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Governing the knowledge society: Studying Lisbon as epistemic setting*

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Abstract: This paper is interested in the role of knowledge as resource, medium and product of governance as well as in ways of studying knowledge and processes of knowledge construction in EU governance. Its particular focus in this context is on the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and the Lisbon Strategy. Based on a discussion of accounts of policy learning, governmentality and Science and Technology Studies (STS), the paper claims that studying Lisbon could be about much more than the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the OMC. Accordingly, it calls for a two-fold extension of the scope of analysis: First, investigations should feed back into reflections about the broader picture. Here, the political space of Lisbon can be analysed in terms of indirect government under the conditions of a knowledge society. Second, in order to achieve a larger picture the analysis should be extended downwards to the everyday practices within (and beyond) the different OMCs where knowledge is produced and through which the epistemic culture of Lisbon is governed and constituted. While this move away from the meso-level of institutions is mainly motivated by a review of governmentality, STS can provide the necessary theoretical and methodological guidance to put such a comprehensive perspective into empirical practice.

Keywords: discourse; governance; knowledge; methodological issues; open coordination; policy analysis, policy learning; sociology; power analysis; political science

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1. Introduction

Knowledge has become part of everyday discourse in European Union (EU) policy-making. For instance, the EU has set itself the goal “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council 2000: no 5). Based on this central political objective, the Union’s Lisbon Strategy aims at “modernising” labour markets and social security systems of the member states. The composite governance regime of the strategy is bound together by a dominant discourse on welfare modernisation which promotes (among

others) the key concepts of activation and an activating welfare state stressing (to different extents) universal labour market participation and investment in human capital (for example Jenson 2007; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2006; Serrano Pascual and Magnusson 2007; van Berkel and Møller 2002; van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007) (1). Furthermore, regarding procedures, this governance regime is composed of different Open Methods of Coordination (OMC). As the EU lacks legal competences in social policy, this instrument is non-binding, offers only minimal possibilities of sanctioning or financial incentives, and operates mainly on the basis of commonly identified objectives combined with various reporting and monitoring procedures on how they are put into practice (the contributions to this special issue provide a wide variety of details; for an overview see Kröger this issue).

Against this context of a dominant conceptual discourse combined with non-binding instruments, this paper is particularly interested in the role of knowledge and knowledge production for understanding the workings of the OMCs and of the Lisbon project as a whole. However, in contrast to the more limited notion of knowledge used in EU political rhetoric the paper adopts a much broader notion of knowledge that allows for better understanding indirect governing beyond the state. All processes within the Lisbon programme are framed as primarily technical problem-solving exercises characterised by conceptual-analytical language and interaction between experts (mostly from the Commission and national administrations). The various OMCs rely heavily on the methodological collection, interpretation and comparison of data, on measuring performance through indicators or on defining political goals in terms of quantitative benchmarks. Moreover, the discursive interactions in these processes can be understood as ‘conceptual debates’, which are about defining problems, solutions and strategies linking the former and the latter (Pfister 2008). Against this backdrop, the paper asks how we should study the role of knowledge and processes of knowledge production within the governance mechanisms of the Lisbon Strategy.

Looking for theoretical guidance in this direction, the OMC has been singled out as facilitating ‘learning’. However, while knowledge – at least implicitly – plays a central role in all arguments about policy learning, the latter often fail to problematise the nature of knowledge itself. Moreover, they do not provide significant insights about the character of the broader socio-political setting that is governed through – and indeed constituted by – learning, expertise and knowledge. Therefore, in a second step, the investigation is extended to governmentality perspectives which offer additional insights in the importance of knowledge in contemporary politics. On the one hand, they expand the scope from policy-making to a world entirely constituted by knowledge, discourse and practices. On the other hand, they draw our attention to the concrete technologies of power at the micro-level. However, they are unable to provide a fully satisfactory empirical account of knowledge and of how a certain order is created and operates. Hence, in the third step, the attention is turned towards Science and Technology Studies (STS), an interdisciplinary enterprise concerned with knowledge itself and the conditions of its production. While the initial focus of STS is on science, its insights are highly relevant for other areas of social enquiry. Most important, in this context, the governmentality perspective can be complemented with a substantial empirical programme.

