On the Construction of Social Policy Actors in the European Union – A Neo-Institutionalist Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, a world culture perspective is applied to alternative forms of governance within the EU. In contrast to the widely held view in governance research that the "Open Method of Coordination" (OMC) constitutes a more or less successful arrangement for policy learning, we propose the hypothesis that mechanisms of "soft" governance are both means and results of the diffusion of a global culture. The OMC surrounds EU Member States with a complex array of expectations that comprise a framework for legitimate action. Ultimately, the Member States' adoption of the OMC leads to a reconstitution of the idea of who is an actor and what an actor does. The European Commission, researchers, and International Non-Governmental Organization (INGOs) play a decisive part in this process of actor formation by taking on the role of "cultural others." Their work can be understood in reference to the work of George H. Mead as a contribution to the sociogenesis of the nation-state in a European community. These cultural others contribute to the dissemination of scripts, which can be defined by three key elements: First, the EU Member States are expected to behave as actors that learn strategically and formulate policy prospectively in a learning-based manner. Second, the coordination of national social policies offers transnational actors diverse and lasting opportunities to act as cultural others and thereby contribute to the new self-understanding of the Member States. Third, through the process of OMC, central terms and concepts are established as European references for legitimization that allow for Europeanization in the form of a "standardization of differences." The world culture perspective and the governance research thus share the view that OMC is a process of diffusion, but according to the world culture perspective advocated here, that diffusion is not primarily of instrumental policy knowledge but rather of existential identity knowledge.

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1. Introduction

For a number of years, alternative forms of governance have been steadily gaining importance in the EU. Instruments that can be seen as the expression of a unique "European governance" (Sabel and Zeitlin 2008) are being introduced in such diverse areas as telecommunications regulation, occupational health and safety, and social policy. This trend is particularly evident in social policy (Armstrong, Begg and Zeitlin 2008). Under the umbrella of the so-called Lisbon Strategy, core areas of national social policy are transformed into enduring issues of European policy. This process has proceeded furthest in the area of employment strategy, which is generally considered a model for the less advanced processes in the areas of inclusion, pensions, and health policy (Schmid and Kull 2004). In the present article, this broad, prolonged trend towards the adoption of alternative governance forms in social policy is examined in a global context. We advance the central thesis that the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), in all its variations, constitutes the means and the result of the global diffusion of a world culture as defined by John W. Meyer (e.g., Meyer et al. 1997a; Meyer et al. 1997b; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

What does this assertion mean? The central premise of the neoinstitutional argument is best understood by calling to mind competing approaches to research on alternative modes of governance. According to these approaches, the dissemination of OMC is primarily an attempt to escape the weaknesses and risks of political blockading inherent in old forms of governance and to explore new ways in politics (Heritiér 2002; Idema and Kelemen 2006; Trubek and Trubek 2003). OMC should thus work in areas where traditional instruments fail—for example, in cases in which the Community Method triggers fears of infringements on national sovereignty (Bauer and Knöll 2003; Linsemann and Meyer 2002). Alternative forms of governance reduce this resistance because—in contrast to the classic forms of integration—they do not insist on decision-making and enforcement, but rather are founded on the principles of voluntary participation and learning (Kerber and Eckardt 2007). This explains why the OMC seems almost ideally suited as a foundation for European social policy. It promises to optimize policy without depriving nation-states of their sovereignty. On the one hand, it allows countries to maintain the institutional structures of their welfare state systems that evolved and are embedded in their own cultures, and on the other hand, it allows them to learn from one another and also to adapt to the increasing integration among individual states.

This "governance perspective" on alternative governmental forms is based on two assumptions that the world polity perspective challenges. The first is that the OMC is solely a multilateral learning process. Although the question has frequently been raised whether the participation of the Member States really is voluntary, and whether the learning processes that take place in Peer Review are in reality able to exert adequate pressure on recalcitrant actors to make necessary changes (Kröger 2006), the tacitly assumed standard of reference remains the eager-to-learn, strategically oriented nation-state that optimizes the effectiveness and efficiency of its policies through interaction and communication with its neighbors. The world culture perspective counters the interest of the new governance approach in questions of implementation with an interest in the essential fact that voluntary participation and learning have even succeeded in establishing themselves as a common expectation for European policy-making. Is it not astonishing that fostering learning is now

on the agenda in the political sphere—the quintessential space for opportunistic aspirations to power?

The second assumption of the governance research implies that alternative forms of governance are a European phenomenon. Similar instruments may exist elsewhere, but the only ones considered important are those between European and national, or between national and regional levels (Büchs 2008). There is no attempt to systematically contextualize the trend toward new governance forms in global processes of change, as proposed by the world culture perspective. It is remarkable that the politicians involved in OMC and the social and political researchers observing the process do not differ in regard to these two assumptions (Bernhard 2009a). As will be seen, the affinity of mind between policy makers and scholars is no coincidence. It can be regarded as an intellectual achievement of the world culture perspective that it is able to make *both* scholarly observation *and* public policy-making the objects of empirical analysis. The involvement of scholarly research in policy formulation, policy advice, and policy analysis is indeed one of the trademarks of the alternative European governance style and an expression of world cultural influences.

Thus it becomes clear that the central thesis of this article is based on a reversal of the research perspective. The basic theoretical assumption is that nation-states (but other actors as well, such as regions and even the EU itself) are not quasi-natural entities, existing a priori to all scientific investigation. Rather, they are constantly developing in line with social expectations, which are diffused into globally consistent standards (cf. esp.: Meyer 1999; Meyer 2005). The process of becoming a state can be conceived, in many respects, analogously to the emergence of identity as described by George H. Mead (Blumer 1966; McKinney 1955; Mead 1967; Smith 1931): a nation-state creates its "self" in constant comparison to social expectations conveyed by internalized interlocutors (generalized "others"). Applied to the instrument of voluntary policy coordination, this means that the OMC is more than just an instrument used by established nation-states with fixed preferences to achieve their goals. It promotes the formation of a social space of cultural others, who tell the nation-states how good (social) policy should be made and what its objectives should be. This theoretical perspective and the parallel to Mead's self-formation

process will be introduced in the following section (Section 2). The empirical part will expound in detail upon the central thesis of the diffusion of world culture scripts in the context of the OMC. It can be defined by three key elements. First, the EU Member States are expected to behave as actors that learn strategically and formulate policy in a prospective and learning-based manner. Second, the coordination of national social policies offers transnational actors diverse and lasting opportunities to act as cultural others and thereby contribute to the new self-definition of the Member States. Third, through the process of OMC, central concepts and terms are established as European references for legitimization that allow for Europeanization in the form of a "standardization of differences" (Schwinn 2006: 225) (Section 3). Finally, the core assertions of the world culture perspective will be summarized in contrast to those of the established governance perspective (Section 4).

