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Socio-political aspects of e-government: Electronic governmentality in Austria**

*Fritz Betz, Monika Bargmann ****

Introduction

At present, the discourse on the various tools summarised under the term e-government and on their societal effects is clearly dominated by the technical, managerial and political elites who intend to implement these tools on a broad scale. Though there seems to be consent that the provision of digital information services and the development of communication and transactions between authorities and citizens based on ICT has or will have a sustainable impact on the political organisation of Western democracies, in Austria critical theoretical work on the phenomenon has so far been an exception within the social and political sciences¹. What is more, this non-reaction is amazing in view of the assumption of Austrian officials who claim a leading role in the digitisation of public affairs and administrative procedures compared with other European countries.

Complementary to this lack of academic reflection, the prevailing technocratic discourse deals with the socio-political dimension of e-government in a peculiar, vague and inconsistent manner: Also in the statements of the producers and supporters we find a remarkable absence of explicit and elaborated concepts with regard to the intentions behind their project. First, such a deficiency can be seen as one of the many signs for a poorly established »political general public« (»politische Öffentlichkeit«) due to Austria's political history with its strong 19th century neo-absolutism, a short and instable period of democracy in the 1920ies and 1930ies, followed by two fascist regimes, and a consensus-oriented post-war democracy with powerful corporatism, an era which is now coming to an end under a state government with a neoliberal and national-conservative programme. Second, this lack of discussion is a symptom of a contempo-

rary »reign of the aseptic administration of public affairs«², which generally has replaced a political culture relying on reasoning with the horizon of a common good in most of the European democracies. Furthermore, the unquestioned acceptance of a ruling »neutral« managerial rhetoric of functionality and efficiency in the e-government debates is an integral part of the neoliberal transformation towards an »economisation of public affairs«.

However, the undertone of this rhetoric hints at a progressive structural improvement of democratic processes via slogans such as »e-Government is an opportunity to create a Digital Democracy«³, or via promising phrases like »more openness« and »increased participation«⁴. Clearly, this is a coquetry with the desires for individual empowerment of citizens by connoting the final redemption of one of the essential ideals of the political Enlightenment. It is the ideal of public access to information, or better, a broad dissemination of knowledge which enables deliberation as a necessary and vivid force within a democratic polity. Nowadays, the functionality of electronic networks and the accompanying comments seem to suggest a vision, whose most radical outline would be the abolishment of any informational asymmetry between individuals and political authorities. In reality, an explicit definition of the underlying understanding of the notion of »democracy« is still nowhere to be found, as well as an explanation of the relationship between democracy and administration. In the same way, a systematic discussion about the correlation of economic rationales and functional efficacy on the one hand and democratic participation on the other hand is missing.

A further barrier for clarification is the diversity of measures when one looks at the Austrian state of the art of existing e-government tools and at those which are planned to be implemented in the near future. If, among these technical artefacts, which are at the same time social technologies, we roughly distinguish between information services, transaction services (such as submitting tax declarations online) and measures for a rationalisation of internal administrative procedures, we should expect different effects from different tools as well as consider the complex impact of their

interdependency. Whereas at present websites providing information might exist isolated from databases used by the administration, the technical trends indicate a merger towards integrated architectures. For example, help.gv.at⁵, a project which gained the eEurope award donated by the European Union in 2003, started in the late 1990s as an electronic information service on »official channels for all life situations«. In the meantime it has progressively developed towards a tool which also facilitates the transfer of information between citizens and the administration being linked with relational databases and the electronic steering of bureaucratic workflows.

Neoliberal Governmentality

As an approach to understand the social and political meaning of e-government, we suggest considering the theoretical »tool box« of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, which has been used and elaborated on since the 1990ies in the context of the Anglo-American »governmentality studies« to analyse neoliberal modes of governance.

»Governmentality« was introduced by Foucault in the late 1970s as a neologism combining the two terms »to govern« and »mentality«, whereby mentality denotes specific historical types of institutional or societal rationality⁶. This concept, which remained incomplete, must be seen as a part of a wider intellectual project, which was devoted to a genealogy of power technologies of institutional mechanisms of disciplining and control, being specific for European modernity. For Foucault, the practices of power technologies are closely related to particularly historical forms of knowledge production: Knowledge is a means of power and a precondition for its exercise. Further, different modes for the generation of knowledge are interpreted as being connected with specific ways to fabricate social realities and make use of them. Types of rationality are ideologies with real, concrete societal impact. Knowledge representation as a construction of the world is social fiction which generates social facts. Discourses, practices, knowledge and power are strategically combined to overarching, implicit and hegemonic »conventions« or behavioural pat-

terns of social aggregates, which are called »dispositifs« and which find their manifestation in institutional apparatuses.

