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Urban Traces

May–July and October, 2015

My fellowship at the Brussels Centre for Urban Studies lasted from early May to mid July 2015, and included an additional 'outlier' of 10 days in early October 2015 to co-host a related international symposium as the endpoint of my fellowship activities. For much of the time my stay in summer was accompanied by glorious summer weather, which made the whole visit even more inspiring, allowing the city to show itself from its best side. My supporting academic units were COSMOPOLIS and SMIT (Studies on Media, Information and Telecommunication), reflecting the nature of the topic: Smart Governance at the interface between ICT and political economy. These 'gaps' in concepts and academic orientation and interest when it comes to the implied meaning and use of the term 'smart', and this on top of the equally broad notions of 'governance' and 'city region', have come to define my work during my stay in Brussels, and it looks like they will continue to do so as part of the projects and work evolving from this fellowship.

"Why are you here?"

On my first working day in Brussels, in the flush and trendy and airy accommodation of SMIT research group (including iMinds), the response by one of the IT programmers when I was describing my research interest and the purpose of my visit, came to symbolise the main focus of my work on 'smart governance': 'Why are you here?', he asked somewhat surprised. 'Why are you not over there with the social scientists?' In effect, the question hit the nail straight on its head – disciplinary 'silos' that prevent taking a broader view of a complex matter: that of how best to design and make policies and govern city regions with their diverse, often competing, and even conflicting, interests and agendas? What can the different disciplines 'dealing' with cities and regions – jointly – contribute to a better understanding of these challenges? And could acting 'smart' by maintaining an open mind, learning, cutting across institutional, ideological and cultural divides, and using the existing policy tools in an evolving, novel way, offer a more innovative and thus more effective way forward?

This response thus gave a great conceptual kickstart to my agenda at BCUS: to explore 'smartness' in its diverse meanings, by seeking to bridge the gap between politics and political economy on the one side, and the more widely reported technological, ICT-related concerns subsumed under that rather fuzzy label of 'smart', on the other. And

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reaching across institutional boundaries, for example, between the different academic units collaborating under the umbrella of BCUS, is one aspect of this new approach.

The office as a source of inspiration

In essence, the experimental context, away from the immediacy of routines and set ways of doing things, was liberating to ideas, conceptualisations and research horizons, and resulted in a fascinating and most enjoyable, inspiring time at VUB. In my trendy office at SMIT, I joined Simon and Nils as 'office mates', both working on mobile apps, urban labs and their use for and in local policies. I had ample opportunities to discuss their work, my work, and the possible roles and facets of 'smartness' in these different conceptual views and perspectives. There was some 'this is a small world' effect when we realised that Simon had graduated with a Master's degree from my home university.

I learned a lot of new things about mobile apps and their use in economic develop-ment strategies – a topic I'm particularly interested in – and how these new tools can be and are being used to boost public participation and thus, democratic engagement. The issue of culture and art as foci of local profiling to boost the competitive prospects of localities, came up as part of that.

And these issues certainly added new insights into the multiple and complex meanings of 'smart' activities in public policy, at least in terms of linking people to local politics and projects. It is a scenario that reminded me of the efforts in the small, but independent, town of

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Unkel on Rhine, south of Cologne in Germany, which tries to position itself as a 'city of culture' (Kulturstadt), using its medieval architecture and attractive setting in the romantic valley of the Rhine as backdrop. This includes mobilising the local public to develop and, importantly, accept, the new strategy, while also establishing and using links to higher tier government to facilitate financial support. Individual personalities matter in this, as insti-tutional structures and capacities are not always geared up to develop and pursue inno-vative policy making that seeks to go beyond procedures and hierarchical relationships. So it was an excellent opportunity to link up political entrepreneurialism and ICT-related 'smartness', including mobile apps, by bringing the respective representatives together at the October symposium.

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The office discussions clearly revealed the need for bridging disciplinary divides and connecting the technological/technocentric notion of smartness with that of political economy and policy making. It was here that the listening in to the more technology-oriented understanding of, and approach to, 'smartness' proved so enlightening not only in highlighting my own disciplinary and analytical confinement, but also opened up a broader perspective on what may be possible to subsume under the seeming catch-all term of 'smart', beyond being a merely 'trendy' label, when it comes to policy making in urban areas. Indeed, this includes the use of living labs as "Public-Private-People Partnerships (PPPP) for user-driven open innovation" (www.openlivinglabs.eu) a tool to link technology and people – something that had been only rather peripheral on the radar screen of my research which has primarily focused on the role of politics and governance in this. And that may offer scope for further development of its conceptualisation.

Getting immersed in the more technology and application oriented understanding of what 'smart' can be about when it comes to 'smart' things in local projects and development strategies, has made visible new avenues for research across a familiar range of questions and analytical practices. This is where an important aspect of 'smartness' can be found: the learning about new ways of looking at policy making, the mechanisms and tools used, and possible novel ways of using them.