2. Cultural Others, World Culture, and the Sociogenesis of the Nation-State

2.1 Cause and effect in the world culture argument

The core assertion of the literature on world culture, which has been growing steadily for decades, is—despite its multifaceted nature—relatively clear and simple, and can be summed up as a relationship between cause and effect. Accordingly, globally unified standards of expectations in the form of scripts, norms, and the like (the independent variable) increasingly define events in the world by providing individuals, organizations and nation-states with a framework for legitimate action (the dependent variable). This idea is presented by Meyer and colleagues as a diffusion argument, that is, an argument demonstrating how the models or scripts of world culture are gaining in importance, both temporally and spatially. On the temporal axis, they show how certain scripts, such as women's right to vote and mass education, are becoming increasingly prevalent over time; while across space, they show that even—and in particular—peripheral regions of the world are embracing claims of world culture, independent of local cultural traditions and of

their actual chances of being able to realize these expectations (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer 1999; Meyer and Ramirez 2005). Although this may not always be clear, the proponents of world culture research make an explanatory claim that is essentially complementary in scope: they attempt to embrace phenomena that other approaches cannot explain. In particular they make use of realistic and functionalistic theories to demarcate their own position (Jeppersen 2002). They do not, however, assert that world culture explains all phenomena.

Figure 1: The Argumentation Framework of the World Culture Approach
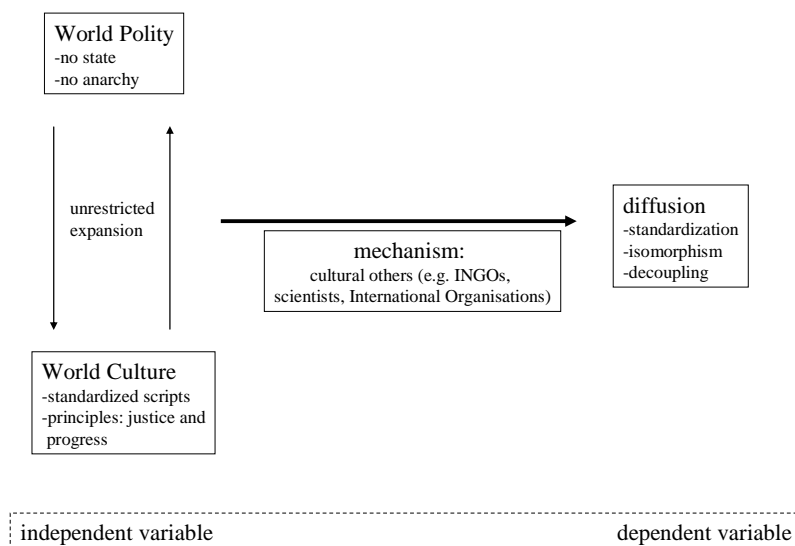
Source: author's diagram

Let us examine the two sides of the causal explanation somewhat more closely (Figure 1). On the side of the independent variables, the terms world culture and world polity are of crucial importance. World culture is, from the point of view of the neoinstitutionalists, not a vague or marginal element that is found somewhere outside the social space and that affects it in an indeterminate manner. Rather, culture refers to concrete institutional expectations *within* the social space that also can be referred to as scripts (Meyer 1999: 126). The points

of orientation for these scripts are derived from the metascripts "justice/equity" and "progress," which emerge from the western process of rationalization (Meyer, Boli and Thomas 1987). World polity refers to the condition in which neither a central global government exists, nor anarchy prevails (Meyer 1999: 126). In this situation, cultural orientations become structures that create order. World culture and world polity are mutually supportive. In the one direction, world culture provides a stateless whole with a structural foundation, and in the other, the absence of a central government provides an important precondition for the unfettered development of world culture claims and expectations (Meyer 1999: 128-129). Demands can be formulated in the name of world culture—for example, the call for human rights (Koenig 2005)—that do not necessarily have to be fulfilled by those formulating them. In this scheme of appeals, the costs of guaranteeing human rights do not fall on those who raise this demand. In contrast to the case within nation-states, for example, there is not always someone to whom demands can be addressed, but resistance is equally impossible to organize. The invocation of world culture values to create scripts thus becomes a process over which no judge prevails, one in which the prosecution never rests and the defendant does not always have to be named precisely. Thus Meyer and colleagues point out that not only is a global order possible—beyond or even preceding the formation of state-like structures—but that it already exists, although not in state form.

On the side of the dependent variable, the world culture approach seeks to explain the worldwide dissemination of scripts. Meyer differentiates three particular interests here: "the rather standardized character of these entities [nation-states] around the world; the tendencies of isomorphic change in their constitutive and organizational structures, and in the activities they pursue; the decoupled character of the links between structure and policy, on the one hand, and practical activity and reality on the other …" (Meyer 1999: 123-124). The standardization of the nation-state means that nation-states tend to increasingly resemble one another in form. For example, if an organized political association wants to present itself as a nation-state in the contemporary world, it will need a constitution, an educational ministry, and a foreign ministry, and it is also highly likely that it will recognize human rights in one form or another. Standardization is not a timeless condition,

but a phase in a global process of isomorphism: not only are the states similar; they become more and more similar over time (Meyer 2000; Meyer et al. 1997a). Finally, the term decoupling refers to the fact that standardization and isomorphism apply only to the formal structure, that is, to the official goals and self-representations, but not to the structure of activity, that is, to what is actually done by and within the states (for the seminal contribution, see: Meyer and Rowan 1977). With their concept of decoupling, Meyer and colleagues clearly delimit the scope of their argument, thereby stimulating further research: by creating the conceptual possibility of decoupling outward self-representation from actual actions, they carefully avoid claiming worldwide isomorphism or a standardization of *practice*. Only the *expectations* of nation-states and their actions converge. To what extent the scripts can actually be maintained, and what strategies are used to avoid them remains unexplained. What does converge worldwide are the matrices of legitimization for practice; not practice itself.

2.2 Embeddedness, cultural others and the sociogenesis of the self

Although it appears to be straightforward, world culture theory incorporates a number of theoretical premises that have far-reaching implications. Any attempt to apply world culture theory to alternative forms of governance in the EU must first clearly accept these premises. Three issues are of particular importance. First, neo-institutionalists see actors (i.e. individuals, organizations, and nation-states) as units that are constructed by social expectations (cf. section 2.2.1). Secondly, the diffusion of scripts presupposes the work of cultural others (cf. section 2.2.2). Thirdly, actors assimilate the social expectations that cultural others assign to them in a way that has been most concisely described by George Mead: they internalize global scripts as part of their self. Thus, the activities of construction that take place in the context of the OMC may be described, to borrow Mead's concept, as the sociogenesis of the nation-state (cf. section 2.2.3).

2.2.1 Embeddedness

In everyday perception, actors (individuals, organizations, and nation-states) all appear to be sacrosanct primordial units with specific goals, resources and values. Actors are seen as units operating within their environment. In other words, they act within an environment which, to a greater or lesser degree, is susceptible to the attainment of their goals, the use of their resources and compliance with their values. They act by identifying goals on the basis of their own preferences, evaluating their resources, analyzing the external (social) world and then acting on and in that world. In this view, the link between the internal world of the actor and the external world of the environment is created, in general, through culture. Culture influences the actors' values and preferences and explains the variations in practice that occur in different places and at different times.

