

**SPEAKING OF CHANGE:
WHY DISCOURSE IS KEY TO THE DYNAMICS OF POLICY TRANSFORMATION**

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There is a Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times.” Or, to be more precise, there is a Western saying that there is a Chinese curse, since no one can actually authenticate it. The closest we can come to it is the Chinese proverb, “It's better to be a dog in a peaceful time than to be a man in a chaotic period.” As citizens today, we are all cursed with living in such a time of chaos, given the aftermath of September 11, climate change, and the economic crisis. But as social scientists, we are doubly so cursed, because the mainstream approaches—the three neo-institutionalisms of rational choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism—leave us completely unprepared to explain these ‘interesting times,’ since they have mainly been focused on continuities based on rationalist interests, path dependent history, and cultural framing. Put more bluntly, these approaches are better adapted to dogs in peaceful times than real human beings.

Fortunately, however, there are a number of non-mainstream approaches that can serve to explain the interesting times, as well as the dull ones. I group these under what I call ‘discursive institutionalism,’ as the fourth new institutionalism.

‘Discursive institutionalism’ is the term I use to encompass a wide range of ‘interpretive’ approaches in the social sciences that take ideas and discourse seriously and, in so doing, help explain the dynamics of change (and continuity). It has its origins in my desire to give a name to a very rich and diverse set of ways of explaining political and social reality which has 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.

With this naming exercise I seek to call attention to the significance of approaches that theorize not only about the substantive content of ideas but also of discourse. And with discourse, I mean not just its theorization as the representation or embodiment of ideas but also as the interactive processes by and through which ideas are generated and communicated. The institutionalism in the name, moreover, underlines the importance of considering both ideas and discourse in institutional context.

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, and contest one another’s ideas from epistemological, ontological, methodological, and empirical 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.

The problem with the older neo-institutionalisms is not simply that they give no space to ideas and discourse but that in so doing they are unable to explain the dynamics of institutional change (and continuity). This is the result of underlying premises that emphasize continuity by positing institutions as in stable equilibria, whether because of the fixed preferences of ‘rational’ actors in stable institutions, the self-reinforcing path-dependencies of historically developing institutions, or the cultural frames and norms of ‘social’ agents. Discursive institutionalism, by contrast, takes a more dynamic view of change (and continuity) by concentrating on the substantive ideas developed and conveyed by ‘sentient’ agents in discursive interactions that inform their policy-oriented actions which in turn serve to alter (or maintain) ‘institutions’ (see Schmidt 2008, 2010).

To say this, however, is not to suggest that the many approaches covered by the discursive institutionalist moniker all take the same approach to change. Much the contrary, since discursive institutionalist approaches differ on questions such as the timing of change, whether crisis-driven or more incremental; on the ideational and discursive content of change; on the agents of change, whether elites or ordinary people, and on their discursive interactions, whether in the policy or political sphere; and on the context of change, involving not only the meaning-based frameworks of communication within which agents exchange ideas through discourse but also the structural frameworks of power and position.

In what follows, I seek to map the field while exploring the range of ways in which discursive institutionalists deal with the dynamics of change (and continuity). In so doing, I examine in greater detail the theoretical issues related to the timing of change, the content of change, and the processes of change via agents in different discursive spheres in institutional context. I will show that only by understanding discourse not only as substantive ideas but also as interactive processes can we fully demonstrate its transformational role in policy change. Speaking of change, in other words, rather than just thinking it, is key to explaining the actions that lead to major policy transformations.

THE TIMING OF POLICY CHANGE

Discursive institutionalists tend to divide between a crisis-driven view of policy change through ‘paradigm-shifts’ and more incremental approaches to policy change in ideas and discourse over time. These divergent views of change tend to map out differently on the three different levels of generality for ideas, including individual policy ideas, policy programs, and underlying public philosophies. Generally speaking, policy ideas are seen as changing much more rapidly than programmatic ideas, and both much more quickly than the philosophical ideas underpinning them, whether the change is seen as revolutionary or evolutionary. Setting out the differences helps us understand the different ways in which policy transformation may be defined as well as differentiated in terms of the pace of ideational change.

