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Corporate Actors in Public Policy: Changing Perspectives in Political Analysis*

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1. Policy Analysis – A New Approach?

Late in 1984, the German Political Science Association organized a seminar to discuss whether the recent proliferation of policy studies signifies a major shift in political analysis that could change the very nature of the discipline (Hartwich, 1985). As Fritz Scharpf put it on this occasion (1985:164), traditional political science had been dominated by concerns of political philosophy, and in its more empirical part had focused on political institutions. The «institutionalists» had been and still are mainly interested in questions of power and legitimacy; they have typically not linked their analyses of the Polity to Policy, neglecting, as it were, the output-side of the political process. This powerful and dominant paradigm has been challenged before, notably by behaviourists and neo-Marxists. Today, however, policy analysis appears to be the major irritant because it seems to threaten the discipline with disintegration into a multitude of problem-oriented fields of study which are no longer integrated by a common frame of reference and largely devoid of theoretical potential.

Is this a correct portrayal of current trends in political analysis? There is no doubt that interest in policy analysis is growing, and that it is a new development – at least for German political science. A survey of the work of German political scientists conducted by Böhret (1985) has shown a significant increase of policy research in recent years. That this is nevertheless still a new field is reflected in the fact that among the sub-sections of the German Political Science Association, as well as among the classificatory categories of the *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, its official journal, *none* bears the title «Public Policy». On the other hand, foreign policy figures both as a sub-section and as a classificatory category; in connection with international relations, for-

eign policy – in contrast to domestic public policy – is a traditional field of political analysis.

But even if the growing interest in policy analysis is a recent phenomenon, it would still be a gross and impermissible exaggeration to call it a basically new paradigm in political analysis, as von Beyme has forcefully argued at the 1984 seminar (von Beyme, 1985). In Germany, concern with policy dates in fact back nearly 200 years to the cameralists and the «Polizeywissenschaft». It was only in the period of the liberal *Rechtsstaat*, when legitimate state interventions were – at least normatively – restricted to the two typical police functions of securing order within and security without, that earlier interest in public policy waned and the term «Polizey» came to mean, as is the case today in German, only police. When policy returned to be of scientific interest, Germans therefore found themselves with a vocabulary unable to express the difference between policy and politics – which we have solved by re-importing our old «Polizey» and using it in its present English form.

In the U.S.A., concern with policy may not have such old historical roots, but policy analysis has a somewhat longer modern tradition. In view of the greater pragmatism of the Anglo-Saxon world, this is hardly surprising. From its beginning, policy research was meant to help decision-makers to design policies, and in this sense it was not only pragmatic, but also prescriptive in general outlook. The crisis of the U.S. reform policies in the sixties which increased the felt need for policy advice, stimulated a veritable boom of policy studies. But because of its pronounced pragmatism, American policy analysis was felt to be of relatively low theoretical significance. Already in 1951 Lerner and Lasswell warned that «the policy approach is not to be confounded with the superficial idea that social scientists ought to desert science and engage fulltime in practical politics» (Lerner & Lasswell, 1951:7). American policy analysts have apparently heeded this advice and have made a case of opposing their kind of problem-oriented interdisciplinary research against the traditionalism of the dominant approach. Their quest for academic respectability was successful, as can be seen in a change of the classificatory system of the Biographical Directory of the American Political Science Association, to which von Beyme (1985:10) has called attention. In 1968, this Directory had 27 sub-disciplines, of which only one referred to policy; not surprisingly, this was foreign policy. Only five years later, the multitude of sub-disciplines had been combined into eight larger sub-groups, and now one of the eight is called «public policy».