The central theoretical premises of world culture theory are contradictory to this understanding of an actor and the scholarly derivatives which are based upon it, in particular rational choice theory (Krücken 2002). World culture theorists put forward an alternative to each part of the everyday/rational actor model. The unit "actor" is by no means a presocial, natural fact but rather a historically variable and culturally based belief. Further, actors are not vessels that are of interest only in terms of the preferences and values with which they are filled; it is the shape of the vessel itself that deserves scholarly attention. In addition, actors do not encounter their environment as separate entities; they integrate the environment through their form of existence (their "shape of the vessel"). And finally, world culture theorists believe that it is wrong to see culture simply as a slim thread linking the inner life of the actor and their social environment. Rather, culture has an expressive side, one that assigns meaning, that makes reference to identities, values and preferences; and an ontological one that constructs actors and their legitimate options from the ground up (Meyer, Drori and Hwang 2006: 29).

Meyer uses the term "embeddedness" to summarize these ideas. As an actor, the nation-state (and the same applies to organizations and individuals) is "embedded in and constructed by an exogenous, and more or less worldwide, rationalistic culture. Culture in this sense is less a set of values and norms, and more a set of cognitive models defining the nature, purpose, resources, technologies, controls, and sovereignty of the proper nation-

state." (Meyer 1999: 123). Here Meyer and his colleagues are reformulating the sociological problem of the actor in a paradigmatic and counter-intuitive manner. The question of how actors act, and what motivates them to do so, what they view as obstacles and where they take their direction from is of secondary importance; what is of greater interest is the (logically preceding) question of how actors' areas of authority are defined. It is not *how* actors act but *what* makes their existence possible and defines it in the first place that is of interest, i.e. how and why they are *able* to act. World culture theory is thus tackling a new subject, namely the legitimate frameworks within which and with reference to which actors in modern societies act. Two research questions then become pressing: Firstly, the shape of the legitimate scripts: this is an interest in their formal structure. And secondly, the issue of the role that the legitimization framework plays in the practice of the actors. This is the question, already mentioned above, of the decoupling of formal structure from the structure of activity. The remainder of this paper will focus exclusively on formal structure. In other words, the OMC will be investigated in terms of how it shapes expectations of the social policy of the EU Member States. The fact that Member States do not always comply with these objectives, that they even sometimes attempt to evade them is then not simply an unexplained remnant of the position put forward. Rather, it is predicted by world culture theory and can be investigated as a separate research object.

2.2.2 Cultural others

From the outline above, it should be clear that Meyer's model divides actors into two analytic components: their legitimate authority to act, on the one hand, and their actual actions on the other. The legitimatization of authority to act takes the form of quasi-natural rights and interests (Bernhard 2009b). For example, it is generally accepted that all individuals have certain inalienable rights (freedom of speech and religion, the right to own property). It thus seems self-evident to us that women are capable of expressing political opinions. However, world culture theory points out that there are a number of prerequisites before this is accepted to be the case. Firstly, women must be seen as individuals (and not, for example, as members of a household) (see Vandenstraeten 2006)). In addition, it must

be generally established that a unit that sees itself as individuals can have opinions and is capable of, and entitled to, express these when they are about political issues. These conditions have not always existed to the same degree at all times and in all places. The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to the actor units "organization" and "nation-state." Today, it is considered normal that corporations frequently seek external advice by professional consultancies. However, this is dependent on a number of factors, such as, for example, that corporations organize themselves in ways that are accepted global scripts, which then make them susceptible to the standard advisory products supplied by consultants. For nation-states, on the other hand, it seems self-evident that in addition to their monopoly on the use of physical force, they should also attempt to define their area of authority in symbolic terms to a considerable degree, for example, by means of economic, educational and cultural policies (Bourdieu 1999). World culture theory explains the selection of some issues for particular attention in this regard, and the sidelining of others, through the effect of globally diffused scripts about the legitimate sphere of authority of the nation-state as an actor unit.

This analytical differentiation between the framework of legitimacy, and activity, forms the conceptual basis for a model of diffusion that relies on cultural others and differs considerably from conventional models of diffusion, such as network diffusion (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett 2007; Scott 2003; Strang and Meyer 1993). Cultural others – Meyer and his colleagues refer, in the first instance, to INGOs, international organizations, experts and scholars (Boli and Thomas 1999) – continually develop actor identities and spheres of action with reference to world culture principles. This creates a complex system of "cultural theorizing" (Meyer 1999: 127) around the units to which the authority for - and power of - goal-directed action are ascribed. The theoretical formations of the cultural others consist primarily of communication: "scientific talk, legal talk, nonbinding legislation, normative talk, talk about social problems, suggestions, advice consulting talk and so on - not binding authoritative action" (ibid.: 127). The subjects of all this talk are the rights and the natural interests of actors, and the talk is usually directed at the nation-state. "And most of the talk addresses the nation-states in terms of their own putative interests and goals – advising them how to be better and more effective actors in pursuit of such goals as economic

development, social justice, and environmental regulation." (ibid.: 127). Thus the cultural others are not themselves responsible for putting into action the scripts that they formulate and disseminate.

This brings us to the differences between cultural others and agentic actors (i.e. nation-states, organizations, individuals) (Meyer 1996; Meyer 2000). Cultural others differ from agentic actors in three ways. Firstly, agentic actors pursue their own (self)-interests, while cultural others are disinterested or act in the interest of general principles and values. Secondly, actors are characterized by a form of boundedness (whether psychological or metaphorical) that makes them appear to be relatively closed units (for example the individual's body, the nation-state's territory, or the corporation's corporate identity). In contrast, cultural others are, often, loosely attached parts of an indeterminate whole (for example, of a profession). Thirdly, actors have particular resources (such as property) but this is not necessarily the case for cultural others (Meyer 1999: 128). The two analytic components of the agentic actors (framework for action, and consequently, legitimatized agency) and of the cultural other create a triangle. In this triangle, it is the cultural others that expand, redefine, and interpret existing authority to act, and make it available as a framework of legitimization for agency. Metaphorically speaking, the cultural others stand alongside the actors, which are positioned by world culture, and help them fulfill their intended purpose.

2.2.3 The sociogenesis of the self

Cultural others are the main mechanism by which world culture is disseminated because they take on its imperatives and make these specific to and relevant to agentic actors. Thus, agentic actors internalize expectations. The first part of their work is easy to understand: cultural others demand that actors do justice to their new rights or interests, making reference to the core values of modernity, i.e. progress and justice/equity. The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), for example, criticizes homelessness in the European Union, which it sees as a social problem that must be addressed. It does so by first postulating a human right to a home, and then

stating that homelessness is an infringement of that human right. The FEANTSA puts its position forward in innumerable papers and submissions, and corroborates it with references to scholarly expertise, including materials it has compiled itself (case studies, statistics on homelessness, etc.) (Bernhard 2009a). From a world culture perspective, this process is simply a refinement of the world culture script of the individual. The individual is positioned as an entity with a natural right to a home. The FEANTSA then explains how the problem, the infringement of this right, presents itself (statistics, etc), who it affects (the homeless), whose job it is to solve the problem (the EU Member States), and how this should be done (policy recommendations).