The paper argues that studying EU governance within the Lisbon programme could be about much more than about the effectiveness and legitimacy of the OMC. The Lisbon Strategy constitutes a key project of European integration in which the parameters for social and economic modernisation are renegotiated on a large scale. Hence, the paper calls for a two-fold extension of the perspective: First, such studies should feed back into reflections about the broader picture. Here, a focus on knowledge production provides a good frame to gain deeper understanding about the political space created by the Lisbon project as an epistemic culture constituted by different governance instruments and an encompassing conceptual discourse. Second, in order get such a larger picture the analysis should be extended downwards to the everyday practices and micro-processes within the different OMCs where knowledge is produced and through which that specific political space is governed and brought about. Thereby, it is not the aim of the paper to present a final theoretical account of what the Lisbon Strategy is but rather to provide some new ideas about how we should study it.

2. Governing Progress – Learning Knowledge? ↑

In the context of Lisbon, the OMC has received most academic attention as the dominant instrument. Moreover, the latter seems to be particularly relevant with regard to knowledge and knowledge production. For instance, Jonathan Zeitlin notes substantive reorientations of policy-making, concrete policy-changes in specific member states as well as procedural shifts in the context of the Lisbon Strategy, which he mainly assigns to its specific governance arrangements (Zeitlin 2005a; Zeitlin 2005c). So he asserts that the status of employment and social inclusion policies has risen at national and EU levels, a new language including new concepts, problem definitions, solutions and strategies has emerged, and, finally, different procedural shifts reflect new ways how these concepts should be applied and implemented. Moreover, these shifts have a clear transnational dimension as there is much overlap in the language used, the problems identified and the priorities set at EU level and its member states.

Political developments in this context are often attributed to processes of ‘policy learning’ which should be particularly encouraged by the OMC (Kerber and Eckardt 2007; Mosher and Trubek 2003a; Mosher and Trubek 2003b; Zeitlin 2005b; Zeitlin 2005c) (2). With the recent expansion of soft law and new modes of governance the topic of learning has gathered new momentum among the EU studies community. Drawing on Hall (1993), Mosher and Trubek distinguish three types of learning: “learning that fine-tunes existing policy instruments, (learning that) keeps goals intact but modifies instruments and (learning that) leads to a change of the goals themselves” (Mosher and Trubek 2003a: 76). In another account, Ferrera and Sacchi (2005) distinguish learning processes where, first, the identification of a common European challenge and a respective approach contribute to broad shifts in national thinking about policies (i.e. heuristic learning); secondly, where the non-binding OMC has led to common indicators and data sets as well as to adjustments of national statistical systems (i.e. capacity building); finally, learning could be reflexive when established practices and ways of thinking are re-examined on the basis of comparisons.

Overall, these accounts of learning point to a central role of knowledge in the governance context of the Lisbon Strategy. It becomes clear that knowledge is a central resource, medium and outcome of governance likewise. At the core of the process lies the collection of data and information. The preparation of National Action Plans (now National Reform Programmes), Joint Reports by the European Commission and statistical indicators and data sets are the essential ingredients on which governance in the Lisbon Strategy is based. Exact and detailed knowledge about the situation in the different member states is seen as essential precondition for being able to learn from each other. Moreover, the central role of this information and the specific way it is used in those modes of governance indicates, in a very specific way, how politics is formulated in the context of the Lisbon Strategy. These reports and indicators are not merely input to the policy process. In addition, they constitute new media to formulate and define problems, goals and strategies. Eventually, these media could have major effects on the very conditions of policy-making. For example, borrowing from Armstrong (2005), the predominant mode of governing under the Lisbon roof could contribute to the decentring of law as the main medium to define and communicate rules and principles in a society. Finally and following from the previous aspects, the governance processes within the Lisbon Strategy produce a new body of knowledge which consists of the concepts and strategies resulting from the collection and processing of information within a specific governance arrangement. However, policy learning accounts of the OMC also suffer some shortcomings which shall be addressed in the following.

