 2005: 52), which can provide the ground for embarking on different socio-environmental trajectories, as mentioned above.

However, despite the initiative’s intentions, it has both failed to have a significant impact in the neighbourhood and to gather public participation. I therefore intend to critically examine the specific governance processes in the initiative, by investigating the expected and encouraged forms of participation in order to assess whether or how the initiative has a potential for a meaningful political dimension in the neighbourhood. This has led to the following research questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is the sustainability initiative in Rosario being governed?
2. Which forms of participation are encouraged and expected?
3. What are the implications of the sustainability initiative for the possibility of a political dimension in the neighbourhood?

⁴ I elaborate more thoroughly on these aspects in the theoretical framework.

II. THESIS STRUCTURE

The thesis is divided into six sections: a contextual section, four analytical sections, and a conclusion.

The contextual section (chapter I-V) presents, aside from the introduction and research questions, the contextual setting for the research both in terms of existing literature and in terms of the spatiotemporal frame of the sustainability initiative. The theoretical framework is presented in chapter IV, which primarily involves exploring key understandings, especially Swyngedouw's, of the post-political condition as a way to critically analyse urban governance for sustainability. This perspective is complemented by Foucault's notion of governmentality that is applied to understand the relationship between the specific governance strategies and the subsequent behaviours they can aim at encouraging among its citizens. Lastly there is a section about the methodological implications, including reflections on methods, of this study.

Chapter VI, *On the Grounds of the Sustainability Initiative*, provides a general introduction to challenges the municipality is facing, as well as the underlying perceptions and logics behind the initiative, in order to better understand why and how the municipality is governing for sustainability in the neighbourhood. Moreover, it discusses how the initiative can be situated within current trends in urban planning, more specifically how through deliberate participation processes citizens are to become 'instruments' for a social change in the neighbourhood.

Chapter VII, *Apocalypse, Morality and Depoliticisation*, moves to the empirical setting of one of the most significant projects in the sustainability initiative, the recycling and solar panel project. It explores two aspects of this project; first, how the municipality, through different strategies or technologies of governing, is encouraging and expecting particular forms of participation. I argue that the discourse on apocalyptic imaginaries as well as a powerful homogenising ethic are used to constitute 'responsible' environmental subjects. This is played out in a consensual techno-managerial approach where the responsibility for sustainability is put upon the shoulders of the individuals in the neighbourhood. I therefore suggest that the sustainability initiative resembles a post-political form of governance. Secondly, I explore the discursive beliefs behind these technologies of governing and as such, which implications it has for the possibility of proper political element in the neighbourhood.

Chapter VIII, *Political Exploitations & Resistance*, takes up the issue of the distrust and apathy in the neighbourhood towards the initiative. I argue that the initiative's lack of a larger institutional support and financial resources suggests that the purpose of the initiative is to garner

votes for the local elections, a phenomenon that people in the neighbourhood not only have experienced previously but also assume to be true. From this optic, it is possible to understand why people generally are not participating in the initiative, and how their apathy can be interpreted as a form of passive resistance to this political exploitation as well as the post-political nature of participation or consensus. Finally, I suggest that specific acts of vandalism towards the recycling and solar panel project can be interpreted as an alternative channel for radical dissent.

In Chapter IX, *Democratic Deficits and Just Governance*, I question the benefits of a governance initiative like this in terms of its consequences in relation to a political involvement or voicing in the neighbourhood in the context of what was described in chapter VIII. I argue that the initiative's failure of fulfilling its promises to the community, along with the existing democratic deficit in the neighbourhood, can be harmful for the trust and incentives for a real political participation. Finally, I discuss how 'much' we ought to expect of this form of local governance in striving for sustainability which leads to reflections on how or in which way we can think about organising the neighbourhood, or the city in general, in a more just way.

In the last chapter, I conclude that the initiative can contribute to a growing apathy in the neighbourhood by not fulfilling its promises to the community, by not providing any channels for a broader political voicing and by drawing attention away from mechanisms of structural inequalities. In other words, I argue that the initiative's post-political governance techniques occasion a foreclosure of a properly political dimension in the neighbourhood.

III. CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

This study contributes to existing literature that approaches sustainability through case studies. Common to these approaches is to show sustainability in action in various localities, with special focus on the different policy measures and processes from which local authorities can choose in order to implement their own forms of sustainable development (Krueger & Gibbs 2007: 3). Within this literature, cities such as Portland (Oregon), Santa Monica (California), Freiburg (Germany) - and perhaps culminating in the ultimate 'clima utopia come true', namely the development of the Western Harbour in Malmö, Sweden (Giddens 2009: 158) - have been praised for their efforts to exemplify models of sustainability for the rest of the world to follow (Krueger & Gibbs 2007: 3). However, as I will elaborate on below, these projects are increasingly criticised from a number of perspectives, especially for ignoring broader social concerns such as justice and equity.

Therefore, unlike the prestigious sustainability projects mentioned above, what initially struck me about the sustainability initiative in Rosario was the apparent lack of any outstanding or apparent improvements in the neighbourhood. It was with this interest that I engaged with the sustainability initiative which, according to its description, aimed at developing actions and projects of common interests and including the citizens in the decision-making processes (Municipalidad de Rosario 2014a). The content of the neighbourhood-centred initiatives in Rosario are quite varied, from training programmes, cultural activities, market fairs and recycling to tree planting - activities that do not only relate to the satisfaction of basic material human needs, but aim to also shape the spheres of identity, recognition and citizenship (ibid., González et al. 2010: 59). Furthermore, the Socialist Party, who has controlled the city government in Rosario since 1989, has in its urban governance, according to themselves, heavily emphasised public participation (Almansi 2009: 27). Despite Rosario⁵ being similar to most other larger Argentinean cities in terms of social and economic aspects, its urban planning is therefore perhaps somehow distinctive as it is characterised by a strong tradition of decentralisation which in theory allows for the participation and capacity development of its citizens⁶ (ibid.), and therefore makes an interesting case of participation in decentralised state initiatives. The sustainability initiative, which focuses specifically on improving the conditions in a marginalised neighbourhood, can exemplify a very different case than those previously examined, one which is very relevant from a social justice or ‘right to the city’⁷ perspective.

However, it is important to recognise that although the municipal government exercises a high degree of autonomy over its own functions⁸, it is dependent on the provincial government to

⁵ Rosario is the third largest city in Argentina with a population around 1.1 million. It is located in the Santa Fe province, 300 kilometres northwest of the capital city, Buenos Aires, on the Paraná River. It forms the core of Greater Rosario, which has a total population of approximately 1.5 million people (2007 estimate) (Almansi 2009: 19).

⁶ This can perhaps best be illustrated with the example of the recent development of its enormous riverbank. Unlike the development of the huge harbour area in the capital Buenos Aires (Puerto Madero), a process which began at the same time, where all public land were fully privatised, Rosario’s riverbank were imposed by planning conditions and restrictions in order to dedicate the land to public use (Almansi 2009: 26).

⁷ ‘The right to the city’ was an expression first coined by Henry Lefebvre in 1968 and has since inspired various literature on urban studies. It is defined by David Harvey as: “*The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights*” (Harvey 2008: 23, Harvey 2012: x).

⁸ Such as setting various taxes, signing contracts and administering its assets.

distribute and allocate financial resources (Almansi 2009: 20). In the same way, the sustainability initiative is not isolated, but is embedded in larger economic and social contexts. More specifically, the initiative has its roots in the provincial initiated programme *Plan Abre (Plan Open)*. The plan mostly aims at improving material aspects and granting land tenure in so-called *Fonavi*⁹ neighbourhoods in the province of Santa Fe throughout 2014-2015.

In Argentina, *Fonavi* neighbourhoods were built at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s as a result of a strong investment by the state with the aim of providing decent housing for low-income families (Rudi et al. 2006: 48-9). These *Fonavi* neighbourhoods can be seen in connection to the large-scale urbanisation process that took place in and around Latin American cities during 1950-80 (Almansi et al. 2014: 6). In Rosario about 100.000 people live in *Fonavi* neighbourhoods, this present neighbourhood being one of them with a total of 37 residential buildings and 168 houses, housing about 3.200 inhabitants. Not uncommon to the majority of *Fonavi* projects in Argentina, the neighbourhood is suffering from a lack of social cohesion, high crime rates, deterioration of public spaces, poor maintenance of buildings, and with an unemployment rate of nearly 16% (Municipalidad de Rosario 2014a, Municipalidad de Rosario 2014b). Furthermore, the inhabitants are exposed to environmental risks and poor housing conditions, including exposure to floods, uncollected garbage, insecure tenure, housing deficits and lack of or poor quality provision of infrastructure and services (Almansi et al. 2014: 6, Rodríguez 2005: 13,60).

This situation is, according to the municipality, to some degree connected to the lack of land tenure in the *Fonavi* neighbourhoods. Although urbanisation in the outskirts of Latin American cities normally happened either as planned or spontaneous/informal undertakings (Almansi et al. 2014: 6), the *Fonavi* neighbourhoods reflect a mixed process, as the lack of land tenure is confined to the residential buildings¹⁰. When handing over the *Fonavi* housing units, the state decided to give land tenure first when the units were paid for by the households, usually after 20 years. In the meantime, this lack of land tenure meant that an informal land market was created where people sold and bought the *Fonavi* housing units. In time, the situation became increasingly complicated for the state; perhaps because of a political lack of willingness to resolve the tenure problems, the complications of how to decide to whom each housing unit belonged after a long period of being on

⁹ “*Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda*” (the national housing fund).

¹⁰ This is mainly due to a bureaucratic question. For the *Fonavi* houses the land tenure has been fairly simple to decide on as it is confined to each individual plot of land, whereas it is more complicated in apartment buildings where there has to be some sort of co-owner agreement of the land between all the residents.

a ‘irregular’ market, and because of the bureaucratic rules surrounding the *Fonavi* area. This has meant that the majority of the 60.000¹¹ *Fonavi* housing units in Argentina have not been able to access land tenure. However, the state has acknowledged its responsibility for this situation and has initiated several initiatives to regularise the situation (Ameriso 2009, Candido 2011, Santa Fe 2015). According to the municipality, the tenure insecurity has hindered attempts to upgrade the conditions in the neighbourhood, because residents have little incentive to improve something that first of all is not theirs and secondly, the recognition that they will receive no compensation for these improvements (Almansi 2009a: 390). However, this situation might change as the province through *Plan Abre* has initiated a process of granting land tenure to the residents.