The second part of the work of cultural others, fostering the internalization of expectations by agentic actors, is a complex process, and Meyer and his colleagues have surprisingly little to say about this. How do the expectations made of the nation-states "from outside" become the inherent characteristics of a good, responsible Member State of the EU? Under what circumstances do global scripts become the maxims by which seemingly independently actors measure themselves and allow themselves to be measured? For these questions, Meyer repeatedly refers to the work of George H. Mead. This allusion has become an intrinsic part of the world culture perspective, in the concept of the cultural other, which is based on Mead's concept of the generalized other (e.g.: Meyer 1996). But world culture theory does not tell us any more. Yet it is extremely helpful to take a closer look at Meyer's analogy of the formation of the agentic actor and the formation of identity in social psychology. In the following paragraphs we first remember that in Mead's work, identity develops from the fact that the individual becomes an object to itself; we will then be able to show how, analogously, the nation-state takes an interest in itself and makes external expectations the basic foundations of its existence (cf. Section 2.2.4). On the basis of these arguments we approach the empirical phenomenon in question: the OMC (cf. section 3).

Mead puts forward the idea, now much respected in sociological theory, that the individual self develops in the process of social interaction rather than, as generally supposed, preceding it. "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the

given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals with that process." (Mead 1967: 135) In his observations, Mead moves strictly from the social process to the individuals, i.e. from the whole to the parts (ibid.: 1). Individuals take part in the social process by means of social acts. They communicate with each other by means of significant symbols such as language; these symbols have the particular characteristic that they create the same reaction in the speaker as in his or her interlocutor. Significant symbols thus allow individuals to be coordinated by taking the perspective of the other participants in the communication (ibid.: 44-47). Each can anticipate the reaction of the others and, in an internal conversation with him- or herself, can adapt their actions to these projected reactions. For Mead, these processes of communication lead to the development of the self: "[T]he individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs." (ibid.: 138) By internalizing the reactions of others to the individual's own actions, the individual internalizes the others' perspectives on his- or herself. The individual thus takes an external view of himself. In Mead's terminology, the individual becomes an object to itself (ibid.: 136). Thus, for Mead, embeddedness in social processes becomes a prerequisite for the development of the self.

In ontogenetic terms, the process of the development of the self takes place in two stages. In the first stage, the self is made up of the organization of the particular (specific) attitudes of others as they are experienced in individual social acts. In the second stage, these specific attitudes are organized into a generalized other, which enters as a whole into the individual's experience (ibid.: 158). Mead described these two stages metaphorically as "play" and "game" (ibid.: 150-155). In contrast to play, individuals involved in a game do not successively take on the role of others, but they take on the reaction all others (of the whole role-set) at the same time. The example of play is children's play where the child acts out the role of a policeman, then that of a baker, then that of a mother, etc. To explain the characteristics of the game, Mead used the example of a baseball game. Here individuals are capable of taking the reactions of all their fellow players into account simultaneously and of integrating these thus forming a new entity: "[t]he organized

community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called 'the generalized other'." (ibid.: 154) This generalized other (also described as "me" (ibid.: 175)) is, according to Mead, an internalization of the social structure within which the individual acts. It is available to the individual in putting his or her plans for action into practice in interactions with the members of the communities in which he or she moves. The internalized generalized other is not a fixed set of expectations, but an extremely flexible arrangement on which the individual can even rely in situations with a large number of actors and varying intentions for action. It is both a result of the social process and a precondition for participating in it. In other words, the generalized other represents the competency of being able to participate in social acts in an effective and legitimate way.

Mead's concept of the self revolutionizes our view of the phenomenon of social control. Seeing oneself as an object means nothing other than seeing oneself through the eyes of others. This external view becomes the constituent principle of the self. With this theory, Mead dissolves the mutual externality of the individual and society; individuality cannot be conceived of without society, and society is a process between individuals who carry the whole in which they are participating within themselves. Thus, Mead does not need mechanisms of power or of persuasion to explain social control. Social control takes place, so to speak, "by its self", i.e. through the acquisition and preservation of the self in the social process. "It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process of community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking." (Mead 1967: 155) Mead shows that society does not need to apply a series of sanctions, controls, and threats of punishment, to the individual if we dispense with the idea that the individual's existence precedes that of society. The basic form of consciousness that is inherent to the self from the outset, and which must be domesticated or at least directed by society, does not exist in Mead's school of thought (ibid.: 328-336). Compliance with social norms seems natural to the individual from the outset because it is through the expectations of others that he or she gains self-awareness in the first place. The meaning of anything an individual can formulate using significant symbols must by definition include

the reactions that others will have to that symbol. The reactions of others are always a fixed point of reference of the individual's decisions to act, even if he or she acts contrary to these reactions, or interprets them in a creative way (Joas 2002).

In terms of the analogy between the sociogenesis of the self and the formation of the nation-state in world culture, the theories discussed above are of interest for three reasons. Firstly, and notably, Mead's logical path is from the whole to the part. In this attempt, he goes further than everyday intuition would suggest. The individual and society are not separate entities; rather, society actually creates the essence of the individual. Secondly, the self is (nomen est omen) a reflexive construct which is experienced as an object by the individual through the reactions of others. Thirdly, according to Mead, social control is literally self-control. In other words, it is an ongoing internal process in which the self is expressed through conflict with the expectations of others. An important characteristic of this is that it is a not an isolated event: it is a process of continually adjusting oneself on the basis of the reactions of others. Thus, even this short outline of Mead's theories makes it evident that Meyer's reference to Mead is not coincidental. Mead's behaviorist psychology and Meyer's neo-institutionalism share a common direction (moving from the whole to the part), and both emphasize the social formation of actors. To what extent, then, can the diffusion of global cultural values by cultural others be described more precisely using Mead's ideas?

2.2.4 The sociogenesis of the nation-state

Meyer's nation-states develop a self within global society in a similar way to that in which Mead's individuals develop a self within their community. Global society precedes the existence of the nation-states in both logical and historical terms, and it is only by participating in that society that nation-states can develop a self. Participating means, here, that nation-states can acquire legitimate spheres of action if they internalize the expectations of their social environment. To do this, they develop a formal structure (which Mead would call a "me") that corresponds to the social expectations placed on them by third parties. This dissolves the actor-society duality: just as, in Mead's theory, society is

not external to the self, the nation-state does not act in global society as a primordial unit. By internalizing third-party expectations as a formal structure, the nation-state can make itself an object; according to Mead, this means that it can thus also judge itself on the basis of these social expectations. "That is to say, self-criticism is essentially social criticism, and behavior controlled by self-criticism is essentially behavior controlled socially." (Mead 1967: 255) The formal structure of the nation-state is thus primarily a kind of checklist for the nation-state to work towards, and by doing so, the state is undergoing social control in the sense of world culture theory. By building this formal structure, the nation-state declares the noble ideals of global society to be its own ideals. In doing so, it makes itself open to both self-criticism and criticism by third parties because it now has to measure itself, and allow others to measure it, against these goals. Creating a formal structure moves the dynamic tension between the authority to act and the resulting legitimate authority (the two components of Meyer's model) inside the nation-state itself. Thus, the nation-state can be conceived as an ongoing process of optimization in the pursuit of general, i.e. world cultural, goals. The actor is embedded in its environment by turning itself into its own object.