Against the odds: International symposium to explore the rather fuzzy concept of 'smartness' by linking theory and practice

The primary objective of my fellowship had been to develop the notion of 'smartness' in the context of governance in city regions. This involved, so the proposal, to draw on ongoing work on city-regional governance in the field of economic development. And this includes the challenges of finding effective forms of collaboration and policy co-ordination - with and without the use of formal institutions. Developing those,

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and making them work, is the main challenge in this undertaking, seeking to reconcile individual, localist interests based on territorially defined political responsibilities and accountabilities for actors, and the understanding of local gain as an outcome of collaborative and collective action. It is here that evidence of smartness became interesting as an expression of innovative forms and practices of policy making. The main objectives for my 3-month stay thus were to explore different aspects and manifestations of 'smartness' in governance, their evaluation and the relationships between them, and develop future research agendas which take that on board.

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An important element of 'being smart' is learning and reflecting on notions about, and experiences with, concepts and practices not just locally, but also elsewhere. For that reason, the second part of my fellowship involved organising an international symposium on smart city-regional governance at BCUS. The two-day event in October 2015 aimed to bring to together academics and practitioners to review different perceptions and examples of 'smart' features in city-regional governance, with a particular focus on its ability to help reconciling competing and conflicting interests around urban international competitiveness, national economic development and societal cohesion. We achieved an interesting line-up of contributors, although the Belgium railway workers' strike just on those two days did its best to make attending the event a somewhat challenging exercise. Still, some 35 speakers were present, from across Europe to the West Coast of Canada.

Topics discussed included inter alia: issue of collaboration across institutional and territorial boundaries and borders, international cross-border governance at sub-national level, mediation between competing pressures fro greater competitiveness, yet also a concern about cohesion and equity between and within regions (including effects of marginalization and exclusion), and also the effects of state structure, political culture and modi operandi. These may reach from smart cities as being understood as entrepreneurial to being optimized in their transport management through the use of the 'big data'. In the former instance, 'smart' policies seek to respond efficiently to changes in global markets, be that as 'wired cities' in which urban technologies contribute per se to better urban governance and management of service delivery and infrastructures, or as cities in which entrepreneurial discoveries and collective experimentations lead to strategic priorities and use of (existing) policy tools, such as mobile apps, to tie together, represent and make accessible to visitors, artists and craft people within a locality as part of creating a 'town of culture'. Such novel, more experimental and entrepreneurial policy making may be viewed as an expression of 'smartness' in urban governance, even if the meanings of what this entails vary considerably between places. A summarising review of this two-day event is under preparation for publication.

The Symposium was followed by my Stadssalonsurbains public lecture, at the Beursschouwburg on 'Smartness' in Governing City-Regions – Why the Fuss? The lecture tackled the 'ancestry' of the 'smart governance' discussions, which, in effect, are a continuation of discussions held some 20 years ago on 'learning regions', moved forward by the new technological possibilities in communication. From that perspective, the discussions about 'smartness' in governance may not be altogether that novel, and it may be too early to adopt the 'smart' rhetoric as a new norm of framing politics and

policies in a novel way. How much difference can/does it actually make? With so many different 'takes' on this label, pulling it together into a coherent, meaningful concept and theoretical construct, certainly requires considerable smartness in reflection and makes synthesizing a complex issue.

This question was revisited during the same period in October 2015, when raising the question of 'What is so 'Smart' about 'Smart City Governance' in a paper during the Open Days of the Committee of the Regions as part of their Master Classes. This led to fascinating discussions with the young participants about what smartness may involve, using posters to summarise and present their views and experiences. Results ranged from presenting the features of a hypothetical 'smart borough' focusing on community-supplied, devolved service delivery, to what 'smartness' needs as key ingredients (openness, public engagement, education, long-term perspective, people-oriented service delivery, etc). So, flexibility, innovativeness and getting out of public administration and corporate rationales for service delivery were clearly central concerns among the participating PhD students, moving much more towards an ad hoc, demand-led, flexibly responding mode of governing.

This theme, albeit in a broader contest, was revisited in January 2016 by a two-day workshop in collaboration with the Committee of the Regions. 'on Knowledge, Policymaking and Learning in European Metropolitan Areas: Experiences and Approaches' was the theme, within which the issue of 'smartness' was less explicitly placed in the foreground. Nevertheless, it was implicitly present most of the time, including the contributions to the round-table 'towards 'smart governance' for European metropolitan areas' The jury is still out, which direction the various conceptualisations in theory and implementations in practice will take the notion of 'smart' in governance. Can it be more than yet another trendy label that may come and go?

Brussels as impossibly complex case of 'nationalist' and international city regionalism

Being in Brussels as an international city and administrative centre of the EU also offered the opportunity to follow up a second objective – that of using the city as a case study of city-regional governance in its own right, in particular, given its rather complex arrangements. This is not merely a case of looking at its policies around 'Brussels Smart City' with its focus on the use of mobile apps to connect people and decision-making, and also optimise connectivity. And this is also becoming a deliberate marketing tool, suggesting a degree of 'trendiness' of the image portrayed by 'smartness'. Yet, while this may not be as such unique to Brussels, it is becoming much more so when taking the complexity of

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Brussels' governance into account in response to cultural-linguistic divisions and the utmost degree of devolution of powers and responsibilities in the Belgian state.