To begin with, many accounts take a positivist standpoint looking for causal relationships within an objective and external reality. This raises theoretical as well as methodological questions. Regarding theoretical issues, ‘knowledge’ in this case is mostly used synonymously with ‘information’ while the latter is assigned objective and material qualities. In other words, knowing is understood as having information. Learning, then, crucially depends on the availability and the quality of appropriate information as well as on mobilisation of all those

actors who could provide, gather or process information. In this narrow sense, knowledge can only work as a resource of governance, while the social and discursive production of knowledge in terms of concepts, problem definitions and political strategies are largely beyond the reach of this perspective.

In contrast, it can be assumed that learning processes, which imply fundamental reorientations towards new analytical frameworks and normative evaluations, are the result of a more complex process. Yet, while governance perspectives are able to detect such reorientations through their focus on changing policies, they are unable to provide adequate conceptualisations of the processes preceding it. However, the latter is necessary before we can decide whether we really want to label them 'learning'.

Turning to methodological questions, such perspectives see policy change as the most important evidence for policy learning. However, this direct causal connection is problematic. It is theoretically more than questionable to infer cognitive or ideational phenomena from observed behaviour nor can such an analysis do justice to the complexity of a process like learning (with an individual and a collective dimension). Furthermore, between a learning process (for example, identifying a problem, reflecting on past practices, finding a solution) and an observable new policy comes the crucial step of implementation. Even in the case of mere imitation the latter is still difficult, time-consuming and requires a certain amount of innovation itself (Kerber and Eckardt 2007).

Even learning approaches that are more aware of those issues have to answer some questions. First of all, there is a strong normative bias: Learning is quite consistently presented as positive and desirable. In contrast, negative instances of learning are reflected rather rarely. For example, the actors participating in a specific OMC could also learn free-riding, how to avoid criticism while not changing perspectives or policies, how to push their standpoint in negotiations about objectives, targets or indicators, and finally, they could learn to block the governance process as such. In fact, empirical research suggests that, if learning takes place at all, a good part will consist of such less positive processes (Kröger 2006).

Closely connected with this optimistic bias is a second concern about the dominant meaning of learning as it (and consequently all related instances of policy change) is mostly presented as an aware and voluntary process. Such a portrayal of learning as conscious (and rational) application of freedom of choice would not only require that the participating actors are fully aware of all aspects of the learning process, but also that they are fully in control of it. In contrast, the extensive political bargaining about targets and guidelines that can be observed suggests that these processes involve a significant element of political power. Moreover, other developments seem to be – at least partially – due to complex non-personal, collective dynamics rather than individual choices (see Carmel 2005; Serrano Pascual and Crespo Suarez 2007a; Serrano Pascual and Crespo Suarez 2007b).

Finally, those overly optimistic assessments of learning point to a rather thin notion of politics. However, governance of social and economic modernisation within the Lisbon Strategy is not just about solving objective problems but also about fundamental political conflicts, unequal power relations, opposed interests and antagonistic identities (following Clarke 2004; Newman 2005; Walters 2004).

Overall, descriptions of the Lisbon Strategy as a space where governance is mainly based on learning within different OMCs direct attention to knowledge as resource, medium and outcome of governance. Moreover, for such descriptions Lisbon seems to be best understood as the sum of OMCs and generalisations tend to be about the OMC as such rather than about the Lisbon programme as the broader context. However, due to the mentioned limitations their strength is rather in understanding the resource aspect of knowledge while they fall short with regard to the latter two.

