

**ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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ABSTRACT:

Recent attempts by the European Union to augment its regulatory-based approach to environmental problem-solving with new policy instruments has led to the promotion of multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships--cooperative attempts to include stakeholders from the government, business, and non-governmental organization (NGO) sectors in the production of consensus-based solutions to specific environmental problems. This paper focuses on these new initiatives and examines the extent to which they are advancing democratic participation in the European Union. Drawing on ethnographic research performed with two case studies, one at a regional level in Belgium and the other at a European Union level, the paper concludes that these partnerships do foster participatory democracy to the extent that they allow citizens to participate more directly and on a more equal basis with policy administrators in the actual environmental decision-making process. Certain constraints nevertheless exist which may limit the benefits gained. These partnerships are vulnerable to co-optation by the state or special interests, and they suffer from unequal representation and the potential for strained relations with existing policy institutions. The general lack of meaningful debate and engagement characterizing the case studies also suggests that environmental decision-making is still being influenced more by the forces of political and economic interests than by the public opinion being generated in the partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes as its topic the recent emergence of multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships in the European Union (EU). These cooperative initiatives, which ostensibly attempt to involve all of the affected stakeholders in the resolution of specific environmental problems, are being promoted at all levels of government as alternative instruments for the production and implementation of policy in the environmental arena. Rather than focus on the obvious significance that these new institutions have for environmental action, this paper directs its attention toward a second area of impact--their implications for the practice of governance. The aim of this paper is to explore the link between environmental partnerships and democracy in the EU and, more specifically, to address the extent to which these partnerships are promoting greater levels of democratic participation.¹

I will commence with a brief description of the ethnographic research project upon which this paper is based. Then, after some preliminary comments on the nexus between democracy and environmental affairs and a discussion of the conditions encompassing the rise of these multi-stakeholder partnerships in Western Europe, I will return to the research and examine the ways in which democracy is being connected to the environmental partnership process in a couple of case studies. This descriptive section will be followed by two more analytical ones in which I will examine the contributions that these partnerships present for democratic participation in the EU and some of the limitations involved. I will conclude by discussing some of the benefits that an ethnographic approach brings to this subject matter and by

¹I utilize the terms 'democratic participation' and 'participatory democracy' interchangeably in this paper.

considering the opportunities that these partnerships may play in the production of environmental policy.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS

This paper grows out of anthropological research performed with three such multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships in Belgium over a thirteen month period in 1994-1995. These included a European Union level initiative addressing the issue of sustainable development, a regional level initiative addressing water quality issues, and a local level initiative addressing the issue of biodiversity. The research focused on the actual process of cooperation itself and, more specifically, on the conflict, misunderstanding, and miscommunication which often characterize efforts to bring together representatives from the government, business, and environmental NGO sectors (Fietkau 1988). My objective was to look beyond the political and economic interests at stake for the purpose of highlighting some of the social and cultural factors also influencing the outcome of the environmental partnership process. Consequently, I directed my attention toward the varying understandings, discourses, and practices that the participants--each coming from different institutions and sectors of society--were utilizing and privileging in their approaches to both environmental problem-solving and decision-making.

My methodology was ethnographic in orientation, and the data presented in this paper derive from my observations of and participation in the meetings which constituted the major form of collective activity in the partnerships and from informal, semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. Over the course of the research, I was struck by the frequency with which the topic of democracy was evoked in these different settings. In particular, numerous comments were made linking the partnership process--the process of bringing together the environmental stakeholders to get to know one another, dialogue, and come to consensus decisions (what in French is commonly referred to as "concertation")--to democratic practice. These comments came from representatives of such diverse sectors as industry, agriculture, trade unions, environmental NGOs, and government itself. What interested me the most, however, was not just that multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships were being linked to democracy but that the participants were not all

defining democracy in the same way. Different participants were privileging different aspects of democracy, and these varying interpretations were then competing amongst one another for legitimacy in the environmental policy arena. I will return to these links between environmental partnerships and democracy later in the paper when I explore some of the case studies in greater detail, but first, I want to take a step back and consider the more general relationship between democracy and environmental affairs in the EU.

DEMOCRACY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Increasing concern over environmental protection in the European Union has resulted in more and more thought being given to the conditions best suited to foster the resolution of this complex set of problems. Particular attention has been directed toward determining the most appropriate form of governance. In the field of environmental politics, most scholars tend to view positive environmental policy outcomes as being more strongly associated with democratic decision-making procedures than with authoritarian rule (Janicke 1996, Lafferty & Meadowcroft 1996a, Pahlke 1996). Less agreement exists, however, as to which constitutes the most appropriate form of democracy (Dryzek 1996).

