

## **Power through, over and in ideas: Conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism\***

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### **1. Introduction**

The emergence of discursive institutionalism as a fourth institutionalism in political science was predicated on the success ideational scholars enjoyed in arguing that 'ideas matter' (Schmidt 2008). To defend the emphasis on ideas as an explanatory factor in political analysis, the first generations of ideational scholarship took pains to demonstrate and theorize that indeed ideas do matter, and that they do so by providing interpretive frameworks that give definition to our values and preferences and thus make political and economic interests actionable (Beland and Cox 2011, Parsons 2007, Schmidt 2002). Considering that power is one of the central concepts of political science, it comes as no surprise that in claiming a central position for ideas in political analysis, ideational scholars often entertain the notion that ideas are somehow related to practices of power. What is perhaps more surprising is that with few exceptions (notably Beland 2010), most scholars in discursive institutionalism speak of the political power of ideas without much further theorisation. Blyth (2001), for example, argues that the possession and promulgation of ideas that serve to define a given moment of crisis and project the institutional forms that will resolve it becomes "a crucial power resource" (p. 4), while Cox (2001: 471, 485) analyses the "path-shaping power of ideas" as well as the "powerful legitimizing impact" of ideas on reform proposals. And, unsurprisingly, examples of scholars who connect the promotion of policy ideas with a more general notion of political or social power are legion (to name but a few: Beland 2009, Campbell 1998, Hay and Rosamond 2002, Kingdon 1984, Kuzemko 2014, Parsons 2002). To distinguish more clearly between the general claim that ideas matter in politics, and the more specific argument that one significant way ideas matter is through agents' promotion of certain ideas at the expense of the ideas of others, this paper develops the concept of ideational power.

Ideational scholarship has put power front and centre, but it has done so without much explicit theorizing about what exactly ideational power is and how it relates to other forms of power. A similar development has taken place in the power debate of the last circa six decades: most approaches have more or less wholeheartedly accepted that ideas are important for understanding relations and structures of power, but little has been done in a general way to theorise this connection. Take for example proponents of a view of power as *compulsory*, i.e. an understanding of power as concerning relations of interaction of direct control by one actor over another where these relations allow one actor to shape directly the circumstances or action of another (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 43, 49). Classic versions of this understanding are found for

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example in the work of Weber (1957: 52) and the pluralist Dahl (1957), the latter of which defined power as instances where “*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he (*sic*) can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do” (p. 202-203). These notions of power are generally joined by a focus on the material foundation of power relations, but, as argued by Barnett and Duvall (2005), “Compulsory power is not limited to material resources; it also entails symbolic and normative resources”. This point was also made by Dahl (1968) – something which is seldom recognized by his critics (Baldwin 2013) – when he included values, attitudes, and expectations among the factors that a power analyst might want to examine in explaining power relations.

Another prominent approach to political power is *structural*, which concerns the constitution of subjects’ capacities in direct structural relation to one another (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 43). The tradition that has perhaps most clearly employed a structural approach to power is Marxism. Here the structural relation is a class relation in capitalism through which resources and thus power is distributed, in turn supported by the state’s public powers of territorial rule and physical coercion that constitute the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation (Poulantzas 1982). Although later writers like Gramsci (1971), Althusser (1971), and Lukes (1974) – and more recently scholars like van Appeldorn (2001), Olin Wright (1997) and Therborn (1980) – have done much to bring greater prominence to ideas in their understanding of class- and state power, in structuralist Marxist approaches ideas figure primarily as a means for furthering the dominance of the ruling class (Abercrombie et al. 1980), or as an expression of the ‘false consciousness’ of the masses. A structural understanding of power has also figured prominently in the study of business power, where the structural dependence of the state on capital is argued to predispose governments to adopt policies that promote firm investment, even without business leaders necessarily having to do anything actively (e.g. Lindblom 1977, Przeworski and Wallerstein 1988).

*Institutional power* is another conception of power that has played a central role in policy research. In this context, institutional power may be defined as actors’ control of others through the formal and informal institutions that mediate between A and B (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 51), an approach represented by authors like Mills (1956) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and more recently by scholars within the historical institutionalist tradition (e.g. Immergut 1990, Rothstein 1992, Thelen 1999, Pierson 2004). That ideas may take on an important role in the context of institutional power was acknowledged by both the early writers as well as the more recent historical institutionalists (Blyth et al. 2015), but in both cases ideational power was never developed as an analytical category in its own right.