Yet, regardless of whether the Lisbon Strategy is mainly about governance through OMC-induced learning or whether the latter is actually taking place, there is widespread consensus

that it is an important arena where a new common discourse has emerged (Jacobsson 2004; Noaksson and Jacobsson 2003; Serrano Pascual 2007). This discourse involves a specific language but also specific epistemic assumptions (e.g. about causal relationships) and normative evaluations. In other words, this discourse reflects new knowledge about the subjects of and the goals for social and economic policy, as well as about the appropriate ways of putting those goals into practice. However, if we want to fully understand this transnational political phenomenon, arguments about learning cannot provide the whole picture. In particular, positivist versions of such arguments are unable to analyse the conceptual discourse in line with the procedures of the OMC. Yet, this overarching discourse is equally significant, if not even more interesting than the existence of an intergovernmental regime with limited legal force (an everyday phenomenon in international relations). Therefore, it is useful, to expand this survey to another perspective which offers a broader view.

3. A World of Knowledge – Extending the Scope Upwards and Downwards ↑

This section discusses a perspective where knowledge is taking centre stage: governmentality approaches. For Foucault, governmentality describes a specific form of political power that has gained dominance since the 18th century and which has as its two poles the individual and the population. Moreover, due to the powerful role of liberalism as conceptual foundation of Western societies, government cannot rely on direct force or command but on the ‘conduct of conduct’ of free subjects (Foucault 1991). All approaches following Foucault in this respect are interested in how political problems, objects and spaces as well as the correlated subjects are constructed and governed. According to Rose and Miller, “knowledge is ... central to these activities of government and to the very formation of its objects, for government is a domain of cognition, calculation, experimentation and evaluation” (Rose and Miller 1992: 175). Knowledge is never just understood as information that can be methodologically gathered, transferred and applied from one context to another. In contrast, together with language and practices knowledge is the very matter which constitutes society. Together these elements determine the space, the problems and subjects of governance as well as concrete technologies of governing (see also Flear this issue). Therefore, it is inevitable to make knowledge a central analytical category.

Knowledge here does not mean ‘ideas’ but refers to the vast assemblage of persons, theories, projects, experiments and techniques that has become such a central component of government (...) the ‘know how’ that makes government possible (Rose and Miller 1992: 178).

While governmentality has entered the social sciences on a broad scale, it is yet to gain prominence in EU studies. Accordingly, this part mainly focuses on a volume by Walters and Haahr, hitherto the most comprehensive attempt to transfer this programme to European integration studies (Walters and Haahr 2005; Haahr 2004; Shore 2006, 2009; see also Flear this issue).

First, a governmentality perspective allows for extending the theoretical scope upwards to reflecting on the Lisbon Strategy as the specific historical context in which the single OMCs are embedded. The historical context of the Lisbon project is constituted by cognitive and discursive practices, or in other words, by a dynamic body of knowledge. Furthermore, Lisbon is said to reflect a certain style (or mentality) of government which is described as advanced liberalism (see below). Liberalism, in this context, is not viewed as an ideology or a set of policies but means that the subjects of governing cannot be ruled by direct command and coercion but by “government at a distance” (Miller and Rose 1990: 9). “Here, power works in terms of the ways we govern ourselves” (Walters and Haahr 2005: 13) within a range of freedoms which we can practice and are obliged to exercise. While liberalism has always been a decisive characteristic of European integration, advanced liberalism means even less involvement in economic policy-making – not even the centrally organised lifting of barriers as in the creation of the single market – but “becomes concerned to reform the conduct of individuals and institutions in all sectors to make them more competitive and

efficient” (Walters and Haahr 2005: 135). At the same time, the space of the European economy is extended from the single market to issues of employment, social benefits and education (i.e. the fundamental reorientations detected above by Zeitlin). Finally, advanced liberal government relies on specific subjects and identities. The Lisbon Strategy draws on specific notions of society, citizens and other collective subjects (see also Flear this issue). Society has come to be seen as field of potentials and energies able to find and provide its own solutions to most problems. It is constructed as a domain of autonomous and capable actors who can get involved and collaborate.