Cultural others play an important role in this process. They (literally) embody the ambitious goals of the global society in which nation-states participate. It is their reactions that tell nation-states what progress and justice, the overriding principles for actors in rationalized modernity, actually mean. Nation-states can communicate and interact with cultural others, and thus find out their scope for legitimate action. Through the social acts (in Mead's sense) that they undertake with generalized cultural others, they can develop the social expectations that make them fully adequate agentic actors, capable of action, within the globally embedded European community of states. Cultural others form the raw material for social control by the nation-states (through self-control). Cultural others thus have a dual function. Firstly, they convert world culture values into specific expectations, which, once internalized, can direct behavior. Secondly, they keep these expectations relevant because their ongoing presence constantly triggers renewed criticism and self-criticism. Taking the analogy between Mead's generalized other and Meyer's cultural other one step further, one could perhaps even read a passage in Mead on the relationship between the

individual and society as a description of the relationship between the nation-state and global society: "The self-conscious human individual [or: the nation-state, S.B.], then, takes or assumes the organized social attitudes of the given social group or community (or of some one section thereof) to which he belongs [or: the globally embedded European community of states, S.B.], toward the social problems of various kinds which confront that group or community at any given time, and which arise in connection with the correspondingly different social projects or organized co-operative enterprises in which that group or community as such is engaged [i.e.: the pursuit of equity and progress, S.B.]; and as an individual participant in these social projects or co-operative enterprises, he governs his own conduct accordingly." (Mead 1967: 156). The diffusion of world culture occurs because scripts are made specific and relevant by cultural others, and because nation-states internally orientate themselves towards these scripts.

We can now make the proposition put forward in this paper more precise. As noted in the introductory section, the OMC is both the means of, and the result of, the diffusion of world culture. It attains this status by creating space for cultural others who communicate situation-specific world culture expectations toward the Member States of the EU. To the extent that the nation-states model themselves on the scripts communicated to them, world culture values are being diffused, and the OMC is acting as the means. To the extent that the OMC is regarded as a legitimate way of shaping policy, it is also itself the end result of the development of global society, a development that it, itself, reinforces. Successful diffusion leads ultimately to the result that the nation-states work to fulfill the expectations contained in the world culture scripts. This does not necessarily mean that their practice corresponds to these formal structures: this is not always the case neither with Meyer's agentic actors nor with Mead's internalization of the "me". Following on from these preliminary explanations, we can now analyze the OMC as an empirical object in terms of world culture.

3. Soft Forms of Governance and National Self-Constitution in European Social Policy

In the following section, it will first be explained how the OMC is intended to facilitate learning between the Member States of the EU. In the light of this, it will be demonstrated that as far as the process of learning policy is concerned, from a governance perspective it is a question of technical knowledge, whereas from a world culture perspective it is existential knowledge that is of importance (3.1). Subsequently, three main effects of the OMC from a world culture perspective will be presented (3.2).

3.1 The diffusion of technical and instrumental knowledge in the OMC

The OMC is described as a new (or alternative) form of governance because it replaces power as a premise for conventional policy-making procedure through learning (Bernhard 2005). The learning concept that forms the basis of this method stems from economics and was then further developed for politics in the pragmatic concept of the Direct Deliberative Polyarchy (DDP) (Dorf and Sabel 1998; Sabel and Zeitlin 2008). According to this concept, policy-making is able to dispense with classical instruments of power and sanction if within a general framework of objectives it brings together a group of actors (for instance, the Member States of the EU) that learn from one another through an organized exchange of experiences. Here, learning is based on collecting and evaluating information in the form of benchmarking, which draws a distinction between successful approaches to policy-making and less successful ones (Eberlein 2004). It is left to the participants to decide whether they will use this information to model their own policies on the best policies identified, and if so to what extent. While the basis for the information is centralized, the decision-making authority remains completely decentralized; the only obligation placed on participants is to make available the information needed for the benchmarking process. Apart from this, there is no formal channel for sanctions that may be used at central (in our case European) level

to force participants to adopt certain policies (Schäfer 2002; Scharpf 2002). The learning model of this alternative form of governance presupposes that the very insight that a policy is higher-ranking and is thus exemplary is enough to initiate learning from the experiences of others. It is evident from this what is meant by the OMC putting learning in the place of power: it is not expected that anything will need to be "forced through". Rather, it is assumed that participants see the process of collecting and exchanging information as an opportunity (see e.g. Mosher 2003).

This principle is frequently applied to European social policy, most prominently to employment, social inclusion, pension and health and long term care policies. Although there are considerable differences in the form the processes takes, above all in the degree of systematization of information collection and centralization of benchmarking, four elements appear in all of the processes (see, in particular, European Council 2000). Firstly, goals (Common Objectives) are set at European level that lay down a very general framework for the entire process of exchanging experiences. Some examples of such Common Objectives are the goal of achieving an employment rate of 70% (CEU 2008: 4) or the goal of effectively combating exclusion (CEC 2006b: 18; CEU 2002). Secondly, the Member States draw up National Action Plans or National Reform Strategies which should make clear how they propose to achieve the Common Objectives. Ideally, these Action Plans include a description of the fundamental problems, the setting of political goals and, if applicable, of target indicators, an evaluation of previous policy evaluations and identification of examples of good practice. On the basis of these reports, thirdly, in co-operation with Member States, the European Commission draws up a Joint Report. This report gathers the experiences from the individual Member States and, as far as possible, processes them so that everyone has an overview of parallel developments in all other EU states. Then, fourth and finally, topics suitable for direct bilateral and multilateral learning processes in a Peer Review are selected. As mentioned above, the institutions of setting Common Objectives, National Action Plans, Joint Reports and Peer Reviews vary from one policy area to another. The Joint Report on pension policies is scarcely more than a paper outlining the differences between the states (CEU 2009b), while for employment policy, specific recommendations can be given to individual Member States (CEU 2009a). What is

more important than these nuances is the fact that in all cases the OMC is designed to be a recursive process, i.e., that after one cycle of the process, from defining objectives to Peer Review, new Common Objectives are then set for a new cycle. Thus, every goal and every political instrument to achieve these goals is embedded in a trial-and-error process, while the goals and instruments of previous cycles are revisited at a later point in time. Moreover, the recursivity means that the process is a permanent one. As argued by Mead with respect to the individual self, this permanence is of crucial importance for the diffusion of world culture content through the development of the (agentic actor) self.

In the self-presentation of the coordination methods by the European institutions and by the governments involved, as well as in scholarly research, the OMC is exclusively a learning process. For the most part, accordingly, reflection on the process deals with the conditions for reciprocal policy learning and/or the limitations to which the learning principle is subjected in a power-based political environment. Kerber and Eckhardt, for example, put it as follows: "For the OMC the most interesting aspects concern (1) the incentives for actors to actively participate in learning about better policies; and (2) the incentives to actually implement such better policies." (Kerber and Eckardt 2007). The research interest is thus formulated in such a way that it sparks off academic debates on the potential of the method. Authors who do not consider learning to be an appropriate form of policy-making then become critics. "It is not reasonable to expect far-reaching results of a mechanism which is not legally binding, which remains rather vague about its goal(s), which does not foresee a mandate for independent evaluation as well as for the dissemination of information, etc.." (Kröger 2006: 13) These quotes illustrate that scholarly debate about the OMC aims at a specific form of knowledge, which may, after Büttner (2009), be described as instrumental knowledge. One way or another, it is a matter of advising social actors, while the academically produced knowledge is at base no different from the knowledge of the actors who are directly involved in the political coordination process. Both researchers and participants want to find out more about the conditions for success, limits and national results of policy learning processes. The distance between scholarly research and political practice is minimal: their perspectives concur to a large extent, differing mainly only in characteristics typical of the different professions involved.

