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Boekbespreking van: The Politics of Environmental Discourse

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But respondents with little knowledge perceive party position as similar to party positions on the left-right dimension on abortion and euthanasia more often than those respondents with much knowledge. This is interpreted as evidence that the left-right dimension dominates perceptions on all issues for people without much political knowledge.

Chapter 9 stands alone from the rest of the book. It reports an analysis that uses the panel data of the 1986 national election survey to estimate both changes in voters' own attitudes toward nuclear energy, and changes in voters' perception of parties' positions on nuclear energy in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion, which took place between the first and second wave of the panel. Both types of change are modelled in terms of the original positions of voter and party, voters' awareness of the positions of the parties, and assimilation, contrast, and persuasion effects. A non-linear estimation procedure developed by Courtney Brown was used to estimate the size of the different effects. Assimilation, contrast, and persuasion effects were found to be very small. The major effects were respondents' change of attitude toward nuclear energy as a result of Chernobyl, and the "objective" change in the parties' positions on nuclear energy. On the basis of this outcome Van der Brug concludes that "Voters appear to be quite reasonable, one could even call them 'rational'" (p. 190).

This theme is taken up again in the final chapter, in which Van der Brug concludes that gross misunderstandings between voters and parties did not occur, and – by simple extrapolation – are unlikely to occur in the near future. The overarching importance of the left-right dimension allows the voter to make rational choices between the different parties. Even though the legislative behaviour of the Dutch parties has depended on a single left-right dimension for some time, the party manifesto results suggest that this may change. For example, the differences among parties on health, education, and the public media do not coincide with party positions on the left-right dimension.

Van der Brug's book is well crafted, with hypotheses developed on the basis of a sound grasp of the literature. But I have some lingering reservations. First a technical quibble: more up-to-date unidimensional procedures could have been used in chapters 3 and 4 to investigate the positions of the parties. Second, the analysis of the party manifesto data leaves a number of questions unanswered, especially about the interpretation of the neglected but undeniably present second dimension, and of changes in the positions of parties. Most problematic, however, is the general conclusion that voters' choices can be explained rationally. For this conclusion to be compelling a link needs to be forged between voters' preferred position on the left-right dimension and their perception of their own well-being. The result that voters with little political knowledge use the left-right dimension more than others points away from that interpretation.

Although Van der Brug uses the available data very ingenuously to support his conclusions, the caution expressed in his final chapter that the left-right dimension may not be here to stay undermines the predictive value of this study. On the other

hand, this expectation opens the field for new research questions on what conflict dimensions will preoccupy future generations, and how voters will cope with them.

Wijbrandt van Schuur

Maarten A. Hajer, *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernisation and the policy process*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995, ISBN 0-19-827969-8

This study focuses on the innovation of theory and method of discourse analysis. The discourse under study is "ecological modernisation". The study compares acidification policies in the 1980s in Great Britain and the Netherlands.

Acidification, caused by SO₂ emissions (coal burning for electricity generation in particular), received wide attention in the eighties, because of the discovery of dying forests in Germany. In many countries, governments started programmes to study acidification impacts in their countries. Hajer pays much attention to the agenda setting of the issue. In Great Britain, the barriers to placing the issue on the political agenda were extremely high. From 1980 onwards, the conservative government successfully denied the issue agenda status for a six year period. The issue was denied by arguing that Britain already had a proud record in fighting air pollution. It was also argued that there was no scientific proof whatsoever for the acidification thesis. The United Kingdom, therefore, came to lag far behind other European countries in developing and implementing policies. In contrast to the UK, the Netherlands showed a flow of general concern about acidification. The issue entered the policy agenda easily. It didn't take long to establish a joint research programme with government and private sector participation. However, as in Great Britain, implementing the policies was a painful process.

The study shows that in both countries large emission reduction policies were supported by a heterogeneous coalition, which included radical environmentalists as well as industry representatives and politicians who did not have any affiliation with the environmentalist movement. What these groups had in common is what Hajer refers to as the discourse of "ecological modernisation". This discourse is characterized by the notion that environmental costs should be included in public and company policies, especially in large investments. By doing so, a nation or a company can gain a comparative technological advantage over competitors. Ecological modernisation, therefore, serves both wealth and the environment.

Pivotal throughout the study is the notion that environmental problems are socially constructed. Hajer shows that the social construction of environmental problems not only relates to the policy arena, where policy-makers and interest groups struggle on the formulation and implementation of environmental policies, but also to the area of scientific expertise. By highlighting the interactions between policy and science for

policy, the study provides overwhelming evidence to support the social constructivist perspective in policy studies, especially where environmental policy is concerned.