Second, governmentality perspectives make it possible to expand the scope downwards by focussing on concrete technologies of power, that is, the concrete practices, strategies, instruments and idioms with which power is exercised and political problems are handled. Unlike policies and administrative procedures, these technologies are often not explicitly defined but rather embedded in contextual knowledge and practices. Especially interesting in the context of this issue, Walters and Haahr do not identify the OMC itself as technology of power but point to the many separate instruments within this mode of governing. Hence the analytical separation between the OMC as set of procedures and the Lisbon Strategy as encompassing political programme is dissolved while the main focus is shifted towards the latter. Instead of focusing on single OMCs, the authors distinguish two major means of power which dominate the whole Lisbon project: ‘technologies of agency’ and ‘technologies of performance’. The former are based (and rely) on the notion of society as a domain of active and autonomous actors constituting multiple potentials to be tapped. All those technologies do not aim at direct intervention but at fostering...

... agency within and across the space of the governmental apparatus of local, national and European institutions. We see a move to implicate other agencies, bureaucracies, organizations and enterprises within a logic of self improvement and the self-driven but carefully regulated optimization of performance (Walters and Haahr 2005: 120).

Thereby, these technologies shall mobilise the relevant actors to recognise and to acknowledge their stake in the project of social and economic modernisation and to contribute to its realisation. The best example is the large-scale production and exchange of knowledges, where large groups of EU and national civil servants, experts from the academy and consultancy (and to some limited extend social partners and NGOs) have become involved in the information collecting, report producing and in systematically exchanging of information and opinions in seminars, peer review sessions etc. However, we should not jump to the premature conclusion that open coordination therefore also contributes to democracy and legitimacy. Rather, the situation is ambivalent (Kröger 2007). Governing at a distance in the context of the Lisbon agenda is not just about promoting agency. The latter is strictly limited by another group of technologies, which must be included in the picture.

As a second major type, according to Walters and Haahr, technologies of performance restrict the freedom of those subjects whose agency shall be activated and increased. The best examples are the systematisation of comparisons, the comprehensive evaluation and monitoring procedures, the definition of political objectives in terms of quantitative targets, the emphasis on performance indicators and, hence, the measurability of progress (examples throughout all contributions to this issue). It is mainly through such technologies of performance that the subjects involved and targeted are to be transformed into calculating and strategic actors. However, the close interrelationship and mutual interdependence of technologies of agency and performance is crucial to understand the ambivalence of the Lisbon programme. Accordingly, agency is mainly fostered when it contributes to the strategic goals. The involvement of activist NGOs or trade unions, however, who promote alternative visions of Europe, is unlikely to be supported.

Overall, governmentality studies provide a broad perspective according to which the Lisbon Strategy is not just a programme employing new procedures. In contrast, it is the European expression of specific discourses and knowledge of government (i.e. advanced liberalism, at a

distance, etc.) and of a much broader and closely connected discourse on the modernisation of social policy and its relationship with the economy and the state (often termed 'activation'). At the same time, this phenomenon at the macro-level is based on specific technologies of power in everyday practice. Furthermore, governmentality approaches draw our attention to the ambivalences inherent in each political settlement (see Flear this issue; Radulova this issue).

However, the governmentality discourse (as put into practice by Walters and Haahr) also has to answer some critical questions. For example, it is rather unclear which agents are in charge of the transition to advanced liberalism, the formulation of a specific notion of society or the acts of subjectifying and identifying. A further critical question follows, since governmentality approaches might be accused of a certain one-sided or unidirectional perspective. Without doubt all those subjectifications, identifications and technologies of power will not remain without reaction from their targets. However, apart from some general hints to the possibility of resistance, Walters and Haahr remain rather silent about those aspects. Yet, Lisbon is not a monologue but a dialogue and without taking into account the different responses, it will be impossible to judge whether the Lisbon Strategy actually fulfils all those deeds attributed to it. Therefore, governmentality approaches also run the risk of over-generalising by analysing the Lisbon Strategy solely on the basis of its textual and procedural expressions. A final point follows from that. While governmentality perspectives draw our attention to the historicity and exceptionality of each social, political and economic formation, they say rather little about how those orders emerge.

We are faced with a perspective that claims that knowledge is a constitutional element of governing and of the world we are studying. However, due to the mentioned limitations it becomes difficult to determine how knowledge is actually produced, or how a specific body of knowledge has emerged. In short, the theoretical potential of governmentality studies should be complemented with an empirical programme.

