



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Longing for Wikitopia: the study and politics of self-organization

Uitermark, J.

DOI

[10.1177/0042098015577334](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015577334)

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Urban Studies

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Uitermark, J. (2015). Longing for Wikitopia: the study and politics of self-organization. *Urban Studies*, 52(13), 2301-2312. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015577334>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Longing for Wikitopia: The study and politics of self-organisation

Justus Uitermark

University of Amsterdam and Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

Urban Studies

2015, Vol. 52(13) 2301–2312

© Urban Studies Journal Limited 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0042098015577334

usj.sagepub.com



Abstract

Self-organisation is an idea whose time has come. As an explanatory concept, self-organisation is central to complexity theory, which is quickly becoming a powerful and perhaps even dominant paradigm in both the natural and social sciences. As a political ideal, self-organisation is filling the void that is opening up as both the state and market are increasingly perceived as undemocratic, unjust and inefficient. Drawing on observations from the Dutch city of Rotterdam, this paper argues that self-organisation indeed is an inspiring ideal but that it is often misunderstood and may produce adverse consequences when used as a policy guide. While self-organisation is too inspiring to abandon, its harsh realities need to be accounted for if we want to think and work with it.

Keywords

community, complexity theory, government, Internet, self-organisation

Received March 2014; accepted February 2015

The complex patterns insects produce are an endless source of fascination for scientists. Fireflies dance in amazing patterns and switch on and off in perfect synchrony. Ants, termites, and bees create structures with a baffling architecture and use highly advanced methods to locate and transport food. The creations are so complex that it is hard not to believe they are produced by architects or designers, but reality is more inspiring. There are no leaders or directors. The impressive nests, the refined survival strategies, the enchanting dances or the sophisticated divisions of labour are not produced by design. The complex patterns are emergent, they rise up out of distributed local interactions; they result from *self-organisation*. Self-organisation has emerged

as a central concept within science in recent years. All sorts of complex structures – ranging from brains to the economy – have been analysed as the outcome of self-organisation (e.g. Ball, 2013; Johnson, 2002; Kauffman, 1993).

Self-organisation has not only gained ground as an explanatory concept but also as a political ideal. The development of technologies for distributed communication has reinvigorated hopes that people can coordinate and cooperate without delegating power

Corresponding author:

Justus Uitermark, Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, PO Box 15508, Amsterdam, 1001 NA, Netherlands.

Email: justusuitermark@hotmail.com

to a central authority. Wikipedia is perhaps the ultimate example. The online encyclopaedia is not created by experts but by hundreds of thousands of volunteers who add or revise topics on their own initiative, in effect creating the world's biggest evolving repository of human knowledge. Recent social movements also embrace the ideal of self-organisation. The web-based movement Anonymous, the Occupy movement and the Spanish *indignados* all reject the delegation of power to leadership and even question the very idea of representation itself. As Manuel Castells notes for the case of the *indignados*, this networked movement 'positioned itself against intermediaries, be it political, media, or cultural' and he notes 'a paradigm shift' as the movement seeks to be 'created equally by thousands of people' each of whom speak for themselves and for themselves only (Toret quoted in Castells, 2012: 121).

Perhaps most strikingly, self-organisation has also been embraced by governments. The idea that state interventions should primarily be aimed at strengthening civil society rather than the state has become a mainstay of international development (Watkins et al., 2012) and more recently governments of Western Europe have also accorded increasingly important roles for local communities, recasting them from parties for consultation to prime drivers of social change. In the United Kingdom, Cameron's government declared its opposition to 'Big Government' and support for a 'Big Society' composed of empowered local communities (Cabinet Office, 2010: 1). The Dutch cabinet states in a recent position paper that society's self-organising capacities are growing (Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2013) and believes, as per King Willem's by now infamous speech, that the classic welfare state must transform into a 'participation society'. Just as citizens have grown increasingly distrustful and critical of governments, governments are increasingly

declaring their faith in citizens' zeal and creativity. Networked communities rather than hierarchical states have come to be seen as the source of welfare, prosperity, and happiness.