The growing interest in policy studies spells neither the disintegration of traditional political science, nor does it mean a revolutionary change to a completely new theoretical paradigm. And yet something important has been happening. Increased attention to Policy rather than to Politics and the Polity means a shift from the input to the output side of the political system. The scientific interest in policy asserts implicitly that political institutions are not important as such, but for what they produce – that it is not enough to ask «who governs» but that one must also ask *how*. In Germany as well as in the U.S.A., the first major concern of political scientists after the Second World War had been with the realization of certain core values of the political order. In Germany, this was the stability of the new democracy, while in America power elite theorists like C. Wright Mills (1956) and pluralists like Truman (1951) discussed the distribution of power in society. A first major shift occurred when unorthodox forms of political action, the fear of political radicalization and the growth of new protest movements called attention to the impending «crisis of governability» (Hennis, Graf Kielmannsegg, Matz, 1977, 1979), where the ability of the state to safeguard its legitimacy and to maintain social order seemed at stake. Even here, however, the major problem still involved questions of power, of politics and the polity rather than policy. This changed where the debate turned to the growth and viability of the modern Welfare State. For the first time, public (domestic) policy became a major focus. In the discussion over public planning (which, in the U.S.A., also assumed a rather pragmatic character, being concerned with techniques such as PPBS or with improving the informational basis of policy-making) and the effectiveness of public policy, the new concern became generalized, embracing now all areas of domestic policy.

There have also been significant changes *within* the field of policy analysis. Linked in what one might call an «attention cycle», the early concern with improving the *design* of new policies motivated attempts to measure policy *effects*, which in turn stimulated the search for the reasons of the observed policy *failures*. In the course of this development, three connected, but distinctly separate research fields developed: Policy analysis in the narrower sense, i.e. dealing with design questions (for instance MacRae & Wilde, 1979), evaluation research (e.g. Rossi, Freeman, Wright, 1979), and implementation research (e.g. Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981; Mayntz, 1980, 1983).

In the United States, attention started to shift from policy formation to implementation in the late sixties, when the much publicized failures

of the «War against Poverty» alerted policy-makers and policy analysts alike. In Germany the focus began to shift only a little later. In the long period of Christian Democratic government, neo-Marxists had triggered a heated debate over the autonomy of the political system and its capacity to formulate and pursue policies which were not dictated by economic interests. After the Social-Liberal coalition government was formed in 1969 and started its programme of social reforms, attention turned to the effective implementation of these policies. In a quickly growing flood of empirical case studies, the preconditions of effective policy implementation, or conversely the reasons for implementation deficits, have been identified. However, it became soon apparent that the implicit assumption of implementation research, i.e. that all is well if only the program gets implemented as designed, is misleading. Poor implementation can obviously ruin a well-designed policy, but even perfect implementation does not guarantee the realization of policy goals if the policy itself takes the wrong approach. This insight has motivated a return to questions of policy formation. In this way, the «attention cycle», which started with policy design and moved on to questions of implementation and evaluation, seems to have returned to its beginning. However, the movement is dialectical and more correctly depicted by a spiral than by a circle. While there is renewed interest in questions of policy design, there is also growing interest in the process of policy formation. It is this last movement which I want to look at more closely. What is new here is not the interest in policy as such, but the kind of questions asked and the analytical frame of reference within which an answer is sought. The questions refer to the *determinants* of specific policies; they are of a more theoretical character than earlier concerns with policy formation. The analytical frame of reference is characterized by its emphasis on variables which other schools of thought have more or less neglected; it is a particular view of the *process* of policy formation.

2. Explaining Policy Decisions

Surveys of the relevant literature (e.g. Mayntz 1985; Schneider, 1986) reveal a considerable variety of attempts to account for the characteristics of specific policies. They vary in their choice of the major explanatory variable, in the implied functional image of the state, in their more speculative or empirical orientation, and even in the way «policy» is

conceptualized. Most schools of thought have concentrated on one particular explanatory variable, which they have sought either in the larger socio-economic context, in specific features of the political system, or in the characteristics of the political decision makers. In most approaches, substantive policy content, and in particular the intended distribution of costs and benefits, is of paramount interest. Often this is considered in rather general and merely qualitative terms, but sometimes quantitative indicators have been sought in the form of budget or expenditure indicators.

At least four different schools of thought can be distinguished which concentrate on the larger social context in explaining policy: functionalism, neo-Marxism, structuralism, and welfare state theory.