Although historical institutionalists are also concerned with the timing of change, and divide between crisis-driven and incremental approaches, they have greater difficulty explaining the dynamics of change as a result of their focus on historical rules and regularities. For crisis-focused historical institutionalists, critical moments are

unexplainable times, as exogenous shocks followed by ‘locked-in’ path dependency through mechanistic processes of ‘positive reinforcement’ and feedback loops (e.g., Pierson 2000, Mahoney 2000). For crisis-focused discursive institutionalists, in contrast, such critical moments are objects of explanation, in which agents’ constructive ideational and discursive engagement with events become the basis for future ideational (re) constructions and actions. Moreover, although incrementalist historical institutionalists provide a more endogenous view of change than their crisis-focused counterparts, they tend more to describe *how* such change occurs through processes of layering, reinterpretation, conversion, and drift rather than to explain *why* it occurs the *way* it occurs (Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005). Incrementalist discursive institutionalists are more focused on explaining the *why* and the *wherefore* of incremental change by reference to agents’ own ideas and discourse about how they go about layering, reinterpreting, or converting those institutions.

This is in no way to suggest, however, that one can always explain change through ideas and discourse since ‘stuff happens,’ and because actors often act without having ideas about what they are doing, let alone talking about it, until after they actually do it (Schmidt 2008, 2010a). Importantly, however, once things happen and actors act, they do develop ideas and discourse about what happened and what they did, which forms the basis of their explanations of change, whether crisis-driven or incremental.

Policy Ideas in Rapid Change

In the extensive literature on policy change, policy analysts have long tended to portray policy ideas as changing rapidly, in particular when ‘windows of opportunity’ for new policies 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). This could be interpreted as implying that the opening of a window of opportunity—read an event or crisis—is mainly what drives policy change, and that ideas have little effect until a window opens up. But one could just as well argue that new ideas ‘open windows,’ creating new opportunities for change; or even that windows open only when events are ideationally constructed as opportunities for change.

This suggests that the process of ideational change (and continuity) is more complicated than the simple formula that policies change when windows of opportunity open. This is why the events that create opportunities for new policy ideas need to be considered separately from the process that serves to explain when ideas for policy change take hold. One can think of such a process in terms of a range of mediating factors that are themselves dependent upon actors’ ideational constructions. These include, first, the problem that opens up the window of opportunity itself, whether event-spurred or ideationally-inspired, and whether that problem is perceived as requiring policy change or not, thereby constituting a window at all; second, the policy legacies that the new problem challenges, and whether ideas about potential solutions mesh with long-standing policy practice; third, the policy preferences of actors, to change their policy legacies or not, whether or not they mesh with policy practice, and, thereby, see the problem as a window for new ideas or not; fourth, the political institutional capacity of actors to change their policy legacies if they perceive a problem and have a preference to resolve it, which in turn depends upon their discursive ability to persuade relevant

actors as well as the public that change is necessary and appropriate (see Schmidt 2002, Ch. 2, 2003, 2004).

The policy ideas discussed here may change rapidly, then, depending upon policy problems, legacies, preferences, capacity, and discourse. Often, however, a given policy is part of a more general set of ‘programmatically ideas,’ in which case policy change is also linked to the trajectory of change of the policy program that underpins such policy ideas. And here, whether the program changes abruptly or slowly over time takes us into another set of debates.

Programmatic Ideas from Paradigm-Shifts to Incremental Change

At the level of policy programs, events are also at the forefront of explanations of ideational change, in particular where change in programmatic ideas is portrayed as crisis-driven and revolutionary. Such change may be understood as occurring at moments of ‘great transformation,’ in periods of uncertainty when agents’ old institutions have failed and there is a perceived need for new ones (Blyth 2002). Or they may be cast in terms of ‘paradigm-shifts,’ building on Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) seminal work in the philosophy of science (e.g., Majone 1989; Jobert 1989; Hall 1993; Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5, n/a), in which change consists of the revolutionary shift from one policy program with a single over-arching idea to the next. Not all views of programmatic ideas involve such paradigmatic or crisis-driven ideational shifts, however. Many scholars instead see slow shifts in ‘programmatically beliefs’ over time as incremental steps in adaptation and adjustment to changing realities (e.g., Berman 2006).

