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**DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALISM:
SCOPE, DYNAMICS, AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

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Abstract

Discursive institutionalism is an umbrella concept for approaches that concern themselves with the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in institutional context. This chapter considers not only the wide range of ideas in discourse that come in many different forms and types at different levels of generality--policy, program, and philosophy--with different rates of change but also the ways in which “sentient” (thinking and speaking) agents articulate such ideas by way of a “coordinative discourse” through which as policy actors they construct their ideas and a “communicative discourse” through which as political actors they make their ideas accessible to the public for discussion, deliberation, and contestation. The chapter also elaborates on the dual nature of the institutional context. This is understood not only in the way of the neo-institutionalists, as the external formalized institutions that constrain action, but also in terms of the structures and constructs of meaning internal to agents whose “background ideational abilities” (building on Searle or Bourdieu) enable them to create (and maintain) institutions while their “foreground discursive abilities” (building on Habermas) enable them to communicate about them for the purposes of collective action--to change or maintain them. But although meaning is socially constructed, the chapter builds on the work of Wittgenstein to show that this does not lead to radical relativism because knowledge comes with different kinds of certainty related to the differences between the agents’ experiences in the world and their pictures of the world.

**DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALISM:
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“Discursive institutionalism” is the term I use to cover the wide range of approaches in the social sciences that take ideas and discourse seriously. It has its origins in my desire to give a name to the very rich and diverse set of ways of explaining political and social reality which have been increasingly pushed to the margins in political science, in particular in the United States, by the growing domination of three older “new institutionalisms”--rational choice, historical, and sociological.¹ By adding a fourth new institutionalism to the other three, I seek to call attention to the significance of approaches that theorize not only about the substantive content of ideas--as in the “ideational turn” (Blyth 1997) or “ideational constructivism” (Hay 2006)--but also discourse and argumentation. And with discourse, I mean not just its theorization as the representation or embodiment of ideas--as in discourse analysis (following, say, Foucault 2000, Bourdieu 1990, or Laclau and Mouffe 1985)--but also as the interactive processes by and through which ideas are generated in discourse coalitions and discursive policy communities more generally (e.g., Hajer 1993; Sabatier 1993; Haas 1992) and communicated to the public (e.g., Habermas 1989; Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996; Zaller 1992; Dryzek 2000; Wodak 2009). The institutionalism in the name, moreover, underlines the importance of considering both ideas and discourse in institutional context at the same time that it draws a line between this framework for analysis and those of the other neoinstitutionalisms.

Briefly defined, discursive institutionalism is an analytic framework concerned with the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse and policy argumentation in institutional context. The ideas it elucidates may be developed through cognitive or normative arguments, come at different levels of generality, including policy, programs, and philosophy, and in different forms, such as narratives, frames, frames of reference, discursive fields of ideas, argumentative practices, storytelling, and collective memories, and change at different rates, either incrementally or in revolutionary shifts. The discursive interactions may involve policy actors in discourse coalitions, epistemic communities and advocacy coalitions engaged in a “coordinative” discourse of policy construction and/or political actors and the public engaged in a “communicative” discourse of deliberation, contestation, and legitimization of the policies (see Schmidt 2002a ch. 5, 2006 ch. 5, 2008, 2010a). The directional arrows of

¹ Rational choice institutionalism focuses on rational actors who pursue their preferences following a “logic of calculation” within political institutions, defined as structures of incentives. Historical institutionalism details the development of political institutions, described as regularized patterns and routinized practices subject to a “logic of path-dependence.” Sociological institutionalism concentrates on social agents who act according to a “logic of appropriateness” within political institutions, defined as socially constituted and culturally framed rules and norms. See Schmidt 2010a.

these discursive interactions may come not only from the top down through the influence of the ideas of supranational or national elites but also from the bottom up through the ideas and discourse of local, national, and/or international “civil society,” social movement activists, or ordinary people.

The institutional context, moreover, can be understood in two ways--first, in terms of the meaning context in which agents’ discursive interactions proceed following nationally situated logics of communication; second, in terms of the formalized as well as informal institutions that inform their ideas, arguments, and discursive interactions (Schmidt 2008, 2010a). The institutions in the first sense of institutional context are above all dynamic, as structures and constructs of meaning internal to agents whose “background ideational abilities” enable them to create (and maintain) institutions while their “foreground discursive abilities” enable them to communicate critically about them and to change (or maintain) them. This kind of social construction of institutions skirts problems of relativism, moreover, because it recognizes differences in kinds of knowledge and certainty between agents’ experiences in the world and their pictures of the world.

Institutions in the second sense are the formal (or informal) ones that are generally the objects of explanation of the three older neoinstitutionalisms, as rationalist incentive structures, historical rules, or cultural frames that serve as external constraints to agents’ action. In discursive institutionalism, these kinds of institutions may be treated either as unproblematic background information, for example, to help elucidate why “simple” polities tend to have stronger communicative discourses and compound polities stronger coordinative ones. Or they may themselves be the objects of inquiry, in particular for those discursive institutionalists who emerge from and/or engage with any one of the older institutionalisms and are intent on showing the limits to explanations in terms of interest-based logics, historical path-dependencies, or cultural framing. Agents’ ideas, discourse, and actions in any institutional context, however, must also be seen as responses to the material (and not so material) realities which affect them--including material events and pressures, the unintended consequences of their own actions, the actions of others, the ideas and discourse that seek to make sense of any such actions, as well as the structural frameworks of power and position.

My purpose in developing what is essentially an umbrella concept for all such approaches to ideas and discourse is not simply definitional. It is also constitutive, in that it seeks to identify a discursive sphere within which practitioners of these varied approaches can discuss, deliberate, argue, and contest one another’s ideas about ideas and discourse from epistemological, ontological, and methodological vantage-points. And it is empirically oriented, in that in bringing together this wide range of interpretive approaches, it seeks to do a better job of theorizing the explanation of change (and continuity) in policy, politics and institutions than the older three neo-institutionalisms.