In the effort to identify the analytical tools to analyse ideational power, the paper advances two connected claims. First, it argues that ideational power may be developed as an analytical category in its own right comparable to other types of power. This as such is not new. Scholars such as Foucault (2000), Gramsci (1971), Lukes (1974), Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have similarly emphasized the central role of ideas in relations of power, be it as discursive formations, hegemony, ideology, or the production of subjectivity. Although the paper draws on insights from these traditions, the approach developed in this paper also differs from existing approaches to ideational power. Thus, having discursive institutionalism as its overall analytical frame, it takes a more agency oriented approach in focusing on the interaction between elite policy actors in wielding ideational power, along with the interaction between elites and groups

less powerful in terms of resources or institutional position. Moreover, while it acknowledges the importance of ideational structures for constraining which ideas are considered politically viable (or even mentionable), it conceptualises actors as sentient and critical actors able to critically engage with the ideas they hold (Carstensen 2011a) as well as to think, speak, and act collectively to (re)construct the structures by which they may be constrained or appear to be determined (Schmidt 2008). Drawing on both existing ideational scholarship and the larger power debate in political science, the paper defines ideational power as the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements.

Second, although the paper seeks to carve out a position for ideational power, it also argues for the relevance of understanding how ideas feed into other kinds of power processes. That is, under the rubric of ideational power, we map three different types of ideational power. The first type is *power through ideas*. Defined as the capacity of actors to persuade other actors to accept and adopt their views of what to think and do through the use of ideational elements, it is the most common approach to ideational power among discursive institutionalists. The second form, here called the *power over ideas*, is most strongly connected to compulsory power since power here is related less to persuasion and more to agents' imposition of ideas and the power of actors to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas into the policymaking arena. Thirdly, ideational power also plays into processes of structural and institutional power, what the paper terms *power in ideas*. In the first case, this takes place through agents having established hegemony over the production of subject positions, in the latter, by institutions imposing constraints on what ideas agents may take into consideration. Taken together, it is the ambition of the paper to present these three types of ideational power – and the different guises they take on as they combine and intersect in concrete instances of power wielding – as analytical heuristics to analyse how ideas play into processes of power and resistance in public policy.

## 2. Ideational power

As a starting point for the following discussion about the specific character of ideational power, a general understanding of what kinds of social relations are broadly referred to with the concept of 'power' is necessary. Here we draw on Hay's (2002) insightful combination of theoretical perspectives, including direct decision-making power (Dahl 1957), indirect agenda-setting power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962) and preference shaping (Lukes 1974). Thus, Hay (2002) defines power as "the ability of actors (whether individual or collective) to 'have an effect' upon the context which defines the range of possibilities of others" (p. 185) (**note 1**). What is particularly useful about Hay's definition is its effort to bridge structurally oriented approaches and explanations more inclined towards an agency-oriented view of power. Instead of favouring one of these approaches to power analysis, this general definition of power focuses on the various ways – whether through the indirect form of power in which power is mediated by structures, or in the direct sense of A getting B to do something that s/he would not otherwise do (Hay 2002: 186) – in which the context that actors inhabit matters for their capacity to act and act upon others.

Following this starting point, we define *ideational power* as the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs

through the use of ideational elements. This may occur directly through persuasion or imposition or indirectly by influencing the ideational context that defines the range of possibilities of others. Although, as shall become clear below, ideational power connects with compulsory, structural and institutional forms of power, we believe this understanding of ideational power retains enough distinctiveness to constitute a form of power in its own right. A useful way of approaching the concept of ideational power, then, is to distinguish it from the more general claim of the literature that ‘ideas matter’. This aligns with Barnett and Duval’s (2005: 42) argument that the concept of power is best understood as the production of *particular kinds of effects*, namely those on the capacities of actors to determine the conditions of their existence, rather than as “any and all effects and thus as nearly synonymous with causality”. In other words, the claim concerning ideational power is more specific than a claim that ideas have causal impact. Clearly, there are numerous arguments about why ideas are important in politics, including that ideas give meaning to actors’ experience of the world (Wendt 1999), enable actors to handle informational complexity or even situations of outright uncertainty by offering interpretations of what is wrong and how to move forward (Blyth 2002) as well as inspire discourses that may justify policy programmes in both cognitive and normative terms (Schmidt 2002). What brings these different arguments together is the core logic of ideational explanation to account for actions “as a result of people interpreting their world through certain ideational elements” (Parsons 2007: 96), ideational elements being discourse, practices, symbols, myths, narratives, collective memories, stories, frames, norms, grammars, models and identities.