In the EU, the predominant response to environmental problems has been regulatory, and this process has traditionally been dominated by elite groups of political actors and technocrats at both the member-state and EU levels.² More recently, it has also become increasingly subject to the influence of advocacy groups representing both business and environmental interests. Consequently, the democratic approach to environmental problem-solving characteristic of the EU may be described as combining elements of elite management and pluralist bargaining.

This particular system of environmental decision-making, nevertheless, has not been without its critics. Some have criticized the short term thinking, domination of economic interests, and "disjointed incrementalism" emblematic of such liberal democratic approaches (Achterberg 1996). Others have focused

²For most of the history of the EU, environmental policy has been the purview of national governments. It is only in the past decade that the EU has surpassed the member states as the central actor in this arena (Sbragia 1996).

on the poor democratic credentials of simple interest group pluralism arguing that this process is all too often characterized by less than equal access on the part of advocacy groups to both resources and policy makers, groups that are frequently rather undemocratic in structure and function themselves, and a tendency by these advocacy groups to distort the public agenda by privileging their own interests (Dahl 1982, Lafferty & Meadowcroft 1996b, Philip 1995). Still others have questioned the democratic quality of EU environmental policy in light of the 'democratic deficit' distinguishing EU policy institutions in general (Baker 1996, McCormick 1995). Is elite management of the environment sufficiently democratic? And does intensive lobbying from special interest groups adequately compensate for democratically weak formal institutions?

Perhaps the greatest criticism levied on environmental decision-making in the EU and its member states stems from the existence of what may be referred to as a "participation gap" (Fiorino 1996). By this, I do not mean to imply that the environmental policy process in the EU is not participatory. Insofar as the concept of participation refers to the "involvement of people from outside the formal governmental apparatus in decisions" (Fiorino 1996:195), the vast number of experts and representatives of special interests consulted in the policy process surely make it a participatory one. The criticism refers instead to a specific lack of "democratic participation"--i.e., people participating as citizens rather than as experts or interest advocates, and participating in a process built more upon discussion and debate than upon opposition between adversarial groups (Fiorino 1996:195-199).

THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

In order to better apprehend the recent rise of multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships in the European Union, four particular contextual areas bear further examination: these include the arenas of democratic governance, environmental policy, international business, and social welfare. But before we enter into this discussion, we should first situate these four arenas within the greater economic system in which they operate--that of market capitalism. Of primary importance here are the constraints that the capitalist modes of consumption and production place on both environmental and democratic values (Dryzek

1996). At the root of these constraints exists a fundamental, self-preservationist need for states to maintain a minimum level of economic activity, because recession spells not only falling tax revenues but decreasing popularity in the eyes of the public. When an economy is not doing well, there is an automatic check on policies that hamper business and so discourage investment. Pro-environmental policies which pose constraints for business profitability are obvious candidates for roll-back here. Insofar as democratic decision-making introduces an element of uncertainty into the business environment, democracy is also at risk. In difficult economic times, deliberate attempts are often made to insulate key economic policy functions from any semblance of democratic control.³ I call to mind these economic constraints because not only do they intimate the profound impact that the economic system has for both democracy and environmental protection in the EU, they also help us to acknowledge that the recent rise of environmental partnerships in Western Europe is being facilitated, if not permitted, by sufficient economic conditions.

Returning to the four contextual areas encompassing the rise of environmental partnerships in the EU, the first arena I would like to explore concerns that of democratic governance. Here, it would be difficult to describe modern day EU or national level political institutions or processes without discussing the so called 'democratic deficit' often attributed to them. At the European level, this deficit refers to both a lack of democratically elected representation in such decision-making institutions as the European Commission and the Council of Ministers and deficient control over these decision-making bodies and processes by the one institution, the European Parliament, which is directly elected by and therefore accountable to EU citizens. When you add to this a want of transparency in the policy production process, it is not surprising that the formal structures of EU policy making are often described as rather undemocratic (Baker 1996). Repeated calls have been made to remedy this gap between civil and political society, as indeed the very future of the EU depends upon it being accepted as a legitimate source of authority in the lives of its citizens (McCormick 1995). Unfortunately, this has proven to be no simple task.

³While I recognize that this is a rather simplified description of the relationship between economic, environmental, and democratic forces, it does reveal some of the fundamental tensions which do exist.