The functionalist approach is based on Talcott Parsons' theory of functional imperatives and functional subsystems in society. Policies are seen as functional contributions to the self-maintenance of society at large. Authors belonging to this school may differ as to the specific function attributed to the political subsystem, e.g. allocation of scarce values (Easton, 1971) or production of collectively binding decisions (Luhmann, 1971), but in each case policies as the output of the political subsystem are considered to be reactions to societal needs, and if the system survives this is proof that these needs have somehow been translated into policy decisions. Obviously, this view does not only de-personalize the process of policy formation, but it also seems to suggest that unless a society breaks down, existing policies *are* viable problem solutions.

Neo-Marxists focus on the macro-social power structure as major policy determinant. They tend to assign a merely instrumental role to political institutions and to deny political actors the power of effecting real choices. For them, policy content is shaped by dominant class interests. More sophisticated neo-Marxist approaches as that of Offe (1972) bear some resemblance to functionalism, in so far as existing policies are interpreted as functional contributions to the maintenance of a capitalist type of society.

The so-called structuralist approach has also Marxist roots (e.g. Poulantzas, 1978; Althusser & Balibar, 1972). This approach does not completely abstract from political actors, but assumes that their behaviour merely reflects and gives expression to the structurally determined power relations between big social groups.

The functionalist, neo-Marxist and structuralist approaches are theoretically grounded, but remain speculative with respect to explaining

specific policy decisions. In fact, they do not look at substantive policy content in much detail, and often *assume* shaping influences which in fact would need to be demonstrated. The emphasis on the macro-social context and the correlative disregard for political actors lend a deterministic flavour to these approaches; they point to hidden forces which make themselves felt over the head or behind the back of individual human actors.

These criticisms hold much less for the fourth macro-analytical approach. Welfare state theories focus on the substantive content of social policy decisions, especially the introduction of social security measures. They are empirical rather than speculative in orientation, and they also have a less deterministic view. While welfare state theories emphasize the stage of socio-economic development of a given country as major explanatory variable, they recognize that political factors like democratization or the existence and strength of labour parties also play a role. In fact, the relative weight of these two sets of variables is one of their major research interest (e.g. Wilensky, 1975; Flora & Heidenheimer, 1981).

In this respect the welfare state approach is related to an important quantitative research tradition in the U.S.A., where, since the early sixties, political scientists correlated socio-economic variables such as degree of industrialization, per capita income, and urbanization on the one hand and political variables such as party competition, electoral participation and the apportionment of seats in the legislative bodies on the other hand with expenditure data of American state governments (Dye, 1966; Sharkansky, 1968). The finding that economic context factors correlate much more highly with spending profiles than the political variables considered, seems to have shocked American political scientists because it apparently forced them to conclude that politics does not matter for policy (Rakoff & Schaefer, 1970). While subsequent methodological and theoretical considerations have shown this conclusion to be unwarranted, the debate made clear that a more differentiated, multi-factor approach was needed (e.g. Hofferbert, 1974:228).

In contrast to the various schools of thought which have emphasized context factors as determinants of public policy, several other approaches concentrate on the actors who make or directly influence policy decisions.

Elite theories see policy shaped by the interests of a specific, powerful group, though there may be important differences in the nature of the perceived elite. The dichotomous view of society of early elite theories,

of which C. Wright Mills (1956) was a representative, has given way to a more differentiated view of the power elite. Knoke's (1981) multiple-elites model, for instance, has in fact moved at least half way to a pluralist view, where policy formation is considered to be the outcome of a continuous struggle between big interest groups. Both the power elite perspective and the approach of early pluralism accord only reduced importance to political actors proper by perceiving the state either as the elite's «executive branch» or as just another power center among many. Even in Dahl's (1967) version of pluralist theory, the official policy-makers play only the role of mediator between conflicting group interests.

In contrast to both elite and pluralist approaches, the New Political Economy concentrates on the political actors in the narrower sense, i.e. parties, individual politicians, and high-level bureaucrats. Their assumed orientation is strictly utilitarian. Compared to the two previous approaches, which also expect policy decisions to reflect group interests, the New Political Economy is characterized by a much more pronounced rationalism. Policy decisions are viewed as (political) goods produced for a market, where the price is paid in the form of votes (e.g. Downs, 1957). Policy choices are thus seen to follow from cost-benefit considerations, and ideologies do not seem to play a role.

