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The Political Economy of Emission Standards

Politics, Business and the Making of
Vehicle Emission Regulations in Sweden
and Europe, 1960-1980s

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Title
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to an improved historical understanding of the challenges and complexities involved in constructing a system of governance of motor vehicle air pollution. The specific aim of the study is to explore the development of regulatory vehicle emission standards in Sweden between 1960 and the 1980s as well as to analyze this development within its broader European economic, regulatory and environmental policy context by adopting a transnational approach. The overarching research question concerns the historical dynamics and processes that created obstacles to implementation of stringent vehicle emission standards in Sweden from 1960 through the 1980s. To answer this question, the study focuses specifically on expert, business, and governmental actors' interaction in the political process in Sweden, seeking to reveal these actors' motivations, justifications, and power to influence the outcome.

The study concludes that one set of difficulties concerned the relationship between vehicle emission standards and international trade, in the sense that stringent emission standards, which in turn are dissimilar from internationally adopted norms, raise trade barriers with implications for trade and foreign relations. The Swedish government, however, implemented stricter standards than those in Europe on three occasions between 1968 and 1982. Both the Swedish and the international car industry were greatly opposed to the Swedish government's implementation of standards that were more stringent than those adopted in Europe, though the Swedish industry was not opposed to the government's environmental ambitions as such. On the international arena, since the late 1960s, the thesis shows that the car industry favored international harmonization of technical regulations and lobbied national governments toward this end, while the study further concludes that the Swedish car industry was unsuccessful in its attempts to oppose regulation at home. Another set of challenges was related to the knowledge creation process and the requirement that these standards should reflect technical, economic, and scientific knowledge. The thesis shows how Swedish techno-scientific experts were key actors in the Swedish system of vehicle emission governance, while techno-scientific knowledge was an important tool in justifying Swedish unilateral policies to industrial actors and foreign governments. Still, producing techno-scientific knowledge is a time-consuming process and requires considerable resources. For small countries, the relative costs of producing techno-scientific knowledge are higher than producing it in the immediate political, economic, and technical context – i.e., together with other European countries and car industries. However, the thesis further concludes that the knowledge created in the Swedish system for vehicle emission governance was an important tool for linking standards with other progressive countries: both in terms of implementing goals on air pollution control that were more ambitious than those adopted by most European countries and for coordinating implementation of these standards as well as new fuel infrastructures.

This thesis contributes new historical knowledge and perspectives of relevance to several bodies of literature. By displacing the EEC/EU from the center of analysis, the thesis offers the literature on European integration new perspectives. The thesis also adds knowledge regarding the construction of technical standards by shedding light on the role of knowledge creation in developing and implementing standards in a transitional setting. The thesis, moreover, contributes to the literature on the political power of business by closely tracing the car industry's attempts to influence the regulatory development.

Keywords

history, car industry, competition, environmental governance, environmental regulation, air pollution, vehicle emissions, transnational, European integration, standards, knowledge creation, linking, delinking, expertise, business power, lobbying, California Effect Hypothesis

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