This democratic deficit is by no means the property of EU institutions alone. A similar situation might also be said to exist within the Belgian state, where the political system is dominated by powerful, hierarchically-organized, and highly centralized political parties and interest associations (Kitschelt & Hellemans 1990).⁴ Policy production is for the most part restricted to bargaining among a relatively small and paternalistic group of these elites, and citizen participation is largely limited to the electoral process. Those individuals who try to participate in the policy process via the party system often find that action is being taken by top officials with relatively little input from the lower ranks.

A second and related contextual arena which merits further description is that of environmental policy. Traditionally, environmental policy-making in the EU has taken the form of a top-down, 'command-and-control' model where environmental objectives are translated into legislation which prescribes how such socio-economic actors as industry, agriculture, households, and the individual consumer should and should not behave.⁵ The fruit of this labor has been a wide ranging though uneven set of rules and regulations constraining the actions of actors at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

Knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, is regarded as a key variable in this 'technical' model of policy making, and decisions are typically made by technical and administrative elites. At the EU level, they are made primarily by the appointed functionaries and political officials of the European Commission and the Council of Ministers, while at the member-state and sub-national levels, directly elected public officials also play an important role.⁶ Regardless of the political level, however, environmental policy production has been marked by a rather small number of actors and interests represented (Dente 1995). Public participation

⁴The preeminent role played by political parties has prompted some critics to refer to the Belgian system as a "particratie" rather than a democracy (Kitschelt & Hellemans 1990).

⁵Glasbergen (1996:183) describes this traditional approach to environmental policy-making as being founded upon certain--what I consider to be rather modernist--assumptions: first, that people choose the behavior they are compelled to by a system of rules and negative sanctions; and second, that the government should provide the leadership for social development via asymmetrical, hierarchical control.

⁶With the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty, the role of the European Parliament has become more important in EU environmental affairs. However, its overall policy impact in the environmental arena still remains small when compared to the European Commission or Council of Ministers (Baker 1996, McCormick 1995).

in the form of lobbying of environmental policy-makers by advocacy groups has been on the rise in the EU (McCormick 1995), but this is not necessarily done in an even and representative manner (Philip 1995).

Public participation in the form of mechanisms such as public hearings also exist, but these remain consultative in orientation with the decision-making power resting with an elite few. In general, democratic participation by individual citizens in this technical model of environmental policy-making has been rather minimal.

Criticisms regarding this dearth of citizen participation, however, have not gone unheard by EU environmental officials. With the publishing of its Fifth Environmental Action Programme, "Towards Sustainability", the European Commission initiated a shift away from this traditional policy-making mentality by calling for new instruments to involve all of the "economic and social partners" in a more "bottom-up" approach to environmental decision-making (CEC 1993:43).⁷ This attempt to include the target groups of policies more directly and positively in the policy-making process has resulted in the promotion of market driven instruments such as eco-labelling, new environmental management tools such as EMAS (the Environmental Management and Auditing Scheme), 'ad hoc dialogue groups' such as the European Commission's General Consultative Forum on the Environment, and the multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships being described in this paper.

The two final areas providing important context for the recent rise of environmental partnerships derive from the increased favor that the idea of cooperative partnerships has also been experiencing in the arenas of international business and social welfare. The business arena, for its part, has recently witnessed a shift in the general approach to inter-organizational relations. The mode of privileging competitive relations between corporations dominant in the 1980s has been replaced by a preference for increased levels of inter-organizational cooperation (Choi 1995, Urban & Vendemini 1992). The exploding number of strategic

⁷This shift in EU policy strategy also comes on the heels of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development which, in its Agenda 21, made the plea for increased levels of consensus building and participatory dialogue (Johnson 1993). In the U.S., Clinton's Presidential Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) recently called in a similar fashion for increased use of "collaborative decision-making processes" in the management of natural resources (PCSD 1996).

alliances between corporations in Europe is a case in point. In the social services arena, decades of attacks on the ineffectiveness of big government and the welfare state have also led to increasing levels of cooperation between government and nonprofit organizations (Gidron et al. 1992). Given these two trends, the emergence of environmental partnerships should be seen not only in terms of its supposed benefits for environmental policy and democratic participation but also as part of increasing efforts by business to augment its role in the policy production process by working more closely with government, and as part of heightened attempts by government to ease the work-load on already over-burdened public officials by sharing some of its responsibilities with nonprofit organizations.

CASE STUDIES OF MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS

The research upon which this paper is based comes from a study of three multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships in Europe: an EU level initiative aimed at enabling the practice of sustainable development in Europe, a regional level initiative focused on improving the water quality of one of the major rivers that runs through the Walloon Region of Belgium, and a local level initiative directed toward preserving the biodiversity in a commune also located in the Walloon Region of Belgium. This paper draws primarily from fieldwork performed with the first two of these. In this section, I will briefly introduce these two case studies and then describe some of the data linking these partnerships to democratic practice.