In line with other researchers in the social-constructivist tradition, Hajer observes that rather than big reports and high-standard publications in qualified journals, the face-to-face contacts, excursions etc. play a key role in making policy-makers aware of the SO₂ problems. However, he continues: "such exercises are of course a highly dubious source of evidence, especially where risk-society problems are concerned, since in such cases the sensory element is even more fundamentally constructed" (p.271). This statement puzzles me, as it seems to contradict what I was led to believe in the foregoing sections, i.e. that scientific evidence itself is as much part of the social construction of the problem as policy arguments. Apparently, even for Hajer, who presents himself as an "anti-realist" (p.264), it is at times difficult to rigidly follow the social-constructivist perspective.

It is the empirical part of the study that I have read with great pleasure. The cases are described in a very lively manner. In addressing the role of science in the policy process, Hajer points to the ironies of environmental policy-making. He subtly points out how the British Forestry Commission between 1985-1988 suddenly changed its assessment of tree health, "which was unlikely to be caused by a revolutionary change in the health of British trees." The study certainly contributes to the understanding of processes of knowledge production, dissemination and utilization in a policy context dominated by mechanisms of discursive exclusion.

Yet, in chapter 2 on theory, Hajer promises to take social constructivist political analysis "much further". He claims to lay the "social-theoretical foundations of a new approach to the analysis of discourse in political contexts" (p.58). The contribution of discourse analysis is not just to gain an understanding of conflicting problems, solutions and related political practices but to find out "why an understanding of the environmental problem at some point gains dominance and is seen as authoritative" (p.44). Hajer thus presents discourse analysis as an explanatory theory rather than a methodological tool for interpreting or "verstehen" which is commonly understood as the main contribution of discourse analysis to the policy sciences.

Discourse analysis is advocated as the theoretical alternative for the "politics of interest" perspectives in policy analysis. As a vehicle in his research approach, Hajer introduces the concept "discourse coalition". This concept is meant to serve as an alternative for the concept "advocacy coalition", developed by Paul Sabatier and others in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). Many of Hajer's criticisms related to the biases in the policy of interest perspectives and the inadequacies in the ACF, which may to a large extent also be considered a policy of interest approach, may be justified. However, whether "discourse coalition" is a viable concept, is another matter. Conceptually, as appears from Hajer's own definitions, discourses usually reflect coalitions of some sort (p.44), and a discourse coalition by definition constitutes a discourse (p.65). From a conceptual point of view, one may wonder why a new concept is needed, if the concept already in use covers its meaning.

Apart from the issue of definition, I have not been able to see where discourse theory has yielded remarkably new interpretations of events, let alone explanations. In fact, the comparative case study results look quite similar to those obtained in studies based on a "politics of interest" perspective, such as the comparative study by De Man (1986) on energy forecasting in the UK and the Netherlands. In explaining the differences between the policy processes in both countries, Hajer points to the distinct characteristics of the British and Dutch political systems in terms that we know from Lijphart and others. In the British tradition ("the winner takes all", "Westminster model"), the characteristic one-dimensional polarization of conflict inhibited the issue to gain agenda-status. The environmentalists' strategy was doomed to fail as long as a lobby of vested (coal) interests dominated the scene. In the Netherlands, conservative business interests were active too, but the Dutch tradition of accommodation politics allowed for a high degree of (symbolic) consensus on the seriousness of the issue. Having read the case studies, I still wonder what makes a "discourse coalition" so special compared to any other type of coalition.

Another point of criticism is that the scientific problem Hajer addresses is not well specified. It is announced that the research questions will be presented in section 1.6 and that the choice of acid rain as an appropriate case to study ecological modernisation will be justified (p.16). However, this section is missing in the commercial edition of the study. This is an omission, since neither the research questions, nor the choice to focus on acid rain in order to highlight the discourse of ecological modernisation, are self-evident. As is widely understood (see for example the recent study by Dinkelman on Dutch air pollution policy), technologies for addressing SO₂ emissions were primarily developed in Japan, while Europe missed the boat.

I share Hajer's major concern that risk society has not yet been able to create institutional arrangements for adequately dealing with the different conceptions of environmental problems among policy-makers, citizens and scientists. Global environmental problems, such as acid rain and climate change, are too often framed from a technocratic perspective to which that citizens and political decision-makers cannot easily relate. Hence, environmental policy meets with public indifference, or worse, political resistance and deadlock. The way out is to bring politics back in again. The study therefore concludes with some valuable suggestions for enhancing political debate on (global) environmental issues.

Conclusively, Hajer's study is a must for those who are interested in the new environmental conflict and in social-constructivist research on policy-science interactions. Hajer's observations in this regard deserve attention in the environmental policy community. However, I would have preferred less emphasis on concepts and theories that do not always strengthen the main argument of the study. A more modest approach would have made the book even better.

Matthijs Hisschemöller