By reporting from the trenches of the 'participation society' in the city of Rotterdam, this paper follows in the tracks of the social state to see what happens as it retreats and mutates. Rather than opening up a void free of state interference, we observe the contradictory – clumsy, creative, ferocious – reconfiguration of relationships within communities and between communities and the government. This paper examines the uneven and contradictory development of self-organisation but first takes a closer look at the rise of self-organisation as a political ideal.

The irresistible rise of self-organisation

As signalled by its simultaneous rise in different sectors, self-organisation has developed into a paradigmatic concept that both explains and prescribes how societies, and also cities, function. It has become common to represent the city as akin to a biological system with a natural order in which every attempt at design or control is problematic or destructive. This quote by the planner Michael Batty, as cited by the physicist Philip Ball (2013: 46), illustrates this well:

Planning, design, control, management – whatever constellation of interventionist perspectives are adopted – are difficult and potentially dangerous. If we assume that social systems and cities [are] like biological systems ... then interventions are potentially destructive unless we have a deep understanding of their causal effects. As we have learned more, we become wary of the effects of such concerted action.

Ball goes on to argue that:

the only effective way to manage cities will be to discover their intrinsic bottom-up principles of self-organization, and then to work with those so as to guide the process along desirable routes, rather than trying to impose some unreachable and unsustainable order and structure. (Ball, 2013: 43)

It is important at this point to distinguish the general concept of self-organisation and the political ideal. As an explanatory concept self-organisation accounts for the ways in which social and natural life evolves. Self-organisation thus understood can refer to natural selection or bureaucracy running out of control and it can refer to processes that are benign or malign. However, self-organisation has taken on a specific ideological guise in recent scholarly literature and policy statements. In this conception, an arbitrary distinction is made between, on the one hand, 'the system' with its endogenous and ingenious principles of self-organisation (i.e. the market and civil society) and, on the other hand, 'interventions' as carried out by some agent alien and exogenous to the system (i.e. the state). Rather than conceiving of the state as foundational or integral to urban and social systems (Schinkel, 2012), its role then becomes to foster and respect the self-organising of communities and especially the market. Adopting a view of cities as akin to biological systems distracts from the wider political and economic forces that determine the ground rules for urban development and makes it possible to portray even contested processes like gentrification as 'natural' (Ball, 2014; for a critique see Slater, 2014).

Although this governmentality is cloaked in an antipolitical vocabulary (Rose, 2000: 1400), it mobilises enthusiasm and scepticism in particular ways: while the logic through which uncoordinated and individual decisions produce social outcomes is readily accepted as a consequence of intrinsic principles of self-organisation that have to be

respected, the logic through which collective and coordinated decisions produce social outcomes is suspect.

Thus emerges the ideal of the self-organised city, a city where people are not directed by central authorities but cooperate voluntarily in communities and for the public good. We might call that city Wikitopia, an ideal city where bottom-up cooperation coalesces into an ingenious and complex social organisation. Reading recent policy documents and media reports, one might get the impression that the realisation of Wikitopia is in process. Journalists, scholars and government officials produce magazines, blogs, and books with inspiring examples of people who organise their own care provisions, generate their own energy, create their own child care facilities, or farm their own food. Neighbourhood centres run by residents rather than welfare organisations have become places of pilgrimage for government officials who have converted to the faith in community power.

The idea that people creatively and harmoniously create their city from the bottom-up is indeed irresistible. The civic success stories are a breath of fresh air for a society desperate for new ways of organising solidarity and social relations. It would be a mistake to view the longing for Wikitopia as only the fig leaf for brutal budget cuts. Wikitopia has political and ideological appeal to both left and right as it promises that the power invested in rigid institutions will be distributed across communities capable of taking control over their own affairs. The longing for Wikitopia is a contemporary variant of utopian ideas on volitional solidarity found in anarchism, libertarianism or socialism and in Christian and other religions. From the hypermodern cybernetics movement to groups aspiring to go back to nature, self-organisation features strongly in projections of an alternative social order. Initiatives that operate without market

incentives or state imposition can be regarded as 'real utopias' that prefigure what alternative ways of organising social relations and solidarity might look like (Wright, 2013).