In what follows, I seek to build a systematic account of the range of ways in which discursive institutionalists deal with ideas, arguments and discursive interactions in institutional context. To do so, we begin with ideas as the substantive content of discourse that comes in different forms, types, levels, and timing of change. Next, we consider the generators of ideas and discourse, that is, the “sentient” (thinking and speaking) agents who construct, articulate, communicate, argue, and contest ideas and arguments through discourse, with special attention to the philosophical questions regarding how such agents are constituted, how they constitute institutions, and what degree of knowledge and certainty about reality is possible given our definitions of agents and institutions. We then explore the dynamics of discourse in terms of the interactive processes of policy coordination and political communication, considering in detail the kinds of discursive policy communities through which ideas are generated and the political actors by and forums in which they are communicated and argued. We end with the institutional contexts within which all discursive interaction takes place.

THE CONTENT OF IDEAS AND DISCOURSE

Discursive institutionalists tend to divide between those who concentrate on ideas and those who privilege discourse. The difference is primarily one of emphasis. Scholars concerned with ideas tend to focus on the substantive content of discourse while leaving the interactive processes of discourse implicit. Scholars who prefer discourse themselves divide into those who also emphasize its substantive content as the representation or embodiment of ideas and those who are more concerned with the discursive interactions through which actors generate, argue about, and communicate ideas in given institutional contexts (to be considered later). Among the scholars concerned most with the substantive content of ideas and discourse, differences abound with regard to the forms of ideas they identify, of which there are a vast array (see, e.g., Goodin and Tilly 2006, part 4). Such ideas may be cast as strategic weapons in the battle for “hegemonic” control (Muller 1995; see also Blyth 2002); “frames” that provide guideposts for knowledge, analysis, persuasion, and action through “frame-reflective discourse” (Rein and Schön 1994); narratives or discourses that shape understandings of events (e.g., Roe 1994); “frames of reference” that orient entire policy sectors (Jobert 1989; Muller 1995); “storytelling” to clarify practical rationality (Forester 1993); “collective memories” that frame action (Rothstein 2005); discursive “practices” or fields of ideas that define the range of imaginable action (Bourdieu 1994; Torfing 1999; Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000); “argumentative practices” at the center of the policy process (Fischer and Forester 1993); or the results of “discursive struggles” that set the criteria for social classification, establish problem definitions, frame problems, define ideas and create shared meaning on which people act (Stone 1988).

Scholars differ also with regard to the types of ideas and arguments they investigate. The comparative politics and political economic literature tends to be more concerned with cognitive ideas that provide guidelines for political action and serve to justify programs through arguments focused on their interest-based logics and necessity

(see Hall 1993; Muller 1995; Schmidt 2002a, 2008) than on normative ideas that attach values to political action and serve to legitimize the policies in a program through arguments based on their appropriateness, often with regard to underlying public philosophies (see March and Olsen 1989; Schmidt 2000, 2002a:213-17). By contrast, in international relations the focus is more on norms, defined as ideas about appropriate standards of behavior or desirable actions shared by members of a social entity (Finnemore 1996), and on the mechanisms by which ideas take hold and are diffused, such as learning, diffusion, transmission, and mimesis (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007).

With regard to the timing of change in ideas, whether fast or slow, incremental or abrupt, differences among scholars have much to do with the level of ideas they consider (see Schmidt 2008, 2010c). Policy analysts have long tended to portray ideas and the arguments in which they are advanced as changing most rapidly, in particular when windows of opportunity open in the face of events, and as old policies no longer solve the problems or fit the politics for which they were designed (Kingdon 1984). But what remains unclear is whether events drive change in policy ideas or whether ideas open windows, creating new opportunities for policy change. Scholars who focus instead on policy programs mostly portray them as the objects of “great transformations” in periods of uncertainty (Blyth 2002) or as “paradigms”--often building on Kuhn’s (1970) approach in the philosophy of science. These are characterized as having a single overarching set of ideas for which a “paradigm-shift” produces revolutionary, and incommensurable, change (e.g., Jobert 1989; Hall 1993; Schmidt 2002a ch. 5, 2010b). Here, the problem is that although the concept of paradigm-shift serves nicely as a metaphor for radical ideational change, it offers little guidance as to how, when, or even why a shift takes place, and rules out the coexistence of rival paradigms or the possibility that paradigm change can occur even without a clear idea behind it, say, as the result of layering new policies onto the old in a given policy program (see Schmidt 2010c). Finally, philosophical ideas are generally portrayed as most long lasting, and less based in the policy sphere than in the political sphere, where the ideas and arguments tend to be broad concepts tied to normative values and moral principles (Weir 1992:169), ideologies (Berman 1998:21), or “global frames of reference” (Muller 1995). Here, the danger is to assume that they never change at all, rather than to look to the ways in which public philosophies may be created and recreated over time, which is often the focus of more historically minded political scientists (e.g., Berman 1998) or historians (e.g., Hunt 1984; Nora 1989).

As for scholarly analyses of change in ideas over time, most political scientists go directly to empirical studies, both quantitative as well as qualitative. Among qualitative studies, process-tracing methods are the most prevalent. These show how ideas and arguments are tied to action by serving as guides to public actors for what to do as well as sources of justification and legitimation for what such actors do (see Berman 1998; Blyth 2002). In addition to tracing empirically the ideas central to the processes of transformation, such processes can also serve to demonstrate the causal influence of

ideas. This could involve providing matched pairs of cases in which everything is controlled for except the discourse, as in demonstrating the success of neoliberal discourse in economic reform (Schmidt 2002b) or in elucidating the ways in which ideas trap or capture agents, whether through rhetorical traps (Schimmelpfenig 2001) or previous diplomatic agreements that agents find themselves bound to follow, like it or not (Parsons 2003).