The European Union level partnership, which I call the EU Partnership for Environmental Cooperation (or EUPEC),⁸ was comprised of over 50 members, most of whom represented European-based multi-national corporations, national and European level environmental NGOs, national and regional level public authorities, trade unions, and expert and consulting groups. It grew out the efforts of two individuals--one, a leader from the environmental NGO community, and the other, a leader from international business--to create an opportunity and a place for the two sectors to meet. Its official mission is to stimulate the dialogue and cooperation between all sectors involved in or affected by the implementation of the EU's Fifth

⁸I use pseudonyms for the partnerships discussed in this paper.

Environmental Action Programme and to serve as a model for similar partnership initiatives at national, regional, and local levels. It also hopes to use this multi-sectorial cooperation to produce policy recommendations pertaining to issues of sustainable development. To date, it has addressed such pertinent concerns as transport, tourism, agriculture, and environmental management. In the area of finances, approximately half of the funding for the EUPEC partnership comes from the European Commission; the other half is provided by the partner organizations themselves in the form of annual membership dues.

The regional level partnership, which I refer to as the "Toupin River Contract" partnership, was comprised of approximately 60 participants including communal and provincial level public authorities, communal and provincial level NGOs (most of which were environmentally oriented), and representatives from agricultural and business alliances and the water treatment industry. Historically, this partnership has its roots in the momentum created by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. It was spawned when a federation of environmental groups in Wallonia, in anticipation of the Earth Summit, asked some of its member organizations in the Toupin River basin to initiate a grass roots environmental project for the region. The result of this request was the decision by a group of 25 NGOs to create and enact what is known as a "river contract"--a publicly recognized though non-legally binding series of propositions for environmental action that the participants of the river contract partnership cooperatively create, voluntarily agree to, and subsequently implement.⁹ Monetary support for this partnership comes almost exclusively from the governmental sector: the Walloon government provides approximately half of the funding, while the rest is split between the involved provincial and communal governments. The Toupin River Contract partnership is one of six or seven such river contract partnerships sponsored by the Walloon government.

The predominant collective activity in these partnerships were the meetings which would periodically bring the partners together. It was at these meetings that the participants had the occasion to get

⁹The idea of the river contract came from France where one such contract had recently been completed to much fanfare and press coverage for the Dordogne River.

to know and dialogue with one another. It was also here that the participants had the opportunities to present their views and attempt to convince others regarding specific environmental and policy concerns. One of the fundamental issues being contested in the two case study partnerships was the general question of how environmentally-related decisions should be made in the future. At stake was the extent to which formerly excluded actors, especially representatives from civil society, would be allowed to participate in the environmental policy process. Interaction over this issue took the form of a debate between two opposing camps--one in favor of augmenting citizen participation in the decision-making process, and the other in favor of maintaining the status quo (a system dominated by elite management and pluralist bargaining).¹⁰ It was also with regard to this issue that many of the participants evoked the topic of democracy.

In the EUPEC partnership, most of the comments came from representatives of the environmental NGO sector and were in favor of increased citizen participation. These partners tied issues of democracy to their arguments in a number of ways. Some saw multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships as part of a broader democratization movement in the EU and, more specifically, as a tool for enhancing participatory democracy. Others described the partnership process as a new form of governance--one which involved shifting power away from the state and including civil society as a full player in the "co-management" of society. Still others credited the partnership process as helping to produce a more responsible citizenry in Europe.¹¹

In the Toupin River Contract partnership, both sides of the debate were more evenly represented, and the issue over future environmental decision-making was more directly addressed. What was interesting was that both camps were making essentially the same argument--that the environmental decision-making process needed to be a democratic one. Where they differed, however, was in their interpretations of

¹⁰The debate itself was rather latent as most of the comments made came in the setting of the interviews rather than from the meetings themselves.

¹¹The one-sidedness of this debate was due in large part to the composition of the EUPEC partnership. In particular, the partnership was marked by a relative absence of actual policy deciders from the EU and national levels. Furthermore, the role of the European Commission was rather ambiguous in the partnership. While the Commission was not an actual partner, it was a financial supporter of the initiative and one of the major audiences to which ideas (including those privileging democratic participation) were being directed.

democracy. One side defined the preferred form of democracy as increasingly involving the participation of citizens, and the other side defined it as justly representative and based upon majority rule.