Arguably the most influential account of revolutionary change in programmatic ideas is that of Peter Hall (1993) in his application of Kuhn’s paradigm theory to the switch from Keynesian to monetarist macroeconomic policy in the UK in the late 1970s to mid 1980s. Hall identifies ‘third order’ change as constituting revolutionary paradigm-shifts in instruments, objectives, and core ideas in response to anomalies produced by events that don’t mesh with the paradigm’s explanations. Third order change is when, using the vocabulary of policy analysts, we would find a ‘window of opportunity’ for major policy change. But, going beyond the policy analyst’s more piecemeal view of policy change, it is when we would expect to see a radical shift in an entire policy sector to a new ‘paradigm’ with very different goals, objectives, instruments, and set of core ideas. Here, the conversion process itself could be seen as radical and incommensurable, much like Kuhn’s (1970) gestalt-switch image of the duck-rabbit, in which in the first instance an image looks like a duck, in the next the same image looks like a rabbit, with no way of switching back.

But although this does well in defining *what* constitutes paradigm change, it does not tell us *when* it occurs. The question is: How do we know a paradigm shift when we see one? The concept of paradigm-shift tells us little about what constitutes the defining moment(s) of transformation in paradigm change. The ‘switching point’ or critical juncture often appears so only in hindsight, looking back at a process that may be much more gradual or incremental. And it leaves open the question as to whether the paradigm shift is consecrated when the problems are recognized as such, when new policy ideas are proposed, when policy actors put those ideas into practice, when the public comes to

accept them, or even when the opposition comes to power and does not reverse them (see Schmidt n/a). With Hall's (1993) case of Thatcher's paradigm-shift to monetarist policy, was it when she developed the monetarist ideas, when she was elected with a campaign focused on these ideas, when she imposed the policy, or when the public came to accept and believe in the policy?

Moreover, depending upon the amount of time one accords to paradigm change, any major change could be called a paradigm shift if in the end we see a transformation from one cohesive set of ideas to another. This leaves open the possibility that a paradigm's development over time may involve incremental change rather than abrupt conversions of all components in an ideational system at any one time. But can this still be called 'paradigm' change? And what if revolutionary change in ideas occurs not just without any abrupt conversion process but also without any clear idea behind the change, as Palier (2005) shows in France's largely unnoticed 'third-order revolutionary change' in its welfare state policy on pensions. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) similarly illustrate the difficulties of sticking to a formulaic definition of paradigm change in the case of the US federal system, in which constant incremental shifts in ideas about policies, as competing policy actors attempt to set the agenda, are accompanied by infrequent revolutionary change, with 'punctuated equilibria' in policy programs, when political actors succeed in agenda-setting by shifting the problem-definition to their policy ideas through image and venue manipulation.

This raises a further question about the extent to which any single overarching paradigm, or even a single 'frame of reference' or *référentiel* (Jobert 1989; Muller 1995), is dominant at any one time or over time. In the policy arena, there is rarely only one predominant paradigm, since there are ordinarily other minority (opposition) programs waiting in the wings, contesting the validity of the dominant program (Schmidt 2002, pp. 220-5). So if we are to hold to the concept of the *référentiel*, it might be best to use it only when speaking of policy sectors in which no rival *référentiels* are present, and in which change is a process in which there is a shift to another monopolistic view, as in the case of French agricultural policy from the 1960s to the 1970s (Muller and Jobert 1987). As Genieys and Smyrl (2008, p. 26) note, however, this kind of ideational hegemony over an entire policy sector may be a thing of the past even for France, given increasing diversity and conflict in views in any given sector. Moreover, whether or not there are one or more 'paradigms' or *référentiels* in a given policy sector, there are often many different, even conflicting, ideas embedded within any given policy program, since any program is the result of conflicts as well as compromises among actors who bring different ideas to the table. Paradigms, after all, are the product of policy as well as political discussion, deliberation, and contestation about principles as well as interests; and they represent the outcomes of policy negotiation, electoral bargaining, and political compromise.