4. Governing the Knowledge Society – the Potential of Science and Technology Studies Approaches ↑

In order to gain the broader perspective suggested in the previous section, this part suggests combining governmentality perspectives with approaches from STS. Both perspectives are able to communicate well with each other. Both share a broad and rather practical notion of knowledge (as 'know-how' rather than 'know-what'); both share a key interest in how discourse, practice and technical aspects contribute to social order. In fact, governmentality perspectives are often at their best where they draw on concepts from STS for empirical purposes (see below). Transferring the latter to the study of European integration can provide crucial theoretical and methodological guidance for thorough empirical studies of the single OMCs and the Lisbon project as a whole. Thereby, it becomes possible to gain crucial insights about how knowledge is actually produced within this composite governance regime and what role the latter plays for government from the distance.

In general, the trans-disciplinary enterprise of STS investigates the technological, social and symbolic dimensions of science and the practices of collective knowledge production in this field. It is mainly interested in empirically studying the conditions and processes in which scientific knowledge is produced and how scientific facts are constructed. One central finding is that the knowledge production of science is not epistemologically (though sociologically!) different from other forms of knowledge production, for example, in a court room or a government agency. A second key finding is even more important for the purpose of this paper: Within processes of scientific knowledge production, nearly everything is negotiable among the actors involved (Knorr Cetina 1995; Latour 1987; for other examples see Latour and Woolgar 1986; Lynch 1985; Lynch and Woolgar 1990; Pickering 1992) (3). Hence, the key challenge for the researcher becomes to investigate the practices through which scientific facts are constructed and the conditions limiting the scope of such constructions.

Similar to governmentality, STS is a diverse field inhabited, for example, by sociologists,

anthropologists, philosophers, or historians who share key common interests – mainly in empirically investigating the actual workings of science and the production of scientific knowledge – but whose accounts display a remarkable theoretical richness. Therefore, the following discussion first draws on Karin Knorr Cetina's work as exemplary (and as one of the most influential, most useful accounts). Where appropriate the discussion is then extended to other accounts.

Knorr Cetina's arguments are based on the assertion that Western societies are increasingly ruled by knowledge and expertise. Put differently, they are transforming into 'knowledge societies'. However, in contrast to predominantly economic (for example Bell 1976; Drucker 1993; Stehr 1994) or technological accounts (Castells 1996) of this development, she promotes a notion of knowledge societies which ...

... switches the emphasis to knowledge as practiced – within structures, processes, and environments that make up specific epistemic settings. If the argument about the growth of expert systems is right, what we call "society" will to a significant degree be constituted by such settings. (...) this is why the study of knowledge settings becomes a goal in the attempts to understand not only science and expertise but also the type of society that runs on knowledge and expertise (Knorr Cetina 1999: 8).

As a further key concept, practice constitutes the basic conceptual unit of her approach. A focus on practice implies researching experts at work and the single "acts of knowledge making" (Knorr Cetina 1999: 8) rather than focussing on knowledge in terms of theories or ideas. Practices are not only the 'actions' of individual or collective actors but certain patterns that structure social life and create the conditions for collective and individual action (see Reckwitz 2002; Reckwitz 2003; Reckwitz 2004; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and Von Savigny 2001). A particular practice has to be analysed in relation to its wider context containing specific understandings, rules and other practices that interact with the former (see Schatzki 2001).

Closely connected with the notion of practice is the notion of culture. The latter is understood as larger setting composed of practices and denotes a specific conceptualisation of social order as internally diverse, contested and dynamic. Particularly important, according to Knorr Cetina, the notion of culture implies ruptures and diversity of practices rather than uniformity and coherence. Moreover, it points to the essential richness of ongoing processes and events involving, among others, multiple instrumental, linguistic, theoretical and organisational frameworks (Knorr Cetina 1999: 10). Finally, culture points to the importance of symbols and meanings as key aspects of practice. This interplay between the key concepts of practice and culture offers exactly the perspectives on agency including issues of creation of and response to dominant discourses that are necessary for studying knowledge and knowledge construction as key ingredients of indirect government from the distance. Within the Lisbon project, both agency and government can now be analysed as facilitated and limited by the social order of a specific epistemic culture.

