The citizen experience of Saillans (2014-2020)

A real and concrete utopia of participatory democracy facing the challenge of ecological transition

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Introduction

Who am I?

Questions I address:

• The citizen's experience of governance of the municipality of Saillans: a concrete utopia?
• Innovative way to face the challenges of the socio-ecological crisis?

A story of this experience:

Objectives & practices

Difficulties and deepening

Transformations underway & transformative potential
Case study: the citizen experiment of the municipality of Saillans

The municipality of Saillans

- 1300 inhabitants (2017) growing by 2% per year over the last 2 decades
- The environment is a factor of migration
- Central political issue = the transformation of lifestyles less carbon-intensive mobility, more grouped and less energy-consuming housing, more local and organic food, ...
- Different aspirations, between autochthons and new arrivals.
Objectives & practices
Organizational chart 2014-2020

Collegiality: elected representatives work in pairs or trio for each delegation

Participation: Participatory events; Popular education methods

Transparency: all meetings are public; broad communication; monitoring board
Objectives & practices
The municipal project 2014-2020

The project is different from participatory democracy as it is institutionalized in France

- Massive participation:
  - 1 event each 3 or 4 days with an average of 20 participants (640 events in 6 years)
  - 1 inhabitant on 2 participate once (670 participants in the 6 years)

- Horizontal relationship
- Empowerment and not control

>> a citizen's experience of governing the municipality as a common good.
Objectives & practices

Hybridisation of “do-cracy” and deliberative democracy

• The ecological transition as a set in motion towards an undetermined objective, to be built collectively along the way.

• A more improvised mode of action, combining democratic practices based on the ethics of 'doing' and 'discussion'.
Objectives & practices

Hybridisation of “do-cracy” and deliberative democracy

- Ethics of “doing”
- Inhabitants take direct and autonomous responsibility for problems in the village
Objectives & practices

Hybridisation of “do-cracy” and deliberative democracy

- Ethics of discussion
- Practice of multiple discussion forums
Implementation, difficulties and deepening

The example of the revision of the Local Urban Plan (2017-2019)

• Participatory method:
  • Deliberative mini-public:
    4 elected representatives & 12 inhabitants drawn by lot
  • Consultative large public workshop:
    392 different inhabitants took part of 39 events

• 2 challenges:
  • ‘greening’ lifestyles while ‘democratizing’ decision-making
  • maintaining its radicalism

Hybrid deliberative mini-public

34 meetings in 2 years

39 participatory events & public meetings

PROPOSE

DECIDE

Municipal Council
VALIDATE

Administration

Diagnosis
Orientations
Rules
Official validation

Technical staff
SUPPORT, OPERATIONALIZE

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Thy, May 2022
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Implementation, difficulties and deepening

The difference of thinking and framing transition between the Municipality and the State

- The state procedure for revising the Local urban Plan is strongly marked by a bureaucratic and technical logic.
- Serious obstacles to the deployment of deliberative democracy and do-cracy

>> depoliticization of the debates within the deliberative mini-public.

>> local misunderstandings and frustrations for both elected officials and inhabitants.
Implementation, difficulties and deepening

The persistence of representations and the difficulty to change the dominant system

Two main controversies:
- Limiting urbanization
- Legitimacy of citizens drawn by lot to take decisions

The revision of the local urban plan was a strong factor of politicization at the village level.

Economic growth, a little more "green", as well as representative democracy, a little more open to consultation with citizens, seem to remain "unsurpassable horizons".
Transformations & prefiguration

Toward a more cooperative and ‘presential’ economy

• The new local urban plan amplifies the ecologization of practices.

• It also promotes a “presential” and cooperative economy

2008
29 ha of building land
950 m²/house.

2020
7 ha of building land
450 m²/house.
Transformations & prefiguration
Toward a political culture of citizen action

• The citizens do not consider themselves, as co-owners defending their properties, but more as inhabitants of a territory, enjoying the concrete experience that it provides and responsible for its future, considering it as a common good.

• Civil society is reinvesting the social learning that has been produced in NGOs or non-formal groups.
Transformations & prefiguration
Opening the imagination

• Saillans as a "territorial ideal" to reconcile, through spatial proximity, 3 aspirations:
  • (re)finding reassuring and convivial social links,
  • getting directly involved in local decisions
  • (re)connecting with nature
  • > prefigure an "alter-rurality“?

• Ecological challenges lead to tensions between social groups in the village. But at the same time, they also invite to renew and amplify the forms of sociability

• Reconsidering social relations seems to open the way to a more global rethinking the relations to nature >> possible counter-Anthropocene ?
Conclusion
thank you

Commune commune, S. Jacquet et D. Brun, 2022


https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/grand-reportage/municipales-limportant-cest-de-participer

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