The processes of exclusion and impoverishment in these areas (Rodríguez 2005: 42) have not only created a large stigma connected to living in a *Fonavi* neighbourhood, but have also, according to the municipality, heavily impacted the residents’ perception of their life situation, in particular contributed to the sentiment that “here we are forgotten”. With a lack of social cohesion in conjunction with an absent state investment, there is a general fear that these neighbourhoods will become the ‘*villas miserias*’ (‘*slums of misery*’) of the future (Municipalidad de Rosario 2014a).

At present, the opportunity exists for the municipality to complement the material investments¹² and the granting of land tenure through the provincial-led *Plan Abre* programme with actions to strengthen the social aspects in the community. In that way, the sustainability initiative could perhaps actually improve conditions for the people in this neglected neighbourhood. Although the project has many good intentions, it is facing many challenges, including difficulties resulting from relationships between the actors; especially this deep feeling of abandonment and mistrust in the neighbourhood towards the local government.

The aim of this study is therefore to critically analyse the logics and processes of governance behind the sustainability initiative. Sustainability initiatives as this are not inherently good meaning we must explore the implications they can have in different contexts, for different actors and ultimately for achieving social, environmental, economic and political sustainability.

¹¹ Approximately 28.000 of these exist in Rosario.

¹² These investments include in the neighbourhood pavement, improved street lighting, improving public spaces, renovation of the facades of the residential buildings, sewer improvements, the formation of consortiums, and granting of land tenure.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Concepts of urban sustainability and sustainable cities have gained increasing ground both in social environmental research as well as in urban planning. Research on the one hand has demonstrated the interconnectedness of physical-ecological processes with socio-economic and cultural processes, thereby exposing the overwhelming contribution to environmental degradation represented by the urban maelstrom. On the other hand, research has also contributed to apocalyptic imaginaries of the world's urban future, imaginaries that are dominated by systemic anxieties of environmental risks and disasters (Hornborg 2014: 1-2, Swyngedouw 2009: 608). In order to avoid this apocalypse, the tendency within analyses of urban sustainability has been to perceive the city as a literal and metaphorical ecosystem in which there exist an urgent task of understanding the city's environmental flows and restore its 'artificial ecosystem'¹³ (Hagan 2015: 4). These studies reflect a belief in the power of the current neoliberal system in which the task is about an intrinsic ability of 'getting it right' to produce desired outcomes (Krueger & Gibbs 2007: 2). This refers first of all to a material level in which the effectiveness of technical and economic fixes might be applied to manage the city in a more sustainable way (Bulkeley & Betsill 2005: 43), as Whitehead (2003) argues: "*such work has tended to reduce the analysis of sustainable urban development to a technical matter of institutional restructuring, traffic management, architectural design and the development of green technologies*" (ibid.: 1187). On the more political level, this approach to urban development is therefore often dominated by a liberal rationalist discourse, a perception of politics as a way to make rational decisions based on the particular issue, often identified in 'good governance' theory (Mouffe 2005: 2, 4, 34). In contrast to these more traditional neoliberal approaches are studies that focus on reformulating economic systems in order to reflect the real value of the 'environment', i.e. redefining how economic value is created (see e.g. Costanza et al. 1997, Hawken et. al. 2000, Brown 2001) and/or arguing for systems of steady-state economies where the economy only grows at a rate in which natural resources can replenish themselves (see e.g. Daly 1974). However, such studies are also premised on the idea that a properly regulated market is an ideal instrument for bringing about sustainability.

In contrast to these approaches, scholars have recently begun to look at sustainability as complex social processes and are adopting "cross-domain" analyses in which several issues of sustainability are considered (for example: justice, equity, power, etc.). Therefore, in spite of how

¹³ In line with this, you can also mention for example Wackernagel and Rees (1996) concept of ecological footprints which seek to measure for example the city's environmental impact on earth - also a source of inspiration for local sustainability.

seemingly neutral or rational above-mentioned, economy-centred urban sustainability initiatives might seem, critical studies point to neglected power relations, derived social consequences (such as processes of displacement and gentrification), and critique the tendency to divorce the local from other scales (see e.g. Agyeman et al. 2003, Banzhaf 2008, Bulkeley & Betsill 2005, Caprotti 2014, Checker 2011, Holgersen & Malm 2015).

In this thesis, I take my lead from these critical perspectives, particularly from Erik Swyngedouw's (2007, 2009, 2010, 2014) post-political approach to sustainable urban governance. Engaging in this sort of focus on the politics of sustainability represents a gap in the current sustainability literature (Krueger & Gibbs 2007: 2). Nevertheless, Swyngedouw's writings are part of a growing body of literature on the post-political or post-democratic condition (see e.g. Baeten 2009, Crouch 2004, Mouffe 2005, Raco 2003, Žižek 2002), which specifically address how the 'mode of governing' of different domains, such as the environmental, social, and economic, are being reduced to a sort of managerial consensual governing where the political is deprived of its proper political dimension (Žižek 2002: 303). According to Swyngedouw this exact post-political condition is not only particularly prevalent in sustainability practices, but it is actually the key arena through which the post-political have been constructed and forged (Swyngedouw 2010: 216, Žižek 2005: 117).

For Swyngedouw, the evidence of the extensive environmental degradation, not at least the undisputed scientific facts of climate change, which is marked by the increasing levels of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere due to anthropogenic activity, are being conveyed into matters of concerns without a proper political intermediation (Swyngedouw 2010: 217). As mentioned above, the production of apocalyptic imaginaries, where the seriousness of environmental problems are perceived as universally threatening to humans and non-humans alike, is generating a particular universal political subject, the "people". If you couple that with the fetishism of CO₂ as the externalised object of cause and fear we get a global antagonistic struggle between us, the people, and them, CO₂ (ibid.: 219). With what consequences? According to Swyngedouw, the maintaining of apocalyptic imaginaries is "*an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism (...) for which the management of fear is a central leitmotif (...). At the symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or displacing social conflict and antagonisms.*" (Swyngedouw 2010: 219). Instead of seeing the environmental domain as wrapped up in fundamentally unequal and unjust social power relations, just as other domains, the construction of climate change or environmental disaster as global humanitarian causes the generation of a depoliticised terrain which is not identified with choosing a

specific political trajectory over another, or creating new socio-ecological projects or revolutions (Bettini & Karaliotas 2013: 333, Forsyth 2003, Swyngedouw & Cook 2012: 1966).

As also touched upon above, in viewing the city as a metaphorical and literal ecosystem, the groundwork is laid for the ‘fantasy of sustainability’, which is possible to reach through a series of technological, managerial and organisational fixes (Hornborg 2014, Swyngedouw & Cook 2012: 1962). Governance becomes in that way increasingly replaced by hard and soft technologies of administration (Žižek 2002: 303), which include the mobilisation of a combination of ecologically sensitive technologies, good managerial governance principles, institutionalised modes of stakeholder-based participation, changing consumer cultures and individual habits (Swyngedouw & Cook 2012: 1962). Swyngedouw therefore argues that in this post-political condition the ‘political’ is being reduced to ‘policing’ and ‘policymaking’ to managerial consensual governing (Swyngedouw 2009: 606).

This form of governing is rather close to Foucault’s notion of governmentality, a theoretical perspective, that I use in the analysis, but mostly as a complement to the post-political framework in order to elaborate on the understanding of the specific governance process. When the technologies of governing operate beyond the state and take the form of stakeholder participation, as mentioned above, it allows for forms of self-management and controlled self-disciplining (Swyngedouw 2009: 612). This is similar to Foucault’s perspective on power, in which power is understood as a way of structuring the possible field of action, it is the ‘conduct of conduct’, through the creation of ‘self-governing’ subjects (Bulkeley & Schroeder 2011: 748). In that way, governmentality is accomplished through “*the construction of certain truths and their circulation via normalizing and disciplining techniques, methods, discourses and practices that extend beyond the state and stretch across the whole social body.*” (ibid.). As such, the above-mentioned ‘policing’ becomes a form of self-policing that is internalised and enforced by the subjects themselves, creating a consonance between the interests of subjects and the interests of the state (Rutland 2008: 630).

All these dynamics lay the ground for a particular form of governance, one that forecloses the existence of a proper political element. When the authors theorise in this way, they address the dimension of politics in an ontological way; the concern is what the essence of the political is, not solely what it might be on an empirical level (Mouffe 2005: 8-9). Although the properly political is conceptualised in different ways, they agree on its antagonistic dimension; defined as the ability to radically criticise the existing power relations or a given order; a dispute over the situation itself

(Mouffe 2005: 52, Rancière 2001: Thesis 8, Swyngedouw 2007: 25). In that way, the properly political is being excluded in this form of consensual post-political governance.

Using this theoretical questioning of sustainability initiatives, I seek to examine the efforts in Rosario to understand the process of governance, whether or in which way it resembles an incidence of a post-political form of governance, and subsequently, how it enriches or detracts from a lively political landscape at the local level.

V. REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY

In the following I will first of all briefly touch upon the nature of my research, namely the case study. Then I go on to reflect on the methodological implications of how my research can be placed within the tradition of critical theory. After this I present the data analysis approach, then go on to consider three points concerning the data collection process; the benefits and limitations of the selected methods, in which way my positionality has influenced the research and ethical considerations.

CASE STUDY

Choosing a case study allows for an in-depth examination or explanation of the sustainability initiative in terms of a detailed consideration to contextual factors (George & Bennett 2005: 19, Ritchie et al. 2014: 66). Taking account of contextual and other historical factors is important when I have to assess the initiative's form of governance and its consequences, as it is not possible to understand these processes in isolation. In that way, the case study can be said to test the theoretical relationship between the initiative's governance strategies and the possibility of a political dimension in the neighbourhood (George & Bennett 2005: 21). It is not possible to assess 'how much' the initiative might impact the neighbourhood; instead the case study method has strengths in identifying whether or how it matters in the neighbourhood. Although the study obviously is not representative for every decentralised governance initiative in marginalised neighbourhoods (ibid.: 30-1), it can contribute to knowledge on urban governance or sustainability strategies and post-political conditions. Considering the accelerations in the numbers of sustainability initiatives, there is still a lack of knowledge on the politics of sustainability as well as urban development initiatives

in marginalised neighbourhoods, as mentioned above.

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory refers to the critical tradition developed in the beginning of the 1930s at the Institut für Sozialforschung, the so-called Frankfurt School, where especially Marx Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno came to shape and represent the development of critical theory (Ramsay 2007: 161). Although it is not my aim to thoroughly elaborate on the many different directions within and understandings of what critical theory is (Kincheloe & McLaren 2002: 89), I will in the following argue how my research can be placed within this tradition by referring to the broad and common characteristics.