Another approach that takes us deeper into the theorization of the content of ideational change--this time from public administration--is provided by Bevir and Rhodes (2003), whose theory of meaning focuses on the incremental changes around a “web of beliefs” that over time constitute political traditions. These political traditions are (re)created through individuals’ narratives, arguments, and storylines about how what they are doing fits with the tradition even as they alter it.

For in-depth philosophical theorizing about how the content of the ideas themselves change, however, one generally needs to turn to more post-modernist or post-structuralist approaches to policy change following discourse analyses that build on the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Laclau and Mouffe. These theoretical concepts--once translated from the sometimes difficult to access and internally referential language--can provide great value to the analysis of the content of ideas and how they change (and continue) over time. And here, no need to buy into their specific ontological and epistemological views in order to benefit from their theorizations of how ideational concepts change through discourse (Schmidt 2010a, 2010b). For example, discourse analyses that build on Michel Foucault can offer insights into how to investigate the archaeology of what was acceptable in a given discursive formation over time, from one period’s *episteme* to the next, through examination of networks of rules establishing what is meaningful at any given time (see Pedersen forthcoming). Conversely, discourse analyses built on Laclau and Mouffe (1985) can point to different ways in which concepts may be employed, such as “nodal points” from which all other ideas take their meanings in an ideological system, for example, how communism in Central and Eastern Europe served to distinguish between “real” (communist) democracy and “bourgeois” democracy (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000).

SENTIENT AGENTS AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

Ideas, naturally, do not “float freely” (Risse-Kappen 1994). They need to be carried by agents. But even where agents are treated as carriers of ideas, the connection between ideas and collective action remains unclear. The missing link is discourse not as representation but as interaction, and the ways in which ideas conveyed through discursive argumentation lead to action. But discourse also cannot be considered on its own, since it requires agents who articulate and communicate their ideas through discourse in exchanges that may involve discussion, deliberation, negotiation, and contestation. These agents can be defined as sentient (thinking and speaking) beings who

generate and deliberate about ideas through discursive interactions that lead to collective action.

Focusing on sentient agents is important, because it emphasizes the fact that “who is speaking to whom about what where and why,” or the interactive practices of discourse, makes a difference. Importantly, it is not just that agents are thinking beings who have ideas and arguments but that they are also speaking beings who share their ideas through discursive interactions that can lead to collective action. What makes agents sentient is that they are possessed not only of what I call their “background ideational abilities,” which underpin their ability to make sense of as well as act within a given meaning context, that is, in terms of the ideational rules or rationality of that setting. It is that they also have “foreground discursive abilities” that enable them to communicate, argue, and deliberate about taking action collectively to change their institutions (see Schmidt 2008:314-16). This means that institutions are socially constructed. What ensures that we don’t end up in complete relativism as a result of agents’ background and foreground abilities to (re)construct their institutional structures has to do with the fact that there are differences in kinds of knowledge--on a continuum from more universal to more culturally bound--and certainty--on a continuum from more certain because based on agents’ experiences in the world to less so because based in agents’ pictures of the world (Schmidt 2008:318-19).

Agency through Background Ideational Abilities and Foreground Discursive Abilities

It is useful to elaborate on this briefly in ontological terms, not only to deepen our consideration of the ways in which sentient agents constitute and/or are constituted by institutions in the world, but also as a way to bridge divides between analytic and continental philosophies.² Most scholars who take ideas and discourse seriously intuitively assume that agents acting within institutions are simultaneously structure and construct (agency), but they rarely articulate this, in particular those whose work is largely empirical. The exceptions are scholars influenced by the work of continental philosophers and macrosociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1994), Michel Foucault (2000), Jürgen Habermas (1989), and Anthony Giddens (1984). But there are also clues in the work of a philosopher in the analytic tradition, John Searle, to which I turn mainly to show that one need not only go to continental philosophy to gain similar kinds of insights on the construction of social reality.

Searle (1995) defines “institutional facts” as those things that exist only by way of collective agreements about what stands for an institution--such as property, money, marriage, governments, human rights, and cocktail parties. Although such facts are consciously created by sentient agents through words and action, once they are constituted people lose sight of this not only because they are born into them but also because they use them as part of a whole hierarchy of institutional facts, in which they may be conscious of this or that institution but not of the whole architecture. Moreover,

² The following discussion expands on Schmidt 2008.

as they use them in speech and practice, the institutions themselves may evolve, whether unconsciously, as people change how they use them, or consciously, as people decide to use them differently or not to use them at all, at which point the institution itself ceases to exist--as in the case of property rights during a Marxian revolution. In consequence, as Searle (1995:57) insists, institutions are process rather than product.

But where then is agency? That is, how do we situate human action within institutions, as process rather than product? For Searle (1995:140-45), the whole hierarchy of institutional facts make up the structure of constitutive rules to which agents are sensitive as part of their “background abilities” that encompass human capacities, dispositions, and know-how related to how the world works and how to cope with the world. Such background abilities are thus internal to agents, enabling them to speak, argue and act without the conscious or unconscious following of rules external to the agent assumed by the rationalist calculations, historical path-dependencies, or the normative appropriateness of the older neoinstitutionalists.

