

PERSPECTIVES ON FOREST CERTIFICATION AS A POLICY PROCESS: REFLECTIONS ON ELLIOTT AND SCHLAEPFER`S USE OF THE ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORK¹

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An array of natural scientific evidence indicates that the planet's environmental health is under increasing and intense stress. As a result, one of the most important tasks facing social science research in the early 21st century is to understand better the processes through which environmentally sensitive policy choices are taken and encouraged. Recognition of this has led a great number of scholars, operating from a wide variety of theoretical approaches, frameworks, and epistemologies, to analyse the policy making process and how policy choices are made. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) developed by Paul Sabatier and colleagues (Sabatier 1999a; 1999b; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier 1993) has been one such approach that has caught the attention of a number of scholars worldwide, and was used in the paper by Elliott and Schlaepfer.

The ACF framework contains a number of specific hypotheses regarding policy change, but its key attraction is arguably because of two conceptualizations it makes. First, it argues that "subsystem" or sectoral level policy making processes can be divided into two or more "advocacy" coalitions attempting to influence policy choices. Each of the coalitions are united by belief systems, further distinguished between difficult to change "core" beliefs and

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more malleable “secondary” belief systems that have more to do with strategies than underlying moral values. This conceptualization has proven attractive to students of environmental policy change because it nicely describes what happens when business dominated resource and other subsectors come under scrutiny from environmental interests.

A second key conceptualization is about the nature of policy change. Sabatier argues that “learning” within the subsystem can occur with respect to secondary beliefs and is thus an important explanation of incremental policy change, but that changes to core values and thus paradigmatic policy change can only be caused by “external perturbations” outside of the policy subsystem. This distinction has proven attractive to scholars because it offers an explanations as to why environmental policy changes seem to be slow and incremental, but while in rare cases, policy change is swift.

The paper presented by Elliott and Schlaepfer is important because it advances the ACF framework in two related ways: it argues that the ACF can be applied to understand better *private* policy making, not just public policy, and that it can be applied to a policy area of less than a decade a more, challenging a core assumption of the ACF. Elliott and Schlaepfer thus modify the ACF framework, identifying a “*fast track*” private policy process to account for rapid policy change in a public policy sector they argue is marked by incremental and slow change. Elliott and Schlaepfer develop their arguments by referring to the cases of forest certification policy development in Indonesia, Sweden, and Canada. While their paper explicitly modifies the ACF, it also permits me to address the question as to whether the ACF is the most appropriate tool for understanding certification politics and policies.

This comment proceeds in three parts. First, I review their argument brief. Second, I address epistemological/theoretical/conceptual issues arising from the paper. Third, I briefly offer my own work with Graeme Auld, Deanna Newsom and Jamie Lawson as perhaps an alternative way to understand the privatization of governance, and the subsequent rules and regulations that ensue.

1 THE ARGUMENT

Elliott and Schlaepfer make two broad arguments: 1) that forest certification policy is different from traditional public policy because it moves much more swiftly and; 2) that an emphasis on policy learning pushes forward an understanding of policy change and durability. They develop their case using a comparative case study approach, looking at two distinct, but related, phenomena that they argue are both examples of private sector “fast track” processes that usurp traditional public policy making processes. The first phenomenon is the example of forest certification, looking at national processes in Canada, Sweden, and Indonesia. They trace certification politics in these countries to show how policy learning either facilitated increased forestry regulations, as in Sweden in Indonesia, or, when policy learning did not occur, as in the case of Canada, no changes occurred. The authors chose to limit their Canadian data to the period from 1993 to 1997, and focus

specifically on the forest industry initiated Canadian Standards Association (CSA) efforts to develop forest certification management standards for Canadian companies.

The second related phenomenon is explored when the authors move from national certification debates to examine an individual forest company in the Canadian province of British Columbia - MacMillan Bloedel (now Weyerhaeuser). The authors argue that MB's adoption of an array of environmental measures through its forest project was another illustration of "fast track" processes influenced by a Canadian environmental forestry "advocacy coalition".

Once exploring these phenomenon, the authors modify the ACF framework by grafting on a "fast track" diagram that bypasses the public policy dimensions of the ACF but retains its focus on "external" and "internal" subsystem perturbations, and the emphasis on learning as a key issue for understanding policy change or stability. As a result the authors argue that the ACF distinction between "actors and events inside or outside policy subsystems, rather than at the national or international level is not only consistent with the original formulation of the ACF. It is also consistent with a globalized world where the distinctions between national and international levels are increasingly blurred". Certainly a key strength of this article is to forcefully argue that a value-based account to policy change serves as a powerful alternative to an interest based account when attempting to explain policy change or stability, and the degree of change that might occur.