In contrast to the assumption of a calculating, rational approach in making policy decisions, other schools of thought have emphasized the ideological orientation of policy-makers, expressed in their political party affiliation, and their social origin, which presumably determines their more conservative or progressive inclination. While the influence of party ideologies (and hence of the ideological orientation of the governing party) on policy has been demonstrated especially in the field of social policy, the expectation that the social origin of policy makers finds a direct expression in policy decision has been largely disappointed (Czudnowski, 1982).

An attitudinal factor which has recently attracted a growing amount of attention is political (and administrative) culture. Policy-makers in a given country are believed to share a certain intervention philosophy by virtue of their belonging to a specific national culture. American policy makers for instance should accordingly display a general preference to rely on individual self-help and free market forces rather than the state. If there really is anything like a national intervention style, this should become visible as a kind of common denominator of the policies adopted in a given country. However, empirical tests of such

an assumption have produced rather inconclusive results. To some extent, comparative policy studies have shown differences between countries which confirm what national stereotypes would have led one to expect (e.g. Jann, 1983). But if one goes more into details and compares formal properties of policies, such as the generality of specificity of legal norms or the scope for discretionary action left to implementation agents, it becomes obvious that the differences between countries in a given policy area are often not very pronounced, and that there is considerable variance within countries from policy field to policy field (Mayntz & Feick, 1982); in the aggregate, there is as much variation between policy fields as there is between countries (Mayntz, 1985:23). This does not only point once more to the necessity of a multi-factor approach in explaining policy decisions; it may also be necessary to revise the underlying assumption that «national culture» is a factor which impinges in a directly demonstrable way on policy.

3. Towards a New Approach in Explaining Policy

The brief survey of major approaches to the explanation of public policy decisions indicates a number of important theoretical deficits. Most obvious is probably the need to give up reductionist attempts to isolate «the» dominant factor; none of the factors singled out in the various approaches discussed can by itself explain given policies. Though arguments for or against the primacy of specific factors are at times theoretically instructive, what is needed is an integrated causal model. To obtain such a model, it is decidedly *not* enough to proceed in an additive way. The interrelationship of the various factors, the specific way in which they are linked together must rather be spelled out. This, however, is impossible unless policy formation is considered as a process where decision makers interact with each other over time.

A dynamic causal model of policy formation must start with the actors who participate in the collective decision process. All context and background factors must be linked to the decisions which specific actors take in a specific sequence. They become effective directly by shaping the preferences of decision makers, or more indirectly by determining the opportunities and constraints under which they operate. Thus, economic context factors influence the availability of resources, which in turn restricts policy options through a consideration of the financial

viability of proposed measures. Constitutional norms and target group attitudes are similarly taken into consideration in order to avoid the subsequent revision of a statute by the constitutional court or widespread popular resistance to a policy. The indirect nature of the influence of context factors does not make them any less important. Socio-economic variables are generally considered to be particularly influential in shaping policy, even though their influence is only an indirect one. However, context factors can never have a determining influence: They shape preferences and narrow the range of feasible choices, but there is not point to point correspondence between them and the substantive content of specific policy decisions.

It is also important to realize that not all factors influence all aspects of a policy to the same extent. Social cleavage structures and the distribution of power in society are directly relevant for substantive policy goals, and particularly the intended distribution of costs and benefits, but are much less influential for the choice among different policy instruments or the degree of specificity with which rules are formulated. On the contrary, a specific cultural orientation of decision makers will find more easily expression in the choice among instruments, in the choice of responsible implementation agents, and in such formal characteristics as the generality or specificity of legal norms. Such differences have so far been rather neglected; their identification presupposes that the general and often vague meaning of «policy» is specified and its component parts, or analytical dimensions, identified.