As well as positivism, critical theory argue that the world exists independently of our knowledge or experience of it, in that way it has a *materialistic* point of departure which relates to its Marxist influence (Sayer 2000: 2, Elling 2009: 209). However, as a philosophy of science it opposes the positivistic claims of social laws, as well as the notion that it should be possible, through empirical observations and experiments, to achieve impartial and objective knowledge of those social laws. In that way, one can argue that critical theorists intend to find a middle-ground between positivism and constructivism by insisting both on non-discursive material settings and the need for interpretive understandings of social life (Sayer 2000: 3,20). Critical theory argues that this material reality is a result of or manifestation of power relations; a result of human factors, including conflicts between different interests and structural factors (Kincheloe & McLaren 2002: 88,90). The structures of society, such as the underlying relations of production, therefore play a crucial role in human's actions. However, this reality often appears distorted or misrepresented. Critical theory therefore contributes to the identification of the real, significant elements by exposing these distorted relationships. This is why critical theory, apart from providing an explanatory bases for social inquiry, also has a normative element that aims at 'human emancipation' in circumstances of domination and oppression (Elling 2009: 208, Geuss 1981: 2).

In the same way, my analysis is centred around the frame of the ideal of what the proper political is and the sustainability initiative's role herein. I am trying to point towards relationships or structures in society in general and in the governance of the initiative in particular, which contribute to, distort or impede the possibility for emancipation potential (i.e. a proper political dimension) in the neighbourhood. As such, I will point towards and reveal structures and forms of power, for

example the rationalities behind the initiative as well as the forms of participation that are encouraged and expected, which stands in the way for or distorts a proper political dimension, and therefore appears suppressive.

METHODS

I have mainly gathered my empirical data through participant observation and interviews. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed for a steering of the themes discussed as well as the opportunity for my interlocutors to talk fluidly and perhaps incorporate issues that I had not initially considered (May 2011: 135). I recorded five interviews with three people from the municipal team (Ignacio, Juan and Pedro), three of them individually and two joint. This municipal team had the main responsibility of creating and implementing the sustainability initiative. Furthermore, I collected seven individual interviews with different people from the neighbourhood. Beside this, I have recordings of some of the meetings in the neighbourhood, municipal material about the initiative, including a census of the neighbourhood, various news articles about the project in the media, and e-mail correspondences with the municipality team.

My data analysis process resembles the methodology of grounded theory (Charmaz 2008). As I began the research with an initial interest in the sustainability initiatives' impact in the neighbourhood, I did not approach my research with a specific theoretical framework in mind. Instead, I began inductively by gathering empirical data. From the transcribed interviews, I coded and categorised the different themes, in order to analyse the data. From this the key issues and recurrent themes began to emerge, key themes which not only challenged some of my preconceived ideas of the field¹⁴, but also helped situate my research within existing theory or literature (ibid.: 155-160). This combination of theory and empirical data is a strategy that is frequent within critical theory, more specifically in Horkheimer's dialectic ideal of science (Elling 2009: 209). After arranging the empirical material in this process that resembles that of grounded theory, I have created my analytical chapter from an alternation between a critical theoretical perspective on the real world, the sustainability initiative and the structures, and a theoretical understanding of those processes in society which contribute to misrepresentations and distortions (ibid.).

In the following, I will reflect on the advantages and drawbacks of the selected methods,

¹⁴ I thought or expected for example to find that processes of gentrification would be very visible or dominating in the neighbourhood (having prestigious urban sustainability projects in mind as mentioned above). However, that was quickly ruled out or disproved by the empirical data.

participant observation and interviews, how my positionality has affected the research, as well as the ethical consideration that has emerged both during process of data collection, but also after in writing the thesis. These aspects are considered first within the municipality, then within the neighbourhood.

THE MUNICIPALITY

I came in contact with the municipality team in August 2014 through my internship in a NGO, where two of the three members of the municipality team, Ignacio and Juan, also worked. Alongside Ignacio's job as the director of this NGO, he was working in the municipality of Rosario with the sustainability initiative, while Juan was contracted to do a specific project with greenhouse gas inventories, a project that also came to be my main task within the NGO. As the sustainability initiative is separate from the NGO, it was not until a couple of months later that I became involved in the initiative and began to have contact with the people in the neighbourhood (which lasted until February 2015).

This data collection trajectory has affected my data in several ways. First of all, I became close friends with these two members of the municipality team before they came to be my 'interlocutors'. The NGO was composed of a large network of Argentinean municipalities working with climate change, which often meant that we had to travel long hours to distant municipalities where we were likely to stay for a couple of days, thus setting the ground for quickly developing close relationships. As I continued working in the NGO while conducting the thesis' fieldwork, the borders between when I was a colleague, a friend or a researcher became blurred. In that way, they were perhaps more likely to see me as one of their peers and not just as an 'outside' researcher.

When I finally began to focus on the sustainability initiative in the neighbourhood, this previous established relationship allowed me to directly participate and accompany the team in its daily inner workings, such as going to and from the neighbourhood, participating in activities in the neighbourhood, overhearing discussions and dilemmas in the municipality, which gave me a unique opportunity to gain insight into their considerations and the way they were working in the neighbourhood. In that way, if it were not for the close relationships and the participant observation, I would only have generated a limited understanding of the governance process (Newell, Pattberg & Schroeder 2012: 379-80).

These relationships with the people in the municipality might have meant that I came to

develop a stake in the success of the project, and that I am in some kind of danger of ‘ethnographic seduction’ - not being able to critically distance myself from my interlocutors - especially when it is people with whom I share values and respect (ibid., Robben 1995: 114). Although it arguably is impossible to completely distance yourself from the people you are studying (and doubtful whether it is beneficial to do so), I argue that exactly because I developed close relationships, especially with Ignacio and Juan, I gained insight into issues that might otherwise have been hidden from me as an outsider. Here I am mostly referring to the critical or perhaps sometimes even sensitive opinions about the working conditions and the higher levels within the municipality. Furthermore, although it is mainly *their* project, it does not necessarily mean that they were particularly eager to present a ‘polished’ image of the situation. This was connected both to our confidence and closeness, but also because of my cultural connection to Argentina - they knew I was familiar with the often very complicated social, economic and political conditions in Argentina, having lived in the country on several occasions.

These aspects have obviously also led to a great deal of ethical considerations in writing this thesis (Ritchie et al. 2014: 81); do I risk putting them in a compromising situation within the municipality when using some of their critical comments? Although everyone mentioned is anonymised it might not take a lot of effort to decipher which neighbourhood I am talking about¹⁵, and thus the identity of members of the municipality team. Even though I have asked for permission for recording and stated my purpose every time I have conducted an interview (not only with the members of the municipality team, but also with the people in the neighbourhood), I have still shown the people quotes used and asked for their approval before using them. To my relief, they seemed much more relaxed about it as they doubt how many will read or understand the text as long as it is written in English, and because they believe that in the case that their comments will be known, it will not have any wider consequences within the municipality. Given these steps that I have taken, I feel comfortable that I have fulfilled the ethical requirements to my interlocutors.

¹⁵ In order to respect both the municipality team’s and the people in the neighbourhood’s anonymity, I have anonymised the name of the neighbourhood. This has some implications for what I can say about the neighbourhood, especially when talking about its specific social fabric, as it was a specific labor segment that was primarily assigned to live there. However, while this might be seen as a weakness, I believe this is kind of censorship can be a necessary and given condition when obtaining knowledge through intersubjective encounters.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

As beneficial for my research my relationship with the municipality team was, it is possible that it had the opposite effect for my access to the people in the neighbourhood. The municipality team was my gatekeeper to the neighbourhood (Ritchie et al. 2014: 90). Without them I might never have heard about the project in the first place. As mentioned above, I accompanied the team whenever they were having meetings or activities in the neighbourhood, thus physically entering and leaving together, which most likely got many people to associate me with the municipality. I could not enter the neighbourhood alone due to the security situation in the neighbourhood and because of my obvious appearance as a foreigner and a woman. It was therefore a compromise that was necessary in the research context in which I had to balance gaining access with unwanted association to the municipality, or perhaps not having any access at all.

I specifically intended to curb this positionality by conducting the interviews without the presence of any municipality team member, clearly stating how the data would be used and with the promise of anonymity. Although I cannot be sure how this exactly influenced the data I gathered, I suspected sometimes that the people were considering me a mouthpiece for their claims to the municipality, for example when they kept insisting and repeating in detail where or how they had to carry out improvements in the neighbourhood, and that they had to fulfil what they had promised. Nevertheless, I do not expect it to have had an enormous influence on the data gathered, as there was not a huge gap between the municipality team and the people in the neighbourhood as the initiative is carried out in a partnership approach¹⁶. This is of course not to say that the relationship was not characterised by a clear distribution or relationship of power, but it did not prevent the people from making their claims known or criticising the initiative or the municipality both in front of the team, and in the individual interviews. In addition to my perhaps authoritative position by being associated with the municipality team, I also had to consider other power dynamics, such as class, nationality, culture and education. While this inevitably forms a limitation to my work, it is obviously not possible to completely escape certain aspects of your positionality. In that way, the best I can do is try to be aware and understand how these aspects influence my research (Smith 1999: 176).

Unlike my doubts about the consequences of the municipality team's statements within the municipality, the people in the neighbourhood are not in a risk of experiencing any negative or unforeseen consequences due to their critical opinions - on the contrary, as mentioned above, these

¹⁶ I elaborate on this aspect in the first chapter of the analysis.

opinions were mostly already all well known to the municipality.

One of the consequences and limitations of the study is my position of being very much an outsider and being constrained in access to the people in the neighbourhood. I could therefore have wished for a closer relationship with the people in the neighbourhood, but that would have demanded spending much more time in the neighbourhood either alone or in the company with some people living there. While the first, as mentioned above, unfortunately was not practically possible, I was not comfortable or did not find it appropriate to ask to take up people's time to just 'hang out' (Ritchie et al. 2014: 87). Apart from two interviews I conducted when Juan and I went to the neighbourhood alone and asked random people on the street if they were interested in talking about the sustainability initiative, I got most of my interviews before or after the meetings or activities in the neighbourhood. This implies that the people I talked to were likely already involved or had participated in the project. However, this is not a limitation to the study since being active does not mean that they were not critical. On the contrary, even active and engaged partners reflected dissatisfaction as mentioned above.

VI. ON THE GROUNDS OF THE SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

In the following chapter, I will begin the analysis by examining the reasoning behind the sustainability initiative in an attempt to better understand which underlying perceptions of urban planning prevail within these. This will help to develop a better understanding of why the municipality is acting the way it does in the neighbourhood. By examining the different logics for intervening in the neighbourhood it will become partly possible to understand how the sustainability initiative is being governed, and which forms of participation are encouraged and expected. This analysis is connected to the first two research question and will continue in the next chapter where I will look closer into the actual applied strategies or technologies of governing.

PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

When intervening in the neighbourhood, the municipality has from the beginning had a clear strategy of not only improving material features, but also work on the social relations in the

neighbourhood. In the words of Ignacio: *“What we see is that it is not enough with the material investment, you know in the buildings, if the social fabric [tramado social] is not strengthened then it will last a very short time (...). Well, our vision is this in a way, try to find a way to intervene in the neighbourhoods together with the neighbours.”* As mentioned above, the material investments and the granting of land tenure provided by provincial programme *Plan Abre* paved the way for the municipality to enter the neighbourhood. It was furthermore, according to the municipality, unthinkable to ask the neighbours to participate in the sustainability initiative had they not seen an actual investment or commitment from the government due to the huge mistrust towards public institutions¹⁷.

A recurrent example of how the municipality had failed previously to implement improvements in the neighbourhood was tree-planting in the mid-90's which resulted in most of the trees getting ripped out. Without knowing the exact motives for these acts, the municipality thinks it could have been because some people either simply did not want them there, or they stole them to put in their own gardens, or as acts of vandalism. Now, as a part of the sustainability initiative, one of the primary schools in the neighbourhood is teaching their pupils how to take care of trees, and some of the older pupils have each become 'patrons' of their own tree. According to the school's headmaster, this will define the success of the project, which besides from creating a more comfortable microclimate in and around the school with more shade, also teaches the pupils something about responsibility. In other words, people in the neighbourhood need to have some kind of direct relationship to the projects initiated by the municipality if they are to last. Without community involvement in the project, and a democratic mandate for acting in the neighbourhood, the municipality believes that will see their efforts destroyed (Bulkeley 2013: 94).

This can on the one hand be understood as a part of the complexity of governing sustainability. The municipality has no direct control over every social problem or every unsustainable practice as these are embedded within multiple scales and actors. Obviously, the municipality cannot in an instant, for example, simply eradicate the violence or vandalism in the neighbourhood; they do not have the power to directly govern “over” society. Non-state actors therefore become integral to governing sustainability, which is achieved by and through individuals and institutions in the neighbourhood (Bulkeley & Schroeder 2011: 748). It is also worth noticing that while the

¹⁷ I elaborate on this aspect more thoroughly in the section 'Political distrust'.

municipality promises a ‘carrot’¹⁸, there are no ‘sticks’, no fines or penalties, if the people choose not to participate. According to Rutland & Aylett (2008) it is therefore exactly here the facilitative power of governmentality¹⁹ finds its place, as voluntary actions are inadequate, but direct enforcement is often both ineffective and seen as an unviable political move (ibid.: 641, Agrawal 2005: 19). Instead, new forms of governance in which communities play a central role, as in this present neighbourhood, have become widespread (Agrawal 2005: 19).

On the other hand, it can also be explained from a financial point of view, as the municipality is facing a reality in which they have limited financial resources at their disposal²⁰. In turn, the municipality has engaged in cooperation with the people in the neighbourhood through enabling or partnership approaches which allows them to benefit from the resources and capacities of residents to more effectively realise their objectives (Bulkeley 2013: 94-5, Bulkeley & Schroeder 2011: 748, Bulkeley and Newell 2010: 3). When I asked Pedro from the municipality about whether this enabling strategy was a deliberate choice or more a consequence of the lack of financial resources, he gave me the following answer:

“Of course it has to do with the lack of money, but how do we resolve the lack of money? Not intervening? So what we think is that when we invest, we do it much more efficient. If you put a seed up here [pointing towards the ceiling] it is not going to grow, but if you work from the type of the soil, you put the seed and end up having a plant. Well, in this moment we are preparing this ground, this soil. (...) There was a first part of investments, now we are investing in the social [aspects], later we are going to have a second stage of material [investment], the renewable energy. In the meantime we are working to prepare this soil.”

The metaphor clearly reflects a holistic approach to urban planning in which it is seen as inappropriate to only focus on one (material) aspect, in achieving results. This is furthermore in line with the concept of ‘sustainability’ where the social, economic and environmental tiers are perceived as interconnected, and cannot be separated. The perception is that it is not enough with a material ‘fix’ to make a change in the neighbourhood, which stands in stark contrast to the more prestigious urban sustainability transformations, for example the Western Harbour in Malmö (Sweden), on which the merits are primarily based on a sort of environmental ‘eco-system’ equilibrium in the material (within for example renewable energy, recycling, water etc.), while

¹⁸ E.g. the recycling and solar panel project, see next chapter.

¹⁹ I am elaborating on this aspect in the following chapter.

²⁰ This aspect is elaborated in the section ‘Sent to war with a fork’.

changes in the more social aspects, for example in the above-average consumption levels in the residents' lifestyles, are completely ignored (Holgerson & Malm 2015: 11,17). Lastly, the comment also indicates a perception of how in a way it is possible to 'form' the people, or the neighbourhood more in general, (i.e. from a seed to a plant) by creating the right conditions, another indicator of how this specific form of governance sees the population both as its 'end and instrument' (Bulkeley & Schroeder 2011: 748).

One of the key component of 'preparing the soil', or the enabling approach, employed by the municipality is participation. From the description of the project, it reads: "*To generate sustainable neighbourhoods from the municipal's side we decided that it was necessary to diagnose together with the neighbours the problems that affect their reality.*" (Municipalidad de Rosario 2014a). As touched upon above, Rosario has had a strong tradition of decentralisation in their urban planning, a tradition which allows for the possibility of citizen participation. In line with this, the project therefore aims to encourage the residents to engage in a process of decision-making where they are the main actors and they themselves diagnose the problems that affect their reality. This should in the longer term empower the residents to propose solutions and create a feeling that they are able to change their reality. The project has so far identified and brought together the institutions that exist in the neighbourhood, such as schools, clubs and civil society organisations to be part of a workgroup. They are invited to fortnightly meetings in one of the municipality districts where members of the municipality team engage with these institutions and other interested individuals from the neighbourhood in identifying problems and plan activities. It is furthermore done on a day-to-day basis, for example, when the primary school teaches its pupils to take care of trees, and also through the recycling and solar panel project, which I will elaborate on in the following chapter. In that way community participation in decision-making is assumed to lead to optimal solutions, not only because priorities and goals are legitimised by the community, but also because of the perception that 'people know best' (Burgess et al. 1997: 153, Swyngedouw 2010: 223). The focus on participation in the intervention does therefore fit into what is often denominated 'governance-beyond-the-state' (Swyngedouw 2010: 227) and what Shresta et al. (2015) call "the mandatory development syntax of the moment" (ibid.: 28), a trend in urban planning which has its roots in the 1990s where communities were to be seen as subjects rather than objects of planning (Burgess et al. 1997: 153).

What I have shown above is that the sustainability initiative is being governed from a focus on participation and social change. By applying these enabling strategies the municipality can

overcome several challenges, such as the need for direct community involvement if the initiatives are to last, not having a direct control over the processes in the neighbourhood, and the limited financial resources. In that way, the municipality is aiming for sustainability in the neighbourhood as an ‘end’, but extends the governance process to operate beyond the state by using the people as their ‘instrument’ through participation. However, far from being an assumedly neutral medium, participation, according to Swyngedouw, invites to forms of self-management and controlled self-disciplining under a specific hegemonic liberal-capitalist order (Swyngedouw 2009: 612). In Foucauldian terms this refers more specifically to a notion of subjects as actively produced through and by the process of governing as touched upon in the theoretical framework, a process I will turn to in the following chapter.

VII. APOCALYPSE, MORALITY AND DEPOLITICISATION

In this chapter I will describe and analyse the perhaps most significant initiative in the sustainability project, the recycling and solar panel project, which serves as an excellent example of how the municipality is invoking particular forms of participation. In the following, I will first of all shortly describe the project, then I will turn to the different strategies or technologies of governing the municipality is applying in order to encourage the people in the neighbourhood to participate in the project. Furthermore, the analysis intends to unveil the intervention’s foundations in a specific underlying worldview or discourse, especially how or whether it is related to a post-political condition, and thus which consequences it may have for a political voicing in the neighbourhood.

THE RECYCLING & SOLAR PANEL PROJECT

The problem that led to the idea of the recycling and solar-panel project was a neighbourhood complaint about how the waste containers were not only very dirty, but were also completely full which resulted in a lot of waste thrown in the street. From this complaint arose the idea of trying to recycle the dry waste²¹ in separate containers, which at the same time could be an opportunity to consolidate the newly formed consortiums in the residential buildings, a process the municipality is

²¹ Such as plastic, glass, carton, paper, etc.

accompanying. As touched upon before, the formation of the consortiums is part of the granting of land tenure through *Plan Abre*. This stems first of all from an acknowledgement that maintenance of public spaces require larger investments than what each individual household can (or should) afford with their own private savings. The consortiums shall act as a body that administers common expenses. Furthermore, in most of the residential buildings the residents neglect the common spaces, such as the entrances, staircases, etc., as they do not consider themselves as an active part of the processes that happen beyond their housing unit - again connected to the tenure insecurity (Rodríguez 2005: 44-5). The idea with the recycling and solar panel project can therefore be seen as an attempt to strengthen the consortium, create a better co-existence and encourage the residents to take care of the public spaces.

In order to provide incentives for the residents to participate in the project, the municipality is promising solar panels on the roofs of those residential buildings where the project is taking place, which shall provide the common areas (entrances and staircases) with light. This is to a very small degree set to be financed by the profit of the recycled waste, while the rest would be financed by the municipality. The idea is then that once the solar panels are installed, and if the residents continue to separate their waste, the consortiums can decide for themselves what to do with the surplus money both from the electricity savings and the recycled waste (Municipalidad de Rosario 2014a).

In the following I will focus on which technologies of governing the municipality is applying in order to encourage or persuade the neighbours to participate in this project, and thus unveil the different strategies of creating certain subjects. Although Foucault does not discuss the specific mechanisms that are implicated in the making of subjects²² (Agrawal 2005: 12,171), I will in the following argue that in this specific case, the invoking of particular forms of participation is connected to diverse modalities of power, such as the use of apocalyptic imaginaries, the promise of benefits and being a leading example, and lastly, the articulation of what can be interpreted as ‘irresponsible’ actions.

²² According to Agrawal, Foucault gives little or no indication of how government shapes subjects, especially how one is to account for variations in the transformations of subjects (Agrawal 2005: 12,171). This aspect of variation is also important in connection to this present research, as of course not everyone in the neighbourhood is acting in accordance with the sustainability initiative and can be said to have become ‘environmental subjects’. I will elaborate on this in the last part of the analysis.

APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARIES AND THE PEOPLE

In connection to the facts of peak-oil scenarios, as mentioned in the introduction, Ignacio from the municipality emphasised the rather gloomy energy situation in Argentina when introducing the project in the neighbourhood in December 2014. Argentina is facing an enormous energy deficit, and alongside a high subsidisation of electricity, there is a general belief that the situation cannot be sustained (Blanco 2015, Braun 2014). As Ignacio said to the residents: “*when they remove the subsidy, which is going to be soon, we are going to pay five-six times more than we are paying today for the electricity. But this is inevitable, it is the real cost of the electricity. That is why we have to see how we can change our energy matrix*”. From this justification of the project, some important points stand out.

First of all, Ignacio is drawing attention to certain ‘truths’, one of them the scientific truth of peak-oil scenarios as mentioned in the introduction, but also the national energy crisis with which almost every Argentinean is familiar. Throughout Argentina there are notorious electricity cuts, either planned to reduce the consumption or when the energy infrastructure becomes overburdened, especially during the hot summer months (Braun 2014, Castro & Blanco 2015). In other words, the crisis is already felt, and change is both necessary and inevitable. The contours of the guilty ‘enemy’ is also emerging as socio-environmental problems are being conveyed into matters of concern, thus producing apocalyptic imaginaries about a future with peak-oil scenarios and skyrocketing energy prices (not to imagine the impact it will have on the people in the neighbourhood who already have few resources). The problem is therefore presented as just some sort of inevitable ‘law of nature’; global oil extraction will decline, leading to shortages (Bettini & Karaliotas 2013: 333), which is daunting in an Argentinean context already affected by shortages. It is something that is bound to happen, as when Ignacio says: “*but this is inevitable, it is the real cost of electricity*”, it is abstract, remote and vague and definitely not socially embodied (Swyngedouw 2009: 612). In that way, the peak oil narrative confines oil’s materiality to its finitude, it is a form of ‘oil fetishism’ in which an independent agency is conferred to oil itself, although its finitude - far from being only determined by its physics - is dependent on the current mode of production, the extraction and consumption patterns on a planetary scale (Bettini & Karaliotas 2013: 332-3). As Huber (2011) puts it: “*oil has no inherent power outside the social and political relations that produce it as such a “vital” resource.*” (ibid.: 33).

The problem is moreover presented in a way which implies its universality for ‘all of us’, thus convincing that both the problems, but also the goals, between the local government and the

people in the neighbourhood are linked and can be addressed using joint strategies (for example the joint interests in co-financing the solar panels) (Agrawal 2005: 193). If we return to the notion of the post-political condition, we can argue that when the ‘people’ are constituted as such universal victims suffering from a common threat or processes beyond their control, it silences social differences and renounces conflict (Swyngedouw 2010: 221). Instead of seeing ‘the enemy’ as unequal socio-economic power relations, the threat becomes ‘naturalised’, and scientific expertise thus becomes the foundation for government, or properly constituted politics (ibid. : 222).

Through these knowledges of what the future might bring, but also through the whole framing of the sustainability project, a particular sphere or domain fit for modern government is therefore being created (i.e. neighbourhood sustainability) through the construction of a social homogeneity: ‘us’ against ‘the energy crisis’. This homogeneity is especially apparent when considering how the problem is presented as laid out above, but also through what is *not* being said; there is no focus on who or what is responsible for this situation, or how or why people are affected by this problems in different ways. In that way, the sustainability initiative is undertaken in relation to, but may not lead to actual environmental improvements (Agrawal 2005: 165). As argued above, this invoking of apocalyptic imaginaries and the ‘people’ as humanity as a whole is an expression of a populist tactic within the post-political condition. However, in the following section I will argue that the construction of subjects or the encouragement to participate are not only happening through these apocalyptic imaginaries, but also through how the municipality articulates the expected behaviours within the sustainability initiative as obvious and morally correct.

THE RIGHT THING TO DO

Generally there has been a large support of and participation from the neighbourhood in the project. In December 2014 the project started out in three residential buildings, but has now spread to include eight. As one woman from the neighbourhood explained: “*The people have become aware [tomado conciencia], no complaints. (...) It is evolving good the work. We continually look [if it is clean what has been thrown out in the containers], and if it is dirty, we clean it. (...) We are well [Estamos bien] because there is less trash in the street, on the sidewalks, [no] carton, empty bottles. We see an improvement in the neighbourhood cleanup.*” She lives in a residential building where some of the residents sometimes even go outside their own apartments to look for waste to create more volume. Beside from the perhaps obvious benefit of having less trash in the streets, why has

the project has been so well adopted in the neighbourhood? Can it only be ascribed to the above-mentioned threat of an otherwise apocalyptic future?

The residents' actions and the woman's comment are good examples of how power is not just something that operates negatively on pre-constituted subjects in terms of constraining certain actions or outcomes. Instead, according to Foucault, power is seen as productive, its effects can be seen through certain bodies, gestures and discourses in individuals (Foucault 1977: 98). The woman's comment illustrates how the residents in general have come to think about and define their actions in relation to the sustainability initiative which, according to Agrawal, is a key indicator of the emergence of environmental subjects (Agrawal 2005: 17). In that way, her use of the word 'well', just like 'the people have become aware', suggest that she has been conditioned to think about her actions in relation to the project in normative terms; there is a good and bad based on whether there is trash outside. In the following I will elaborate on this form of homogenising ethic.

From Agrawal's research on the change in community forest conservation in Northern India, he argues that the creation of certain subjectivities are closely related to local participation, involvement and benefits (Agrawal 2005: 9). The sustainability project does in the same way entail these dynamics, but I will in the following add that beside the aspects of participation and benefits, the emphasis on how the neighbourhood will become a 'leading' example, as well as the framing of the 'irresponsible' partners, also play a role in encouraging participation.

If we first of all turn to the aspect of benefits; to encourage a specific form of behaviour, the municipality is promising solar panels. Ignacio explained that: "*We are not going to change anyone's life. Only those who want to participate can participate in this project. The more waste we collect, the more costs are we going to cover, so this is in the end a benefit for you. But I repeat, we will not force any neighbour to participate in this project, understood?*". Although he emphasises that it is completely up to each neighbour whether or not he or she decides to participate, he also in a way says that there is no logical reason for not participating. This initiative is not anything that will radically change their every-day life, it only requires a small effort, and besides, the more recycled waste they manage to collect, the more money they will get - so what is there to discuss? Again, we see a perception of a homogenised community: "*we are not going to change anyone's life*" where Ignacio assumes to know what people's daily lives are like and that they are all the same. Furthermore, we see how the project is played out in a form of consensus discourse, (i.e. "so

this is in the end a benefit for you”), which, as mentioned above, is also an indicator of a form of post-political governing²³.

Apart from the aspects of benefits, he goes on to talk about the innovative aspect of this flag-ship project, describing how they will be a leading example to follow:

“What we want to talk about is what the chances are of this building to be part of one of the three Fonavi buildings, the first in the city, or I would say in Argentina, to make this experience, that you separate the waste in order to create the matter with which the renewable energies are financed. (...) We want the whole city to be involved (...). And that people will see, because the idea is that based on this, there will come a lot of people to learn what you are doing. So well, light in a different way, the solar panel, the instalment of these LEDs [light-emitting diodes] in all the building.”

This persuasion might have a certain impact among the neighbours, from having a general feeling of living in a neglected *Fonavi* neighbourhood, and the stigma attached to it, participation means a chance to be a leading example that others will look up to and admire. This has, to a certain degree, happened not only through visits from the mayor of Rosario, and other local government officials, but also because the project has won an award by an Argentinean environmental think-tank and has been featured in various news-articles, including the most important a double-page spread in one of the largest newspaper in Argentina²⁴. The project does aim to be contagious and inspire action throughout the city and the country, as well as create a reputation of this neighbourhood, or the city more in general, as being sustainable. It was therefore perhaps no coincidence either that five out of the eight residential buildings requested to be part of the project exactly the day the mayor of Rosario came to the neighbourhood to see for herself how the recycling and solar panel project was coming along.

The last strategy of persuasion that I want to emphasise is how the municipality articulates and frames the actions of those who may or will not participate:

“And creating harmony in the building, right? We don't want... let's see, you didn't throw out [waste for recycling], well, then nothing... The one who does not want to participate, he doesn't participate. It's important that we try to get everyone to participate. When the rest of

²³ I elaborate on this aspect in the following section ‘Dissent within the existing’.

²⁴ I am not disclosing the name of the think-tank, the newspaper nor their sources in order to keep the neighbourhood anonymous.

the neighbours realise that it isn't a complicated thing, that it is beneficial for you, when we have the renewable energy, that we are a leading part of the city, then people will add up. But across the country, and even in Sweden and Denmark I imagine, there are some people that will never participate, because they are not used to live... So let's not fight with him who has some sort of social problem."

Again, we see how Ignacio describes participating in the project as an entirely positive thing in which it does not make sense not to participate. Thus, the logical explanation to why some people could choose not to participate is because they suffer from some kind of social abnormality. He obviously made the reference to Sweden and Denmark because I was present in the meeting. However, there was also a general perception of Scandinavia as some sort of ideal society. When he therefore underlines that there also exist people there who do not participate in projects like this, in a way he naturalises or reduces the 'irresponsible' act to a disorder, a social pathology, which is not contingent of a particular time or social context - like a 'natural' disease it can exist in even the best societies. In other words, those who choose not to participate are being evacuated from the political terrain, i.e., are illogical and representative of disorder, and therefore do not have a legitimate voice (Swyngedouw 2010: 227, Theodossopoulos 2014: 416). In that way the act of governing is reduced to the 'responsible' stakeholders in a sphere dominated by consensus. This is furthermore a clear example of how the political is played out in a sort of moral register where the choice is not between left or right politics, but between what is the *right* or *wrong* thing to do, a typical indicator of the post-political condition according to Mouffe (2005: 5).

What I have argued above is that the municipality through the knowledge or discourses on the apocalyptic imaginaries, the benefits, the promise of being a leading example, and the framing of the 'irresponsible' partners, is encouraging people in the neighbourhood to participate in the project. In that way, the expected behaviour is changes in individual practices, as when the municipality is encouraging people to recycle and collaborate in the consortiums. This is done through a strong homogenising ethic based on what is the *right* or *good* thing to do, where participation as such is reduced to a moral act (Mouffe 2005: 5, Marvin & Guy 1997: 316).

To sum it up, the municipal strategies are to become anchors for processes that reshape the individuals who are both objects, and also part of the intervention as touched upon above. By looking at these launched practices in the project, it becomes possible to see how different social actors, strategies and subjectivities together constitute different technologies of government (Agrawal 2005: 219). While you could see this approach as the municipality's efforts to involve and

educate the residents, I will in the following look at the underlying beliefs behind these efforts and argue that it is not a completely neutral or directionless process.