This in turn raises questions about the paradigm in policy formulation, when a set of ideas about what to do is agreed, as opposed to policy implementation. When ideas are put into practice, many possible disconnects can emerge between the original ideas in the policy program and the actions taken in its name, which may be very different from

that intended, not to mention the unexpected and unintended consequences of those actions (see Schmidt 2002, pp. 225-30). Here, in fact, we might usefully borrow concepts from historical institutionalist approaches (e.g. Streeck and Thelen 2005) to consider the ideational problem of ‘drift’ as the ideas attached to the original program seem to fade, as new ideas are ‘layered’ onto the old to generate new kinds of actions under the aegis of the policy program, as new ideas serve to re-interpret the program or even to convert actors to other programs.

In the end, then, although the concept of paradigm-shift may serve nicely as a metaphor for radical ideational change, it offers little guidance as to how, why, or even when the shift takes place, and it cannot account for incremental change (Schmidt n/a). This is not to suggest that we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, we should recognize that ideas matter in periods of stability as well as in periods of crisis, although they may matter differently (see Blyth 2010). It is equally important to add that even though a given ‘paradigm’ may explain or predict less and less of what is going on, social agents often nonetheless hold onto those ideas until a major crisis hits—as in the case of the current economic crisis. In other words, change in ideas occurs all the time, not only incrementally but also in big-bang paradigmatic ways, depending on what actors themselves think.

But this then takes us back from questions about change in ideas to ones about continuity, and how to assess gradual change over time. Historical institutionalists talk not just about the path-dependence of institutional practices but also that of ideas, in which there is little alteration in the core ideas over time (e.g., Pierson 2004, p. 39). For discursive institutionalists, the challenge is to find less deterministic and more dynamic ways of thinking about continuity that may nevertheless allow for a lot of change and incremental development.

A useful way of thinking about such ‘continuity through change’ would be in terms of Merrien’s (1997) concept of ‘imprints of the past’ (*l’empreinte des origines*), with which he seeks to explain the framing influence of the foundational principles of welfare states on their subsequent trajectories. Another way to think about such continuity through change would be Rothstein’s (2005, pp. 168-98) use of the concept of ‘collective memories’ to explain the long-term survival of Sweden’s peaceful and collaborative industrial relations system which, although established at a critical juncture, changed over time with people’s changing views of institutional performance. Further ways of thinking about this are in terms of traditions, as in the study of the British political tradition by (Bevir and Rhodes 2003), conventions, or more dynamically, as ways of remembering and forgetting, as in the case of gender inequality and how rules get interpreted and reinterpreted through conscious and unconscious practices of memory (Leach and Lowndes 2007).

Philosophical Ideas and Slow Change

Programmatic ideas are different from the deeper and even longer lasting philosophical ideas. These are generally seen not as the products of expert knowledge and confined largely to the policy sphere but rather are part of the political sphere, as “broad concepts tied to values and moral principles...represented in political debates in

symbols and rhetoric” (Weir 1992, p. 169) or as ‘ideologies’ (Berman 1998, p. 21). Such philosophical ideas generally underlie policy and programmatic ideas, whether seen as ‘public philosophies’ (Hecló 1986; Weir 1992, p. 207, Campbell 1998), ‘public sentiments’ (Campbell 2004), ‘deep core’ (Sabatier and Jenkins 1993); worldviews and ‘*Weltanschauung*,’ or ‘global frames of reference’ (*référentiels globaux*) (Jobert 1992; Muller 1995, 2005) which frame the policies and programs through appeal to a deeper core of organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge (in the sense of *Wissenschaft*) and society.

This level of ideas is not always so readily separable from the previous one. This is because a programmatic idea can be so widely accepted by the society at large that it comes to resemble an uncontested public philosophy. By the same token, however, a society may have no generally accepted public philosophy, such that core principles are as contested as programmatic ideas. In Germany from the postwar period forward, for example, the ‘paradigm’ of the ‘social market economy’ was so much a part of the fabric of everyone’s ideas about how the market did and should operate that it acted like a basic philosophy shared by left and right alike (Lehmbruch 2001). This is in contrast with France from the postwar period to the early 1980s, where left and right differed in public philosophies (see Schmidt 2002, Chs. 5 & 6). Further confusing matters is that the same concept may be used to convey different level of ideas, as when Keynesianism is used to describe particular economic policies in use in different countries (Hall 1989), as a paradigm with a particular set of problem solutions, policy instruments, and objectives that was superceded (Hall 1993), and as a progressive philosophy (Blyth 2002, 2008).