In spite of their interest in substantive details, earlier case studies as well as comparative policy studies have apparently felt no need for a more formalized description of governmental interventions (e.g. Heidenheimer, Hecló & Adams, 1983). Recently, however, various analytical schemes for the description of policies have been proposed (e.g. Jann, 1983; Daintith, 1984). Their categories tend to reflect the different cognitive interests of the scholars using them. Analytical schemes developed in the context of research on policy implementation put for instance great emphasis on a detailed categorization of operative rules which influence the behaviour of implementation agents (e.g. Mayntz & Lex, 1982), while an interest in the legal system as a determinant of policy decisions suggests a classification of policy measures according to their legal source and status (Daintith, 1984). There is obviously no one «best» way, but a useful analytical scheme for the description of a policy should at least distinguish between its objectives, the instruments chosen to implement them (e.g. regulatory norms, financial incentives

etc.), and the concrete (legal) measures which put them into operational form – including the designation of implementation agents, due process rules, and internal control procedures.

Aside from their reductionist nature and the lacking specification of their dependent variable, the approaches to explaining public policies discussed in the previous section are deficient in other respects: They do not pay much attention to institutional variables, and they neglect the process character of policy formation. Of course, both have been *studied* by political scientists, but generally not with a view to explaining policy decisions.

The very fact that institutional and policy approaches can be seen as separate, if not opposed to each other, indicates that «institutionalists» have in general not paid much attention to the policy consequences of specific institutional arrangements. A book as that by Rose and Suleiman (1980), which analyzes in detail the institutions of executive leadership in several countries, illustrates this prevalent orientation. There is only one notable exception to this rule, namely the neo-corporatist school of thought (e.g. Schmitter & Lehmbruch, 1979), which occasionally relates the substantive content, especially of economic and labour market policies, to a specific institutional arrangement, a kind of bargaining and exchange system linking the state and major private-corporate actors together. Still, the main message of neo-corporatism is the rejection of the similarly extreme, but otherwise opposed assumptions that policy is made only by politicians, or only by organized interest groups.

Whether this has been recognized or not, the characteristics of political institutions and the structure of the whole political action system should have a powerful influence on policy. A country's party system, type of government (presidential, cabinet etc.), and the effective roles which parliament and ministerial bureaucracy play in policy development should all affect policy content by influencing the relative power of different actors in different phases of the decision process. The institutional context also influences the strategies of core actors. Fritz Scharpf (1984) for instance has explained Austria's greater success in containing unemployment compared to that of Western Germany by pointing to institutional differences in the respective federal banks and collective bargaining arrangements. In addition, overall structural properties such as the relative openness of a political action system to the demands of organized and unorganized interests, or the relative concentration of decision-making power should influence such characteri-

stics of policy outputs as their responsiveness, timeliness, coherence, and re-active or pro-active nature.

What is true of political institutions also holds for the policy formation process: It has often been studied, but rarely in an attempt to account systematically for the form or content of public policies. There are, of course, numerous case studies which reconstruct the development of a specific policy decision or piece of legislation, but these are by and large descriptive historical accounts rather than contributions to a systematic theory. On the other hand there exist several more systematic attempts to study policy formation not as a process in the narrow sense of politics, i.e. the power struggle between specific parties, organized interests etc., but with respect to some more general process features. Some of these are normative phase models which depict policy formation as a rational decision or problem-solving process; these are of little interest where explanation rather than prescription is the goal. Potentially more relevant are empirically based process theories such as the «bureaucratic politics» (Allison & Halperin, 1974), garbage can (March & Olsen, 1976), conflict transformation (Nedelmann, 1982), and reform cycle (Russ-Mohl, 1981) models. But while these models isolate, describe, and explain important process features, they seem less interested to link these with the nature of policy outputs than in showing that, how, and why the reality of policy-making differs from the normative model of rational decision. The approach called «bureaucratic politics» emphasizes organizations as actors and shows how procedural routines, domain interests, and competition for power shape their strategic choices. A basic thesis of both the garbage can and the conflict transformation models is that in the course of the collective decision process, the initial problem (or conflict) becomes dissociated from the decision output. The reform cycle model finally shows how under certain conditions typical changes occur in the composition and structure of the action system: which is formed around a policy issue, and how this propels the policy process through the phases of latency, mobilization, hyperactivity, and cooling-out. It seems clear that such process characteristics can be of decisive importance for policy output, not only in terms of substantive content but also – and maybe more importantly – with respect to its problem-solving capacity.