The authors conclude that their modified ACF approach "provides a powerful framework for analyzing both public and private policy change, and thus governance, particularly on issues where knowledge is uncertain and there is therefore a need for policy learning". The paper thus performs an important service in reminding scholars that care must be paid to the kind of methodological and theoretical approaches we use. Accordingly, I know turn to detail some questions I have regarding just such choices made by the authors.

2 METHODOLOGICAL/THEORETICAL ISSUES

Measuring "swift" policy change

A key methodological issues arises in this paper over how to measure and conceptualize swift policy change. This is important because the authors forcefully argue that forest policy, in the public policy domain, has been slow to change. Part of the explanation of this slowness, according to the authors, is that "forest policy, as a branch of public policy", has been dominated, by "a limited number of actors in which change is normally measured in decades". The authors explain that, deforestation in the tropics in the 1980s and "subsequent recognition of problems in temperate forest management" resulted in the promotion of private sector forest certification eco-labeling initiatives that bypassed governmental processes, resulting in "fast-track" policy change not witnessed in traditionally closed public policy making processes. The swiftness of certification policy change is then illustrated by examining forest certification dynamics in Canada, Indonesia, and Sweden.

Their argument that public policy change has been slow is an understandable one. In the 1980s and 1990s, environmental activists, frustrated by what they asserted to be a slow pace of forest policy change domestically and internationally (Bernstein and Cashore 1999), focused increasing attention on boycott campaigns that targeted firms directly (Cashore, Vertinsky, and Raizada 2001; Cashore and Vertinsky 1998). And, as Elliott and Schlaepfer note, ENGOs support of certification has given firms a choice of a carrot to supplement the boycott's stick.

At the same time, the authors do not define "slow" or "fast", thus making it difficult to test their key assumption about the nature of public policy change. I suggest the authors look to some of the recent scholarship seeking to measure and define policy change. Just how to measure policy change has consumed the attention of many public policy scholars in recent years, including Peter Hall (Hall 1993) and Paul Sabatier himself. My collaborations with Hoberg, Howlett, Wilson and Rayner (Cashore, Hoberg et al. 2001) resulted in a modification of Hall in which we identified three measures of policy change: policy goals that provide overall direction (such as environmental protection and economic health), policy objectives (such as improving streamside habitat or maintaining corporate profits), policy instruments (the actual way in which goals and objectives are addressed, such as command and compliance regulations or market incentives), and the specific policy settings, such as a change in the speed limit or the size of clear cuts. These distinctions turned out to be extremely important because we found out that in some forest subsectors in British Columbia such as timber pricing, goals objectives and instruments were very resistant to change while settings fluctuated widely; while in other subsectors such as forest practices regulations and protected areas, existing economic health goals were met with environmental protection goals (although clearly inferior). We found that simple descriptions of policy change were difficult to make, but that this more nuanced approach allowed for a broader theoretical understanding of policy change, leading us to theorize that "critical subsectors" that were the most difficult to change ended up constrained policy change in other subsectors (Rayner et al. 2001).

Accordingly, it seems to me that this article could benefit from developing a clear definition of policy change, which might better enable the authors to solidify or reject its argument that forest certification policy is necessarily more swift to change than public policy. Certainly existing research on Canadian and US forest policy reveals that this is at the very least, an overgeneralization of a much more complex process. For example, my research comparing British Columbia and US Pacific Northwest forest policy found that forest policy change governing forest management on US federal forest lands resulted in significant paradigm change, where ecosystem management was embraced, and where harvest levels in the mid 1990s fell to about 10 per cent of their late 1980s levels (Cashore 1997). Indeed, I have been only one of many scholars to note the incredible change that occurred on these forest lands. The work of (Hoberg 1993a and b, 1997; Shannon and Johnson 1994; United States. Department of Agriculture, Committee of Scientists 1999; Yaffee 1994; Johnson 1993; Lippke et al. 1990; Sher and Stahl 1990; Sher 1993; Tuchmann et al. 1996; Thomas et al. 1990; United States, US House Committee on Natural Resources 1994; Hungerford 1994) are just a small example of the vast documentation on this topic which calls into question the

distinction that certification is necessarily a “fast track” compared to public policy. Indeed, it is because policy has moved so swiftly on US national forest lands in the Pacific Northwest that the Sierra Club and other environmental groups, have pushed for a US FSC policy *not* to permit forest certification on any national forest lands, for fear that this might open up logging and *reduce* public policy regulations on these lands (Cashore 1999).