In considering philosophical ideas, the danger is to assume that there is never any change at all, such that ‘*plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose.*’ This view would mesh with sociological institutionalist approaches that emphasize cultural framing, such that public philosophies are seen to ‘frame’ all action. But although public philosophies may for the most part be slow to change, at any one time may seem all-defining, and are unlikely to undergo rapid, revolutionary paradigm change, significant change does and can occur. Historians have probably been the best to demonstrate not only how public philosophies are created and recreated over time, as Lynn Hunt (1984) showed with the reinvention of the meaning of the French revolution, but also how they are maintained as well as changed, and as Pierre Nora (1989) demonstrated in state institutionalization of collective memories through symbols and monuments as ‘*lieux de memoires*,’ or ‘realms of memory,’ in efforts to build a sense of national identity. Political philosophers concerned with intellectual history like Quentin Skinner (1988) have also shown how philosophical ideas may shift in response to legitimation crises in political society, when a philosopher successfully rewrites the old political conventions or ideology and recharacterizes political action in order to come up with new conceptual frameworks, often by reweaving past communal memories and understandings into something new and different which nevertheless continues to resonate with the population. But political scientists have also shown how basic public philosophies about the role of government can also change, in the UK, as Blair built on Thatcher’s neo-liberal legacy but nevertheless introduced a more ‘steering state’ (Moran 2003), and even in France, where

a much more limited and less interventionist role for government has become accepted by government and society (Jobert 1994; Schmidt 1996).

But all of this raises further questions about the ideational content of policy change, whether changing at critical junctures or more incrementally over time as policy, program, or philosophy.

THE CONTENT OF POLICY CHANGE

Much of the political science literature on the content of policy change tends to be empirically focused, and speaks more in terms of ideas than discourse. In comparative politics and public policy, where theorization occurs, it tends to center on how to trace empirically the ideas central to the processes of transformation (e.g., Berman 1998, 2006) or to demonstrate their causal influence (e.g., Parsons 2003; Schmidt 2003). This literature also tends to be more focused on cognitive ideas that provide guidelines for political action and serve to justify policies and programs by speaking to their interest-based logic and necessity (see Hall 1993; Sural 1995; Muller 1995; Schmidt 2002, 2008) than on normative ideas that attach values to political action and serve to legitimize the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness, often with regard to underlying public philosophies (see March and Olsen 1989; Schmidt 2000, 2002, pp. 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. For more philosophically-based analysis of change in the content of ideas, however, one could turn to post-modernist or post-structuralist approaches to policy change following discourse analyses that build on the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Laclau and Mouffe.

All such approaches tend to see ideas in policy change as coming not only at different levels—policy, program, or philosophy—but also in different types—cognitive and normative—and in a wide variety of forms that should be understood not simply as the shape taken by ‘ideas’ *per se* but in terms of how they are expressed through as well as embedded in and embodied by discourse. The form taken by ideas and discourse may be narratives or discourses that shape understandings of events (e.g., Roe 1994; Hajer 1995, 2003); 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); ‘frames of reference’ that orient entire policy sectors (Jobert 1992; Muller 1995, 2005); ‘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, Stavrakakis); or ‘argumentative practices’ at the center of the policy process (Fisher 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 upon which people act (Stone 1988).

Any one concept, moreover, may contain a range of meanings or ‘strategic ideas,’ as Nicolas Jabko (2006, ch. 3) shows in the case of European market integration, in which the market was used at one and the same time as a constraint in the financial arena, a norm in the energy sector, a space in regional economic development, and as a talisman representing a new source of discipline in Economic and Monetary Union. The discourse, moreover, may intersperse technical and scientific arguments with more generally-accessible narratives to generate compelling stories about the causes of current problems, what needs to be done to remedy them, and how they fit with the underlying values of the society (e.g., Roe 1994; Hajer 1995). Thus, for example, the ideas in Thatcher’s neo-liberal paradigm were articulated through a discourse that combined cognitive, specialist arguments about the disastrous economic effects of neo-Keynesianism, and the necessity of reform because of TINA (there is no alternative), with a normative narrative about the benefits of thrift and hard work, which she linked to Victorian values and illustrated through the experience of her grocer father (Schmidt 2002, p. 215, 2008).