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Staying in Brussels has opened new, fascinating insights into complexities of the city-region's status and myriad ways of governing in the context of devolution and changes to state structures. Furthermore, the unique position of Brussels as the centre of the EU's machinery has made the city particularly interesting to me in terms of my work on cities as international actors and their role in influencing, even shaping, global governance and its interpretation. In particular, this included the role of Brussels as an international actor in its own right. As pointed out during an interview at the international department of the Brussels Capital Region, this means that the three main regions – Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital Region– effectively representing the Belgian state at the international level when it is the city-region's 'turn' among the three Belgian regions to do so. Just as important is the role of Brussels as an arena for the rapidly growing international representation and action of cities and regions from across Europe, either individually or as part of dedicated representational networks and associations. Interviews held there during my visit provided important analytical field evidence for my just completed book (with Peter Newman) 'cities as international actors' (Routledge). This investigates how cities join an increasingly multiscalar arrangement of international/global governance, as they seek to reach out beyond 'their' respective states to develop and utilise their particular competitive opportunities beyond what they see possible within their national settings. Gaining international visibility is an important strategy in this attempt, such as through the 'European Capital of Culture' programme. Strategies vary, and may involve substantial, perhaps overambitious, capital projects, such as the new railway station in Mons (Belgium) as part of the city's attempt to rebrand itself as 'trendy' by following the example of successful similar projects elsewhere. Whether seeking to copy 'success' is 'smart', is a different question altogether.

Competition is never far away between the represented cities and regions, as evident during a visit to the joint offices of Copenhagen and its Swedish counterpart across the Øresund, Malmö. While office space may be shared, local politics remains 'in the air'. Elsewhere, political agendas also shape national municipal representations, although there are variations. For instance, the German Cities' Association, as was explained there, views itself less of a 'political animal', and more a membership club to feed information on EU regional policies back to their members, than the English Local Government

Association, for instance. Different national arenas in central-local relations, and the varying constitutional circumstances (powers) for local government matter here for political cultures.

Going from here…

Two projects have evolved out of my 3+ months stay at the Brussels Centre for Urban Studies – one directly, and one indirectly. The former will include further exploration of 'smartness' in city-regional governance through the new international research network 'Smart City-Regional Governance for Sustainability', supported by the Regional Studies Association through a grant of £10,000. This has at its core group members from the United States and across Europe (UK, Germany, Poland, Belgium). The application was prepared during my stay in Brussels in close collaboration with my colleagues at Cosmopolis, aided by good use of the Departmental coffee machine and the austerity-conform 'tasse de crise' as, in effect, a half-cup.

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This new RSA Research Network, running over a three-year period, explores the multi-faceted meaning of 'smartness' by bringing together 'different minds' and understandings of 'smartness' – in terms of policy fields (sustainability, climate change, economic development, social cohesion) and agendas; conceptualisations of 'smartness' between broad social science-based 'takes' and more project-based, technologically-centred solutions to boost the functionality of places. This may involve balancing and negotiating between varying interests and 'their' respective representatives. For instance, how does a drive for greater urban competitiveness go along with the idea of a cohesive, sustainably organised and operating society and state territory – as the current EU's strategic plan of Horizon 2020 suggests? The RSA Research Network distinguishes four key dimensions of 'smartness', reaching from a concern with cities as geographic places and governmental territories, with institutionalisation as part of governance, to a focus on use of technology in obtaining and processing data and managing policy processes and delivery, and the adoption of individual 'smart' initiatives/projects. These four 'dimensions' are: spatial smartness, data/information smartness, institutional smartness, and innovative, experimental smartness. They will serve as conceptual-analytical grid for the comparative analysis.

The second project pointing forward will also keep me in connection with my Brussels hosts for the next three years, and is the result of an invitation to participate in the JPI Urban Programme by the EU on 'Improving anticipation and social inclusion in Living Labs for Smart City governance', which is headed by Maastricht University. Quite clearly,

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it addresses the interface between the more quantitative, data-based notion of 'smart' and that of a more political-economic, qualitative meaning. An important element of this comparative international study is the collaboration between practitioners and academics to embrace both theoretical explanations and practical implementation of 'smart' governance to get a better grasp of what can work, and what not, and where the particular 'smart' ingredient may lie. Partners in this consortium are the universities and cities of Brussels, Bellinzona, Graz and Maastricht. I was invited to join the Brussels (Cosmopolis) team, which is great, as it provides an excellent opportunity to continue working together. I am very much looking forward to that.

Thanks a million…

And, last, but not at all, least, I would like to thank my hosts and colleagues within the Brussels Centre for Urban Studies, and Cosmopolis and SMIT in particular, for their generous hospitality, welcoming and inspiring engagement with me, and general friendliness and openness to debate ideas and discuss current affairs around Brussels and the wider world – Bas van Heur, Stefan de Corte, Shenja van der Graaf, Nicola Dotti, Simon Delaere, Nils Walravens, and everyone I met and chatted with in Cosmopolis and SMIT during my stay. Thanks a lot, and I hope there will be good opportunities for continuing our inspiring discussions and pursuing interesting collaborations in the future.