The side favoring increased citizen participation here was comprised of a wide range of actors from the industrial, agricultural, environmental NGO, and governmental sectors. Those from government tended to be relatively recently elected officials who appeared to have been influenced to some extent by the Green movement in Belgium. This camp's basic argument was that the partnership process provides civil society with a greater level of "democratic control" over the way that political administrators make decisions. They also maintained that partnerships make the decision-making process more transparent. All in all, they tended to view the partnership process as a "new type of democracy"--one involved in an evolutionary transition from a more representative (and authoritarian) form of democracy to a more participatory one.

The proponents of the other side of the debate, those who were in favor of maintaining the existing decision-making institutions and processes, were comprised primarily of elected officials and government technicians directly responsible for managing the Toupin River. The participants in this camp argued that only publicly elected officials had the authority to make decisions that would affect the population as a whole. They based this argument on the fact that only these elected officials could be held accountable for their actions to the public. They also feared that the increased participation enabled by the partnership process could be appropriated by advocacy groups or individuals concerned solely with their own interests and not those of the greater society. Finally, they claimed that opening up the decision-making process to civil society would only serve to lessen the efficiency with which environmental issues were already being dealt.

The remainder of this paper picks up from this debate and looks more analytically at some of the questions which emerge from it. In particular, it attempts to address the following: Are these environmental partnerships actually contributing in practice to participatory democracy in the EU? How exactly are they doing so? And what are some of the potential drawbacks involved which might lead us to re-evaluate the democratic benefits of these new policy instruments?

ENVIRONMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

One way to gauge the contribution of policy instruments such as multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships to participatory democracy is to compare them to an ideal set of criteria for democratic participation. Fiorino (1996:200-201) provides the basis for such a set. He asserts that:

a mechanism or process promotes democratic participation to the extent that it (1) allows for the direct participation of amateurs; (2) enables citizens to participate with administrators and experts on a more equal basis; (3) creates a structure for face-to-face interaction over time; and (4) allows citizens a share in decision making.

Without going into too much detail, I contend that both of the case study partnerships introduced above generally meet the criteria of this participatory ideal, though they differ somewhat in the degree to which they do so. The first criterion, for example, requires that people become engaged in governance as citizens rather than simply as professionals (e.g., elected representatives or lobbyists) doing a job. This is true for both case studies in the sense that many of the participants describe themselves as representing both personal as well as organizational concerns in the partnerships. This is less true, however, for the EUPEC partnership than for the River Contract partnership. This is due in part to the fact that membership in the EUPEC partnership is directed primarily toward larger organizations which tend to be large and which must pay dues in order to participate. As these organizations typically demand that their interests rather than those of the individual representatives be served, participation on behalf of individual citizens of the EU is more restricted. The Toupin River Contract partnership, on the other hand, is open to anyone who wants to participate, whether as a citizen or as a representative of an organization, and there is no membership fee. As the participating organizations also tend to be smaller and more local, participants are more inclined to represent their own positions.

The second criterion concerns the fact that citizens, in their approaches to specific environmental issues, often are not operating from the same basis of information as policy administrators. In both of the case study partnerships examined, great emphasis is placed on educating the participants regarding environmental matters. An important way this is encouraged is via the exchange of information among the varied partners, each of which is seen as bringing expertise from his or her own sector. Furthermore, both

partnerships also attempt to influence greater publics outside of their institutions. The River Contract partnership attempts this by conducting information campaigns using such communication tools as the local news media, public conferences, and free publications. The EUPEC partnership's strategy is to publish information for dissemination via its networking contacts (e.g., with lower level environmental partnerships). In both cases, the partnerships are taking steps toward producing more knowledgeable and active citizens.

The third criterion, that which refers to the importance of face-to-face interaction, is based on the assumption that deliberation and debate--in their capacity to enable citizens to better understand each other's points of view, discover shared interests, and successfully transform conflict into agreement--are central to democracy. As bringing together partners from the different sectors and engaging them in a process of dialogue is the cornerstone upon which both partnerships are built, they definitely provide opportunities for this facet of democratic participation. I would add here that this practice is not confined to the formal meetings. It is also prevalent during the time periods immediately preceding and following the meetings when more informal communication and networking is taking place.