At the same time, the government's idealisation of citizens and the boasting about civic power raises suspicions. It is narcissistic to only see the power and beauty of civil society. The idealisation of citizens – by governments and occasionally by citizens themselves – betrays a lack of real curiosity and true commitment as it is blind to self-organisation's weaknesses and darker side. Michael Batty is certainly right when he says, as quoted above, that government intervention is 'difficult and potentially dangerous' but this is just as well true of self-organisation and policies aiming to harness self-organisation. Just as the state can fail, so can the market, and so can civil society.

The challenge is to walk on the fine line between, on the one hand, denouncing the ideal of self-organisation as a fig leaf for cold-hearted austerity and, on the other hand, celebrating self-organisation as an infallible or inescapable principle of government (North, 2011). What we need to do instead is to cultivate curiosity and commitment. This requires, on the one hand, a distanced, macroscopic view that allows us to map and explain broad patterns. On the other hand, it requires a microscopic view to examine what goes on within self-organising networks.

A macroscopic view

With a macroscopic view we can examine where self-organisation takes off and where it does not. In recent years, researchers have shown that self-organisation develops stronger in some than in other areas. Robert Putnam has shown in his studies on Italy (Putnam, 1993) and the United States (Putnam, 2007) that some areas have greater

capacity for self-organisation than others. Robert Sampson's research on Chicago also shows the uneven distribution of self-organisation. Initiatives like charity benefits or protest actions are much more present in some than in other neighbourhoods (Sampson, 2012). What explains this uneven development? Although research shows that economically deprived and ethnically diverse areas score relatively low, residential composition does not fully account for the geographical differences. More important than the background characteristics of the population is the institutional tissue of associations and foundations that enable people to connect (Putnam, 1993; Sampson, 2012). Walter Nicholls (2009) calls places where this tissue is strongly developed relational incubators.

The city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands is one interesting case for examining self-organisation – here colloquially understood as collective action by citizens that is not directed by the government – because cooperation towards a common cause is far from trivial here. Rotterdam has become known in the Netherlands and in the academic literature as a city where revanchist sentiments have been forcefully expressed (Van den Berg, 2012; Van Eijk, 2010). Anxieties about the discontents of multicultural society are now compounded by concerns over austerity measures. As in other countries, the Dutch government simultaneously cuts budgets and delegates responsibilities to municipal governments. Considering the magnitude of the budget cuts, municipal governments are reconsidering their own role. On the one hand, they are tightening their grip on groups subjected to workfare policies. On the other hand, municipalities are now more eagerly than before looking for ways to give communities the space they need to provide services through mutual support and generalised reciprocity. This longing for a more Wikitopian city is not mere veneer for draconic budget-cuts but also expresses widely

felt discontents with state-delivered services which are believed – not just by governments or parties on the right – to have alienated people by considering them as customers or target groups rather than constituents. One important question, however, is where and how communities can and do self-organise.

A first insight into Rotterdam's varied geography of self-organising capacity can be gleaned from Rotterdam's Social Index survey. Respondents were asked if they take care of less able people, improve their neighbourhood in some way, and work as volunteers. When the answers are scaled and expressed as grades, the poor and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods of Bloemhof, Tussendijken and Bospolder would not pass the test while the more affluent and homogeneous neighbourhoods of Hillegersberg-Schiebroek and Hoek van Holland score high grades. The first impression these figures give is in line with Robert Putnam's finding that deprived and diverse neighbourhoods do not do well.

However, when we look at neighbourhood data rather than aggregated individual data, a very different pattern comes up. A survey of Rotterdam's civil initiatives shows a surprisingly even distribution: all city districts have between 200 and 300 citizen initiatives (Schinkel et al., 2010). A plausible explanation for this pattern is that Rotterdam has a highly developed city-wide infrastructure for community development. From the 1980s onwards, the municipality has invested in umbrella organisations and professional support for residents, immigrants, women and other groups (Uitermark, 2012). Through that infrastructure the Rotterdam government has rolled out city-wide community development programmes, with the so-called Opzoomeren as iconic example. Opzoomeren was invented when residents in the run-down Opzoomerstraat decided to work collectively to make the street clean and friendly by

sweeping the street and planting flowers. The municipality scaled this initiative up to the entire city and since the 1990s hundreds of street groups throughout Rotterdam participate in Opzoomeren. More recently the activities of Opzoomeren have been expanded to Dutch language lessons and reading sessions which are now organised throughout Rotterdam with financial and professional support from the municipality. These kinds of community development programmes are strongly associated with the social state; they are centrally coordinated, standardised, and rely on public funds and professional support.