Acts of ideational power – whether successful or not – only occur in a subset of the relations relevant for understanding how ideas matter, namely when actors seek to influence the beliefs of others by promoting their own ideas at the expense of others. In this view, ideational power has three distinguishing features. First it is characterized by a conception of power which is exerted through the constitution of intersubjective meaning structures that agents both draw on to give meaning to their material and social circumstances and battle over to affect what ideas and discourses are deemed viable. Second, ideational power is conceived as both a top-down and a bottom-up process. That is, ideational power takes seriously not only the discursive struggles taking place among policy actors at the top of the hierarchy to effect their particular vision of the world but also those related to the effort of policy actors at the bottom as much as at the top of the power hierarchy to translate their ideas into language accessible to the general public (Schmidt 2011). This contrasts with the singular focus on top-down interaction generally characterizing the compulsory, structural and institutional understandings of power.

Finally, in this paper, ideational power is conceptualized in agency-oriented terms. Although, as we shall see below, less agency-oriented approaches – like for example the structural and institutional understandings of ideational power – are relevant for analyzing the role of ideas in exerting political power, the approach developed here focuses on the ways that actors through the use of ideational elements seek to influence other actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs. As a result, although such actors could be represented as members of elites, classes, or interest groups, as in compulsory, structural, and institutional power, when talking of their exercise of ideational power, they are better described as ideational leaders (Stiller 2010) and/or as members of advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), epistemic communities (Haas 1992), as well as of social movements (Béland 2009). That we take an agency-oriented approach should not be taken to indicate that ideational structures are

unimportant. Quite the contrary, agents are clearly dependent on existing ideational structures to develop, defend and communicate their ideas to other elites and the public. However, it is important to recognize that ideational structures are not constants unamenable to revision or conversion through strategic agency. Ideational structures continually evolve through agents' unconscious use of them, but will come to be recognized consciously when critics contest them – a view also taken by Gramsci (1971) on the role of intellectuals. In the view of this paper, at their inception ideational structures are the result of conscious construction by agents committed to a certain set of (often philosophical) ideas, which they work hard to promulgate through persuasive discourses (see also Schmidt 2016).

In this paper we suggest three types of ideational power, each dealt with in consecutive sections. First, and perhaps most commonly analysed within discursive institutionalism, ideational power occurs when actors have a capacity to persuade other actors of the cognitive validity and/or normative value of their worldview through the use of ideational elements (*power through* ideas). Second, ideational power is manifested as a capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas, either directly by imposing their ideas or indirectly through shaming opponents into conformity or resisting alternative interpretations (*power over* ideas). This version of ideational power connects with more compulsory forms of power, since here the beliefs of others are directly disregarded. Third, and finally, ideational power shows itself when certain ideas enjoy authority in structuring thought or institutionalizing certain ideas at the expense of other ideas (*power in* ideas). Here ideational power is most closely related to structural and institutional forms of power, since it concerns the ways that historically specific structures of meaning or the institutional setup of a polity or a policy area enhances or diminishes the ability of actors to promote their ideas.

### **3. Power through ideas**

The understanding of ideational power as a capacity of actors to persuade other actors to accept and adopt their views of what to think and do through the use of ideational elements – here called *power through ideas* – is the most common approach to ideational power among discursive institutionalists. Persuasion is clearly central to this form of ideational power. Rather than viewing power as making someone do what they would otherwise not have done based on force, threats, institutional position, material resources, etc., the ideational power actors exert is based on their capacity to induce other actors to do something through reasoning or argument. It is not necessarily – or rather, it rarely is – a completely 'rational' process in the sense that the most powerful necessarily are the ones with the 'best' argument. Instead, the persuasiveness of an idea depends on both the cognitive and normative arguments that can be mustered in its support.

Cognitive arguments depend for success on their ability to define the problems to be solved, and to propose adequate policy solutions to those problems (Schmidt 2006, p. 251; see also Campbell 2004; Mehta 2011). Power is clearly at play here, since affecting what is considered viable problem definitions and solutions through the use of ideational elements fundamentally frames the context which defines the range of possibilities for others. More specifically, according to Schmidt (2002: 219), to be persuasive in cognitive terms, policy ideas – and the discourses employed to defend them – should be able to demonstrate, first, the policy

programme's relevance, by accurately identifying the problems the polity expects to be solved; second, the policy programme's applicability by showing how it will solve the problems it identifies; and third, the policy programme's seeming coherence, by making the concepts, norms, methods, and instruments of the programme appear reasonably consistent and able to be applied without major contradiction. The emphasis here is on 'seeming coherence' since sometimes vagueness or ambiguity makes for discursive success, as different parties to the discussion can interpret the ideas differently (Schmidt 2006: 251). Neo-liberalism is a case in point, since its very generality, adaptability, and mutability is one of the reasons for its success (see Schmidt and Thatcher 2013, ch. 1).

