

# Territory, Politics, Governance

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtep20>

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To cite this article: Maarten Hajer & Wytske Versteeg (2020): Imagining the urban, Territory, Politics, Governance, DOI: [10.1080/21622671.2020.1799850](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1799850)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1799850>



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Published online: 14 Sep 2020.



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REPLY

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## Imagining the urban

Maarten Hajer <sup>a</sup> and Wytske Versteeg<sup>b</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This is a response to rebuttals by David Wachsmuth and Stephanie Pincetl to our paper ‘Imagining the post-fossil city: why is it so difficult to think of new possible worlds?’. Our response explains why their realist urban metabolic analysis suggests the ‘city’ is an arbitrary scale for analysis, whereas our constructivist approach focusing on the politics of meaning makes this appropriate. We basically share their concern over a strategy building on local initiatives only, but suggest it is paramount to understand better the politics – and polity – shaped by the required energy transition, and vice versa. Ultimately, we reiterate the crucial role for the imagination in any democratic energy transition. Moreover, we suggest it requires not just one type of imagination, but an ecosystem of imaginative logics.

### KEYWORDS

imagination; imaginaries; imaginative logics; energy transition; sustainable futures

**HISTORY** Received 11 March 2020; in revised form 20 July 2020

In two separate contributions to *Territory, Politics, Governance*, David Wachsmuth (Wachsmuth, 2019) and Stephanie Pincetl (Pincetl, 2020) raise thoughtful points about our paper ‘Imagining the post-fossil city: why is it so difficult to think of new possible worlds?’ (Hajer & Versteeg, 2019). Why the focus on a post-fossil *city*?, they ask, while concentrating also on the vulnerability of strategy-building on the basis of *local* initiatives. We will address these concerns below, but start by briefly reiterating our core point: how ‘imagination’ features in the sustainability transition.

Crucial political topics such as the ‘climate crisis’ and ‘global inequality’ are abstract conceptual inventions: neither easily presents itself to our senses. Academics approach global inequalities through statistics, but only the images of a burned down clothing factory leaving many young workers dead may help relate buying cheap garments to the material reality of social injustice elsewhere, bringing statistics to life. Without a narrative, numbers are numb. In a similar vein, the climate crisis only becomes visible through intermediate signifiers – graphs, but also narratives and images. In both cases the imagination is the go-between. Our imaginative capacities suggest what is and is not normal, which are the relationships between action and effect, which types of change are (im)possible. In this way they shape our politics (which, in turn, provide a framework for imagination). It is therefore paramount that we pay careful attention to the political dynamics

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of imagination, including the creation of images of past, present and future. This means that we need to take seriously circulating images and metaphors and investigate the ways in which they (fail to) emerge, spread and have their effects. Let us now turn to the key points raised by Wachsmuth and Pincetl.

## WHY POST-FOSSIL CITY?

In their comments, Wachsmuth and Pincetl question our usage of the ‘city’ as a territorial focal point. Here, we perceive a confrontation of research strategies: the realism of an urban metabolic analysis, on the one hand, and a constructivist approach focusing on the politics of meaning, on the other.

Urban life depends on metabolic flows. No city could exist without food and energy, without sand, clay or wood coming from the ‘hinterland’. Without understanding the flows leaving the city, we cannot grasp the related challenges facing urban life, putting the city in context. Yet, we do not suggest that the city is the ideal level at which to understand urban metabolics, far from it. In the text we reference the UNEP/IRP report *The Weight of Cities* (Swilling et al., 2018). This report, of which one of us was joint lead author, is a meticulous analysis of the resource flows needed to erect and support urbanization in the decades to come, calculated in terms of domestic material consumption (DMC). These figures are deeply worrying, showing how urbanization depends on the extraction of resources drawn from a global hinterland.

Yet, urban politics is not about such metabolic flows per se, but about the interplay between the materiality of those flows and the way in which people are mobilizing around them. And here the ‘city’ is a signifier that resonates, as the uptake of the concept of the ‘smart city’ indicates. The (policy) career of the smart city shows that ‘city’ is an important signifier, one of those symbols through which social change may occur.

This resonance carries a risk. Pincetl is right in pointing out that we may have too easily drawn on the narrative of the ‘urban age’. After all, here too, imagination is politics. The tendency to naturalize the migration to cities by means of the endlessly reiterated reference to United Nations statistics suggesting a further growth of people living in cities up to 66% in 2050 can easily lead to an uncritical attitude in which alternative possible futures remain undiscussed.