The government in the 'participation society' demands more and gives less. Citizens are expected to play key roles in providing their own provisions. One important example is public libraries. In the United Kingdom, hundreds of public libraries have closed but also many new community-run libraries have been established. In Rotterdam, the government decided to close down 14 out of the 21 libraries in 2011. In response to the closure of the public library in their neighbourhood, two sociologists and active residents, Joke van der Zwaard and Maurice Specht founded the Reading Salon West, a vibrant place where people read, work, take Dutch lessons, organise meetings, and perform poetry or music. The Reading Salon became one of those places of pilgrimage for government officials as it supposedly demonstrates that unsubsidised volunteers are better capable of creating vibrant neighbourhood spaces than publicly funded officials.

However, there is more to the success story than the ingenuity and commitment of the Reading Salon's founders. The Reading Salon could emerge in this neighbourhood because of the strong institutional tissue that had historically developed around the Aktiegroep Oude Westen (Van der Zwaard and Specht, 2013). The networks that had

been cultivated through the Aktiegroep enabled the Reading Salon's founders to reach out to potential volunteers and mobilise people to design, maintain, and operate the space. This helps us understand why in all the other 14 neighbourhoods where public libraries had to close, residents have *not* successfully taken initiatives to create community-run libraries. Organising an initiative like the Reading Salon requires immense effort from dozens or even hundreds of people volunteering their time and coordinating their activities. In the absence of strong and dense pre-existing networks, undertaking an enterprise of this magnitude is too much even for very committed and skilful initiators.

Not only social but also economic capital is unevenly distributed and such inequality is likely to increasingly translate into uneven service provision as the state delegates its responsibilities. Celebrated forms of self-organisation like cooperatives in the field of care, housing construction, or renewable energy emerge where people are well-organised *and* can afford the necessary investments. Elinor Ostrom's research that is often used to underscore the value and feasibility of self-organisation suggests that robust forms of common resource management benefit from homogeneity among participants and the possibility of excluding outsiders (Dietz et al., 2003: 1908). The so-called Klushuizen, or Do It Yourself houses, are an example of common resource management in the field of housing. As part of an operation to upgrade the neighbourhood of Spangen, the Rotterdam municipality bought an entire housing complex and gave it for free to a cooperation of aspiring home-owners on the condition that they would renovate the buildings. The project has been widely cited as an inspiring example of collaborative and bottom-up initiative. It did indeed provide tangible benefits for the group of home-owners – a spacious and

affordable home overlooking a gated inner-garden that is a focal point for vibrant community life – but these are not available for people unable to finance a major renovation.

These examples illustrate that community life may surge where the government devolves responsibilities and assets to communities but they also illustrate that this is a highly uneven process. A research agenda into global patterns of self-organisation should not only examine success stories but all cases to search for underlying factors that account for self-organising or the lack thereof. It is important to acknowledge that residents in one neighbourhood created a very successful initiative in response to the closure of their neighbourhood library but it is equally important to recognise that this is exceptional as no community initiatives emerged in 13 other neighbourhoods where public libraries closed. If we take a broad look, we find that self-organisation is unevenly distributed across countries, cities, and neighbourhoods. This makes it all the more interesting and urgent to investigate the geographical distribution of self-organisation and explain why some areas fare better than others.

A microscopic view

Research into the determinants of self-organisation can give insight into the structural conditions that conduce or restrain citizens' initiatives. But self-organisation is not a pure expression of these conditions. People who organise and take initiatives try to beat the odds and outmanoeuvre conditions hindering them. This is a fascinating process exactly because it is difficult. People are not fire flies, bees or ants. While those insects know their place instinctively, self-organisation among people is even in the best cases the result of struggle and trial and error (see Harvey, 2000). When we take a microscopic view of self-organisation, we do

not observe the seamless confluence of pre-programmed elements but different characters and interests which sometimes creatively merge but at other times tragically crash.