By implication, the preceding discussion of deficits points the way to a more promising and theoretically ambitious approach to the study of policy formation. Starting from the two elements which until now have been rather neglected in the causal analysis of policy decisions, i.e.

institutions and process characteristics, such an approach seems in fact to be emerging at present. There are case studies using it, such as Volker Schneider's analysis of the development of the German toxic chemicals law (Schneider, 1986), or my own current study of the innovation process in modern telecommunication technology. There are also a number of theoretical contributions which spell out aspects of the approach. To these I would count Laumann and Knoke's framework for «concatenated event analysis» (Laumann & Knoke, 1982), Marin's attempt to formulate a theory of exchange processes in policy formation (Marin, 1985), and Sabatier's effort to study strategic interaction and policy-oriented learning over time (Sabatier, 1985) – to give a few examples. In important respects, this approach meets the criteria of the «new institutionalism» which Johan Olsen advocated only a few years ago (March & Olsen, 1983). It is characterized by the attempt to show how specific policies (or socio-technical systems, for that matter) emerge through the interaction among a (possibly changing) set of actors who operate in a given (though not immutable) context. In this process, all of the factors identified in the more reductionist (and static) approaches come to bear on policy decisions; by observing *how* this happens, the *contingent* nature of their influence becomes visible. Since the core actors in the process are considered to be formal organizations rather than individuals or social groups like classes and elites, we may call it the corporate actor approach. In the final section of this paper, I shall try to summarize the main assumptions underlying this approach.

4. The Corporate Actors Approach in Policy Analysis

The corporate actor approach is based on the premise that *organized collectivities*, both public and private, have become the most important participants in processes of policy formation. Corporate actors are capable of producing unit acts which can be attributed to them rather than to specific individuals. The corporate actor approach neither ignores that individuals, singly or as unorganized collectivities, can influence policy formation, nor does it deny that it is individuals who make organizational decisions and that a change of incumbents in top positions can therefore significantly affect organization strategy. The interplay of individual and organizational properties in shaping corporate action is in fact an important research issue within this approach.

Corporate actors have a constitution which defines their legitimate domain, potential membership, and operational rules, but they are not believed to speak with a single voice. They are internally differentiated, and their actions are often the product of internal conflicts and power struggles. Like all organizations, corporate actors develop informal practices, a sense of group identification, and hence an interest in their own survival, growth, and domain expansion. Corporate actors are therefore not strictly and often not even primarily output-oriented; they engage in symbolic as well as defensive action, reciprocate favours, and may need to be prodded and provoked before they move. It is consonant with this perspective that the behaviour of corporate actors is typically analyzed in terms of *strategies*, rather than interests or goals. This permits to avoid misleading assumptions of rationality or goal orientation. Besides, strategies, being defined at the behavioural level, can be empirically observed, while interests and goals must normally be inferred, if not imputed.

The second major feature of the corporate actor approach lies in the importance assigned to the *structure of the action system*. Such a system, often called policy network or policy system, is constituted and delimited by a specific policy concern and can be described in terms of various kinds of internal linkages. In his analysis of the development of the toxic chemicals law, Schneider (1985) has for instance used network methodology to describe the communication and resource exchange relations among the participating actors, as well as the pattern of their joint memberships in various committees and boards. In this way he was able to identify focal actors, coalition structures, dependence relationships etc. which helped to explain why the policy options of specific actors won out in the end. Sabatier (1985) has ventured the hypothesis that advocacy coalitions tend to form around the options with regard to a given policy issue, and wants to trace the learning process which is triggered by their interaction. Policy systems can also be characterized in terms of general structural properties. Neo-corporatist bargaining structures, «iron triangles», or Heclø's fragmented issue networks are familiar examples (Jordan, 1981). Such structural properties are of evident importance for instance for the likely speed of reaching an agreement or the probability of a «garbage can» process occurring.