Searle’s concept of background abilities is not unique, as he himself acknowledges. He sees it as the focus of Wittgenstein’s later work and also notes that it is present in Bourdieu’s notion of the “habitus” (Searle 1995:127-32). Bourdieu’s “habitus” resembles Searle’s “background abilities” in that Bourdieu sees human activity as neither constituted nor constitutive but both simultaneously, as human beings act “following the intuitions of a ‘logic of practice’ which is the product of a lasting exposure to conditions similar to those in which they are placed” (Bourdieu 1990:11). In psychology, the theory of cognitive dissonance also comes close to what we are talking about here, at least insofar as it refutes assumptions about the rule-following nature of behavior because it shows that people generally act without thinking of any rules they may be following, but then check what they are doing against the various rules that might apply, with consciousness about the rules coming into play mainly where cognitive dissonance occurs, that is, when the rules are contradictory (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999).

The ideational processes by which agents create and maintain institutions, whether we ground these in Searle, Bourdieu, or cognitive psychology, can be summarized by the concept of “background ideational abilities.” This generic concept is useful in signifying what goes on in individuals’ minds as they come up with new ideas or follow old ones. But it does not explain much about the processes by which institutions change, which is a collective endeavor. It also underemphasizes a key component in human interaction that helps explain such change: discourse.

We undersell discursive institutionalism if we equate the ontology of institutions with background ideational abilities alone, neglecting what I call sentient agents’ “foreground discursive abilities.” This is peoples’ ability to think and argue outside the institutions in which they continue to act, to talk about such institutions in a critical way, to communicate and deliberate about them, to persuade themselves as well as others to change their minds about their institutions, and then to take action to change them, individually or collectively. Even though Searle does not talk about any such “foreground

abilities,” one could argue that they are implicit in his view of the importance of language, in particular “speech acts,” and in his insistence that institutional change can not only be unconscious, as agents start to use the institutions differently, but also conscious, when they “decide” to use them differently. Such “deciding” leaves the way open to our argument here that discourse as an interactive process is what enables agents to consciously change institutions, because the deliberative nature of discourse allows them to conceive (ideas) of and talk (discourse and argue) about institutions as objects at a distance, and to dissociate themselves from them even as they continue to use them. This is because discourse works at two levels, at the everyday level of generating and communicating about institutions and at a meta-level, as a kind of second order critical communication among agents about what goes on in the institutions.

By calling this interactive externalization of our internal ideational processes “foreground discursive abilities,” I offer a generic term close to Habermas’s (1989) view of “communicative action” (although without the normative prescriptions). It is also in line with much of the underlying assumptions of the literature on “discursive democracy” and “deliberative democracy” (e.g., Dryzek 2000), which is all about the importance of discourse and deliberative argumentation in breaking the elite monopoly on national and supranational decision making while ensuring democratic access to such decision making. As such, the concept of “foreground discursive abilities” also provides a direct response to macro-sociologists and philosophers like Michel Foucault (2000), who sees little escape from the ideational domination of the powerful, or Pierre Bourdieu (1994), who 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. “Foreground discursive abilities” are what ensure that Foucault, Bourdieu, and colleagues are able to step outside the *doxa* through their own writings as well as the public more generally through discourse and debates. These are the abilities that ensure that people are able to reason, argue, and change the structures they use--a point also brought out by Antonio Gramsci (1971), who emphasizes the role of intellectuals in breaking the hegemonic discourse. But beyond even Gramsci, this term points to the importance of public debates in democratic societies in serving to expose the ideas which serve as vehicles for elite domination and power or, more simply, the “bad” ideas, lies, and manipulations in the discourse of any given political actor or set of actors. An approach that takes ideas and discourse seriously, in short, assumes that the clash in ideas and discourse is just as important in building, maintaining, and changing “institutions” as is any ultimate compromise, consensus, or even imposition related to one set of ideas, arguments or discourse.

The ontology of discursive institutionalism, in sum, combines the “background ideational abilities,” which answer the questions, “How are institutions created and how do they persist?” with the “foreground discursive abilities,” which answer the question, “Why do they change (or continue)?” But this then sends us on to another set of questions, focused on epistemological issues about the kinds of knowledge and certainty

possible in a world in which sentient agents could be said to construct the structures by which they are structured.

Knowledge and Certainty Based on Experiences in the World vs. Pictures of the World

The epistemological questions raised by our answers to the ontological questions are mainly about “How can we be sure that we know what we know?” and “What is reality in a world in which structure and agency are as one?” These questions often lead to accusations against those who come down on the agency side of the agency-structure debate such as that they cannot know anything for certain once they see everything as socially constructed, that they turn reality itself into a social construction, and that they therefore are on the slippery slope of relativism.

Fears of relativism have led some discursive institutionalists to stay on the materialist side of the materialist-constructivist divide. They tend to hold to a correspondence view of the world, that is, that material reality is out there for agents to see, and that scholars are in the business of discovering it. Wendt (1999:109-10), for example, maintains a kind of “rump materialism” determining a hierarchy of needs in economic life. Others (e.g., Gofas and Hay 2010) try to straddle the divide between materialism and constructivism through “critical realism,” worried that if there is no “truth,” no “objective” reality, then there is no way to protect contextualized (social) “scientific” explanation from the radical relativism of “anything goes,” in which power and subjectivity could trump truth and objectivity. Critical realism traces its roots back to the ambivalence of philosophers of science such as Bhashkar (1979/1998) and others to choose between beliefs in, on the one hand, proximate truths established through standards of empirical verification or falsification of (objective) explanations and, on the other hand, beliefs in relative truths established through standards of evaluation based in the success, progress, and/or creativity of (subjective) ideas (as elaborated in the work of Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, and Polanyi). Critical realists, in other words, remain on the fence, trying to reconcile what are essentially nonreconcilable approaches grounded in different ontological and epistemological presuppositions. It is therefore questionable enough an approach when applied to science. But for the social sciences, it could very well end up in the radical relativism critical realists fear most, since it starts with a definition of reality based in science, and then goes from particles to people rather than starting with a more society-focused philosophy that goes from people to particles (see Schmidt 2010b).