DISSENT WITHIN THE EXISTING

When the recycling and solar panel project was introduced in the neighbourhood, the meetings did not end quietly with people agreeing to participate. In every meeting in each of the three residential buildings the introduction was followed by heavy discussions evolving around different aspects of the containers. These discussions spanned from minor issues, such as where it would fit in, and if someone were to deliberately or mistakenly throw something wet in the container, to a genuine concern or fear that someone would set fire to the containers because of the security situation in the neighbourhood, or that people outside the community would steal the recycled materials. The solution became in the end that they would put locks on the containers with each of the neighbours getting a copy of the key. These discussions clearly reflect how discussions or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of, and the calculus of risks in the project (Swyngedouw 2009: 32), i.e., where to put the containers, and how to prevent fires and theft. In other words, the participation is limited to what is defined by the municipality, which is coupled with restrictions on what is 'open' for negotiation - the discussions were encouraged, but there was no debate over the overarching framework of the situation, only the technologies of management (ibid.).

Again, you can argue that the transformations are rooted in a particular underlying discursive belief about *the* environment. As mentioned above, the environment is discrete from humans and is at risk by the irresponsible humanity as a whole, and that environment needs to be 'fixed' through careful government and change in individual behaviour. In that way, power or governing is closely related to 'the right disposition of things', a restoration of the urban ecosystem, which again is connected to careful investigation and deployment of techniques supported by a municipal 'technocracy' assumed to be neutral (Agrawal 2005: 219, Swyngedouw 2009: 612). However, what by now should begin to be clear, is that this techno-managerial approach has its roots in a specific worldview, and thus prioritises certain actions over others (Rutland & Aylett 2008: 641) - the municipality encourages people to do certain things and not others. In line with the general sustainability framework, this project evolves around ideas of ecological modernisation (Swyngedouw & Cook 2012: 1962), in which the reduction of environmental pollution (i.e. waste) is turned into an economic benefit (i.e. recycling), thus creating technological advancements (i.e.

solar panels). This form of ecologically rational resource use operates under a global capitalist or neoliberal world order which is not being questioned, as the enemy, as mentioned above, is not seen as the 'system', but is external and objectified in peak-oil scenarios and rising energy prices.

This becomes especially apparent when considering the shift of accountability in the sustainability project which can be seen as a means through which the municipality shifts the responsibility (and accountability) for 'sustainability' to the individuals in the neighbourhood, who have little in the way of power to address the larger structures of environmental degradation and social injustices (Bulkeley & Newell 2010: 85). This can be seen as a part of a neoliberal trend away from the welfare state, where the state responsibility of waste management is displaced to the citizens. Furthermore, one can argue that the potential for a neighbourhood critique against this is not being precluded, as the 'fight' is instead being articulated as between those who participate and recycle, and those who do not.

If we return to this dominating symbolic understanding of *the* environment, as being a predictable and determined set of processes that tends towards equilibrium but is disrupted by our human actions, according to Swyngedouw, this actually fails to perceive the possibility of the existence of numerous and complex natures (Swyngedouw 2007: 13,18). This means in other words, that the sustainability initiative is lacking a proper political element, which is defined as the ability to radically criticise a given order, as touched upon in the theoretical framework. Instead of focusing on the geographical, economic and social differences which is producing a low-income *Fonavi* neighbourhood in social, environmental and economic decay in the first place, the municipality is promoting "sustainable" solutions (such as taking care of trees, an ecological awareness, a few solar panels and recycling) to rectify this one environment without questioning the frame of a neoliberal hegemony. The irony of the situation is clear; the practical solution to an otherwise immeasurable problem consequently comes to be increased waste recycling and the employment of solar panels in a few residential buildings. This is a clear example of a very populist post-politics "*one that elevates the interests of "the people", "nature", or "the environment" to the level of the universal rather than aspiring to universalise the claims of particular natures, environments, or social groups or classes*" (Swyngedouw 2007: 32) and does as such fail to envisage the possibility of the existence of different socio-environmental trajectories.

VIII. POLITICAL EXPLOITATIONS & RESISTANCE

In the last two chapters of the analysis I will look at whether and in which ways the sustainability initiative can be seen to affect the people in the neighbourhood, more specifically whether it enhances or diminishes their possibility for a proper political voicing. First of all, I will look at how the initiative's institutional support and lack of financial resource can have an impact on what the municipality team has promised the people in the neighbourhood, and then examine this in the context of the already existing political distrust in general in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, I will look at the people in the neighbourhood's opinions and attitudes towards the sustainability initiative, and for reasons behind their lack of participation as well as widespread apathy towards the local government and the sustainability initiative.

SENT TO WAR WITH A FORK

Being sent to war with a fork is how Juan described his feelings about the insufficient means the municipality team were given to launch a sustainability initiative like this in the neighbourhood. In the first part of the analysis when I emphasised the incremental steps the municipality is taking towards sustainability in the neighbourhood, they must be seen in connection to the initiative's financial resources and its larger institutional support. What one municipal team is able to accomplish is bound by strict material limits.

Although promises of solar panels were given in the neighbourhood in December 2014, there are still no expectations of having them installed in the near future, if they are going to be installed at all. This is creating an uncomfortable situation for the municipality team; encouraging people to participate, promising benefits, but later recognising that they might not be able fulfil these promises - a situation they are experiencing with unease. Ignacio said: "*With the neighbours we don't have any incidence in anything, we're full of hot air [habladores al pedo], because we don't resolve anything,*" and Juan from the municipality team explained: "*My disappointments are within the results of the project, which we aren't achieving due to lack of support from the municipal government. It's not just lack of support, apart from this, they didn't fulfil the things our bosses promised.*" Although the municipal team is primarily working in support of this project, there has not been a specific budget allocated for the initiative. Instead, funding is dependent on other areas of the municipality willing to allocate some of their resources to the initiative (e.g. the energy

department allocating resources to renewable energy, etc.), creating a great deal of insecurity that was expressed by Juan: *“In short, right now we don’t know very well where the money is going to come from, who will give the money, neither how we are going to obtain refunding. We have no idea of the time frames, because we don’t control them”*. The municipal team are especially frustrated about not being able to solve basic problems in the neighbourhood, such as the problems with the sewage system.

Throughout my interaction with people in the neighbourhood and at the meetings, these sewage problems have been an on-going topic of discussion. Especially in the *Fonavi* residential buildings, the sewage system has not been properly constructed which often creates flooding within the apartments on the ground floors and in the streets. Apart from the poor sanitary conditions, and the risk of the spread of diseases (Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences 1998), in the summer months in particular, this creates a horrible stench in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, it has obstructed the formation of some consortiums in the residential buildings as the residents living on the ground floors are forced to call and pay a company to drain the sewers every time there is flooding, thus discouraging participating and paying into a consortium, as well as participating in an initiative that does not manage to address one of the most basic needs in the neighbourhood. Instead of relying on the municipality, this shows how the people in the neighbourhood are turning to the private sector for solutions to their needs. This is problematic, as the municipality is not delivering the services it should.

The lack of financial resources and support from the higher levels within the municipal government has made the municipal team question the whole project: *“If we don’t have investments in the neighbourhood, then we cannot say sustainable neighbourhood (...) they [the municipal government] like how the name sounds but they don’t want to spend money and efforts in a long-term project”* said Juan. This reflects how the project resembles a temporary ‘catalyst’ initiative that does not manage to address the deeper problems in the neighbourhood, and lacks a long-term perspective (Carley & Smith 2001: 195). In that way, the sustainability initiative appears instead to be a populist gesture by the local government. You might therefore raise the question of who really benefits from a so-called sustainable neighbourhood; is it perhaps a sort of greenwashing project by the local government intending to gain accolades? I will turn to this in the following.

POLITICAL DISTRUST & APATHY

In line with the already deeply rooted distrust towards the state at all levels in the general Argentinean population due to high levels of corruption (Almansi et al. 2014: 45), people in the neighbourhood continuously touched upon their lack of trust or scepticism towards the local government which they feared were using this initiative as a political means to gather votes in the latest local government election in June this year. On the one hand, this suggests that there can be an instrumentality driving the project, where it is primarily being implemented for political election purposes, and as such, do not support meaningful sustainable development as touched upon above.

When asking one of the neighbours about her reasons for participating in the initiative, she replied: *“This is without a political flag, they do it because of politics, I don’t, I do it because I want to make it better for the people in the neighbourhood.”* She hopes that despite the political purpose or exploitation behind the initiative, it will provide improvements in the neighbourhood. According to Juan, this points towards a clientelistic way of thinking which is both present within the neighbourhood, but also within the municipality. The initiative can in that way be said to allow both the ‘clients’, the people in the neighbourhood, and the ‘patrons’, the municipal government, to gain advantage from the other’s support (Roniger 2004).

The municipal team is furthermore being met with a lot of disbelief, as Juan said: *“Then you have people that grabs you and say; ‘this is not going to work, not going to work. We have been abandoned for 25 years, we are going to be abandoned. You come because of the elections and afterwards you leave.’”* As the project is not institutionally founded, and if the local government would have changed in the June elections, then it could have meant the end of the project. However, although the Socialist party still got the majority in the elections (Cronista 2015), different priorities do emerge after the election changes in the local government, and furthermore, I was told, both by the municipal team and the people in the neighbourhood, that the local government usually tries to do all the big public works before the elections, and often afterwards they run out of money. This point was elaborated by the municipal team who believed that the instalment of solar panels or other improvements in the neighbourhood would be postponed significantly after the elections. The people in the neighbourhood are bitterly aware of this aspect, as the principal of the primary school told me:

“We are unfortunately used to that when there’s a political period, they say ‘we have to do this, and this, and this.’ Then comes another political period; ‘this doesn’t work, we have to do this instead’. So we are always used to that, and what we want with this [project] is that

it doesn't happen. Instead that any political sign continue with the good stuff. (...) It doesn't interest me if it's the radicals, the peronists [political movement based on the former president Juan Domingo Perón], the socialists, if the project is good, then they have to do it."

This suggests that people are being used to be treated as puppets in the machinery of the political voting system. Apart from undermining any long-term investments or changes in the neighbourhood, it has created a huge cynicism about participating in the sustainability initiative among the residents. This is also why, as touched upon above, the municipality saw it as impossible to enter the neighbourhood with a participative project like this, if the province through *Plan Abre* had not made improvements in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the people in the neighbourhood are used to either not receiving any governmental attention at all or have seen development initiatives undermined, as a woman from the neighbourhood told me: *"Well, for many years, 30 years, we have been demanding solutions in the neighbourhood and not one politician has done it. They're all promises..."* Although the recycling and solar panel project has been received very well, it is still only confined to 8 out of 37 residential buildings, while the number of people from the neighbourhood generally participating in the project is very low which was both confirmed by the municipality, the people in the neighbourhood and my own observations.