According to Foucault, a specific type of power rationality emerged in the late 18th century, the impact of which can still be felt in the present. As exemplified with the architectural model of the »Panopticon« by the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, modern measures for the fabrication of social order do not aim at repression and punishment, but seek to ensure good and avert ill by making individuals productive. Subtle mechanisms of education use soft tools like anonymous machineries, transparency and procedures of individualisation to safeguard normalisation⁷. Historically seen, such social technologies for efficient normalisation with the purpose of accumulating people in a useful way are linked with the political economy of the developing capitalist production and the apparatuses of public security.

The dissemination of disciplining and normalising power goes along with two remarkable aspects: 1) Since it operates anonymously, and since its effects become subsequently internalised by the targeted individuals, it undermines a conventional dichotomy of rulers or subjects of communication here, and the ruled or objects of information there. In connection with this widespread dispersion of power 2) institutional tactics of government are reflected, reproduced or integrated by the techniques of a government of the self, or, as one would put it nowadays, by the techniques of »self-management«.

Hence, we are confronted with an inter-dependency of an individualised »microphysics of power« on the one hand, and of institutional governance envisaging the administration of large social aggregates since the mid-nineteenth century on the other hand. Foucault called the latter »biopolitics« as it is mainly concerned with issues of the biological reproduction of the population, with the refined and specified calculation and control of life-spans, of public health and of migration and settlement⁸. All of these ingredients are contained within the notion of »governmentality«: »By this word I mean ... the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise

of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security«⁹.

The current »governmentality studies« focus on the trends towards an »economisation of politics« and towards the invention and promotion of »technologies of the self«, which can be coupled with governmental aims¹⁰. What is fading away nowadays with the retreat of the state's function from steering social integration is »a single matrix of solidarity, a relation between an organically interconnected society and all the individuals contained therein, given a politico-ethical form in the notion of social citizenship«¹¹. With the disintegration of the welfare state the previous object of government as restricted to territorial boundaries, the national population or »society« has been replaced by actors who are constructed as the novel objects/subjects of government. »The economic fates of citizens within a national territory are uncoupled from one another, and are now understood and governed as a function of their own particular levels of enterprise, skill, inventiveness and flexibility«¹². Perhaps due to political traditions (such as communitarianism or a communitarian notion of multiculturalism), Nicholas Rose and other Anglo-American theorists focus on real or imagined »communities« as the contemporary object of governmental tactics, whilst in the case of Austria we rather tend to support the diagnosis made in the German social sciences: With the fragmentation of the social, a transformation of public institutions after the market model and a »hegemony of managerial thinking in all parts of life«¹³ it is the individual which is expected and forced to act as an entrepreneur of his/her own fate, as a »micro-enterprise« in the widest sense, whereby the managerial attitude is not restricted to activities in economic markets, where the »micro-enterprise« is known under terms such as »intrapreneur«, »Ich-AG« or »Arbeitskraftunternehmer«.

E-governmentality in Austria

When considering the background of a neoliberal governmentality and the present e-government activities in Austria in detail, everything indicates a victory of economic rather than political liberalism. When the websites

and brochures of federal ministries, as well as the speeches of the e-government engineers, again and again stress the aspect of efficient, rapid and cost saving administrative procedures, we must remind ourselves that not only the state supposed to act efficiently these days is as a competitor amongst others on the market. This is particularly true for each of its citizens, in the framework of e-government usually regarded as the state's »customers«. From this view, quick and extensive electronic service delivery providing access to information on administrative procedures or legal requirements is a preliminary for the competitiveness of each individual micro-enterprise. The vast majority of governmental on-line information in Austria nowadays addresses the recipient either as a consumer (e. g. in the case of tourist information) or as an entrepreneur of his/her own life. With regard to the latter, it seems to be significant that the online-registration of a business has been among the first available electronic transaction services in Austria. On the one hand, the online provision of comprehensive legal information as represented by the Austrian Legal Information System (Rechtsinformationssystem – RIS) ¹⁴, or legal information regarding social security as it can be found at Sozdok¹⁵ signals individual empowerment by enabling a new independence, not only from territorial boundaries, spatial and temporal restrictions, but also from experts like civil servants and lawyers. At the same time such services are an appeal to the individual for increased self-responsibility to know and be conscious of legal and institutional rules. This does not only help to save costs with regard to the personnel of civil servants, it further transforms citizens economically and psychologically into unpaid civil servants who manage themselves. The act of self-bureaucratization is complementary to the role of individual entrepreneurship. Knowledge about the legal aspects of the social security system, for instance, helps the micro-enterprises to calculate the risks of their own professional careers, which these days are more probably discontinuous ones facing more frequent changes between the positions of employment, unemployment, vocational training and self-employment.