In the comparative politics and public policy literature, empirical approaches to the ideational content of change tend to trace the changing details of agents’ concepts about political, economic, and social reality over time. This is done mainly through qualitative comparative historical analyses although quantitative content analyses are also frequent. Where theorization about ideas occurs, it tends to consider, for example, the ways in which ideas ‘trap’ or capture agents. These may be rhetorical traps (Schimmelpfenig 2001) or ideational ones that agents find themselves bound to follow, like it or not, as Craig Parsons (2003) shows for French policy toward the EU, as leader after leader, however resistant to the EU before election, finds himself constrained by the institutionalized ideas of his predecessors. Alternatively, empirical theories consider the ways in which different cognitive ideas are used to appeal to interests or normative ideas to legitimate (see Schmidt 2010). Comparative political economists of advanced welfare states (e.g., Palier 2007; Bonoli 2000; Häuserman 2008), for example, highlight the importance of cognitive ideas in the explanation of the successful negotiation of social policy reform in countries like Switzerland, Germany, and France, in which such ideas served to balance perceptions of positive and negative interest-based effects. But normative ideas also matter, since we cannot explain the successes—or failures—of welfare state reform efforts without considering the role of discourses about the normative legitimacy of reform, and not just its cognitive necessity (Schmidt 2000). In France, contrast Prime Minister Juppé’s dismal failure to impose public sector pension reform without any normative legitimizing discourse in 1995, which was greeted by paralyzing strikes, with President Sarkozy’s success twelve years later, in which he legitimated eliminating special privileges for public sector workers by reference to long-standing Republican principles of equality (Schmidt 2007, 2009).

In international relations, studies of ideational change tend to be more theoretically oriented than the comparative politics and public policy specialists. They often build on the work of sociological institutionalists, to theorize about the mechanisms of change in terms of emulation (imitation), learning and competition dynamics (Dobbin et al. 2007) or on mechanisms of diffusion, dissemination, and transmission belts for

ideas via discourse. Thus, for example, competitiveness concerns arising from processes of market integration can be analyzed not only in terms of the domestication process of European market integration, as noted above, but also in the diffusion of market ideas internationally (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007). The discourse of globalization and competitiveness can also be a potent ideational weapon for policymakers whose goal is to replace statist paradigms with neo-liberal ones (Hay, 2001).

Other approaches take us deeper into the theorization of the content of ideational change. In public administration, Bevir and Rhodes (2003) base their theory of incremental change around ‘webs of beliefs’ that over time constitute political traditions that are (re) created through individuals’ narratives and storylines about how what they are doing fits with the tradition even as they alter it, while change results from the ways in which people hook new understandings on to aspects of their existing beliefs (Bevir (1999, pp. 235-6). Carstensen (2011a) builds on this emphasis on the different elements in a ‘web of related elements of meaning’ while adding insights from Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 112), such as their notion of central ‘nodal points’ vs. other more marginal elements in ideas, to point to the ways in which change may occur, as meanings shift by changing the ‘weight’ in a web of meaning. He uses the case of the UK as provided by Bevir (2005) to show that New Labour was able to change the approach to work and welfare by first integrating the Conservatives’ emphasis on individual responsibility and duty as ‘individualization’ into their own vision of an active labour market policy and second by shifting the conception of the public service from the Conservatives’ attempt to increase efficiency through privatization and liberalization to one focused on joined-up government and networks of trust between the public and the private sector.

The most developed approaches to theorizing change in ideational content are those of discourse analysts who build on the work of Foucault, Bourdieu and Laclau and Mouffe. The theoretical concepts of the various discourse analysis schools—once translated from the sometimes difficultly accessible and internally referential language—can provide great value-added 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 (1966, 1969) can offer insights into how to investigate the ‘archeology’ 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 n/a). 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; the ‘logics of equivalence’ that forge common concepts to overcome particular differences, as in Mexican social movements’ discourse of ‘the people’ that enabled them to overcome internal ideational divisions by seeing themselves as ‘the oppressed’; or the ‘logics of difference’ which separate out ‘bad’ ideational elements, as when reference to ‘the transition’ in Romania entailed new understandings

of ‘market’ and ‘privatization’ (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000). This is, in short, the way in which different conceptual elements in ideas are combined or recombined in ways to make new ideas acceptable.