Moving to the constructivist side of the materialist-constructivist divide need not lead to radical relativism. Constructivists tend to assume that most of reality is constructed by the actors themselves beyond a very basic level, but they do not deny the “materiality” of that most basic level.

However, to ask if material reality exists (correspondence vs. noncorrespondence) is in any event the wrong question: We do better to ask what is material and “real” and what is real even if it is not “material.” The latter is particularly the case of institutions

that may be “real” because they constitute interests and cause things to happen even though they are socially constructed and thus not material in a visible, “put your hand or rest your eyes on it” kind of concrete sense. Searle (1995) can prove helpful in elucidating this point when he distinguishes between “brute facts” like mountains, which exist regardless of whether sentient (intentional) agents acknowledge their existence or have words for them, and “social facts,” of which “institutional facts” are a subset, which do not exist without sentient agents. Thus, while brute facts define a basic material reality, social facts may not be material even though they are “real,” while institutional facts are real to the extent that the collective agreements by which they are constituted continue to hold, which is often very real indeed if we think about the institution of property or of money, for that matter, even though it is a “social construction” (see Ingham 2008).

To get clearer about questions of certainty or uncertainty related to such “social facts,” but from a different vantage point, we could turn to Wittgenstein who, in *On Certainty* (1972), suggests answers to our questions by differentiating between different kinds of knowledge and certainty based in different “forms of life,” as expressed through “language-games.”³ Here, he makes a little-noticed but important distinction between language games based on our experience in the world, for which radical uncertainties rarely occur, and those based on our pictures of the world, which involve knowledge closer to the kind found in (social) science, and which can involve radical uncertainty akin to shifts in “paradigms” and “cosmologies.”

Language games based in our everyday experiences in the world ordinarily admit of no doubts and mistakes--such as knowledge of one’s own name, address, actions, and history; of the number of hands and toes one has; and of the meaning of the words one uses. If doubts occur, they suggest exceptional circumstances (e.g., I doubt that this is my name because I have amnesia) (Wittgenstein 1972). Similarly, moreover, we don’t doubt that the step will be there as we step down, or that the mountain we see out of our window will disappear if we look away. If there is no reasonable explanation for such doubts, we might assume that the individual expressing doubts does not know the meaning of the words themselves, or is not rational in any everyday sense of the word.

By contrast, language games based in our pictures of the world, which often follow from our (social) scientific interpretations of the world--such as belief in the existence of the earth one hundred years ago, in the events of history, in the temperature at which water boils--always allow for doubts, mistakes, and even gestalt switches, although much less often for those at the “foundation” of our picture of the world, which “stand fast” because they are part of the very “scaffolding” of our thoughts (Wittgenstein 1972, #s 211, 234). In science, we could add the existence of subatomic particles--molecules, quarks, neutrinos, and so on--along with theories of relativity, which exist for us today in the way that the humors and gases or the four elements of earth, wind, fire

³ The following builds on discussions in Schmidt 2008, 2010b.

and water existed for the Ancients--at the very foundations of our scientific explanations of the world.

The experience games of everyday life, in other words, are so certain as not to be doubted; but picture games may always be doubted, although some may be more uncertain than others depending upon their place in the overall system of picture games. Moreover, while knowledge derived from picture games always allows for a radical conversion process, as in revolutionary changes in scientific paradigms à la Kuhn, experience games do not (see Schmidt 1986). Radical relativism, as a result, could be much more of a danger for picture games, in particular if they are far removed from the "scaffolding" of our own pictures of the world, than for experience games, which tend to be more universal. As Wittgenstein has noted elsewhere: "The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (1968:1:206). And although this need not mean that we will have words for everything, such as the Hopi Indian's understanding of time or the Eskimo's many words for snow (see Whorf 1956/1997), we can translate these into our own language and experience. This ensures a high degree of certainty not only for common behavior (knowing one's name) but also commonly experienced material realities--what we see, like mountains and buildings--even if their significance may be more uncertain for us depending upon where they fit against our pictures of the world. One could even argue that there are certain bases to human rationality that allow for universalism, as illustrated in Wittgenstein's (1968:2:xi, 223) famous observation: "if a lion could talk, we would not understand him." And it is also the case that if all ideas are "constructed," it is possible, although not easy, to construct international ideas about interests and norms--what is the modern notion of human rights about, after all, if not that (see Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999)?

In the social sciences, approaches based in historical and interpretive analytic frameworks tend to be closer to everyday experience in terms of the phenomena they seek to explain than the more systemic and lawlike social scientific frameworks, which produce explanations that are often closer to picture games. For example, in historical explanation, the "facts" about agents' experiences are usually not in dispute even if the interpretations are, and those facts are not likely to change radically even if there may be some question about which facts to take into account in the interpretation of events. By contrast, the "facts" deduced through the mathematical models of the economists--with their pictures of a world in which rational actors are in the business of rationally calculating their interests in order to maximize their utility--can vanish entirely, in particular when the models fail to predict, as in the massive financial market crash of 2007-2008. As Taleb (2007) has argued, all such probabilistic models mistakenly assume that this is a world of risk (read world of experience), and therefore predictable, rather than one of uncertainty, in which unpredictable "black swan" events happen with much greater regularity than probabilistic theories (pictures of the world) expect. The further complicating factor here, as Mackenzie (2006) argues with regard to performativity in financial markets, is that social agents employing probabilistic "pictures of the world" to

measure market performance actually alter the market (and the picture), because their models act as an “engine” transforming the environment, not a “camera” recording it. Note that where bankers went wrong is when they ignored what they knew from their everyday experience of lending, assessing the reliability of risk, credit-worthiness, and the likelihood of repayment over time to place their faith instead in probabilistic (picture of the world) models and packaged credit default swaps on loans they knew from everyday experience were major credit risks (Schmidt 2010b).