Normative arguments, by contrast, are not so much concerned with demonstrating the validity of an idea as its value. As such, they tend to make appeal to the norms and principles of public life, with persuasiveness dependent upon the extent to which they are able to demonstrate its appropriateness in terms of the values of a given community, whether long-standing or newly emerging (Schmidt 2002: 213). Although some ideas and discourses are based only on technical and scientific (cognitive) arguments, to make these powerful in persuading the broader public and the organizations representing it, they still need to fulfil a normative function by providing a more generally accessible narrative about the causes of current problems and what needs to be done to remedy them that resonate with the public (Schmidt 2006: 251-253). As noted by Widmaier et al. (2007: 755), "the success of any elite group engaged in persuasion is often less related to their analytic skills than to the broad mass intuitions of the moment". This means that mass expectations about how the economy should work—not just cognitively but normatively—set limits on the kinds of policy ideas that elite actors are able to persuade their constituents are necessary and/or appropriate. For example, even though one might expect neo-Keynesian cognitive arguments to persuade the public that more state spending in times of an economic downturn is the tried and true route to recovery from excessive deficits and debt, normative appeals based on neo- (or ordo-) liberal philosophical principles have in recent post-crisis times instead won the day, by invoking 'common sense' images of up-standing and righteous Schwabian housewives tightening their belts when their households are indebted.

The agency-orientation of this understanding of ideational power distinguishes it from the structural theories of theoretical dominance or socialization mentioned above, since it emphasizes actors' ability to 'stand outside' and critically engage with the ideas they hold and promote. In this perspective, ideas are not thought of as internalized or 'contained' in the minds of actors, but instead as a resource – a toolkit and not a coherent system – that exists between and not inside the minds of actors, and the use of ideas thus demands some creativity and critical faculty of the actor (Carstensen 2011a), at times enabling him or her to 'buck the system' (Widmaier et al. 2007). That is, actors not only have 'background ideational abilities' that enable them to think beyond the (ideational) structures that constrain them even as they (re)construct them. They also have 'foreground discursive abilities' that enable them to communicate and deliberate about taking action collectively to change their institutions (Schmidt 2008). In this view, ideational power is not primarily about manipulating people into not recognizing their 'real interests' (Lukes 1974), but rather about persuading other agents about one's understanding of an issue based on available intersubjectively held ideas. What becomes important in this perspective is to have influence on what is considered 'common knowledge' (Culpepper 2008) among elite

policy actors within a policy area and use this in a discourse connected to the public philosophy of the polity.

In the process of persuasion, moreover, we need to distinguish between the policy sphere, in which policy actors (consisting of experts and advocacy networks, organized interests, civil servants, and public officials) engage in a ‘coordinative’ discourse of ideational generation and contestation, and the political sphere, in which political actors (consisting of politicians, spin doctors, campaign managers, government spokespersons, party activists) engage in a ‘communicative’ discourse of translation, discussion, deliberation and, again, contestation with the public (including not just the general public but also informed publics of opinion makers, the media, organized interests, community leaders and activists) (Schmidt 2002, 2006, 2008). Notably, while the coordinative discourse may very well remain a top down process, the communicative discourse ensures *power through ideas* occurs not only from the top down but also from the bottom up.

Power through ideas can have effects that matter for both stability and change in ideas and institutions, and may be exerted in both processes of revolutionary and evolutionary change. During more radical shifts in the ideas that govern a polity, the power that actors are able to exert through ideas is for example central for contesting existing institutions and to build legitimacy around a competing set of ideas (Blyth 2002), both among elites and in the public (Schmidt 2002). Because the authority of a reigning paradigm is not automatically challenged by developments in material circumstances (Hall 1993) – such developments need to be interpreted as policy anomalies that undermine the authority of the paradigm (Blyth 2013) – citizens and elites alike have to be persuaded about the weaknesses of existing institutions, which makes power through ideas absolutely essential for effecting change. When ideational power is exerted through ideas, evolutionary change may also be the outcome. This may for example happen as policy actors seek to respond to critiques from competing coalitions and sustain the legitimacy of existing institutions; by accepting that new ideas and institutions are layered on top of the existing institutional set up; or, alternatively, that existing institutions are converted, i.e. they are reinterpreted or redirected by the adoption of new goals, functions, purposes or the incorporation of new groups (see also Streeck and Thelen 2005). However, whether the changes are radical or evolutionary in kind, to effect change at the level of a policy program or a paradigm – or indeed in public philosophies – it is necessary to challenge actors’ *power over ideas*, to which we now turn.