In addition, a view on STS provides interesting methodological inspiration concerning the organisation of empirical research. For example, most studies rely on ethnographic methodologies to study actors in their natural environment (for example Knorr Cetina 1999; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Lynch 1985). Secondly, this move is often accompanied by a scaling down of the units of analysis. For example, many STS analyses are "laboratory studies" where the laboratory is a key site for empirical research but also a crucial social configuration (Knorr Cetina 1995). At the same time, it is possible to construct a broader image of a social order consisting of smaller, local configurations.

How can these insights from the study of science be transferred to studying the EU's Lisbon Strategy? To begin with, all OMCs rely on different interlocking expert systems which produce knowledge, but also where knowledge is the key resource, medium and product of governing. Furthermore, these expert systems and the knowledge they produce play a central

role in creating and reproducing the broader socio-cultural framework of the Lisbon Strategy – i.e. the epistemic culture determining the conditions of governing within the Lisbon Strategy. Investigating practice and the rich everyday activities within these epistemic settings would contribute valuable insights about the ‘how’ of governing in this particular context. Moreover, when studying Lisbon in terms of knowledge, practices and culture, the interest shifts from observable behaviour (as in many accounts of learning) towards meanings and symbolic aspects. Crucially in this respect, Lisbon is not only a constellation of specific procedures, actors and interests but also a dynamic system of meaning and meaning-making (see Horvath this issue; Radulova this issue). In addition, Knorr Cetina points to the importance of identifying the ‘laboratories’ within each OMC, that is the committees, subcommittees and working groups but also the offices where knowledge about economic and social organisation is negotiated.

Interestingly, the potential value of science studies for empirical research in other areas of social science is also demonstrated by governmentality authors. To begin with, Miller and Rose (1990) base their fundamental idea of ‘government at a distance’ on the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon – two key figures of STS. The latter have coined the concept of ‘translation’ to describe the process in which a scientific fact is becoming accepted as true. Accordingly, it does not depend on the inherent truth of a research result but rather on the ability of its producers to build a big enough network (i.e. an ‘audience’) within which a specific definition is accepted. For a scientific debate to be settled, each statement needs to be translated in a way that it appeals to the interests and identities of the involved actors. In fact, translation also implies regular reframing of interests and identities. In the course of such translations, statements that were once uttered by a specific actor can become ‘objective facts’ (see Callon 1986; Callon 1995; Latour 1986; Latour 1987). Similarly, negotiations about the significance of specific data, about the definition of indicators, or about choosing and setting a specific benchmark within an OMC committee could also be investigated in terms of processes of translation. In this case, the participating officials negotiate ‘facts’ they are prepared to believe in and which they would accept as direction for their policies. For example, the prevalent supply-side orientation in employment policy or the widespread abolition of early retirement programs throughout Europe could be further investigated as processes of translation.

From this need to translate and to establish a sustainable network with – often distant – actors follows also that power is an effect rather than cause (Latour 1986). In the context of the OMC, this means that it becomes a powerful regime only if a body of knowledge can be negotiated that binds crucial actors to the process while pre-existing institutional resources (such as votes in the Council) are less important.

In addition to literary and rhetorical means to translate and to objectify a fact, various STS studies deal with the role of technical means, which are used to represent a fact (see Knorr Cetina 1995), most important, ‘inscription’. Inscription devices are the different means with which phenomena can be made visible and thereby turned into facts, such as diagrams, statistics or graphs (Latour 1987) (4). Inscription “renders reality into a calculable form” (Rose and Miller 1992: 185) which means that specific objects are constructed and that it becomes possible to evaluate, to calculate and to intervene in them. For example, Hacking (1991) has pointed to statistics as the crucial inscription device to create social categories but also to organize them along categories, for example, of ‘normal’, ‘problematic’ or ‘deviant’ behaviour (bureaucratic government). In a similar manner, further research on the OMC and Lisbon could focus on the broad spectrum of inscription devices used. How are reports, indicators, Council decisions, tables or benchmarks used to create ‘objective’ knowledge about welfare and welfare problems in the member states? How are they utilised to stabilise theoretical concepts? How are social categories created in that context? A further set of questions refers to how inscription is used by specific actors to create ‘centres’ of information and thereby control the knowledge production within the epistemic culture of Lisbon.

