How science and European Union politics come to terms with legitimising basic research – interpretive schemes, sense selection and the establishment of a European Research Council

Over the last 30 years, social scientists have continuously seen the legitimacy of basic research contested, including its funding modes and organisation. This questioning is due to purported changes in knowledge production as well as to the various social pressures on science to prove its social and economic benefits. If the legitimacy of basic research is under attack, then why and how can new forms of basic research funding arise and stabilise? In other words: How can science and politics come to an understanding for establishing and sustaining the institutional legitimacy of basic research?

In this dissertation, this question will be answered by reconstructing a policy process, which has led to a new research funding organisation: the European Research Council (ERC). The chief attraction of this study is that it is situated in a policy field hitherto dominated by industrial and politically integrative reasoning: since the early 1980s, the European Commission has organised the Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development to overcome a technology gap with the U.S. and emerging high-tech regions of South-Asia. This *conceptual idea* has been widely enlarged as a result of further political motives addressing issues such as integrating new member states and their R&D entities into the EU, thus rendering the initial concept of the ERC even more unlikely to be established. Not least, basic research funding in Europe has primarily been arranged by *national* funding bodies, while the EU had been repudiated to take action.

The ERC in a nutshell

The principal goal of the ERC is to fund the so-called "research at the frontiers of knowledge", where it tries to serve justice to an allegedly new understanding of uncertain, interdisciplinary, and highly original research projects, most closely affiliated with what is widely acknowledged to be 'basic research'. Established in 2007 as part of the 7th European Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7), the ERC represents an autonomous and science-driven funding organisation working irrespectively of national juste retour calculations and without political priority-setting commonly associated with EU research policy-making.

In this respect, the policy process that eventually led to the ERC should serve as a case to analyse the underlying *interpretive schemes* ("Deutungsmuster") in order to shed light on how politics can make sense of science and connect the latter's concepts into an existing organisational framework. Which distinctive interpretive schemes were operational to integrate the ERC into the dominant logic of EU research policies, and what might be special about them? Why have some, and not other, interpretive schemes become dispositive for selecting sense and meaning in the course of justifying the ERC? Moreover, how can distinct organisational features of this research funding body be interpreted in the light of these interpretive schemes? The methodological approach of this dissertation combines objective hermeneutics with discourse analysis applied to a mixture of primary-source and interview-based data.