The world culture perspective deviates from this norm. Here, instrumental knowledge is secondary material. The issue of much greater importance is what may be called existential knowledge, i.e. world culture theory is not concerned with the effectiveness of the method but with its formative effects upon reality. What principles of good policy underlie the OMC? How is the nation-state envisaged? What actors in what capacity are defined as relevant actors? The world culture perspective breaks away from the perspective of the participating actors and of the implementation-focused research surrounding them. It poses questions that are naturally of no interest to the latter: Research analyzing existential knowledge is unable to answer instrumental questions. Proposals for improving learning processes are far from the thoughts of those who are interested in the constitutional process of the European nation-state. Hence, the present article is likely to of little interest to an application-oriented practitioner. The extra information to be acquired by a change to the world culture perspective is beyond the scope of application orientation: it stems from the fact that it can tailor the contents of its research more freely. It is in the position to question the tacit prerequisites of EU policy-making thus revealing implicit assumptions. This also means that the activity of the implementation oriented researcher becomes part of the subject of investigation. Here, governance research is a characteristic of the empirical process observed; researchers move from observing to being observed. The increase in the significance of research (and researchers) indicates a tendency toward a "scientificization of governance" (Münch and Bernhard 2009), which in turn is a result of world culture diffusion.

3.2 The OMC as a means and a result of the diffusion of world culture

At the level of existential knowledge, we can identify three effects of the OMC. 1) The OMC encompasses a large number of expectations, which boil down to the overall expectation that nation-states re-orientate themselves as strategically learning units. 2) It creates social spaces where researchers and INGOs can act as cultural others and 3) it creates new legitimation references for national social policy.

3.2.1 The strategically learning nation-state

The OMC helps to ensure that in social policy, in additional to economic and fiscal policy, the nation-states of the EU move from being isolated entities in a diffuse global environment to members of a European family of nations. The guiding principle behind this process of transformation is that of the strategically learning nation-state that participates voluntarily in learning processes and that is always prepared to reform itself in a pragmatic, unideological manner, based on the model of superior policies. Strategically learning nation-states are expected to be the main force behind this process. There should thus be no need for carrot-and-stick-type means of authority or sanction. The script for the strategically learning nation-state is formulated, in the OMC, in three chapters. a) Firstly, the European nation-states are joined together to form a common European family of nations that has common problems and in which all are equal. b) These equal rights are then operationalized by creating comparability as the basis for learning processes. c) Finally, specific styles of behavior are prescribed stipulating how each state, as an individual unit among equals, should behave.

a) The European family of states: When work on coordinating a particular area of policy is beginning, heads of state and government agree on "Common Objectives." From a implementation-oriented research perspective these are, in the main, of little use as political objectives in the classic sense as they are far too general. How, for example, could the objective of ensuring the financial sustainability of the pension system (CEC 2005; CEC 2006a: 2) serve policymakers in any way as a direction for learning processes? It was thus to be expected that observers would soon become somewhat disillusioned: these commitments simply re-stated what everyone already knew and wanted. It is easy to make this criticism but it ignores the real issue. The point of the Common Objectives is not their actual content, but the fact that they are stated at all and that they are European objectives. In world culture terms, they are extensions to the nation-states' legitimate scope of action. They mark out areas where action is needed, no more but also no less. Thus, the goal of making pensions policies sustainable is merely a signal of a sphere of action for a legitimate agency that has yet to be defined. The same applies to policies to promote social inclusion. If Member States decide to attempt to reduce social exclusion, this may be seen

as the summary of a new world culture script for which the individual chapters have yet to be written. It is a statement that a nation-state wishing to be a legitimate member of the EU must accept: Social exclusion is a common problem, and it is one that should be tackled by all kinds of policy efforts.

In practical terms, this expansion of the need for action results in considerable efforts to document the attempts at action that are being made. This includes the creation of National Action Plans, which should, where possible, be based on regional action plans and should be drawn up after extensive consultation with actors from civil society. It also includes the Joint Reports. Neo-institutionalism defines such processes under the umbrella term of excessive structuration (see, for example, Meyer et al. 1997a). One effect of all this activity, an effect that should not be underestimated, is that in the course of working on the formal structures of demonstrating Common Objectives-oriented actions, nation-states declare themselves willing to be seen as part of a European whole. The world of the European nation-state is thus one in which the supra-national context of national social policy can now be determined more precisely than ever before, namely as a group of European Member States that are willing to learn. In this community of EU Member States and under the approving gaze of the cultural others, the European nation-state develops its self (in terms of social policy).

b) Comparability: One fundamental assumption behind the OMC's learning dynamics is that the Member States of the EU are all equal and must see themselves as equal; if this were not the case, learning from the experiences of others, from Peer Reviews and from decontextualization of policy knowledge would be much more difficult. Strang and Meyer have emphasized the importance of this assumption: "States subscribe to remarkably similar purposes (…). And while these cultural definitions can be and are in fact violated, they provide fertile ground for the rapid diffusion of public policies and institutional structures. Consider how much diffusion would be slowed if nation-states were wholly primordial, or if they occupied formally differentiated positions within a hierarchical global political structure." (Strang and Meyer 1993: 491) In this respect, the OMC is a mechanism for creating uniformity. It ensures that the nation-states represent their historical

developments, current situations and policy approaches in a uniform manner and thus offer them to the other members as a resource for experience-based learning.

Outlines for the National Action Plans give detailed instructions about what these should contain (CEC 2006b). Overall, the whole structure that the National Action Plan should take is described, from the selection and presentation of examples of good practice, to the descriptions of attempts to involve non-state actors, and the sequence and extent of the descriptions is also stipulated (including the number of pages for each topic). For the national plans on strategies to promote social inclusion, for example, the documentation lists the topics that Member States should discuss, in what order they should discuss them, how they should take the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon of social inclusion into account, and how the local and regional dimensions of campaigns against exclusion should be strengthened (ibid.: 7-8). Furthermore, it is expected that the Member States list the policies already in existence, and additional policies planned, for each of the Common Objectives, that they provide accompanying indicators and state the processes of monitoring used, as well as describe the resources employed (ibid.: 9). A similar procedure has been created for pension policy and for health policy (ibid.: 12-17). Thus, specific socio-cultural and historical issues are made available for a common project and are accessible for argumentative purposes. References to national traditions and exceptions no longer suffice to justify the continuation existing policies. Policies should only be retained if they have proven to be at least equal to the political approaches taken in the other EU Member States.