In general, only on the basis of this empirical programme, it would become possible to analyse conceptual discourses and procedural aspects of governance alongside in a single research

programme.

5. Conclusion

This paper was interested in the role of knowledge in the governance context of the Lisbon Strategy. It surveyed three kinds of literature: Arguments about learning as key element of the OMC suggest that knowledge is a central resource, medium and outcome of policy-making in the context of Lisbon. However, they fall short of conceptualising knowledge itself as theoretical category. Remaining at the meso-level of political institutions, they neglect actual practices on the ground and offer only limited insights in how expert systems and processes of knowledge production could feed back in the constitution of the political space of the Lisbon Strategy comprising the respective OMCs and but also a wider conceptual discourse.

In contrast, the governmentality approach by Walters and Haahr proposes a perspective where knowledge is a key constitutive element of the (social) world. Their focus draws our attention to wider questions about the constitution of particular historical contexts as well as to micro-level questions about concrete technologies of power of which those contexts are composed. However, their perspective finds it difficult to determine how specific knowledge settings come about, reproduce and change due to a missing strong notion of agency. This also implies difficulties for translating this theoretical building into empirical research.

Looking for ways to achieve such a comprehensive perspective, the paper suggested complementing the outlook on dominant discourses and rationalities of government with perspectives from STS which provide a rich empirical programme. Thanks to the resulting emphasis on practice and the methodological stress on ethnographic research, such an approach is expected to open up new and original ways of studying the micro-processes that constitute the conditions for knowledge production, mediation and consumption in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy. Moreover, especially due to its composite conceptualisation of culture, STS is capable of linking perspectives on actual practice back to insights about the epistemic culture that sets the conditions for governing within the Lisbon Strategy in general. Importantly, based on the empirical insights facilitated by such an approach, STS could also crucially complement the critical potential of the governmentality perspective by showing how ambivalences are negotiated in concrete situations.

So far, considerations about the significance of Lisbon or the OMC have often limited themselves to arguments about EU social policy, processes of welfare state reform or questions of legitimacy. The combined approach suggested here for the study of European integration can provide a much more comprehensive picture based on the study of actual practices on the ground (rather than institutions) and on how norms, analytic concepts and power relations feed back into the epistemic culture of Lisbon. Indeed, much more research of this kind is necessary before we can fine-tune our disputes about politics, legitimacy and democracy to the particular historical circumstances – especially as we can only judge the ambivalence inherent in the Lisbon project (an indeed in all political constellations) with a view to how they are produced, interpreted negotiated and contested in practice. For example, Armstrong's (see above) question whether a language of statistics, indicators and benchmarks would be decentring law as central means of communication (including all possible implications) can only be fully addressed from such a perspective on practice and meanings. Similarly, much more insights of that kind are necessary before we can decide whether and how key meanings of EU law are transforming (for a critical discussion see Dawson this issue) or whether the Union is turning into a directly-deliberative polyarchy (Cohen and Sabel 2003; Gerstenberg and Sabel 2002; Sabel and Zeitlin 2007).

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Endnotes

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(1) This list of key concepts is just a rough sketch; importantly, most of the concepts used within the debate about welfare reform (especially at close inspection) combine analytical and normative elements.

(2) For a detailed presentation of different assessments of the OMC, see Kröger this issue.

(3) This does not mean that scientific knowledge has no connection with the physical world or that it is entirely random but rather that it is essentially uncertain and contested because the outcomes, even of the most sophisticated experiments are always undetermined and open to numerous interpretations.

(4) This term also includes visualisations on screens or scales of technical instruments; yet, the latter are less important in the context of the Lisbon Strategy.