Finally, the fourth criterion harkens back to the fundamental notion that citizens in a participatory government must share in the process of governing. Here, a difference again arises between the two case studies. The EUPEC partnership meets this criterion only to the extent that it is providing the European Commission with policy recommendations. As the European Commission is not an active partner in EUPEC, the partnership's relationship with the Commission remains one based on consultation, not on decision sharing. The Toupin River Contract partnership differs in this regard. This is due to both the specific composition of the partnership and the mechanism of the actual "river contract" itself. Unlike in the EUPEC partnership, governmental officials play a primary if not the dominant role in the Toupin River Contract partnership. This is necessitated by their role as legal managers of the Toupin river and its tributaries. To the extent that all of the participants in the River Contract partnership, via the consensus process, have some (though not necessarily equal) input in defining the content of the "river contract" itself, and insofar as governmental institutions, once they sign the contract, are committing to take certain actions

with regard to the river, individual citizens, via participation in this process, have the opportunity to directly share in environmental decision-making.

Now while the above exercise evaluating the contribution of environmental partnerships to democratic participation seems to indicate that both of the case study partnerships are successfully promoting participatory democracy according to the criteria defined (with the Toupin River Contract partnership doing this somewhat better than the EUPEC partnership), I want to take a step back and suggest that these partnerships are also enhancing democratic participation in two even more fundamental ways: 1) by providing a new avenue for citizen participation in the environmental decision-making process, and 2) by creating a new public space where discussion and deliberation on environmental issues can take place.

The first of these relates directly to a particular democratic deficiency in the current environmental policy production process. The problem is as follows: even though a number of consultative mechanisms already exist for opening up the environmental decision-making process to greater publics, this does not necessarily guarantee that more citizens are actually being included in the process. The point is that certain players still have greater and more privileged access than others (McCormick 1995). It is with regard to this inequality that these environmental partnerships provide a basic contribution. An anecdote from one of the case studies will help illustrate.

A formative event in the development of the EUPEC partnership was the publishing in 1995 of what has come to be known as the Molitor Report.¹² This report was the product of a consultation that DGXI conducted with a select group of 'experts' on the topic of how to redefine EU environmental policy for the future and, more specifically, how to simplify and alleviate what has been criticized as over-prescriptive and rigid legislation. The Molitor group was composed predominantly of representatives from industry ministries and the business sector along with a few academics and trade union delegates. In their report to the European Commission, the Molitor group proposed sweeping changes in the direction of deregulation

¹²This event was formative because it took place during a period when a number of the prominent environmental NGO participants in the EUPEC partnership were deciding whether or not to continue participating. Their departure would have severely hampered the multi-sectorial quality of the partnership.

which would further shift responsibility for environmental protection away from the government and legally-based standards and towards market-based mechanisms and voluntary measures. What infuriated some of the environmental NGO representatives in the EUPEC partnership, and what caused some of them to cite this case as demonstrating why partnerships like EUPEC were necessary, was not the conclusions reached by the Molitor group but the manner in which they were achieved. As not a single environmental NGO had been included amidst the numerous industrial representatives, the real issue was the blatant failure of the European Commission to assure representivity in the consultation process.

What the EUPEC partnership offers to this contested practice of exclusion is a ready-made consulting body whose policy recommendations come not from one sector alone but from a consensus of representatives from all of the major sectors.¹³ Citizen participation benefits in two related ways. On one hand, the partnership provides a new connection or liaison between citizens and policy makers--a new avenue of access to the policy production process. On the other hand, the multi-sectorial quality of the partnership improves the chances that it will be included in future consultations, especially since institutions like the European Commission need mechanisms like this to help legitimate their decisions. Increased inclusion of the EUPEC partnership in the consultative process thus provides participatory opportunities for those of its partners who had formerly been excluded.

The second fundamental way that these environmental partnerships foster democratic participation stems from their role as new public spheres where discursive interaction between citizens is possible.¹⁴ The submergence of status differences, the equal right to speak, and the search for consensus that are ideally fostered in these partnerships all help produce a climate where public opinion can be engaged and galvanized. There is also a hope in these partnerships that cooperation and accommodation among the different organizations and sectors will develop and that this will be founded upon dialogue between the

¹³In this manner, the EUPEC partnership is fundamentally different from other participants in the EU environmental consultative process.

¹⁴Some scholars, like Dryzek (1992), argue that more public sphere participation is precisely what is needed to help us meet our current environmental challenges.

participants rather than political and economic domination. Insofar as these partnerships serve as forces of societal integration which challenge and to some extent prevail over the forces of money and administrative power in the process of legitimation, they may be said to contribute to a new, more participatory form of democracy (Habermas 1992).¹⁵

LIMITS TO THE PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Now despite the contributions that these partnerships bring to democratic participation, certain constraints exist which threaten to compromise the benefits gained. I will touch on four areas here: limitations to the functioning of partnerships as public spheres, risks of exploitation, issues of representivity, and the potential for conflict with existing policy institutions.