I emphasize the importance of providing a clear definition of incremental and paradigmatic policy change because if there is something more to the “fast/slow” dimension than “private/public”, this raises the question as to whether the fast track metaphor is the most appropriate way to proceed epistemologically and theoretically. Indeed, even the authors’ own evidence is mixed as to whether certification produces swift policy change, since their focus on the Canadian CSA process revealed little learning and little policy change through certification. Certainly research does indicate that certification may in fact hold promise for increasing regulations (Meidinger 2000 and 1997; Cashore, Auld et al. 2001a and b), but this is still a matter for empirical research and hypothesis testing. Interestingly, my own work with research with Auld, Newsom and Lawson has revealed that certification may lead to important policy change in Canada, but at the provincial, not federal level, and in certain provinces such as British Columbia, rather than other regions such as the Maritimes (Lawson and Cashore 2001).

Are there Identifiable National Advocacy Coalitions?

Another key assumption of the paper is that exists identifiable national forest coalitions distinguished by an environmental coalition on the one hand, and a development/industry coalition on the other. I would like to specifically address whether this applies in the Canadian context, an area with which I am most familiar. The assumption that there exists a national environmental forestry advocacy coalition stems from Sabatier himself, who argued that advocacy coalitions necessarily transcend jurisdictions, permeating the political landscape all the while maintaining its structure within the subsystem. I want to take a bold step and argue that there actually is no discernible Canadian environmental advocacy coalition - precisely because jurisdictional and land ownership issues have placed most forestry concerns at the provincial level (with the exception of fisheries and endangered species act considerations (Amos, Harrison and Hoberg 2001)).

Rather, environmental advocacy coalitions do seem to exist, but at the provincial levels - particularly in British Columbia (Lertzman, Wilson and Rayner 1996; Wilson 1998), where new environmental activism has worked to push policy in directions it would not otherwise have taken, and which has rendered British Columbia forest policy quite distinct from other provinces and federal approaches. Indeed, it is ironic that in the province where the most significant public forest policy changes have taken place, British Columbia is now witnessing the strongest interest in forest certification than most other regions in Europe and North America (Cashore, Auld et al. 2001a and b).

Thus, the environmental forestry coalition in British Columbia certainly is identifiable, and its membership comes from all parts of the globe - but it is focused on territorial boundaries of the province of British Columbia. Even with forest certification, the Forest

Stewardship Council has created a regional standards process that follows exactly the BC territorial lines used for public policy development. Research on other provinces reveals that this BC coalition does not focus much on other provinces, and that the role of environmental groups is quite distinct.

Recognition that there really is not an identifiable Canadian environmental forestry advocacy coalition raises some question about Sabatier's assumption that advocacy coalitions transcends jurisdictional boundaries - certainly their members may come from many areas of the world but international membership should not be confused with evidence that jurisdictions don't still frame policy debates and policy community membership - they clearly do.

Recognition that these coalitions may not be the same across different jurisdictions leads to another important methodological issue: how does one measure an ACF? In the Elliott and Schabfer paper, this issue is side stepped, instead looking at a national industry initiated forest certification program (CSA), and then from there, moving to the individual firm level, exploring the choices made by MacMillan Bloedel (now Weyerhaeuser), following international market boycott campaigns. This raises the third methodological issue I wish to explore

Are firm level policy choices and forest certification both measures of "fast track"?

MacMillan Bloedel's environmental policy changes have also attracted much scholarly attention, particularly regarding the effects of market campaigns on individual firm choices (Cashore and Vertinsky 1998; Cashore, Vertinsky and Raizada 2001; Raizada 1998; Stanbury 2000; Stanbury et al. 1995; Vertinsky 1997; Vertinsky and Zietsma 1998). By including the case of MB in their analysis of "fast track", the authors seems to be broadening their definition to include any choice made in the private sector that was influenced by environmental group initiation. Such a broad definition, it seems to me, ignores what is unique about forest certification - that it promises a new system of governance through which an array of companies and actors will be regulated. This seems quite distinct from individual cases of firms that responds to societal pressures. Indeed, there is a large literature within organization theory that has addressed the way in which firms respond to outside pressures (Jennings and Zandbergen 1995; Oliver 1991; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1991), but these individual firm choices are different from the emergence of new governance systems that could restructure how all of us seek to influence and/or study governance policy choices.