This process of standardization via the National Action Plan is further supported by a complex apparatus of knowledge production about a wide variety of social policy issues. First and foremost is, of course, the Joint Report; its explicit objective (in terms of instrumental learning processes) is to create a shared pool of knowledge that can be accessed by all those interested in learning at any time. The Joint Reports are accompanied by expert reports created by a network of independent national experts.[1] The European Commission regularly contributes reports on the social situation in Europe (e.g. CEC 2007).

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[1] http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/expert_reports_en.htm und: http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/network-of-independent-experts, 28.4.2009.

It also finances transnational projects at local levels, focusing on implementation and knowledge, as part of its action program PROGRESS.[2] A large number of research reports deal with individual issues.[3] And the Peer Review process is taken as an occasion to bring researchers, practitioners and politicians together.[4] The European Observatory on the Social Situation and Demography and the knowledge-oriented work of the INGOs (e.g. FEANTSA 2007) ensure that there is a constant flow of comparable information about each nation-state in the EU. Finally, the continual expansion of the European statistical infrastructure will, in the medium and long term, help to drive the cognitive acceptance of Europe as a common social space (Bernhard 2009a: 322-346). All these sources of information are characterized by the idea that transnational comparison can act as a psychological vanishing point. They help to smooth out the idiosyncrasies that had developed among the European nations. In a Europe of learning nation-states, there is no place for the competing concepts of civilization that Norbert Elias once found in France and Britain (Elias 1997). Nowadays, peculiarities appear only as different placings on shared scales of measurement and comparison.

c) Styles of behavior: The OMC script includes very specific expectations about the type of behavior expected of Member States. They should develop a pragmatic "means to an end" attitude, proceed in a strategic manner yet be willing to learn, involve regions and NGOs in the form of cooperation and dialogue, and where possible, base their policies on the results of scholarly research.

The institutional structures of the OMC encourage EU Member States to question not only their methods of policy implementation but their actual policy objectives themselves. This is based on the pragmatic view that policy goals are not unaltered by attempts to meet them; in fact, objectives change on the basis of the methods selected for their implementation (Dorf and Sabel 1998). One effect of the sequence of prospective policy formulation, implementation, and retrospective evaluation is that Member States expose themselves to criticism (both internal and external), which might urge for either better methods or for

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/transnational_exchange_en.htm, 28.4.2009.

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/studies_en.htm, 28.4.2009.

[4] z.B. http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2008/public-information-on-pension-systems-and-pension-system-changes, 28.4.2009.

different objectives. It must be taken into account that the fact that all 27 Member States of the EU regularly formulate their policies in the form of medium-term, goal-oriented national strategies is by no means a matter of course. With each new group of Member States admitted, it is evident that nation-states have to get used to this way of seeing their policies, and that the European Commission does its best to assist them in this process (on the expansion of the EU to the east, see CEC 2004). The new Member States only gradually become members of the European family of states, assisted by cultural others.

The primary condition for functioning processes of policy selection is that Member States strategically act in a manner that is focused on learning. In principle, the entire system of knowledge production around the OMC as outlined above is an offer Member States might accept to a greater or lesser degree. "Knowledge" means primarily being able to know, learning from experience is an option, not a compulsion, and improving each state's own policies is only necessary because it is possible. Accordingly, the Peer Reviews are organized as voluntary events. The European Commission gathers topics that might be of interest for a number of nation-states and leaves it up to the Member States to register their interest in any of the Peer Review processes (Bernhard 2009a). The most direct expectation that Member States will act strategically and focused on learning is expressed in the guidelines for producing National Action Plans on pension, social inclusion and health policies. Member states are requested to explicitly set clear and, where possible, quantifiable output and input targets and to evaluate these after the event. "Member States are invited to set clear specific quantified targets for the reduction of poverty and social inclusion (…) and for the outcomes of the implementation of their key priorities." (CEC 2006b: 6) We must remind ourselves how surprising this expectation that politics can function as a learning process actually is. It is in complete opposition to the widespread view of politics, according to which states are power-oriented, opportunistic and self-interested actors (Radaelli 2003). Nowhere is this rupture more evident than in the idea that collecting comparable information at European level might (one day) develop into a thorough benchmarking process. Creating a hierarchy among Member States on the basis of the success of their policies is an extremely effective instrument for self-criticism and external criticism, and precisely what would be ruled out by the "old governance" policy.

Even if the OMC largely refrains from using benchmarking, it is this technology that best illustrates the leitmotiv of the world culture expectations implicit in the scripts.

Another feature of legitimate governance in the OMC is the cooperative and inclusive nature of the process. This orientation has long been characteristic of the European Union; think, for example, of the complex system of committees (comitology), the social dialogues, and the attempts to enrich EU governance activities with increasingly far-reaching and increasingly systematic attempts to work in cooperation with civil society, regions, and local bodies (e.g. CEC 2001a: 4). With the OMC, the European Commission has found a way of demanding that the Member States also adopt this cooperative and inclusive attitude. For all its OMC, it stipulates that non-state, regional and local elements should be involved in formulating the national action plans and in evaluating policy. It is in the nature of the policy object that this point is emphasized most vehemently in writings on social inclusion policy. The "involvement of all actors" is in fact one of the four European Common Objectives (CEU 2002). The fact that the style of policy creation is actually an explicit policy objective is a characteristic of alternative forms of governance. The journey is to a large extent its own reward, and attention is redirected from actual policy and values to questions of process. The core concept here is, once again, the expectation that learning will take place. The relationship between political actors is systematically redefined: a world of potentially conflicting national interests that must be reconciled through compromise is converted into a world of productive cooperative competition. As in the classic model of the market, the greatest benefit is obtained if all of the actors involved develop their own interest in the optimization of policy, assuming, of course, that they pursue this interest within the open and cooperative framework of European policy coordination. In this situation, those competing to have the best policy also become partners in learning that provide each other with information and discuss strategic options together.

Finally, an essential element of nation-states that are willing to learn and that proceed in a strategic manner is that they base their actions on the results of scholarly research. This means, firstly, that the advice of experts is obtained at all stages of policy formulation (from policy planning to evaluation). I described above how this ground is prepared at European level by a series of experts' networks, research reports, and finance for observers.

The increasingly scientific nature of governance is reflected in the fact that knowledge produced by scientific means and presented by researchers becomes the primary source of legitimate justifications for decisions. Science becomes to some extent the language in which policy is articulated. But there is a second, deeper sense in which governance is becoming "scientific": the literature on the knowledge society has indicated that it is not just that science as a part of society is becoming more influential, but that individuals are increasingly behaving like scientists (Büttner 2009). The OMC demands that politicians at all levels use an evidence-based approach to determining policy, which means that they should, like actual scholarly researchers, actively collect and interpret data in order to draw conclusions. They are supposed to do this in selecting policy objectives and methods in the first place, (through information pooling (e.g. best practice), international comparisons and Peer Reviews), when actually planning specific areas of policy (through research-based definitions of problems and prospective definition of goals), and in self-observation (by evaluating their own policies). "Science" is more than an external advice to politics. It inspires the style of policy-making and thus becomes part of the self that European social policy propounds for the European nation-states.