Picking up from the previous discussion on the contribution of environmental partnerships as public spheres, a first constraint to the promotion of democratic participation arises from the fact that the partnerships depart somewhat from the ideal functioning of public spheres. Notwithstanding the particular debate discussed above, the predominant pattern of interaction in the meetings attended was heavily procedural in orientation and distinguished by a relative lack of confrontation between ideas or interests. As such, the quality of the dialogue in these partnerships deviates rather markedly from the notion of "rational-critical discourse" that Habermas found so fundamental to the constitution of an ideal public sphere (Calhoun 1992). This is especially striking given the argumentation which often typifies interaction between proponents of environmental protection and economic imperatives in such other institutional venues as public hearings and consultative fora. As deliberation and debate play important roles in the functioning of democracy (Fiorino 1996), the practice of non-confrontation characteristic of the environmental partnerships studied appears to constrain the actual level of individual engagement, and hence democratic participation,

¹⁵A Habermasian perspective might describe this instead as a return to a formerly more internally functional form of democracy (see Calhoun 1992).

which occurs.¹⁶

A second constraint, and another manner in which environmental partnerships deviate from the ideal of the public sphere, concerns the fact that the government sector participates, at least to some extent, in these initiatives. As such, these partnerships represent non-autonomous public spheres where direct opposition to the state, as was prescribed by Habermas, becomes problematic (Calhoun 1992). In the case of the EUPEC and Toupin River Contract partnerships, both are dependent in large part upon the state for their funding. Consequently, individual actors in the partnerships naturally refrain from attacking the state as this might have the unwanted effect of undermining the stability of the very institution that gives them the opportunity to participate in the first place. This dependency also necessitates that the partnerships and their constituents bend somewhat to the agenda of the state, thereby opening the door for possible state co-optation of these partnerships. In these situations, individual partners also risk losing touch with their own grass-roots interests--a situation especially problematic for the environmental NGO community (Dryzek 1996).

This is not, unfortunately, the only possibility for exploitation in these environmental partnerships. Also vulnerable to abuse are the democratic qualities of the partnership process itself. Many participants in the Toupin River Contract partnership, and especially those coming from NGOs, warned against local and provincial public officials appropriating the partnership process purely for reasons of political interest. They feared that these officials might utilize the partnership's participatory and multi-sectorial qualities for the purpose of legitimizing decisions which would in reality have been made prior to the partnership process and behind closed doors in a decidedly less democratic fashion. A number of participants from the public sector, for their part, also expressed concern over the possibility of co-optation--in this case co-optation by special interests. They worried that advocacy groups might try to manipulate the partnerships to advance their own specific agendas.

¹⁶I argue elsewhere (Poncelet forthcoming) that this practice of non-confrontation is somewhat particular to multi-stakeholder partnerships. It stems in part from the vast amount of time and energy that these partnerships devote toward maintaining their existence as institutions.

A third area limiting the potential contribution of multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships to democracy concerns the problem of representivity. At issue is whether or not environmental partnerships satisfactorily ensure that all the affected stakeholders are included in the collaborative process and that the interests at stake are being represented in a manner in line with the importance accorded to them in society. For instance, in the case of the Toupin River Contract partnership, some of the organizations representing business interests often complained that they were constantly heavily outnumbered by environmental group representatives at the partnership meetings. They felt that due to their numerical minority status, environmental concerns were being given more voice, and therefore accorded more weight, than economic concerns. Failure of multi-stakeholder partnerships to assure equitable levels of representivity satisfactory to all of the participants within the institution will undermine any supposed contributions to democratic participation.

A final constraint that merits discussion involves the relationship that these partnerships have with actual policy-making institutions and processes. Insofar as these partnerships are intended only to complement and supplement the existing legislative system, they must be careful not to exceed this mandate. If the partnerships place themselves into direct competition with traditional institutions over the production of environmental policy, they risk alienating the very establishments to which they may be dependent not only for financing but for enforcement of environmental decisions. Moreover, they will surely evoke resistance toward any further attempts to democratize the environmental decision-making process.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A MORE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The ethnographic approach to environmental cooperation upon which this paper is founded presents certain benefits to the study of citizen participation and democracy in the European Union. First and foremost, it provides a way to get at the understandings and practices of the very people involved. With regard to the policy arena, it encourages us to see the process of environmental policy production less in terms of faceless actors mechanically pursuing the interests and acting out the functions of their respective

political, economic, and social institutions and more in terms of actual individuals--replete with personal and social histories and who privilege specific discourses and practices--coming together in particular contexts to participate in the dynamic process of collective decision-making.