At the very least, if the authors believe that the firm level choices of MB are as illustrative of the certification "fast track" approach as are choices over whether to support a national certification program, then they need to provide more explanation of why this is so.

3 OTHER APPROACHES

Framework/Theoretical Issues

One of the key strengths of the Elliott and Schlaepfer paper is that it provides an important modification to the ACF framework in order to allow it to address private policy making dynamics, which from many accounts appear quite distinct from public policy domain. Instead of rejecting the ACF as not applicable, Elliott and Schlaepfer take the innovative step of modifying the ACF flow chart in which the public policy dynamics can be circumvented through private sector initiatives. The key question for scholarship is whether this modification permits us to understand better the processes through which certification policy is developed, and political struggles that may determine important policy choices. Why has certification developed as an alternative to public policy? Who grants certification programs rule-making authority? Why is it that some forest companies are supporting the prescriptive FSC while other companies are supporting more flexible FSC competitor programs? It is unclear whether the modification to the ACF framework adequately addresses these questions. Indeed, while learning is important, there is not evidence that broad societal learning outside the subsector is occurring, and yet the authors argue it is evidence of large scale forest policy change - something that the ACF says can only happened with social learning outside the sector. The authors argue that application of the ACF revealed that it was “not about strategies of actors”, but rather value - based subsystem account, and events “external” to the subsystem that was the appropriate distinction. Our research indicates that strategies, values, and sectoral level issues all matter - but that they intersect in unique manners in the case of forest certification.

Certification and Legitimacy Approach

My research with Auld, Newsom and Lawson looks at the issue of certification from a slightly different perspective. It argues that certification represents a startling new phenomenon: the emergence of domestic and transnational private governance systems which derive their policy making authority not from the state, but from the manipulation of customer preferences in the market’s supply chain (Cashore 2002; Cashore, Auld et al. 2001a and b; Cashore, Auld and Newsom 2002). From forestry (Forest Stewardship Council 1996) to fisheries (Simpson 2001) to coffee (Fair Trade. org. 2001) and food production, (The Food Alliance 2001), non-governmental organizations have developed governance structures and social and environmentally focused rules concerning the production and sale of products.

This is important, because if the state’s traditional sovereign decision-making authority is not granted (or ceded) by the state to these new systems, then particular care must be placed to understanding how these new systems gain legitimacy, or the authority to make the rules. My forthcoming article in *Governance Journal* outlines four unique characteristics of the Non-state, market driven (NSMD) governance systems: the role of the market (products being regulated are demanded by purchasers further down the supply chain); the role of the state (state does not use its sovereign authority to directly require adherence to rules); the

role of stakeholders and civil society (authority is granted through an internal evaluative process), and enforcement mechanisms (compliance must be verified). In order to understand how these governance systems gain legitimacy, I have turned to a seminal article in organization sociology by Mark Suchman (Suchman 1995) that identifies three distinct forms of legitimacy that may be granted to NSMD governance systems: a short term “pragmatic legitimacy”; a more durable “moral legitimacy”; and a highly durable “cognitive legitimacy” which is granted because it is “understandable” or because to do otherwise is “unthinkable”. These distinctions are important because they reveal that NSMD governance programs in general, and private eco-labeling programs in particular, gain legitimacy from external audiences who are guided by a complex interplay of motivations. The market provides the context within which material and short-term self-interest motivations intersect with moral and cognitive elements - that together determine whether and how different NSMD governance systems gain authority to make rules. A focus on material/profitability incentives alone fails to uncover these more complex legitimization dynamics.

Identification of this heuristic framework also facilitates the development of a nuanced theory of the way consumers within civil society shape the content of eco-labeling/private governance rules, and how this influence intersects with the companies being regulated, companies that purchase the regulated industry’s products, organized environmental groups, and other social organizations. It will also inform those NSMD cases, such as in the forest sector, where there is a competition among different NSMD governance systems over whether eco-labeling rules ought to be strict and difficult to achieve, or flexible and relatively easy to obtain (Elliott 1999).