Let's look at one spectacular example by way of illustration – the Burning Man festival that takes place each year in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. The festival is inspired by the philosophy that visitors are not passive consumers but active participants who co-produce performances, make sculptures, offer massages, and play music. Goods and services are not traded but exchanged through a gift economy. Burning Man is a sort of Wikitopia. The festival site is a makeshift city where tens of thousands of visitors each decide on their own initiative what they do or contribute. But looking from above, it becomes apparent that these chaotic and creative interactions take place

within a clear structure reflecting classic hierarchical steering (Figure 1). Initially Burning Man was radically unstructured but as the festival grew and incidents took place, the organisation of Burning Man consolidated and became more stringent. A for-profit organisation was established and a director was put in charge to streamline coordination and a range of restrictions were imposed on participants to prevent incidents (Chen, 2009). The organisation attempts to be radically inclusive but to do so it paradoxically has to make stipulations and impose restrictions.

That even Burning Man adopts hierarchical steering and takes on the form of a corporate entity is suggestive of the limitations and contradictions of self-organisation. While exclusion, power concentration, and bureaucratisation are often considered as



Figure 1. Burning Man aerial.

Source: Kyle Harmon, Creative Commons licence.

counter or alien to self-organisation, these tendencies can emerge from self-organisation. This is also the case for perhaps the most iconic example of the power of self-organisation, Wikipedia. As pointed out in the introduction, Wikipedia is an impressive and inspiring example of self-organisation but a closer look at the online encyclopaedia reveals that cooperation and coordination among the hundreds of thousands of volunteers requires considerable work. Self-organisation is facilitated by a formal organisation, the Wikimedia Foundation, that maintains servers, fights legal battles, raises funds, and develops software. Wikimedia also struggles with tendencies towards bureaucratisation and exclusion. In their efforts to work efficiently and conscientiously, Wikipedia editors have developed jargon, acronyms, and rules that come across to outsiders as obscure and secretive language. That secretive language has not been developed with the purpose of excluding others but yet this is what happens. Newcomers find that their edits and additions are often immediately undone by more senior editors or automated content management systems (so-called 'bots') (Rijshouwer and Uitermark, 2014). Wikipedia and Burning Man are spectacular and inspiring examples of self-organisation but those success stories are exceptional and moreover ambivalent. While many commentators give the impression that contemporary self-organising networks elide tendencies to centralisation or exclusion, it turns out that self-organising networks are often less open, flexible, and egalitarian than we perhaps would like (Freeman, 1973). Exactly because self-organising networks lack central oversight and people do not know their place instinctively, it is a matter of struggle and improvisation to bring divergent ideals and interests in line (Boutellier, 2011).

This process of struggle and negotiation is especially challenging in urban areas

characterised by deprivation and competing demands from diverse groups on limited space. Schipper's (2014) ethnography of a resident-run community centre in Rotterdam provides one interesting example. The centre used to be managed by a welfare foundation until budget cuts forced it to close in 2012. The building remained vacant for almost two years until a group of neighbourhood residents occupied it. While before the centre had been run by professionals, after its relaunch it developed a culture of cooperation underpinned by active participation and now provides space to Turkish and Moroccan women learning to mend clothing, Polish and Dutch residents exchanging language lessons, former prisoners reintegrating into mainstream society by assisting activities, pensioned artisans doing repairs, and clients of labour market reintegration programmes. The residents ritually reiterate how their occupation of the building ushered in a period of civic resurgence. Their new community centre receives subsidies and assistance from subsidised professional organisations but a crucial difference is that residents are now in charge and that they have a diverse yet connected constituency of user groups. However, a challenge the residents face is that the government will increase the rent to 'commercial' levels after two years because it feels its task is only to help kickstart projects, not to sustain them. This is likely to result in the end of the project or a reorientation to other, more profitable groups and uses, which are – by the way – difficult to find in this deprived neighbourhood.