In that way, when people in the neighbourhood react with a lot of apathy and indifference towards the initiative, it could be interpreted or regarded as a form of passive resistance by the community (Theodossopoulos 2014: 416). As mentioned in chapter one; in line with the public participation zeitgeist of urban planning, people are constantly being urged to participate and to be engaged. To be apathetic, or to not participate, is therefore regarded as irresponsible, it is even pathologized, as shown in chapter two. But by reducing the 'deviant' and 'irresponsible' acts as something enacted in another abnormal or isolated social space or time, it contributes to the silencing of resistance, by ignoring it altogether or downgrade it as something pathological (ibid.: 419-20). While apathy could be a sign of one visible form of resistance in the neighbourhood, the initiative has also received a tangible attack when two containers from the recycling and solar panel project were set on fire a few days before the local government elections in June. I will elaborate on this in the following.

ANTAGONISM AND VANDALISM

According to Juan from the municipality team, the burning of the containers from the recycling and solar panel project, could have been a sort of prank by a group of young people in the neighbourhood. However, perhaps a more likely reason when taking the time of the elections into consideration, again according to Juan, is that it either could have been people from another political party intending to destroy the project or make it look bad, or that some dissatisfied group of people, angry about the increased political presence in the neighbourhood, wanted to make some kind of protest by creating vandalism and induce fear.

Even if we look away from the exact motives behind the fires, the acts can be interpreted as some individuals or groups way of 'being heard' or expressing discontent. According to Mouffe, when we live in a time where the consensual mode of politics, the post-political, is prevalent, then antagonistic²⁵ struggles are likely to take violent forms. Or said in other words, radical dissent or critique is being evicted from the political arena, as no legitimate political channels for dissenting voices exist, and is instead reflected in unauthorised violence (Mouffe 2005: 21, Swyngedouw 2010: 227). Although I have shown above how the sustainability initiative very much resembles a form of consensus-governing where there is no space for a real confrontation over the matters of the situation, and discussions instead are reduced to the institutional modalities of the sustainability initiative, I cannot draw a direct causal link between the initiative and the burning of the containers.

The acts are perhaps part of the situation of increased violence, crime and the feeling of insecurity²⁶ in general throughout Argentina, a situation the neighbourhood is not exempt from. Argentina experienced a traumatic debt default in 2001/2, but despite strong economic growth in the years after, inequality rates have been rising, and the number of people living in slum areas grew about 50% in the period from 2001 to 2010 (The Economist 2014). In October 2014, Argentina found itself yet again in another economic crisis as it defaulted on its foreign debt, although not as serious as the previous one (Reyes 2014). Opposite of what the official data says about various

²⁵ According to Mouffe, the antagonistic dimension is constitutive of the political, as also mentioned in the theoretical framework. Since all forms of political identities entail a we/they distinction, then there will always exist the possibility of emergence of antagonism (Mouffe 2005: 16-7, 52).

²⁶ Since 2009 no public quantitative data exist on crime rates. According to the UN Argentina has one of the highest theft/robbery rates in Latin America with 973,3 assaults per 100.000 inhabitants (2011 numbers) which represents an increase from 2005. However, also according to the UN, Argentina has one of the lowest homicide rates in Latin America with 5,8 homicides per 100.000 inhabitant (2011 numbers) but that still represents an increase from 2001. Nevertheless it is being argued that it is not only a matter of numbers, as there seem to appear qualitatively different and new forms of crime, such as increased drug trafficking, illegal markets, mob crimes, etc. (Reyes 2014, Infobae 2013).

issues, such as inflation and poverty²⁷ (Greenfield 2015), I did not meet anyone who did not think that the problems with the economy and insecurity were getting worse in Argentina in general, and in the neighbourhood in particular:

“One of our biggest doubts is whether we are able to reverse this growing spiral of violence, and this increasingly complicated situation with the economy. (...) Insecurity affects the whole society. In these last years it intensified a lot all the problems associated with insecurity. In particular it affects the [sustainability] project in that it complicates every activity in the public spaces - meetings, encounters, urban furniture²⁸ [mobiliario urbano]” (Interview with Ignacio).

Whether or not the acts can be seen in connection to the sustainability initiative, the already existing distrust towards the state, or because of the general situation of poverty and increased violence, is not the most important thing here. Instead, the burning of the containers, and perhaps the violence more in general, can be seen in the same optic of resistance as mentioned above. As with the apathy, vandalism is also interpreted as an irrational act, one that has no argument or speech; the acts are anonymous and hidden. However, this aspect might also suggest that the perpetrators recognise that they are vulnerable to the potential consequences of their actions. In that way, the vandalism can be regarded as a way of withdrawing consent from the existing order, *“a rational means for redressing the irrationality of injustice”* (Don Mitchell 2003: 53), or as mentioned above, as an alternative channel for radical dissent.

In conclusion, the sustainability initiative’s lack of a larger governmental support and its limited financial resources, not only hinders solutions to the most basic problems in the neighbourhood, but also suggest that the initiative can be a superficial means to gather votes in the latest local government election. People in the neighbourhood are accustomed to and assume this instrumentality behind public projects to be true, a reason to why they act towards the initiative with a lack of participation, distrust, vandalism and apathy. Instead of seeing these acts as illogical or

²⁷ According to the current government the poverty rate is one of the lowest in the world, now lower than 5%, while the inflation rate is around 10-15%. The poverty rate is calculated using the current inflation rate in the country, numbers that are taken from INDEC, the National Institute of Statistics and Census (*“Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos”*). However, these national numbers from INDEC have long been challenged, and are even being censured (as the first national numbers provided by a country in history) by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for not providing accurate data on inflation and economic growth. Instead, independent sources or private economists talk of inflation rates higher than 25-30% which obviously will lead to a completely different result on the poverty rate, if one were to use these numbers instead (Bloomberg 2013, Greenfield 2015).

²⁸ He is referring to for example the containers, and other material things, such as playgrounds, street lighting, and so on, which are situated in the public areas.

pathological, they can be interpreted as a way a resisting accession to the post-political nature of participation or consensus, that is, in other words, as an act of a properly political gesture. The question becomes therefore now, how to envisage a form of expression of this antagonistic dimension which does not destroy the political association; for example, in the case of vandalism or violence, what could constitute its tamed version? (Mouffe 2005: 20). According to Mouffe, we need to envision a sort of ‘conflictual consensus’ that provides a common symbolic space for opponents who are considered adversaries instead of enemies²⁹. In this space, the democratic debate is conceived as a real confrontation of the existing power relations, contrary to the consensual post-political form of democracy (Mouffe 2005: 20, 52). I will turn to these aspects of how to reach this space, whether or in which way it is possible, in the following chapter.

IX. DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS AND JUST GOVERNANCE

In this chapter, I continue within the people in the neighbourhood’s lack of a channel or space for a proper political dimension. When understanding the long history of state abandonment, and their experiences with other forms of local political participation, it becomes possible to understand which consequences the sustainability initiative can have in the neighbourhood. In the last section, I discuss some of the underlying assumptions in the analysis, especially how or in which way I can assess whether an initiative like this actually does more harm than good in terms of a political dimension in the neighbourhood. Within this discussion, I reflect in particular on the danger of falling into a ‘localist’ trap, and in which way we can think about how to govern or organise the neighbourhood in a more just way.

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Some important points stand out from what I have touched upon in chapter three. Both the huge mistrust and apathy, the burning of the containers and the violence more in general, indicate that the reality is *not* characterised by the ‘people’ as a social homogeneity as the sustainability initiative

²⁹ This requires turning ‘antagonism’, as relations between enemies, into ‘agonism’, as relations between adversaries.

would have. These aspects coupled with the municipality's failure to deliver what they promised along with the political exploitation of the project indicate that the reality involves a situation of unequal power relations and class differences, where we on the one hand have the local government with power and money to promise and carry out improvements in the neighbourhood, and the neighbourhood on the other hand which has little or no ability to affect or decide on the course of action, and is familiar with the real-life consequences of being let down. Nevertheless, although the people in the neighbourhood are aware of this aspect, as when they complain about the political exploitation of the project and the lack of solutions to the most basic problems, such as the sewage system, this dissatisfaction with the local government is not being mobilised into a political mobilisation or critique except perhaps through a passive resistance in apathy or these 'illegitimate' channels of expression in vandalism.

In other words, in spite of the initiative's insistence on strategies on a consensual form of governance, the persistence of inequality is clearly present, first of all in the real-world material inequalities (i.e. a *Fonavi* neighbourhood), secondly in the acts of apathy and vandalism that can represent a resistance to the post-political form of participation or condition more in general, as touched upon above.

If we turn to the last aspect of a lack of a proper political dimension, then it can be seen in relation to their long history of state abandonment as mentioned above, and also because, according to Ignacio, "*there has never been a real political participation in these places.*" The neighbourhood can in that way be understood as suffering from a democratic deficit in which the neighbours are alienated from decision processes and are very cynical about initiatives and projects that are related to the local government and democracy (Carley & Smith 2001: 195), i.e., not participating in and not trusting the initiative. In that way, it is wrong to believe that the decentralisation and the involvement of the people in the decision-making processes in the sustainability initiative can bring, by itself, local empowerment. Instead there needs to be commitment and willingness to share responsibility by both parties. In that way, this form of participation in decision-making processes can be related to a *political* dimension, whereas, if the government wish to overcome the democratic deficit, then they must begin to share responsibility and power over city-planning processes, and as such, according to Martinelli et. al, broaden the local governance to encompass a *public-managerial* dimension too (i.e., access to, control over and management of resources, primarily financial) (Carley & Smith 2001: 195, Martinelli et al. 2010: 216). This latter dimension

is obviously not present in the sustainability initiative as not even the municipality team has control over the initiative's resources.