#### **4. Power over ideas**

The second type of ideational power emphasized in this paper is the capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas. Here we want to emphasize three general forms that *power over ideas* may take: The first is exerted by actors with the power to impose their ideas; the second, by normally powerless actors who seek to shame other actors into conformity with their ideas or norms; and the third, by actors who have the capacity to resist even considering alternative ideas.

In the first case, the actors involved encompass those who control most of the levers of traditional power—coercive, structural, and/or institutional—and who can therefore promote their own ideas to the exclusion of all others. Here, agents with the other traditional kinds of

power resources also deploy ideational power to ensure that their ideas remain predominant so as to guard against challenge to their exercise of coercive power or questioning of their structural and institutional powers. Although in this case there may also be elements of persuasion involved (*power through ideas*), as political elites seek to convince mass publics of the cognitive validity and normative value of their ideas through reasoned argument, the most salient characteristic of this kind of *power over ideas* is the control over the production of meaning and the diffusion of information via the mass media.

The classic case of this is of course the totalitarian regime, as defined by Arendt (1951), in which ideational power is a key defining characteristic, along with coercive, structural, and institutional power. In totalitarian regimes, ideational power – similar to Lukes' (1974) third face of power – comes in the form of control over public discussion through the dissemination of an ideology supported by massive propaganda campaigns and relentless repetition of misinformation provided by educational institutions, intellectual and artistic production, as well as all forms of public communication. In the present day, although the most prevalent cases of 'power over ideas' certainly have little to do with totalitarian mind control and total control over the media of information and communication, they display nonetheless similar characteristics in terms of primary access to the main channels of information diffusion. These go from control over the content of educational texts through control over the mass media, which serve to shape attitudes while crowding out alternatives. As cases in point, we need only mention the ways in which the media conglomerates of Rupert Murdoch in the United Kingdom and the Berlusconi media empire in Italy (including public television when PM) wielded major influence over political decision-making.

In the second case, although the actors are usually (but not necessarily) powerless in the sense that they enjoy little access to compulsory, institutional and structural forms of power, they are nonetheless able to pressure otherwise powerful actors to act in ways they would not otherwise have done by the use of discursive means. This second kind of ideational power shows some affinity to compulsory power as a result of its emphasis on a conflictual relation between actors, notably that an ideational agent is able to affect another agent without recourse to persuasion or necessarily changing the other agent's beliefs. In contrast to *power through ideas*, here the use of ideas to exert power is more instrumental in the sense that the actor who is affected does not necessarily believe in the ideas, but the intersubjective efficacy of the idea – and the communicative discourse employed by the ideational agent – is so strong that the actors concerned are compelled to adhere to the idea. Probably the clearest examples of such use of ideational elements to shame otherwise powerful actors into conformity is found in the literature on the norm setting power of domestic and transnational nongovernmental organizations and social movements (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). In the area of human rights, for example, Risse et al. (1999) argue that advocacy networks play a potentially important role in developing international norms by employing shaming tactics to raise consciousness about an issue, both in reminding liberal states of their own identity as promoters of human rights, and for scolding non-liberal states for their violations.

Finally, another way that *power over ideas* shows itself is in the ability of actors – normally quite powerful also in terms of institutional position and authority – not to listen, i.e. a capacity to resist alternative ideas. In these cases, the generators of ideas are not only the powerful political actors discussed above, whose power over ideas ensures that their domination

of meaning production includes their ability to remain deaf to contradictory ideas. It also characterizes policy actors clustered in closed groups of people, as part of, say, epistemic communities, discourse coalitions, or advocacy coalition networks that are able to harness enough legitimacy around their policy ideas to avoid considering alternative approaches. Often such legitimacy is based on the technical or scientific complexity of the knowledge necessary to create policy in a given sector, which enables actors to disregard alternative approaches as untenable or not even qualified for discussion. This form of ideational power is often itself the main target of social movements' critique, since these dominant ideas set the parameters for what action is considered doable, which solutions are workable and what overall outcome is appropriate, and thus what kind of policies have any chance of success within the policymaking process (Schmidt 2002: 217-222).

