Chapter IV
Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

...a spurious syllogism may...be based on the confusion of the absolute with that which is not absolute but particular. As in dialectic, for instance, it may be argued that what-is-not is, on the ground that what-is-not is what-is-not...so also in rhetoric, a spurious enthymeme may be based on the confusion of some particular probability with absolute probability.

—Aristotle, 336 BC

INTRODUCTION

The primary theoretical perspective and framework of analysis for this study are public sphere theory and political economy. Although standardization is a social practice that springs from tradition and not from any theoretical grounding, it is situated and institutionalized in a public but non-governmental setting that could be seen as a public sphere as described by Habermas (1962). Public sphere theory provides a focus on publicness and the discursive process that are relevant for analyzing and understanding standardization practice. Political economy provides an approach to understanding the various interests being served by the social practices that are relevant to this study, and to the underlying reasons for their establishment.

The primary research method employed in this project is discourse analysis. Furthermore, this study takes a view of standardization as a social practice. Discourse analysis provides a method of extracting the meanings in any social practice,
which may be defined as the symbolic means by which people negotiate and share their realities. In the case of standards-making, standardization practice is a recurring ritualized and institutionalized group interaction and its discourse includes a wide array of oral, written, procedural, and symbolic acts. Standardization as a social practice may be operationally defined as a combination of standardization discussion and the settings within which that discussion proceeds. In other words, practice includes the way meetings are conducted (i.e., rules, procedures, order of business, agendas, etc.), who participates or does not, what is discussed and what is not, the language used, documents produced, and the terms of discourse and their underlying assumptions; all these elements taken together, constitute standardization as a social practice. In this study, much of the discourse under analysis is metadiscourse, or discourse about the standardization discourse and practice.

The adapted analysis relies on a definition of social practice offered by MacIntyre (1981) as a cooperative social activity pursuing and systematically extending internal and external goods and standards of excellence. The practice of standards-making is such a cooperative social activity seeking to establish community goods (e.g., communication protocols, product interoperability, certain specialized markets, etc.) by a voluntary consensus process conducted under well-established procedures, protocols, and rituals. In MacIntyre’s terms, such goods (i.e., the technical standards) produced as outcomes of the practice would be considered external. Things like cooperation, rational deliberation, practices, procedures, standards of excellence, and other elements inherent to the process itself (including discourse about the practice) would be considered internal. Taking this approach of standardization as a social practice recognizes that both the standards and the practice by which they are achieved are human constructions formed by shared activities that, in turn, form social habits and are fundamental to social processes. Other social theorists, including Bourdieu (1990) and Craig (1996), have provided further perspectives on social practice along similar lines.

The problem of enclosure described earlier is complex, and the approach taken in this study is only one possible path of inquiry. In this inquiry, other theoretical perspectives could have been used and other methodological approaches could have been taken. No single approach by itself is complete. In this case, the study of rhetoric offers a starting point, providing theory and method together. For example, a common rhetorical device found in discourse is the enthymeme, an incomplete syllogism that persuades not by logical force of argument, but by reliance on pre-existing beliefs and assumptions in the mind of the reader/listener/participant. It also relies on preceding discourse and on the context of that discourse. Discourse analysis is a valuable approach because standardization practice is inherently discursively constituted through words and meanings. Essentially, discourse analysis digs out such meanings and assumptions.

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