Even in the natural sciences, moreover, we can differentiate between knowledge based on pictures of the world and those closer to everyday experience. For example, changes in the theories of physics--say, from Newtonian mechanics to Einsteinian relativity--are very different from those in natural history--say between Linnaeus and Darwin. Whereas in physics the very nature of the phenomena described may change--from the elements of the Greeks to subatomic particles--much as in Kuhn’s (1970) duck-rabbit picture (first you see a duck, then a rabbit), they do not in natural history. An eagle remains an eagle for Darwin and Linnaeus. Only if the characterization of an eagle perched on a cliff turned into a “cleagle” would the change in explanation be similar (Schmidt 1988:184-85).

The distinction between matters of experience and pictures of the world, thus, is a crucial one for our discussion of epistemological questions related to knowledge and certainty, since it helps us avoid the risks of radical relativism. It suggests that social scientists’ explanations have varying degrees of certainty, depending on their objects of knowledge and explanation. It demonstrates that social agents in any given culture and time can generally understand other cultures and times based on common experiences through translation and interpretation, even if they may have greater difficulty with their pictures of the world. Finally, with regard to sentient agents, it shows that knowledge and certainty are collectively constructed within given institutional contexts. And for such collective construction, we need to examine more closely the range of discursive actions in which sentient agents engage.

DISCURSIVE INTERACTIONS: DISCOURSE COALITIONS, DISCURSIVE COMMUNITIES, AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

Discursive interactions generally fall into one of two domains in the public sphere: the policy sphere characterized by a “coordinative” discourse among policy actors engaged in creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining, and reaching agreement on policies, and the political sphere characterized by a “communicative” discourse between political actors and the public engaged in presenting, deliberating, arguing over, contesting, and legitimating those policy ideas (see Schmidt 2002a ch. 5, 2006 ch. 5, 2008).

The agents in the coordinative discourse are generally the actors involved in the policy process, including “policymakers” or government officials, policy consultants, experts, lobbyists, business and union leaders, and others. They generate policy ideas and

arguments with different degrees and kinds of influence. And they organize themselves in a variety of groupings as discursive communities in order to influence the generation, shaping, and adoption of policies, often activated by entrepreneurial or mediating actors and informed by experts.

“Discourse coalition” is arguably the most general way of conceiving of such discursive communities. Maarten Hajer (1993:45) uses the concept to combine the analysis of a “discursive production of reality,” or “social construct,” with the extra-discursive practices from which social constructs emerge and in which the groups of policy actors who construct the new social idea or narratives engage. He uses the concept of discourse coalitions in particular to illustrate how a social construct, in his case acid rain in Britain, came increasingly to be used by competing coalitions that sought to control the construction and implementation of acid rain policy in the country. Discourse coalitions are also used by Gerhard Lehmbruch to identify the policy actors who share ideas across extended periods of time, as in the rise of *ordo-liberalism* in Germany as well as the idea of a social market economy, developed in early postwar Germany by Alfred Müller-Armack, the entrepreneurial actor responsible for leading the discourse coalition that developed the arguments that convinced policy actors, political actors, and then the public of the necessity and appropriateness of this idea (Lehmbruch 2001).

The members of the discourse coalitions themselves need not share all the same ideas, beliefs, and goals, or to the same degree, in order to promote a common policy program. Instead, they may be united by agreement on certain policy objectives or the use of certain policy instruments. They may agree on the cognitive arguments to justify a policy program but disagree over aspects of the normative arguments to use in legitimization. They may agree on an overall policy program but disagree over the nature and range of its sectoral applications. Their interests may naturally be different, but they may nevertheless agree on the institutional arrangements to be set up to arbitrate among those interests (see Jobert 2003). Importantly, then, discourse coalitions are themselves engaged in constant argumentation in their efforts to develop the arguments that they hope policy actors will ultimately take as their own as they generate policies.

When discourse coalitions are conceived of mainly as linking actors on the basis of their shared ideas, they have also been called “epistemic communities” to call attention to the loosely connected transnational actors who hold the same cognitive and normative ideas about a common policy enterprise that they seek to promote (Haas 1992). Another subset of discourse coalitions are “advocacy coalitions,” a term that tends to be used for more closely connected individuals who don’t just share ideas but also have access to policymaking (Sabatier 1993). In addition, particular agents in discourse coalitions may themselves be cast as policy “entrepreneurs” (Kingdon 1984) or “mediators” (Jobert 1989; Muller 1995) who serve as catalysts for change as they articulate the ideas of the various discourse coalitions or of discursive communities more generally.

Discursive communities, including discourse coalitions, often generate their own information, although increasingly the technical experts to whom they turn are organized in think tanks, often separate from the discursive communities. Fischer (1993), for example, notes that in the United States, the Democratic Party first used policy analysts in think tanks as a way to legitimize their “new class liberal arguments” by disguising them as technocratic discourse, with cognitive arguments that, because they came from purportedly apolitical experts, were to supplant to “the everyday, less sophisticated opinions of the common citizen.” He then shows that the Republican discourse coalition went one better than their rival’s liberal-technocratic reform strategy, by politicizing expertise via the conservative, politically engaged think tanks that had been proliferating since the 1970s. Rich (2004) updates this with his own study of Washington-based think tanks, in which conservative think-tanks that produce unabashedly political and value-laden research have gotten a much bigger bang for their buck than more progressive think tanks, which seek to be (or at least to appear to be) more value-neutral and objective. Campbell and Pedersen (2010) have recently shown that a similar phenomenon has been developing in Europe, in which only in the past five years or so have think tanks proliferated in national capitals and in Brussels.