One area of policymaking where this form of ideational power has been especially prevalent is financial regulation. Important for the *power over ideas* enjoyed by certain policy making groups in national and international settings has been the increasing complexity of crafting financial regulation, the lifting of important regulatory subjects to an international agenda, and the isolation from more popular concerns. Thus, according to Tsingou (2014), an important reason for the intellectual dominance of market-friendly ideas, and the underrepresentation of more market-sceptic ideas was that many of the most important ideas in financial regulation – ideas generally consistent with private sector preferences – were hatched inside transnational networks of experts held together by elite peer recognition, common and mutually reinforcing interests, and an ambition to provide global public goods in line with values its members consider honourable. The relations between members of the networks were based not on official affiliation but rather on sharing financial expertise and views about how to regulate financial markets, and were thus practically impossible to access for policy entrepreneurs with alternative views. Although many of the 'market efficiency'-oriented ideas no longer dominate public discourse about financial markets and how they function, and despite the fact that lobbyists of the financial sector do not enjoy the same degree of privileged access to policymakers that they did before the crisis (Young 2013), the regulation of financial markets continues to be based on ideas that are directly borrowed from neo-liberal conceptions of financial markets (Mügge 2013). An important reason why seems to be that actors with stakes in the upholding of pre-crisis ideas remain able to largely ignore alternative conceptions of how to regulate financial markets (see also Moschella and Tsingou 2013).

This also indicates that power over ideas is particularly important for fending off pressures for change. During a period of crisis, for example, it matters hugely who has the authoritative capacity to interpret events as anomalous and thus as a challenge to the reigning paradigm. In battles for authority characteristic of periods of crisis (Hall (1993), power over ideas enables actors to ignore alternative idea sets and thus keep them from receiving serious consideration by elites and public alike. Power over ideas may not only be instrumental for actors in avoiding change, it may also be useful for implementing changes to the existing institutional setup in a more evolutionary way, perhaps by pushing institutions towards greater purity and conformity with their policy paradigm. It is worth noting, however, that the control over which ideas are given consideration in the policymaking process is not ultimate control. If for example a competing coalition of policy actors is able to challenge the authority of an epistemic community, perhaps by employing *power through ideas*, it may be necessary to accept

the inclusion of ideas belonging to another paradigm into the policy program. In other words, power over ideas is never final; it is always potentially open for challenge and contestation.

## 5. Power in ideas

How can we understand that certain ideas are considered viable and reasonable – or at least that actors feel justified in having a discussion about their merits – whereas others are considered too extreme or unrealistic to include them in policy discussions? The third form of ideational power – *power in ideas* – concerns just this, namely the authority certain ideas enjoy in structuring thought at the expense of other ideas. Above we have already touched upon the question of what makes some ideas more effective in influencing actors' normative and cognitive beliefs, but while *power over ideas* and *power through ideas* focus on the direct use of ideas to influence other actors, *power in ideas* is about the background ideational processes – constituted by systems of knowledge, discursive practices and institutional setups – that in important ways affect which ideas enjoy authority at the expense of others.

Although similar neither to notions of structural nor institutional power, it does connect with literatures that emphasize how fundamental and historically specific structures of meaning produce and constitute actors' self-understandings, identity, and perceived interests (see also Barnett and Duvall 2005). That is, while the other forms of ideational power are focused more directly on the interaction going on between ideational agents, *power in ideas* concerns the deeper-level ideational and institutional structures that actors draw upon and relate their ideas to in order for them to gain recognition among elites and in the mass public. In this perspective, *power in ideas* concerns the ways that agents seek to depoliticise ideas to the degree where they recede into the background, meaning that they become so accepted that their very existence may be forgotten, even as they may come to structure peoples' thoughts about the economy, polity, and society. This may for example happen as policy programs become taken-for-granted in terms of their methods, instruments, and goals such that they, too, fade into the background. But the background ideas should not therefore only be seen as hard or immovable structures dominating people's thoughts as in Foucault's (2000) sense of the 'archeology' of a discursive formation. Rather, they are better seen as constantly evolving malleable structures subject to continual reconstructions by sentient agents who may unconsciously change them as they are using them (Carstensen 2011b). That being said, and despite their malleability, the background ideas and public philosophies of a polity do usually develop slowly in an evolutionary manner through incremental steps via adaptation and adjustment to changing realities (Schmidt 2016).