Van Summeren's (2012) case study of a community garden provides another interesting glance into the micro-dynamics of self-managed spaces. The community garden she researched has been created on a vacant lot of land that had not been developed because of the financial crisis, providing one example of how aborted projects created

new spaces for civic engagement. Creatief Beheer, the organisation managing the space for the government, receives funds from the municipal budget for physical management but it opts for a more community-based approach as it employs gardeners who are expected to cultivate the land and to cultivate community in the process – a practice Gilchrist (2000: 269) refers to as ‘human horticulture’. Creatief Beheer radically embraces the principle of openness and refuses to erect fences, use surveillance cameras or regulate access through identification cards. This philosophy goes against the intuition of many neighbourhood residents using the garden. They pressure the professionals to regulate access and enforce rules but Creatief Beheer categorically rejects these demands. Although this strategy is not without its costs, Van Summeren’s (2012) research

suggests that it may be successful. Her network analysis shows that the users of the garden segregate into different clusters but these clusters are connected through brokers who mediate potentially conflictive relations (Figure 2). The biggest node in Figure 2 is a professional working for Creatief Beheer, which indicates that she is an important broker between individuals. However, she is strongly connected to adults with mostly Dutch backgrounds while having no direct connections to a group of neighbourhood youngsters with mostly foreign backgrounds, represented by the tightly connected yet somewhat isolated cluster at the top of Figure 2. A youngster of Turkish descent, represented by the second biggest node in the middle of the figure, forms a bridge between the adults and youngsters. Since this youngster was trusted by both groups, he

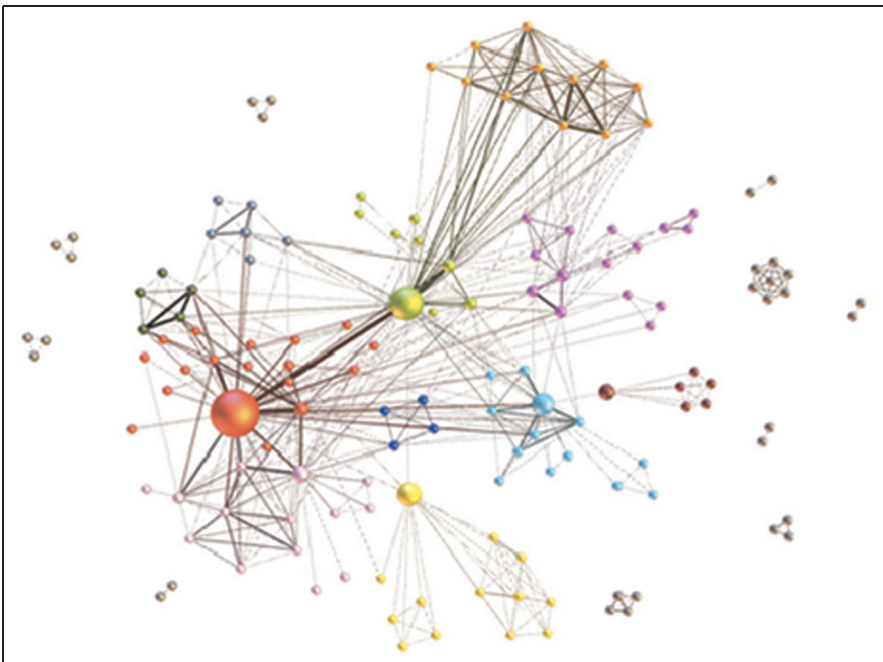


Figure 2. Network structure of social relations in a community garden managed by Creatief Beheer. Nodes represent persons; edges indicate persons engaging in activities together; colours indicate clusters; node size indicates betweenness centrality, a measure for brokerage.

Source: Van Summeren (2012).

could help to bring about results the professionals could not achieve alone; he enlisted volunteers and carved out a space for the youngsters to participate. The network is nevertheless fragile; relations are disproportionately formed around a professional and there are only few linkages among segregated groups. Given the likely prospect of further budget cuts, the hope is that residents will self-organise as a community to manage the garden, but so far they have not.