The framework also permits us to identify within the broad certification trends noted by Meidinger in this conference (Meidinger 2003) a specific NSMD phenomenon that arguably carries with it the most important and profound implications for new forms of governance. As such, it might help address Meidinger’s ambivalence about whether certification programs can be seen, “At least in the near term, ...as strengthening governmental regulation, and possibly even extending the reach of the legal system” versus his argument “If they manage it, forest certification programs are likely to have truly outstripped the nation states’ legal systems”. And when Meidinger addresses the different possible outcomes, he ends up, as I have, to focus on issues of legitimacy and the support given to different programs by external audiences, “For now it appears that the legitimacy of forest certification programs is heavily dependent on the credibility of the groups supporting them”. The question is how this support is granted and the implications of this for the privatization of environmental governance is thus a key question in need of future research. My work with Auld, Newsom and Lawson reveals that how this support emerges, if at all, is important because there is often a competition among competing NSMD governance systems for the right to be considered the legitimate authority (Newsom 2001; Newsom et al. 2001; Lawson and Cashore 2001; Cashore, Auld et al. 2001a and b; Auld 2001; Auld, Cashore and Newsom 2001; Newsom 2000; Cashore 1999).

Our comparative research in the forest sector has revealed that in some regions such as British Columbia, the more prescriptive Forest Stewardship Council program has gained considerable support from forest companies operating in that region while just south of the

border, almost all major forest companies have been steadfast in support of the “FSC competitor” program in the US, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. Similarly varying degrees of support have been found in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Canadian Maritimes (Newsom 2001; Auld 2001; Cashore, Auld et al. 2001a and b; Lawson and Cashore 2001). As a result of this research, we have, through inductive approaches, developed seven hypotheses about the way in which FSC and “FSC competitor programs” “legitimacy achievement strategies” are mediated by a region’s place in the global economy, the way in which the public policy process was able to address environmental forestry conflicts, and the structure of the domestic forest sector (Cashore, Auld et al. 2001). As a result, this research has been able to uncover important political struggles in the private sector that we feel Sabatier’s approach, while helpful, fails to adequately uncover.

I would not reject Sabatier’s work completely however, but would work to incorporate some of its important insights that apply to NSMD dynamics. For example, our research to date indicates that NSMD programs have what Sabatier refers to as a “core audience” that shares a set of values that shapes its perceptions of the world. Environmentally and socially concerned organizations tend to make up the FSC core audience, while forest companies and landowners form the core audience of competing NSMD programs. Identification of these conceptions supports research by Sabatier and colleagues (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983) in which coalitions (usually between “environmental” and “development”) compete for policy influence. Under Sabatier’s conception, unchangeable “core values” structure and mediate tactics, strategies and public policy dynamics. It seems important to understand how these core audiences limit or influence legitimacy achievement strategies as the programs move to woo over non-core audience members.

4 CONCLUSION

The paper by Elliott and Schlaepfer was important for reminding scholars that special attention must be paid to developing appropriate frameworks and theories, especially with respect to such new trends that forest certification and the privatization of governance introduce. It is for this reason that the papers by myself and Auld, Newsom and Lawson stepped outside political science literature to see what other approaches might shed light on these important issues. By carefully specifying the conditions of NSMD governance, we were able to highlight the important role *evaluations* play in the granting of legitimacy. This, in turn, led us to apply a modified version of Suchman’s legitimacy framework to develop a nuanced classification system of NSMD dynamics, as well as raising important theoretical issues. Certainly this review demonstrates that legitimacy is a key issue with respect to certification governance, a point raised by Meidinger’s review in this conference.

The granting of legitimacy appears to be for quite different reasons, with fundamental implications regarding the durability and malleability of legitimacy status, and what is required by the organization to achieve it. At the same time, more research needs to be done to further develop Suchman’s implicit idea that there is a durability continuum - with

pragmatic legitimacy susceptible to change, moral legitimacy more durable, and cognitive legitimacy the most resilient to change, as it may be that durability is more related to the audience giving it, than an objective status associated with the concept itself.

Indeed, the application of Suchman reveals that the three forms of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive - an organization may attempt to achieve all three at the same or different times. This raises fundamental questions about the interaction between different types of legitimacy in a NSMD governance system. If cognitive legitimacy is indeed the most durable, what is its relationship to other types of legitimacy? Given NSMD market incentives, is pragmatic legitimacy always required before an organization can attempt to achieve moral or cognitive legitimacy? Are legitimacy dynamics affected when there is a competition to achieve rule-making authority? Does maintaining moral support from the core audience act as a constraint on an NSMD governance system's efforts to achieve broader legitimacy, or does such a requirement add to its longer term durability?

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