One way to think about this kind of authority of ideas at the expense of others is in terms of the power exerted through agents' employment of public philosophies (Schmidt 2008) or public sentiments (Campbell 1998) that form the background of policy-making processes. These kinds of ideas work at a deeper level than policy ideas and programmes, and are often left unarticulated as background knowledge. On the one hand these deeper level ideas act as a constraint by limiting the range of alternatives that elites are likely to perceive as acceptable while also serving as guides to public actors for what to do and/or as sources of justification and legitimation for what such actors can or should do. Ideational power relates both to the constraints it puts on policy makers to legitimize their policies to their constituents and to the limits they set for the range of policy options they themselves believe to be normatively

acceptable (Campbell 1998).

There are a number of relevant literatures within sociology and political theory that in different ways deal with the question of how relations of power are connected to the question of why certain traditions, philosophies, and ways of thinking become dominant. One important example is Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, understood as the intellectual and moral leadership of a social group exercised within society. The leadership is built not just on the use of force but also on the consent of the governed, making it necessary for leaders to establish their authority and legitimacy in society as a whole (Howarth 2000). Or, in the words of Perry Anderson (1976: 26), "hegemony means the ideological subordination of the working class by the bourgeoisie, which enables it to rule by consent". According to Hay (2002: 1979), Lukes (1974) used this notion of consent to argue that "the societal consensus which pluralists and elitists would take as evidence of the absence of systematic inequalities of power is, in fact, the consequence of highly effective and insidious mechanisms of institutionalized persuasion", although he coupled this notion of ideological dominance with a more liberal argument about the possibility of freedom (Haugaard 2011)

Another approach to understanding how ideational structures have an important impact on which ideas enjoy authority at the expense of others is represented in the work of Michel Foucault (1980, 2000). His approach to power developed through the different phases of his work, and it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to elucidate its various intricacies. What is important for our purposes is to point to his understanding of power as intimately bound up with knowledge. In opposition to Lukes' understanding of power through the dichotomy of 'false consciousness/true consciousness', Foucault argued instead that in modern power, individuals are constituted as objects within a system of thought which, of necessity, implies a form of subjectification to a particular way of being (Haugaard 1997: 43). In other words, Foucault suggests that we best "abandon the whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, demands, and interests" (Foucault 1977: 315). This is an understanding of power that emphasizes its positive effects, i.e. power "does not only weigh on us as a force that says no", it also "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault 1980: 119). As an example, Foucault's (2004) study of *ordo-liberalism* in Germany from the 1930s through the 1950s provides a deep understanding of how such *power in ideas* helps explain the way in which the Germany macroeconomic policy arena has been understood and structured ever since, with the market coming first, the state limited to establishing and administering the rules that would ensure market stability. As for neo-liberalism more generally, Foucault (2004) sees its underlying approach to governing, or 'governmentality' as seeking to shape individuals as governable, self-disciplined, enterprising subjects not directly, through state intervention, but indirectly, via the creation of structures of incentives.

More recently, Howarth (2009) has suggested a poststructuralist conception of the relation between discourse and power that combines the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and the later Foucault (1979). Howarth (2009) takes a hegemony approach to power that sees hegemony both as a practice of coalition building, where disparate demands and identities are linked together to forge 'discourse coalitions' that can contest a particular form of rule, and as a form of governance that offers points of attachment and identification that enable the

reproduction of the existing order without direct challenge to the existing order. In this view, power concerns “radical acts of institution, which involve the elaboration of political frontiers and drawing of lines of inclusion and exclusion” (Howarth 2009: 309). One particularly promising aspect of this reworking of the concept of hegemony in the context of discourse and power is its combined emphasis on the undecidability of any social order, borrowed from Laclau and Mouffe as well as the later Foucault’s distinction between domination and power, with the latter requiring some freedom on part of actors. Both perspectives open up the possibility of resistance and change through agency in periods where the undecidability of a social order is revealed, potentially enabling the subject to identify with new objects and ideologies.

What is particularly interesting about the *power in ideas* is that it could be seen as even more ‘powerful’ in some sense than coercive or structural power. While coercive power forces agents to do what they might not want to do, and structural power imposes, in both cases agents may at least be aware of this domination, like it or not. In the case of Foucault’s structuring ideas, by contrast, the ideational structure dominates not just what agents do but also what they think and say. Bourdieu (1994) takes a similar approach to the structuring power of ideas when he argues that the *doxa* or vision of the world of elites who dominate the state creates the “habitus” that conditions people to see the world in the way they (the dominant) choose.

