Discovering Materiality in Political Issue-Formation

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One of the major contributions of laboratory studies is the discovery of materiality and its relevance to sociological understanding. What objects is it that the scientist is working with? How does she do it and in which way do these objects help constructing scientific facts? In this course, laboratory studies were able to show that science is not just to be understood as mere talk and argumentation, that it is not only the immaterial workings of logic that have to be retraced. This view renders important insights not only concerning the sociological investigation of science but could also be rewarding to research of other social contexts that are closely connected to the idea of "resolution by argumentation", like for example, the political field.

In my own research, based on ethnographic fieldwork in different German parliaments, I would like to use the idea of materiality, but stretch it a little further: Not only is it necessary to be aware of the impact of material objects (like huge piles of paperwork placed in front of the representatives) on the political process. But looking at politics, you can also see the material quality of political argumentation: Arguments are pushed and pulled around until they fit, in formative acts previously amorphous issues are gaining substance, they are aligned with clear cut counterparts (often provided by the political opponent). Following these characteristics of the political process, I propose a material view on political issue-formation. This view prevents political argumentation from being made (sociologically) invisible by the notion of its arcane immateriality. Using a work theoretical approach and drawing on my data from the fieldwork, I would like to argue that there are three commonly used political ways of forming an issue: By political game, by political solution and by issue dismissal.