THE AGENTS OF POLICY CHANGE

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, and the way in which ideas conveyed by agents through discourse lead to action. But discourse also cannot be considered on its own, since it requires agents who articulate and communicate their ideas in exchanges that may involve discussion, deliberation, negotiation, and contestation. In policy change, moreover, 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, the political sphere characterized by a ‘communicative’ discourse between political actors and the public engaged in presenting, contesting, deliberating, and legitimating those policy ideas (see Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5, 2006, Ch. 5, 2008).

Sentient Agents

The agents of policy change can be defined as ‘sentient’ (thinking and speaking) agents who generate and deliberate about ideas through discursive interactions that lead to collective action. In other words, thinking, saying, and doing are all equally important for explaining the driving forces of policy change. This said, sometimes agents act without saying what they are doing and thinking. Sometimes they say what they are doing but this is in contradiction with what they are actually doing and, maybe, thinking—since they may not be thinking at all as they act. In short, the interrelationship of these three elements of thinking, saying, and doing is often difficult to gauge. This helps explain why rational choice institutionalist scholars often prefer to look at what ‘rational’ (calculating) agents do and deduce what they are thinking from that, dismissing all ‘saying’ as cheap talk, in favor of more ‘parsimonious’ explanation, since instrumental action ‘speaks more loudly than words.’ But in so doing, rational choice institutionalists risk attributing to actors what they themselves think, which is often instrumental, and they thereby miss out on the complexities of human action. Discursive institutionalists instead seek to account for that complexity, by teasing out the ideas behind the action as well as the discourse. They do this mainly through empirical evaluation, although such evaluation can be informed by many different theoretical approaches to the role of sentient agents in policy change.

Among scholars who have taken the ‘ideational turn’ in comparative politics, Daniel Beland (2009) suggests that sentient agents use ideas to identify their interests, to construct their policies, and to legitimize them. Discourse analysts would go further to argue that they use ideas to dominate or to create ‘hegemony,’ so much so that we sometimes lose any sense of agency at all where ‘agents’ are portrayed as dominated by powerful ideas (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The ‘interpretive’ approach tends to suggest

more dynamism in agents' use of ideas, by focusing on the continual reinterpretation and creative reworking of elements in 'webs of meaning' (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Sociologists like Ann Swidler (1986) also see agents in a constant process of engagement with ideas, but as '*bricoleurs*' who handle the complexity of information through 'schemas,' and whose information-processing involves constructing 'chains of action' with some 'pre-fabricated links' based in culture, used as a toolkit to engage with events. Campbell (1997, see also 2004) adds a historical dimension to Swidler's approach when he suggests that innovation comes from bricolage in which agents bring together pieces from different legacies, while Freeman (2007, p. 485) adds an epistemological dimension when he finds that actors piece together what they know in different ways from different sources across different epistemological domains. Carstensen (2011b) builds on all these approaches with his discussion of how agents act as '*bricoleurs*' who use 'toolkits' to combine elements from the existing ideational repertoire to create new meanings and, with these, seek to create a powerful political coalition for change. In international relations, finally, norms are the lingua franca of transnational actors, or 'norm entrepreneurs,' which serve as the sources of (new) standards of appropriate behaviour for policy-making through processes of framing and socialization (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse-Kappen 1994).

Focusing on 'sentient' agents of change is important, because it emphasizes the fact that 'who is speaking to whom about what where and why,' or the interactive process of discourse, makes a difference. Importantly, it is not just that agents are thinking beings who have ideas but that they are also speaking beings who share their ideas through discursive interactions that can lead to collective action. Although there are many different and often contradictory ways in which scholars conceptualize the ontology and epistemology of this, I have sought a middle way, arguing that sentient agents not only have 'background ideational abilities'—whether understood in terms of Searle's (1995) 'background abilities' or Bourdieu's (1990) *habitus*—that enable them to think beyond the (ideational) structures that constrain them even as they (re)construct them. They also have 'foreground discursive abilities'—understood in terms following from Habermas' (1989) 'communicative action' (but without the idealization)—that enable them to communicate and deliberate about taking action collectively to change their institutions (see Schmidt 2008, pp. 314-16; 2011).