Another set of approaches to understanding the authority that certain ideas enjoy at the expense of others is also relevant here, namely a number of contributions originating in the ‘new institutionalisms’ of political science. Although these arguments are most easily placed under the rubric of institutional power, as indeed was done above, in pointing to the relevance of institutional history and culture, they remain important to understanding why some ideas are taken up, while others are not even considered. This is because while the process of institutionalization can be understood in terms of *power through ideas*, as ideas about policies and programs may be debated, agreed, and implemented, the crystallization of such ideas in established rules (for historical institutionalists) or frames (for sociological institutionalists) should be understood as *power in ideas*.

Historical institutionalists, for example, occasionally theorize *power in ideas* when they consider the institutionalization of ideas in the rules that come to regulate the polity, or in the path dependencies by which ideational continuity appears as a defining characteristic of the trajectory of post-crisis institutions (Pierson 2004, p. 39). A good example involves the governance of the Euro, as the Maastricht Treaty and the Stability and Growth Pact consecrated a set of ordo-liberal ideas about how to govern the currency that created a self-reinforcing path dependency that ensured that the easiest follow-on would be increasingly stringent stability rules, as evidenced by the subsequent Six-Pack, the Two-Pack, and the Fiscal Compact. That this rules-based governance can also be explained in terms of *power through ideas*—as Chancellor Merkel, the heads of the ECB, and the Commission sought to persuade all parties to the debate that this was the only way to proceed—points to the fact that historical institutionalism can complement discursive institutionalist analysis, since the pro-austerity camp gained power from the fact that these ideas had already been institutionalized.

Sociological institutionalists generally do even more to theorize *power in ideas*, since they as a matter of course consider the norms, cognitive frames, and meaning systems that constitute the institutions within which agents come to understand and act in the world. Where these are treated more as static structures than dynamic constructs, the focus is more on *power in*

*ideas* rather than *power through ideas*. Ruggie clarifies the difference when he distinguishes between constructivists who ‘cut into the problem of ideational causation at the level of “collective representations” of ideational social facts and then trace the impact of these representations on behavior ...[rather than] as Weber tried, begin with the actual social construction of meanings and significance from the ground up’ (Ruggie 1998, pp. 884-5).

## 6. Conclusion

The battle for mainstream recognition of ideational scholarship was waged on the foundational claim that an analysis of why certain actors want what they want and get what they do in policy-making processes should start from an understanding of the ideational structures through which actors understand the(ir) world. From the beginning, disparities in the capacity of actors to affect these processes – i.e. power – played a central role in the discussion, but the significant effort that went into conceptualising what ideas are and the role they play in politics was not matched by similar theoretical interest in how ideas play into relations of power. There might be good reasons for this. One might for example argue that power is such an expansive, complex and inherently normative concept that we as social scientists are better off without it. On the other hand, this is true of many concepts in political science, including interests or, indeed, ideas. Another potential objection could be that it is unnecessary to develop a specific category of power that concerns the capacity to use ideational elements to affect actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs and instead understand the role of ideas in politics by connecting it to a more general concept of political power. To us – along with a number of the contributors to this special issue – this stands as a wholly viable approach, but we still argue in favour of carving out ideational power as a specific category of political power.

We do so for three reasons. First, discursive institutionalists have already come some way in developing concepts that are relevant for understanding relations of power, but placing these under the more general claim that ‘ideas matter’ does little in way of clarifying this claim. That ideas matter for political processes is the foundational claim, but developing a more explicitly ideational understanding of power is helpful for analysing the battles going on between policy actors, within elites, and between them and the masses, as well as to distinguish them from the relations that are not relations of power.

Second, developing a specific category of ideational power is helpful for analysing how different dimensions of ideational power may combine and intertwine in concrete empirical cases. That is, hopefully a more developed approach to ideational power will enable more fine-grained empirical analyses. Moreover, thinking of the relation between ideas and power from a more specifically ideational vantage point might also enable a clearer analysis of how different kinds of power – be it compulsory, structural, institutional or ideational – are connected.

Finally, developing the analytical category of ideational power may help identify and criticise the actors who have a central impact on which issues are considered problems and which solutions are thought viable. As argued by Hayward and Lukes (2005: 5), “Analyzing power relations is an inherently evaluative and critical enterprise, one to which questions of freedom, domination, and hierarchy are – and should be – central“. Hopefully, developing a clearer and more explicit vocabulary for talking about ideational power will enhance the ability of discursive institutionalists to track the agents, whether collective or individual, who have the ideational capacities to affect the context in which interests are defended and to assign them

responsibility accordingly.

## Notes

1. A similar approach is found in Barnett and Duval (2005) where power is defined as “the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (p. 42).

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