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**Contested framings of economic rationality and financial responsibility**

**Abstracts:**

The present study takes up the issue of the role of conceptualizations of economics in present-day politics, focusing on the development in recent decades of the role of the Danish Ministry of Finance. Two sets of competing conceptualizations are described: First of all, the different and contested versions of rationality associated with economic theories and practices. Secondly, three competing ways of conceiving of the role of a Ministry of Finance.

The existence of competing variants of the content of a concept does not rule out precise description of contested conceptualizations, cf. Gallie (1956). A basic variant of rationality is the ‘capacity for rational action’, arguably presupposed by more elaborated views of rationality, e.g. Habermas (1981), Searle (2001), definable as the ability to act in ways where means bring about intended ends, so that e.g. attempts to satisfy hunger bring about acts of eating.

In the specific case of economic rationality, three variant conceptualizations may be discerned, with different relations to basic rationality: ‘textbook economic rationality’: ‘ideal economic rationality’ and ‘raw economic rationality’. ‘Textbook economic rationality’ (cf. e.g. Paul A. Samuelson’s classic, 1948 and later) is predicated on the laws of supply and demand in the market, optimizing the relation between cost and revenue, and getting the maximum profit that conditions make possible for the economic agent (= the economic man).

In ‘ideal economic rationality’, basic economic rationality is upgraded to address also outcomes where no monetary dimension is directly involved, making it possible to prioritize between potential actions by calculating the outcome in relation to all types of relevant goals. On the other hand, there is also what may be termed ‘raw economic rationality’. This is the rationality associated in various forms with cutthroat capitalism as prevalent in international finance, the defining characteristic being the prioritization of hard-core financial gain under disregard of all other considerations. A key reason for trying to unravel the three is that it is often unclear which of them is at work in political discussion and decision-making.

The uncontested core of the way Ministries of Finance are conceptualized may be rendered as ‘having control with government spending’. Three variants of this may be discerned in Danish politics over the past 40 years. The ‘core’ or ‘classic’ version is when the Ministry of finance actually controls that expenditure does not exceed the collectively decided level. A weaker version involves the ‘book-keeping’ variant, where the Ministry collects the invoices but does not in fact control public expenditure. A stronger role, which has some connection with the situation in European economic policy as conceived and partially controlled also by the powerful German Ministry of Finance, is when the Ministry of Finance controls not only the maintenance of fiscal responsibility, but the whole area of public expenditure. This entails the
pre-eminence of purely economic considerations in the prioritization of public policy over qualitative dimensions. All these roles can be practiced with reference to the three different versions of economic rationality (as illustrated with reference to a corpus of texts on or by the Danish Ministry of Finance).

In conclusion, the role of variational combination of societal efficacy with conceptual understanding, and the ensuing interplay of cognitive and societal framings are argued to be underrated factors in understanding problems of political deliberation.