And yet the city is a level to which people can relate, that inspires action. It can therefore be one of the leverage points for creating an alternative to the prevailing negative images of a move towards a sustainable future. Moreover, it is not a level of futuring through ‘policy coordination’, but much as a ‘battleground’ at which protests are staged and conflict becomes visible more easily.

Regardless of which scale one picks (home, street, neighbourhood, city, province, nation), one runs the risk of missing out on the possibility of what Wachsmuth nicely labels an ‘outsourcing [of] unsustainability’ (Wachsmuth, 2019, p. 138). That is a rightful and legitimate concern, to which we return below. And when Pincetl argues that we should ask ourselves what post-fossil cities could be like, and for, relative both to humans and their quest for meaning in life, and in terms of human relations to Earth systems, we could not agree more.

### The meaning of local

Both Wachsmuth and Pincetl rightly point to the complicated and typically asymmetrical relationship between the city and its hinterland. This is not a new argument. Bulkeley and Moser (2007, p. 5) have already argued that ‘in order to recognize how, where and why climate protection governance is taking place, we need to rethink the boundaries and nature of the polity’. Thirteen years later, this point seems more acute than ever. And yet, Pincetl’s urge to re-inhabit the countryside sounds rather unrealistic to our ears – an idealization of a time before ‘triumphalist, techno-optimist neo-capitalist resurgence’ (Pincetl, 2020, p. 10).

We share the concern over the all-too-prominent place of ‘bottom-up’ initiatives, or do-it-yourself (DIY) planning. In fact, we challenge this bottom-up discourse in our paper, mentioning the example of the Energetic Odyssey. This transdisciplinary experiment ran initially under the label ‘Big is Beautiful’, precisely to point out that urbanites often have a misguided understanding of how much space is required to cater for urban energy needs. In new research (ReSET)<sup>1</sup> we hope to find out under what conditions renewables may further the viability of rural areas, at least to reduce the need to leave for the city in order to escape poverty. The point here is not that big should replace small, or vice versa – given the challenges we face, we will need both. Rather, we argue that it is of paramount importance to understand better the politics – and polity – shaped by the required energy transition, and vice versa. What are, or could be, the democratic implications of a decentralized energy system? What if, to paraphrase Dewey, the emergence a public depends as much on place as on problem? Here, again, we think the role of the imagination is crucial.

### Imagination as logic

To a certain extent, the answer to the question what the future(s) will look like is moot. If one thing is sure, it is that such futures will not emerge as blueprints from the desks of academics, designers or policy-makers – nor should they. Whereas it is important to try to think beyond dominant, frequently corporate-driven imaginations of the future such as the smart city, it is arguably even more crucial to consider the conditions necessary to think beyond – or next to – the seemingly self-evident.

For one, this requires attention for the processes through which societal learning and diffusion of ideas takes place. As Wachsmuth rightly points out, living labs and DIY urbanism do not necessarily impact broader governance structures. Yet sometimes they do, and the question is why. At the Urban Futures Studio we currently investigate the particular dramaturgical arrangements through which experiments become impactful. Moreover, we see the need to go beyond our previous call for ‘more’ imagination to the question which types of imagination are helpful when and where.

Arguably, a democratic energy transition requires not just one type of imagination, but an ecosystem of imaginative logics (Pelzer & Versteeg, 2019). Any democratic society allows for a spectrum of imaginations, from doable, convincing and action-inspiring images via those that show the absurdity of the present and defamiliarize the self-evident, to ones that are procedural, shaping the conditions necessary for collective imagination in the first place (Pelzer & Versteeg, 2019).

As with the previously mentioned large, top-down and small-scale, bottom-up initiatives mentioned above, the question is not which one of these imaginative logics is ‘better’. Given the urgent challenges we face, we will need all of them – particularly if these challenges are to be addressed in ways fitting to democratic societies. But it can be productive to ask which type of imaginative logic is better suited for which task (or, from an analytical point of view: which type of imagination gains prominence at which stage in a political process, and why). Taking these questions seriously helps one to acquire a better understanding of the many conflicts and ambiguities around the transition towards a post-fossil world – including those related to the metabolic flows and relative importance of the city.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## NOTE

1. Cf. <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/urban-futures-studio/initiatives/reconfiguring-energy-for-social-equity>.

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