As soon as attention is paid to the interactions taking place in a policy formation process, the synchronic portrayal of structure is transformed into a diachronic analysis of process. Thus, *structural and dynamic aspects are closely linked* in the corporate actor approach. Neither the

composition nor the structure of an action system are considered to be stable over time: New actors may join while others drop out, peripheral and core actors can change places, and communication exchange is intensified or discontinued as coalitions emerge and are transformed. The process perspective is even extended to the «independent variable», policy. All static approaches with their dichotomous distinction between policy determinants and policy outputs seem to suggest a clear separability in time – as if the formation process would, at a certain point, end with the birth of a policy. In the process perspective of the corporate actor approach, policy is seen to emerge in a piecemeal fashion while the issue may change and agenda setting continues. Even the formal passage of legislation is an artificial cutting point in a policy formation process, which moves on from there to the next amendment. For this reason, Sabatier (1985) even prefers to speak of «policy change» instead of policy formation.

Policy formation processes are structured by *decision events*, which are characterized not only by the actors involved and by the decisions taken, but also by the *arena* where this takes place. Arenas are part of the institutional framework in which processes move. Within limits, actors can choose to which arena to carry an issue, and this can be an important part of their strategy. Schneider (1986) for instance has shown how the policy formation process leading to the German toxic chemicals law has been pushed forward by decision events at the European level when the issue seemed to be immobilized at the national level. Constitutional courts are another important arena in many policy formation processes.

The corporate actor approach does emphasize the proximate causes of policy, the factors which shape decisions more directly, but this does not mean that contextual factors are neglected. Features of the societal context influence the kind of action system which forms around a given issue, and it also influences the issue itself and the available options. In the telecommunications policy study which I mentioned before, we are for instance taking four context factors explicitly into account: Available technology; legal norms which define the jurisdictions of core actors; economic factors such as branch structure, market shares and competitiveness of equipment producers; and features of governmental and departmental organization. In fact, by making the study internationally comparative, we are trying to find out whether and how differences in these context factors between countries are ultimately reflected in the features of the emerging socio-technical system. If there is such

an influence, it will be possible to show how it is mediated through the strategies of corporate actors operating in differently structured national action systems. But it is not a foregone conclusion that variations in the context factors mentioned will in fact lead to different results. It is equally possible that the introduction of modern telecommunications in different European countries leads over time and through processes of learning, imitation, and mutual adjustment to a convergence among the initially rather different socio-technical systems and the extent and form of their utilization.

It is not my intention to spell out the analytical framework of the corporate actor approach in any more detail, but even so it may have become evident that the emergence of this approach within political science is related to a more general paradigm shift in the social sciences. Especially in the European social science community, the earlier confrontation between structural-functionalists and neo-Marxists recedes into the background as a new confrontation between systems theorists and action theorists takes shape. Parallel to this, the methodological debate between positivism and dialectics is replaced by the criticism which proponents of a dynamic and processual perspective make of static structural types of analysis. But even for someone who like myself, is an advocate of the new dynamic and actor-centered approach, it is easy to discern its methodological Achilles heel. This lies in the problem of generalizability. To put it simply: The dynamic and actor-centered approach may, with its emphasis on the contingent nature of social events, blind us to existing regularities, so that instead of producing empirically based theory we end up with nothing but detailed historical accounts. In this formulation one can recognize the familiar methodological debate about the idiographic or nomothetic nature of social science, which has only seemingly been decided in favour of the latter half a century ago. The corporate actor approach in political analysis does not aim to produce only history. It is theory-oriented and wants to draw general conclusions about the influence which the structure of an action system has on the policy formation process, about the impact of specific context features on strategies, and about the relationship between process features and the policy decisions taken. But this is only part of the story, only half of the truth: Social events *are* highly contingent, and we will therefore never be able to explain what actually happens and may happen in social reality if we only look for regularities and disregard the existing degrees of freedom for human action and in social events. The corporate actor approach is thus deeply linked to

questions about the lawful or unlawful nature of social reality, and the human quest for gaining knowledge of it.

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Note

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