For a fragmented citizenry »participatory democracy«, a term extensively highlighted in US-American, Canadian or Australian publications on the

role of ICT-based governance¹⁶, means work rather than political programming. E-government has adopted the concept of »prosumerism« from private e-business, which signifies that a consumer of information services becomes a co-producer of the consumed good by overtaking transaction costs, and by investing knowledge and time for the good she/he pays for¹⁷.

In this sense, the Austrian CIO's objective of »bringing up the citizens to administration«¹⁸ via e-government tools can be understood as providing them with the resources »to do their governance work«¹⁹. Voluntary governance work carried out by everybody, and, as we would argue, mainly with the purpose of bureaucratic self-regulation, is not only an offer, but gets its shape as a morally and technically suggested duty.

»Indeed, the right to information is commensurate with the obligation of the citizen to do governing work and with the scope of the citizen's governance duties and ambitions«²⁰.

From such a point, it is further easily understood why electronic governmental services focus on the mediation of a certain type of information, namely of information on administrative procedures. »Knowledge management« in such a context sees its prior task in structuring information for the »vocational« skills of the new amateurish self-bureaucrats:

»It is the aim, to impart (procedural) knowledge to the citizen, which he needs for an intensive collaboration with public institutions. A shift away from overburdened civil servants in dusty offices and confused petitioners (citizens) towards service-oriented staff members of the public administration and participative citizens should take place«²¹.

Decentralised governance work and central surveillance

In outlining and legitimising the contours of informal bureaucratic work organisation and division on a high technological level with the imagined clean, modern, human-centred and friendly aura of the service sector, the last quotation on a semantic level paradigmatically also plays with traditional connotations of political emancipation.

The unnamed counterpart of the »confused petitioner« is the »mature citizen« of the political Enlightenment. Within the same metaphorical frame the »service-oriented staff members« are distinguished from the image of an authoritarian administration operating on strict principles of secrecy. In combination with the »dusty offices« this evokes an image of the Austrian public administration with its historical roots as a major and powerful pillar of 19th century neo-absolutism. Apart from its propagandistic effects, such a cliché about the authoritarian style of the past (which programmatically has to be overcome), also neglects the modernity of the neo-absolutistic administration and overemphasises the historical break at the cost of potential continuity. From the mid 19th century the monarchist bureaucracy also functioned as one of the protagonists of what we have introduced as Foucault's understanding of »biopolitics« on a highly advanced technological level. Early the administration utilised the state-owned telegraphy for the control of the empire's territorial periphery. Well-known for its precise and comprehensive compilation of data and their procession by statistical methods it was one of the forerunners for the adoption of Hollerith machines used the first time for an analysis of census data in 1890.

In assuming an end to central control and surveillance, those, who seek to model the public institutions upon the image of the private service sector, are partly in agreement with the statements of their critics.

»The neoliberal programme neither targets at a disciplining nor at a normalizing society, but at one, which is marked by cultivating and optimizing differences. In this sense, it is neither necessary nor wishful that the society features conformity to a large extent«²².

This is mainly true for the sphere of consumption, where a multitude of lifestyles, identities and »cultures« (the gay, the elderly, the overweight,...) is mouldered by the products of the media industry. The regular compilation of customers' data by companies and their combination and analysis via relational databases seeks to approach these »cultures« as distinguished target groups for meeting their specific demands and even to assure customer loyalty by creating distinct virtual lifestyle-

communities. Yet, from a political perspective, conformity has remained on the agenda. Neoliberalism means both, decentralisation and individualisation in concurrence with an enforcement of central surveillance and moral imperatives: As the entrepreneurs of their own health or of family planning micro-enterprises are guided by financial incentives, as given by federal policy as well as by the moralisation of physical fitness or by appeals on the demographic responsibility to have kids for the sake of the pension system. Capitalist production demands from micro-enterprises physical mobility or, in the digital era, the mobility of the information they produce, whereas the trans-national monitoring of this mobility via networks controlled by central governments is justified with varying propositions, these days with that of a war against »worldwide terrorism«.