These examples suggest that some important emancipatory effects can be realised when professionals do not monopolise social development but they also hint at the fragility of self-organisation. Rotterdam seems to be in a limbo. On the one hand, self-organising residents have stepped in as the social state retreated. As welfare organisations have dwindled and market-based development projects were aborted, community engagement has been ‘crowded in’ (cf. Ostrom, 2000). As the government becomes dependent on communities to perform key tasks, community members are in a better position to push for the changes they like to see and get meaningfully involved. On the other hand, self-organisation is in an important part predicated on the financial and professional support that helps residents to finance activities and cope with the more vicious problems associated with self-organising in an urban context where community cohesion is not self-evident. In opposition to the ‘crowding out’ hypothesis, we might expect that engagement suffers when communities are left to vent for themselves: if the state retreats further, so may residents. The challenge, then, is to open the black box of self-organisation and discover why networks come together or fall apart.

Politics, research, and the politics of research

The research agenda outlined above has relevance for practitioners and therefore also for

policy makers. But ‘practice’ should not be conflated with ‘policy’. It seems that up until now self-organisation is, somewhat ironically, to a large degree a government affair and a government goal. It has now become customary for ministerial departments, local councils, and government advisors to declare that they want to support citizen initiatives rather than impose plans of their own. While the government sees itself as rigid, expensive, and inefficient, citizens are portrayed as creative, flexible, and decisive. In spite of the self-flagellation in policy documents, the government does afford itself an important role in stimulating self-organisation. In one breath the government declares itself incapable of fulfilling tasks associated with the social state *and* grants itself new legitimacy and functions with respect to the promotion of self-organisation in local communities (Rose, 1996; Uitermark, 2014).

In the policy field that unfolds around self-organisation, researchers take up a prominent position. In their reports, researchers say that the government is too insensitive and slow and they urge the government to become more inviting, sensitive and flexible. That sounds critical but often amounts to assisting the government’s self-flagellation. As modern-day Machiavellis, researchers assist the government in mapping out civil society and getting a better grip on what goes on there. Their advice on how to promote and exploit self-organisation may be plausible but is symptomatic for a policy fixation among researchers. Going beyond that policy fixation would bring at least two advantages.

The first advantage is that we can better incorporate the uneven politics of promoting self-organisation. Since the government is fully committed to promoting self-organisation, it has little interest in acknowledging that there will also be many instances where citizens left to vent for themselves will not be able to do so. It more specifically has no

interest in highlighting its own role in facilitating the initiatives of some (complacent or constructive) citizens while obstructing the initiatives of other (critical or stigmatised) citizens (Uitermark and Gielen, 2010). Attending to these issues helps to better understand what happens at the interface between government and civil society.

A second advantage of letting go of the policy fixation is that other parties than the government could benefit from insights gained through research. It is disturbingly paradoxical that in most of the literature on self-organisation the government is the default point of reference while self-organising citizens appear as a target group. It seems as if citizens are organising more, faster and better, and that therefore the government has to receive advice on how to catch up. But self-organisation is challenging for people actually involved in the process. Whether one organises a hackerspace or a neighbourhood watch, it is a challenge to recruit, connect, and coordinate volunteers. Given the challenging conditions community groups find themselves in, research into self-organisation should not primarily help the government to deal with citizens who organise faster, better, and more than before (they do not seem to do so) but should help citizens to organise faster, better and more.

Conclusion

Self-organisation has long been a political ideal but the ongoing budget cuts mean that more is at stake now. While self-organisation has always provided tangible benefits, it becomes more important as governments make communities responsible for the provision of libraries, homework counselling, playgrounds, kindergartens, housing or elderly care. Self-organisation will be vitally important and that's why we would do well to be curious about how it works. An exclusive focus on success stories might be inspiring but it will not lead to greater

understanding of self-organisation's uneven development and inner workings. The self-organising city will not evolve into a Wikitopia where everyone contributes according to capacity and takes according to need. Self-organisation among people is different from self-organisation among insects or cells. The self-organising city will sometimes be a platform where different ideas and interests will harmoniously fall in place but at other times it will be an arena where different ideas and interests come into collision. Emphasising that self-organisation is not always good and does not always succeed does not imply criticism of self-organisation as such. To the contrary, self-organisation would not be exciting to do and research if success were guaranteed.