However, in line with Rosario's somehow distinct approach to urban planning as mentioned above, the municipality was in 2002 the first municipality in Argentina to adopt a public-managerial dimension in its local governance, namely participatory budgeting (Municipalidad de Rosario 2002). The idea of participatory budgeting³⁰ is for ordinary citizens to directly decide how to allocate a part of the municipal budget (Harvey 2012: xii). Although this form of participatory budgeting cannot provide a radical transformation of the capitalist city, according to Harvey, it institutes a very powerful form of local democracy which over time might lead to something more revolutionary - an indicator of a so-called termite theory of transformation (Harvey 2012: 136-7, Mahon 2012). Unlike the sustainability project, the participatory budgeting could therefore be regarded as an important and democratic tool for providing solutions to the problems in the neighbourhood, or more in general in all of Rosario's *Fonavi* neighbourhoods. However, the participatory budgeting process is also failing on a crucial aspect, as one of the older neighbours who has been participating in the process for 11 years together with his wife, told me:

"I can tell you that there are projects [that have been voted for, but] they have never been carried out. So people look at it badly because there's no answer to it. When there's no answer, people say; 'why should we keep participating when the things we voted for two, three, four years ago, and more as well, haven't been done? Why should we keep participating?' It's like this."

As in the sustainability initiative, the municipality fails to carry out the projects that have been decided and voted for which discourages people from participating.

What I have argued, is that this lack of political participation in the neighbourhood is not just a product of the post-political sustainability initiative, but should be seen in a larger historical perspective. However, it is important to underline that a post-political initiative like this actually can make matters worse with regard to people's trust in and their incentives for participating in the political system. The more recent experiences with the participatory budgeting are examples and arguments to this. The aspect of not fulfilling what they set out to do, along with the

³⁰ Participatory budgeting was first developed in the city Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1988. Today there is more than 1,500 participatory budgets around the world, mostly on a municipal or city level (Participatorybudgeting 2015).

decentralisation and participation in the decision making processes in the neighbourhood, can, according to Martinelli et al. (2010), contribute to an even larger disempowering of marginalised communities (ibid.: 216). Although it is exactly the opposite of what the initiative sets out to achieve, in these situations where the projects are not followed up, the distrust is bound to grow towards the local government. This became especially apparent when I asked the people in the neighbourhood what would happen when or if the municipality was no longer present with the initiative in the neighbourhood, and I got the answer that obviously the municipality should always be present. As one of the older residents in the neighbourhood said: *“If they fail to comply with what is promised, and even the political campaigns, I think that it’s nothing beneficial.”* Furthermore, and another important point, is that the sustainability project does not manage to provide a channel for expressing the discontent that exist in the neighbourhood, nor provide any space for a legitimate discussion about the unequal and unjust situation itself. You can actually argue that it does the opposite by silencing socio-economic differences as analysed in the previous chapters.

IS DOING SOMETHING BETTER THAN DOING NOTHING?

Here, in the last part of the analysis, I will take a step outwards and discuss some of the underlying assumptions in the discussion of the sustainability initiative. I have through the analysis argued that the governance practices employed in the project resembles tactics that can be characterised as post-political, and does as such lead to forms of depoliticisation in which broader and structural mechanisms that produced the excluded *Fonavi* neighbourhood in the first place are not addressed, nor does it encourage broader political voicing or mobilisation (Martinelli et al. 2010: 215).

However, for the municipality team the task has first of all been an aim of ‘doing something’ in this neglected neighbourhood although they have restricted means to act due to the larger institutional context in which they have limited support and financial resources at their disposal. For example, when knowing about the waste problem in the neighbourhood, the recycling and solar project can be regarded as a good attempt to reduce the total amount of waste, and thus alleviate the problem. Although it can be argued that it is a way for the municipality to avoid its responsibility, what are the municipality team supposed to do? Only focus on internal lobbying within the municipality for a municipal solution to this problem, where there might not be enough resources or willingness to solve this problem, and as such, risking not having any projects in the neighbourhood at all? The municipal team is confined by and embedded in structures which constrain their

intentions of actually trying to improve certain aspects in the neighbourhood, a situation they are aware of and are experiencing with unease as mentioned above. Taking these unfavourable consequences into consideration, you might wonder if the municipality should have avoided intervening in the neighbourhood in the first place, when they not only fail to fulfil their promises, and perhaps even contribute to a larger disempowerment, but also fails to provide a means through which the neighbourhood claims can be heard.

When discussing this issue, it is first of all important to think about how much we can or ought to expect of the municipality, and especially be aware of not falling into the trap of having an exaggerated belief in the power of local agency as well as believing that all needs are best satisfied within the local sphere (González et al. 2010: 50). In line with the ‘development syntax’ of the moment, namely participation as mentioned above, ‘localism’ has become the vogue for governance for sustainability (O’Riordan 2009: 326). In this localist framework, the local scale is often seen as some black box which can be physically and socially shaped into sustainability through local governance (Marvin & Guy 1997: 317). However, what these local-centric views ignore is first of all how the local scale is socially constructed, and does as such not exist ‘out there’ by itself, but is embedded in broader and changing geographical and political scales (González et al. 2010: 50). Furthermore, such views may fail to acknowledge how other institutions (or again, other scales) have a much more powerful role in either enhancing or obstructing the quest for sustainability in a locality (Adger et al. 2003: 1099, Marvin & Guy 1997: 317). In that way, when discussing the issue above, it is important not to develop an inward-looking analysis in which the local government becomes the dominant actor through which sustainability can be delivered (and thus, the primary responsible in case it cannot) (Marvin & Guy 1997: 317).

I have in the above pointed towards different social, political and economic aspects which can be said to impede not only the municipality team’s objective of a sustainable neighbourhood, such as the lack of institutional support and resources, but also hinders a political mobilisation in the neighbourhood, such as the initiative’s use of post-political tactics and the already consolidated democratic deficit and mistrust or apathy towards the state in general. However, these analyses do not offer insight into how the people in the neighbourhood might become aware of these aspects, or how their already existing resistance in apathy and vandalism might can be turned into a ‘legitimate’ political demand or mobilisation (Davis 1991: 8). As an outside researcher it is perhaps ‘easy’ to identify these threats to locality-based action and then argue or assume that it otherwise could happen. However, when I remember the conversations I had with the people in the

neighbourhood and look through my empirical material, I have very little to give me an idea of how they would like to change their situation, or what their interests are in the neighbourhood; how come some have come to accept and appreciate the sustainability initiative, while others are hostile towards it? Although there exist a deep and general discontent in the neighbourhood, it is not that people are asking for some kind of social or political revolution. On the contrary, they are asking for what would seem quite simple in comparison; first and foremost solutions to the problem with sewage system and the garbage problem, better public lighting, better access for disabled people on public transport systems and so on, which, according to Harvey, is a typical feature of what people usually want in low-income areas; the same as exists in the bourgeois areas (quoted by Mahon 2012).

What I am trying to say is that although I have argued that the sustainability project is far from resembling a political governance structure that can guide the neighbourhood towards a sustainable future, and perhaps even does the opposite, then I do not provide either an answer or solutions to what this sustainable future might look like or how it might come about. While it is not within the scope or intention of this thesis to do so, the analysis of the governance of the sustainability initiative can provide as a means for further research on how then to organise a neighbourhood or a city in a more just way in line with a proper political dimension. This form of research also represents a gap in the existing literature (see also, Adger et al. 2003: 307), as Harvey puts it, when answering Fletcher and Gapasin's question of how to organise a city:

“The honest answer (...) is: we simply do not know. Most of what we now know about urban organization comes from conventional theories and studies of urban governance and administration within the context of bureaucratic capitalist governmentality (against which Lefebvre quite rightly endlessly railed), all of which is a far cry from the organization of an anti-capitalist politics.” (Harvey 2012: 140).

With this quote and suggestions to future research, I will end the analysis and turn to the conclusion in the next chapter.

X. CONCLUSION

Through this thesis I have set out to critically examine how a municipal initiative for sustainability in a marginalised neighbourhood is being governed by investigating which forms of participation are encouraged and expected, in order to assess whether the initiative has an emancipation potential in a proper political dimension for the people of this neighbourhood.

The underlying rationalities behind the sustainability initiative stem from a holistic approach to urban sustainability planning. The predominant perception is that the governance process must focus on including people in the neighbourhood in order to be successful and to achieve a social change. This stems both from previous attempts to improve certain characteristics that failed due to a lack of community involvement, and also from the acknowledgments of the complex and not directly controllable ‘unsustainable’ practices in the neighbourhood. By creating opportunities for participation, the municipality can benefit from the neighbourhood’s resources, a practice which fits well into ‘governance-beyond-the-state’ trends within urban planning wherein communities are increasingly regarded as both an instrument and an end.

Within these governance strategies, specific forms of participation are encouraged and expected. These become especially visible upon analysis of the initiative’s most significant project, the recycling and solar panel project. Through apocalyptic imaginaries an independent agency is conferred to peak-oil and energy crises, thus constituting a universal ‘all’ against these remote processes beyond control. Furthermore, through a consensus discourse on the benefits of participation along with the articulation of non-participation as pathological, the municipality contributes to invoking a certain code of conduct in which the responsibility for ‘sustainability’ is put upon the individual, a sort of ‘politics of self’ where political values are replaced by moral ones.

As such, I argue that the mode of governance is reduced to a post-political techno-managerial approach of ‘fixing’, through ecological modernisation and individual change, *one* environment within the existing system. These governance processes all work to draw awareness away from the properly political issue of unequal power relations in society; the structural mechanisms that produced the environmental ‘bads’ and the socio-economic exclusion in the neighbourhood to begin with.

However, participation strategies are dependent on the goodwill and voluntary actions of the people in the neighbourhood which has not been easy to gather. On the contrary, there is a widespread distrust and apathy towards the sustainability initiative and the municipality in general.

This is connected to several aspects; first of all, the initiative lacks a larger institutional support and financial resources to solve the most basic problems in the neighbourhood, which suggests that instead of supporting any meaningful and long-term sustainable development, there is an instrumentality behind the initiative to garner votes for the latest local government election. While some accept this exploitation in hope of improvements in the neighbourhood, others react with apathy or vandalism towards the initiative. Taking into consideration how the initiative is played out in a political arena of consensus in which radical dissent is excluded, the apathy and the acts of vandalism can be interpreted as alternative channels for an antagonistic struggle, as forms of resistance. Instead of reducing these acts to a social abnormality, they can be understood as ways to resist accession to the post-political nature of participation, in other words, as properly political gestures from the community.

This resistance is not only a consequence of the initiative's use of post-political tactics, but should be seen in connection to the community's history of state abandonment, disappointing experiences with other forms of local democracy, and the therefore already consolidated democratic deficit. The sustainability initiative can contribute to a growing distrust in the neighbourhood by not fulfilling its promises to the community, by not providing any channels for a broader political voicing and by drawing attention away from mechanisms of structural inequalities.

The series of post-political governance techniques fostered by the initiative occasion a foreclosure of a properly political dimension in the neighbourhood. The question is therefore now, how to envisage and provide a space for expression for this antagonistic dimension, the currently 'illegitimate' perceived resistance, in order to organise the neighbourhood, or the city in general, in a more just way.

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