In the communicative discourse, the agents of change consist not only of the usual suspects: political leaders, elected officials, party members, policymakers, spin-doctors, and the like who act as “political entrepreneurs” as they attempt to form mass public opinion (Zaller 1992), engage the public in debates about the policies they favor (Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996), and win elections. They also include the media, interest groups acting in the specialized “policy forums” of organized interests (e.g., Rein and Schön 1994), public intellectuals, opinion makers, social movements, and even ordinary people through their everyday talk and argumentation, which can play an important role not just in the forum of “opinion-formation” but also in that of “will-formation” (Mansbridge 2009). In other words, all manner of discursive publics engaged in “communicative action” (Habermas 1989) may be involved, with communication going not only from the top down but also from the bottom up.

The spheres of coordinative policy construction and communicative policy legitimation are of course interconnected in terms of both the substantive content as well as the interactive process. To begin with, the policy ideas in the coordinative discourse--often more heavily weighted toward cognitive justification--are generally translated by political actors into language and arguments accessible to the general public as part of a communicative discourse that also adds normative legitimation, to ensure that the policy and programmatic ideas resonate with the philosophical frames of the polity (see Schmidt 2006:255-7). The process itself is one in which the coordinative discourse can be seen to prepare the ground for the communicative. In the United Kingdom, for example, the ground was prepared for Thatcher’s monetarist paradigm-change before her election, by the ideas developed in a coordinative discourse consisting of a small group of the “converted” from the Conservative party, financial elites, and the financial press (Hall 1993). But Thatcher herself was the political entrepreneur who put these ideas into more

accessible language through a communicative discourse to the general public, as we saw above (Schmidt 2002a ch. 6).

This said, the coordinative and communicative discourses don't always connect with one another. Policy ideas may remain in the policy sphere, either because the public might not approve, as has sometimes been the case of more progressive policies, or because the public is not interested, as in the case of highly technical reforms of banking and finance. But there may also be cases where politicians argue for one thing in the coordinative policy sphere, another in the communicative political sphere, as has often been the case with the European Union, where the perceived democratic deficit is due in part to the blame shifting of national political leaders who agree to one thing in the coordinative discourse of the Council of Ministers but, fearful of negative public reaction, say something very different in the communicative discourse to the general public (see Schmidt 2006 ch. 1, 2008).

We still have a problem, however, because this discussion remains focused primarily on the discourse of elites, whether in a top-to-top coordinative discourse or in a top-down communicative discourse. Mostly, however, in addition to any formalized, elite processes of coordinative consultation and whatever the elite-led processes of communicative deliberation, the public has a whole range of ways of arguing about and responding to elite-produced policies. The media, for example, are often key to framing the terms of the communicative discourse, creating narratives, arguments, and images that become determinant of interpretations of a given set of events. In the case of the financial market crises, we could mention the Barings bank debacle, when the British bank spectacularly collapsed as a result of the unauthorized trading of Nick Leeson. This crisis was personalized in terms of a "rogue trader" as opposed to being generalized as a deeper critique of the internationalized banking system (Hudson and Martin 2010), just as Martha Stewart became the poster child for the early 2000s financial crisis, and Bernie Madoff for the 2008 crisis.

Social movements are also significant forces in a "bottom-up" communicative discourse. Scholars who focus on "contentious politics" demonstrate the many ways in which leaders, social movement activists, along with everyday actors spur change through ideas that contest the status quo, conveyed by discourse that persuades others to join in protest, which in turn generates debate and argumentation (e.g., Aminzade et al. 2001; Della Porta 2009). Charlotte Epstein's (2008) account of how "Moby Dick" became "Moby Doll" is a clear demonstration of the way in which social movements coalesced against the whaling industry and, determined to save the whale, were able to change ideas through a communicative discourse that led to radically altered policies negotiated in the trans-national coordinative sphere.

Social movements are best categorized as part of the communicative discourse because they are at least initially removed from the policy world, and rely on pressure from the outside, through media coverage of their protests and actions, rather than from

the inside, through policy influence. But often, as social movements develop, the outside communicative practices are accompanied by inside coordinative ones. In some cases, as social movements become institutionalized, particularly the case with regard to the environment or women's issues, the coordinative discourse with policy actors becomes predominant, and the kind of activity engaged in makes the social movement one in name only except for the moments when a mobilizing issue comes up, and the social movement returns to protest and argumentation in the streets.

Finally, the general public of citizens and voters to whom this communicative discourse is directed also contribute to it and, thereby, spur policy change. They do this as members of civil society, not just through grass-roots organizing, social mobilization, and demonstrations, but also as members of "mini-publics" in citizen juries, issues forums, deliberative polls, and the like (see Goodin and Dryzek 2006) as well as more simply as members of the electorate, whose voice is heard as the subjects of opinion polls, surveys, focus groups, as well as, of course, as voters--where actions speak even louder than verbal arguments. Not to be neglected in this, however, are also the everyday practices of ordinary people, even in cases where ideas are unarticulated, and change is individual, subtle and slow, as they articulate their protest through sanctioning politicians in votes or by not voting at all (Seabrooke 2007).

THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS AND DISCOURSE

Institutional context also matters. If sentient (thinking and speaking) agents are the drivers of change, and their ideas (what they think and argue about what to do) and discourse (what they say about what to do) are the vehicles of change, then the institutional context is the setting within which their ideas have meaning, their discourses have communicative force, and their collective actions make a difference (if they do what they say they think about what to do).