3.2.2 Spaces for cultural others

Not only does the OMC reconstitute the Member State as a strategically-learning actor, it also defines who relevant actors in the transnational learning process are and what is expected of them. The political style of alternative governance sees governance as a cooperative process between state actors and non-state actors at every level. The OMC brings in researchers and policy advisors, INGOs, social movements and international bureaucracies in a targeted way, based on the idea that policy learning is best done in a dense and diversified network. Of particular importance at European level are the INGOs, researchers and the European Commission. These actor groups have a comprehensive advisory function within the OMC's governance architecture. The OMC is intended to help Member States "to progressively develop their own policies" (CEC 2003b: 9) The cultural others to whom this task is given are INGOs and scholarly researchers. INGOs like the

European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and FEANTSA collect information from their national member organizations, use reports to criticize and praise policies, and contribute to monitoring the process. In addition, INGOs are involved in transnational networks, in practice and research projects at European level, and make suggestions about how the procedures for the European coordination process should be improved (e.g. EAPN 2000; EAPN 2004; FEANTSA 2006). In all these activities, they make reference to scholarly expertise or compile their own research. In addition, as we have seen, researchers are heard at central points in the processes, in particular when projects are being evaluated for Peer Reviews, when statistics for comparative descriptions of the social situation in Europe are being prepared, and as suppliers of knowledge for the Joint Reports of the European Council and Commission.

In cooperation with the European Commission, INGOs and researchers are thus constantly involved in the coordination process. They continually remind the nation-states of the expectations of the script of the strategically learning nation-state – the iterative process of the OMC offers them a range of ongoing opportunities to do so. Thus, European Commission, INGOs and researchers can become *cultural others* for the nation-states. Their activities drive the internalization by the nation-states of what is expected of a modern, future-directed nation-state. We can grasp the significance of these advisory services by referring to Mead's work. The advisors are others, i.e. they are a constant point of reference for the development of the self in the nation-states' social environment. The advisors (others) determine which world culture expectations, in which form, are to be adopted by the nation-states for self-criticism and third-party criticism. Through constructive criticism and guidance for self-criticism, a "me" is created, which the nation-states can then use for monitoring their own actions. The role of the cultural others is not primarily to supervise; rather, they give the Member States the opportunity to control themselves. With each National Action Plan in which the Member States makes an attempt to show that they envisage quantitative policy goals, with each identification of examples of good practice, with each participation in a Peer Review program, and with each demonstrated proof that policy learning has taken place, it becomes evident that the EU Member States have accepted the standards of world culture as a measure of the

development of their self. Their behavior shows how world culture expectations become relevant in practical terms, namely as self-evident, and self-applied, scales for measuring their own behavior.

3.2.3 New legitimation references for national social policy

Finally, despite the vagueness of the OMC process with regard to policy content, it does manage to create some directions for policy in the form of references. It does not determine what policies the Member States should pursue but does localize their efforts within a common European project. Their influence does not take the form of stipulating particular goals or methods; it is limited to attempting to define the background to the Member States' attempts at steering. Because these references are made again and again (and not just at particular points in time) and in a systematic form (not as vague references), the definition of the European situation in effect becomes a common point of reference. Standardization takes place through a "standardization of differences" (Schwinn 2006: 225-227). This means that national policies are not legitimized in and by themselves, but by their proximity or distance from a common European point. The shared framework creates a uniform system of coordinates within which each state takes a clearly identifiable place: particular national features thus become local European specifics.

The core concepts of European discourse are the idea of the development of a knowledge society and the resulting need to invest, and invest in, human capital (CEC 1997; CEC 2001b; CEC 2003a; European Council 2000). Key concepts include flexicurity, social inclusion, knowledge, learning and equal opportunities (Daly 2006; Dräger 2007; Jensen 2008; Szyszczak 2001). Any entity that translates its policies into this language is acting legitimately in the sense of the European scripts. The fact that the terms and concepts used are not normally clearly defined is not a disadvantage; indeed it is a necessary vehicle for the creation of difference with reference to a standard. Almost any kind of policy can be described as being in accordance with the vague goal of "flexicurity". All that is required is to detail which part of a policy is designed to improve security and which is targeted at flexibility. Of course, critics can argue that the concept is in fact meaningless, and this

cannot be denied. But this is not why the concept of flexicurity is useful. If all Member States of the EU define their policies with reference to the same conceptual dimension (flexibility – security), a new overall picture is created, which is qualitatively different from the unrelated fragments that previously made up the landscape. The construction takes place not at the level of "what", but at the level of "what for", "to what end". National social policies are literally *thought through* European concepts and thus become part of *one* European flexicurity policy. Seen from this perspective, the vague character of many of the main concepts of European social policy is not a regrettable problem, but a prerequisite so that a uniform European social policy can be conceived of.

The most important exercise in the standardization of differences is the creation of the National Action Plans and the (overarching) National Reform Strategies. As has been shown, Member States have been required to demonstrate, within a precisely defined framework, the attempts they have undertaken to fulfill the Common Objectives. They are thus requested to describe their specific experiences within a common system of reference. In the best case scenario, the Member States would use the European objectives to reconceive their policies from the ground up, more stringently than before. In the worst case scenario, the creation of the national reform strategies becomes an intellectual exercise of categorization after the fact, in which national policies that were planned in any case are assigned to the various European goals. Empirically, evidence has been found for both tendencies, depending on the Member State and on the area of policy involved (Heidenreich and Bischhoff 2008). Because the world culture perspective is not interested in instrumental knowledge, but in existential knowledge, it can identify structures even where the European objectives did not play any role when national policies were being formulated. In the German National Action Plan on pensions policy, for example, the reforms known as the Riester and Rürup reforms are listed as contributions to the European Common Objective of making sure that pensions will be adequate (BMAS 2008: 68-70). Of course, the attempts at reform within Germany were launched independently of the agreed European objectives. But the country was still required to create an explicit reference to those objectives. It is engaged in processing the received expectations of

cultural others and creating a world culture "me". This process may often take place after the fact, but even if this is the case, it confirms the relevance of the expectation.

4. Conclusion

This article has dealt with the subject of the OMC as a means and a result of diffusing world culture expectations. In so doing, it has argued expressly against the learning model of the OMC. The change of perspective that is evident from the following definition of research subjects: For the rational learning mechanism of the OMC that is the subject of governance research, the main issue is the diffusion of *instrumental knowledge*. This knowledge is instrumental because it refers directly to actions by those political actors who are to be placed in learning situations through the coordination process. Their interest is geared to dealing with social conditions and their action is aimed at improving their policies. In contrast to that the diffusion that the world culture perspective observes refers to *existential knowledge* encompassing both capacities to act and actor identities. The main issue is not techniques of learning from experience but rather, the expectation that Europe's nation-states see policy as the subject for learning processes thereby opening themselves up to the "inquisitive activities" (Jacobsson 2006: 207) of the OMC. The focus is not on the actual improvement of national policies but instead on the hope that this improvement may be achieved by means of strategic planning, by involving non-state actors, extract policy recommendations from scholarly research, and by opening themselves up to self-criticism as well as to external criticism. That is, of course, not to say that the question of whether Member States of the EU will learn from one another has been answered. It has simply been put aside so that something rationalist governance research does not see comes to light: namely, that the entire method of voluntary policy coordination is part of a global process script diffusion.

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