Acknowledgements

This paper is a revised version of the inaugural lecture 'Verlangen naar Wikitopia', delivered on 10 January 2014 on the occasion of the installation of Justus Uitermark as endowed professor of community development at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The author would like to thank Emiel Rijshouwer, Anne van Summeren and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Ball P (2013) *Why Society is a Complex Matter*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Ball P (2014) Gentrification is a natural evolution. *Guardian*, 19 November. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/19/gentrification-evolution-cities-brixton-battersea>.
- Boutellier H (2011) *De improvisatiemaatschappij*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Cabinet Office (2010) *Building the Big Society*. London: Cabinet Office.

- Castells M (2012) *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chen KK (2009) *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dietz T, Ostrom E and Stern PC (2003) The struggle to govern the commons. *Science* 302(5652): 1907–1912.
- Freeman J (1973) The tyranny of structurelessness. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 17: 151–165.
- Gilchrist A (2000) The well-connected community: Networking to the edge of chaos. *Community Development Journal* 35(3): 264–275.
- Harvey D (2000) *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Johnson S (2002) *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kauffman SA (1993) *The Origins of Order: Self-organization and Selection in Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ministry of Interior Affairs (2013) *De doe-democratie*. The Hague: Ministry of Interior Affairs
- Nicholls W (2009) Place, networks, space: Theorising the geographies of social movements. *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers* 34(1): 78–93.
- North P (2011) Geographies and utopias of Cameron's Big Society. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(8): 817–827.
- Ostrom E (2000) Crowding out citizenship. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 23(1): 3–16.
- Putnam R (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam R (2007) *E pluribus unum*: Diversity and community in the twenty-first century. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30(2): 137–174.
- Rijshouwer E and Uitermark J (2014) A self-organizing bureaucracy? Bureaucratization, power concentration and closure in the evolution of Wikipedia. In: *Citizenship 3.0 seminar series*, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 28 February.
- Rose N (1996) The death of the social? Re-figuring the territory of government. *Economy and Society* 25(3): 327–356.
- Rose N (2000) Community, citizenship, and the Third Way. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(9): 1395–1411.
- Sampson RJ (2012) *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schinkel W (2012) Van bestuur naar zelfbestuur: Overheid, burger en zelforganisatie. In: *Toekomst van de Stad*. The Hague: Rli, pp. 10–13.
- Schinkel W, Van Houdt F and Dekker R (2010) *Verbindend burgerschap: Burgerschapsbriefing 4*. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Schipper K (2014) *Onder constructie: Verbondenheid als ambacht*. MA thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands.
- Slater T (2014) There is nothing natural about gentrification. *New Left Project*, 24 November. Available at: http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/there_is_nothing_natural_about_gentrification.
- Uitermark J (2012) *The Dynamics of Power in Dutch Integration Politics*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press.
- Uitermark J (2014) Integration and control: The governing of urban marginality in Western Europe. *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* 38(4): 1418–1436.
- Uitermark J and Gielen AJ (2010) Islam in the spotlight: Discursive politics in an Amsterdam neighborhood after 9/11 and the assassination of Theo van Gogh. *Urban Studies* 47(6): 1325–1342.
- Van den Berg M (2012) Femininity as city marketing strategy: Gender bending Rotterdam. *Urban Studies* 49(1): 153–168.
- Van der Zwaard J and Specht M (2013) *Betrokken bewoners, betrouwbare overhead: Conditie en competenties voor burgerkracht in de buurt*. Rotterdam: Kenniswerkplaats Leefbare Wijken, Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Van Eijk G (2010) Exclusionary policies are not just about the 'neoliberal city': A critique of theories of urban revanchism and the case of Rotterdam. *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* 34(4): 820–834.
- Van Summeren A (2012) *De bindende factor*. MA thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands.
- Watkins SC, Swidler A and Hannan T (2012) Outsourcing social transformation: Development NGOs as organizations. *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 285–315.
- Wright EO (2013) Transforming capitalism through real utopias. *American Sociological Review* 78(1): 1–25.