Secondly, it helps us to avoid totalizing multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships by revealing the great variety of configurations that these institutions may take. Each partnership--depending on the political level at which it is situated, the environmental issues being addressed, the specific partners participating, and the particular historical context in which it was created--is capable of different types of action and thus of different types of influence not only on activity in the environmental arena but in the realm of democratic governance as well. This diversity is exemplified by the two environmental partnerships explored in this paper. The EUPEC partnership's preference for organizational members, for instance, causes it to operate more pluralistically and hence in a less participatory democratic fashion than the Toupin River Contract partnership. This distinction in participatory quality is further influenced by differences in their environmental foci. Here, the EUPEC partnership addresses the more abstract notion of sustainable development by generating broad policy recommendations, while the River Contract partnership focuses on a very concrete environmental issue (a polluted river) with the intention of producing pointed environmental actions of remediation or conservation. As local level issues and actions tend to impact people more directly in their everyday lives, it is easier for the Toupin River Contract partnership than it is for its supra-national level counterpart to secure the interest and involvement of individual citizens.

A third advantage of an ethnographic approach is that it observes the anthropological tradition of paying attention to the difference between what people say and what they do. As such, it compels us to look for differences between how environmental partnerships are supposed to work in theory and how they actually operate in practice. In theory, players from all sectors of society will sit down together, get to know one another, and collectively solve pressing environmental problems via consensus decision-making. In practice, people do not always get along. And in practice, change is never easy--especially when it involves the transformation of institutional power structures in Western Europe's political and economic systems.

The data presented above suggests that some of the elite environmental decision-makers now participating in these partnerships (e.g., those more heavily influenced by the green movement) will be more amenable to sharing their power and authority than others (e.g., old timers entrenched in the traditional prescriptive system).

If we return now to the topic question of this paper, we can conclude that multi-stakeholder environmental partnerships do present an important opportunity to augment the participatory quality of democratic governance at both EU and regional levels. To the extent that the partnerships include political decision-makers, interests groups, and individual citizens as partners, they may even be thought of as embodying a more balanced combination of elite, pluralistic, and popular forms of democracy. But despite the gains, certain obstacles remain which may limit the extent of the contributions made. For instance, any advances in the direction of participatory democracy are easily negated if the partnerships themselves operate in a non-democratic fashion. The degree to which cross-sectorial representation is secured, collaboration with traditional elected democratic institutions is preserved, and democratic functioning of the actual institution is maintained all have an impact on the contribution that these partnerships bring to democratic practices (Lafferty & Meadowcroft 1996b). To foster democratic participation via institutions which are themselves not democratically organized or run is not necessarily beneficial to democratic governance.

Another important impediment concerns the overall lack of meaningful debate and engagement which characterized the two case studies examined here. This suggests that the environmental decision-making process at both supra- and sub-national levels in the EU is still being influenced to a greater extent by the forces of political and economic interests than by the public opinion being generated in the partnerships. If this is indeed the case, it indicates that these environmental partnerships, as they are currently designed, coordinated, and practiced, are not likely to have a major effect in bringing about radical change to the EU's current form of democratic governance. Indeed, fear already exists that these alternative policy instruments being privileged by the EU are little more than symbolic actions which have more to do with institutional positioning around a green agenda than achieving fundamental environmental change

(Philip 1995). They even run the risk--in the sense that there exists the potential for exploitation of this process by political and economic interests who use their participation in these partnerships as a means for legitimizing their positions of power and privilege in society--of undermining the very process of participatory democracy that they intend to promote.

While these obstacles may appear daunting, they are not overwhelming. If we view the rise of environmental partnerships as part of an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process, it is evident that change in the direction of increased participatory democracy is already well on its way. It is interesting to note that how far this change will proceed may ultimately depend less on the future design and operation of instruments such as the environmental partnerships described here than on the extent to which citizens of the EU choose to participate in their own self-governance.

As to the contribution that these instruments will have on the areas of environmental policy production, implementation, and successful realization, I suggest that it is still too early to tell. Although past cases of increased citizen participation have been shown to promote positive environmental policy outcomes due to the improved understanding of the problems and the decreased public resistance to policy implementation that this strategy engenders (Achterberg 1996, Fiorino 1996, Janicke 1996), the preliminary results from the two partnerships presented here are ambiguous enough that I believe we should withhold final judgement on their overall impact until later. Rather than jump to conclusions, I suggest that we remind ourselves that this instrument is still a relatively recent arrival on the EU policy scene and that environmental problems, by definition, are seldom resolved overnight.

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