This double figure of decentralisation/centralisation also becomes visible with the next steps in the development of the Austrian e-government system: Each electronic transaction with public institutions, such as the online submission of tax declarations, each interaction with the authorities is planned to be coupled with the data in the central federal registration database (Zentrales Melderegister – ZMR)²³ for the purpose of personal identification. The obvious threats of the possibility to aggregate and combine data to such an extent are dismissed by officials by pointing out the legal and technical provisions preventing an exchange of data between different administrative units. Equally well-known as this standardised argument is the standard objection against it, namely what matters is the technological potential and not the immediate realisation of this potential. According to a pessimistic philosophy of technology it is the »morals« of machines that their functional potentials become actualised. What might be classified as an »abuse« or »accident« from the human moral point of view lies in the »techno-logics«. Hence, for the philosopher Günther Anders, a demand for a restriction in the construction and use of technologies results in the following Categorical Imperative: »Have only those things whose maxims of operation could become maxims of your own acting«²⁴.

Conclusion

Far from such a restriction, the Austrian e-government system shows continuous growth. In a neoliberal framework e-governmentality is unfolding along two structural components, constituting the figure of coexisting modes of decentralisation and centralisation: On the one hand, a fragmented citizenry of individuals who invest »governance work« for their own self-bureaucratisation and economic socialisation, on the other, the residual state, which is interested in improved surveillance.

Notes

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¹ In contrary to the Anglo-American academic debates, see note 16.

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⁵ HELP.GV.AT (Amtshelfer Online), Wien 2003, <http://www.help.gv.at/>.

⁶ For differences in the interpretation of Foucault's fragment and within the methodological discussions on the contemporary »governmentality studies«, see e.g.: OSBORNE, Thomas, Techniken und Subjekte: Von den »Governmentality Studies« zu den »Studies of Governmentality«, in: Demokratie.Selbst.Arbeit. Analysen liberal-demokratischer Gesellschaften im Anschluss an Michel Foucault, Mitteilungen des Instituts für Wissenschaft und Kunst. Bd. 56 (2001), pp. 12 - 16.

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⁸ FOUCAULT, Michel, Der Wille zum Wissen. Sexualität und Wahrheit 1, Frankfurt/Main 1977.

⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel, Governmentality, in: I & C. Bd. 6 (1979), pp. 5 - 21.

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¹³ BRÖCKLING, Ulrich, Totale Mobilmachung. Menschenführung im Qualitäts- und Selbstmanagement, in: Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann, Thomas Lemke (eds), Gouvernamentalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen, Frankfurt/Main 2000, pp. 131 - 167.

¹⁴ RIS (Rechtsinformationssystem), Wien 2003, <http://www.ris.bka.gv.at/>.

¹⁵ SOZDOK (Dokumentation des österreichischen Sozialversicherungsrechts), Wien 2003, <http://www.sozdok.at/>.

¹⁶ See e.g. HAGUE, Barry N., LOADER, Brian D. (eds), Digital Democracy. Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age, London-New York 1999. JUILLET, Luc, PAQUET, Gilles, Information Policy and Governance, Ottawa 2001, <http://www.governance.uottawa.ca/english/Publications/Paquet/Inf-Policy.pdf>.

¹⁷ JANSEN, Stephan A., PRIDDAT, Birger P., Electronic Government. Neue Potentiale für einen modernen Staat, Stuttgart 2001.

¹⁸ Original quotation: »Heranführung der BürgerInnen an die Verwaltung«. POSCH, Reinhard et al., Zielsetzung und Aufgaben der IKT-Stabsstelle, in: Maria A. Wimmer (ed), Quo vadis e-government. State-of-the-art 2003, Wien 2003, pp. 111 - 122.

¹⁹ JUILLET, Luc, PAQUET, Gilles, Information Policy and Governance, Ottawa 2001, <http://www.governance.uottawa.ca/english/Publications/Paquet/Inf-Policy.pdf>.

²⁰ JUILLET, Luc, PAQUET, Gilles, Information Policy and Governance, Ottawa 2001, <http://www.governance.uottawa.ca/english/Publications/Paquet/Inf-Policy.pdf>.

²¹ Original quotation: »Ziel ist, dem Bürger (Prozess-)Wissen zu vermitteln, das er für eine intensive Zusammenarbeit mit öffentlichen Institutionen braucht. Es soll eine Verlagerung weg von überlasteten Beamten in verstaubten Amtsstuben und verwirrten Bittstellern (Bürgern) hin zu serviceorientierten Mitarbeitern der öffentlichen Verwaltung und mitwirkenden Bürgern erfolgen«.

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²³ (Zentrales Melderegister), Wien 2003, <http://zmr.bmi.gv.at/>.

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