Three elements--ideas, discourse, and institutions--all need to be considered in terms of the institutional context. That context is first of all the "meaning context" in which ideas, arguments and discourse make sense, such that speakers "get it right" in terms of the ideational rules or rationality of a given setting, by addressing their remarks to the "right" audiences at the "right" times in the "right" ways. This is why even where a term may be disseminated internationally, when it is taken up nationally, it is likely to be used very differently, given differences in meaning context and all that that entails in terms of culture--economic, political, and social. Ideas and discourse about globalization, for example, are very different from country to country, even between countries with seemingly similar liberal public philosophies like the United Kingdom and Ireland, where leaders sought to present it as a challenge to rise to (Hay and Smith 2005), let alone between these countries and a country like France, in which leaders argue more about the virtues of resisting globalization (Schmidt 2007).

The context, however, may also refer to the "forum" within which the discourse proceeds, following a particular logic of communication. Thus, for example, Stephen

Toulmin (1958) shows that in any given “forum of argumentation” or discourse, the procedural rules create a common set of understandings even when speakers lack trust or consensus, as in the adversarial arguments that take place in a courtroom. Moreover, in international negotiations where the rules are not preestablished and the “forum” is an ad hoc creation dependent upon the players and the circumstances, prenegotiations are the context within which the rules of discursive interaction are set, even though the actual process involves other kinds of discursive interactions outside the negotiating context, such as with domestic constituencies and other international actors (Stein 1989). Here we could also mention differences as understood by the *référentiel* school, between the forums in which deliberative argumentation is more open by contrast with the arenas in which bargaining is the focus (Jobert 1989). Finally, formal institutions--as elaborated in historical institutionalist explanation--also constitute the institutional context, and give shape to discursive interactions. Formal arrangements affect *where* discourse matters, by establishing who talks to whom about what, where and when. For example, although all countries have both coordinative and communicative discourses, one or the other tends to be more important due to the configuration of their political institutions. Political institutional setting helps explain why simple polities like France and the United Kingdom, where authority tends to be concentrated in the executive and reform agendas are generally decided by a restricted elite, tend to have more elaborate communicative discourses to the public--so as to legitimate those reforms--than in compound polities like Germany and Italy, where authority tends to be more dispersed. These countries tend to have more elaborate coordinative discourses among policy actors--so as to reach agreement among the much wider range of actors involved in arguing about and negotiating reform (Schmidt 2000, 2002a, 2006).

The formal institutional context, however, is not neutral with regard to its effect on politics. But one cannot therefore simply map power onto position, as is often done in rationalist and historical institutionalist analyses that assume we know an agent’s interests and power to serve those interests if we know their position (Schmidt 2010a). In discursive institutionalism, by contrast, there is always the recognition that ideas and discourse can also provide power, as actors gain power from their ideas at the same time they give power to their ideas (see also Wodak 2009:35-36). This results, for example, when agents are able to “set the agenda” as “policy entrepreneurs” who build coalitions for reform or as “political entrepreneurs” who gain public support for reform (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Moreover, actors can gain power from their ideas even where they may lack the power of position--as in the case of discourse coalitions that manage to have their own social construct adopted, as in the case of acid rain (Hajer 1993) or of social movements in which their arguments become predominant, as in the case whales (Epstein 2008).

But actors also gain (or lose) power to the extent that their ideas, arguments and discourse have meaning for their audience. Because power itself derives not only from position, meaning actors’ ability to wield power, but also purpose, actors’ ideas and discourse about how they can and should wield that power may reinforce or undermine

the power they derive from their position, depending upon the responses of their audience to their stated purposes. This is the essence of political leadership.

Ideational power can also come from a position *qua* position, however, since ideas and values infuse the exercise of power and perceptions of position (Lukes 2005). Theories about the structures and practices of elite ideational domination abound among continental philosophers and macro-sociologists (e.g., Bourdieu 1994; Foucault 2000; Gramsci 1971). But as we have already seen, the importance of discourse means that regardless of the power of the background ideational context, in which people may very well be socialized into a certain manner of thinking and arguing through elite-dominated ideas, foreground discursive abilities enable those self-same people to reason about and critique those ideational structures. But this is not to suggest that therefore simply recognizing, arguing about, and thereby seeking to delegitimize the power of elites' ideas necessarily changes the structures of power and the power of position. Structural power is also the power not to listen.

CONCLUSION

In discursive institutionalism, then, we focus attention not only on the content of the ideas and discourse, which comes in a wide variety of forms and types at different levels and different degrees of change but also on the interactive processes of discursive argumentation. The “sentient” agents in such processes engage in coordinative policy discourses and communicative political discourses that may go in many directions, whether from top to bottom, bottom to top, or may even stay at the bottom. The institutional context in which they interact is also important. It is constituted not only by the meaning-based logics of communication in any given setting that agents navigate through their background ideational abilities and maintain or change through their foreground discursive abilities. That context is also defined by their (in)formal institutions, since power and position also matter in terms of ideas and discourse as well as structural constraints.

But once we have constituted the field that discursive institutionalists occupy, what is next? Learning from one another as well as debating and argumentatively contesting one another's conceptions of ideas and discourse. First in line could be my own ontological and epistemological arguments, such as the argument that relativism need not be a problem so long as we recognize that certainty is split between things we can't really doubt involving matters of experience, and those we can always doubt, although we often don't, involving our pictures of the world. Beyond this, however, it would also be useful to engage with other social scientific approaches--in particular the other neoinstitutionalisms--in order to see to what extent their results can provide useful background information for the discursive institutionalist enterprise, and what needs to be contested. In this vein, it is interesting to consider the ways in which recent developments in rational choice institutionalism on collective choice, in particular in experimental political psychology regarding 'framing effects,' tie in nicely with discursive institutionalist analysis, showing the importance, for example, of communication and

deliberation for ensuring more 'rationality' in collective choice at the same time that it also demonstrates the limits of deliberative effectiveness (see Schmidt 2010a, pp. 18-19). Most importantly, I developed discursive institutionalism not to make it stand alone, but rather to demonstrate that it, too, is a key component in the social sciences' methodological toolbox.

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