Moreover, as sociolinguistics shows (e.g., Ager 1991), we need to consider not just the source of ideas, or who is articulating the ideas in what context with what objective in mind aimed at which audience, including the meaning context for the speaker. We also need to consider the 'speech act' itself, meaning the message, how it is delivered, in what medium or format, and what is said as well as what is not but is nonetheless tacitly understood. And we have to consider the receptor, or the audience in terms of who they are, what they are expecting, what their capacity is for understanding the message, and how they respond, which can itself constitute a kind of agency. This is why it is also useful to separate the discursive interactions into coordinative and communicative spheres, given differences in speakers, message, and audience.

Discursive Interactions

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 in different ways with different degrees and kinds of influence, whether as transnational members of ‘epistemic communities’ of loosely connected trans-national actors who share cognitive and normative ideas about a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992); as transgovernmental networks of state officials whose roles in constructing, legitimating and diffusing knowledge across states have an impact of domestic policy development (Slaughter 2004); as national members of ‘discourse coalitions’ of policy actors who share ideas across extended periods of time, as in the rise of *ordo-liberalism* in Germany (Lehmbruch 2001); or as local members of ‘advocacy coalitions’ of more closely connected individuals who share ideas and access to policymaking, as in water policy in California (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Alternatively, the agents may themselves be policy ‘entrepreneurs’ (Kingdon 1984) or ‘mediators’ (Jobert 1989; Muller 1995) who serve as catalysts for change as they articulate the ideas of the various discursive communities.

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 (Art 2006; Mutz et al. 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’, 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 of ideas as well as the interactive process of discourse. 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 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, pp. 255-7). The process itself is one in which the coordinative discourse can be seen to prepare the ground for the communicative. In the UK, 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 2002, Ch. 6, 2009).

This said, the coordinative and communicative discourses don't always connect with one another. Policy ideas may be part of 'closed debates' in the policy sphere, either because the public might not approve, as was case of some of the more progressive immigration policy reforms in European countries (Guiraudon 1997) or because the public is not interested, as the case of banking reforms more generally (Busch 2004). But there may also be cases where politicians say one thing in the coordinative policy sphere, another in the communicative political sphere. This 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 2006a, 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 deliberating about and responding to elite-produced policies. The media, for example, are often key to framing the terms of the communicative discourse, creating narratives 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, which 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), or Martha Stewart as 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 (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.

In fact, new ideas can come from anywhere to generate transformative public debates, as in Rothstein's (2005) story of how a Finnish novel written in the 1950s created an understanding of the bloody civil war spurred public debates and discussions in which the Finnish public came to reconsider the past and to reconcile itself to it. But great thinkers can also be key figures in transformative discourse, whether Kuhn's (1970) 'great scientist' with a new paradigmatic idea, like Newton or Einstein, or Skinner's (1988) 'great philosopher' who is great because able to produce a 'text' that captures the

spirit of the age better than all the other philosophers at the time saying similar sorts of things.

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 words. 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 Seabrooke (2007) argues in the case of the change to Keynesian macroeconomic policy in the interwar years, leaders need legitimacy from the general public, which can make its views felt not only at the ballot box or in the street but through the ‘everyday practices’ that convey ideas in a kind of unspoken discourse that makes clear that they no longer see the established rules as legitimate, which is then picked up by the media and reformist political leaders, and which in the end can lead to significant reform.

The importance of taking account of the everyday actions of ordinary people in its turn brings us back to the need to explain the ‘governors’ responses to the governed.’ This may be when policymakers seek to institute reforms to remedy the ‘drift’ by conveying ideas about how they will solve the problem and engaging in communicative discourse that serves to legitimate their proposed solution. This may also help explain why scholars in the public policy sphere were the first to get onto ideas and discourse (e.g., Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993), as a way to account for new laws or rules being brought in to solve problems.

THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

Institutional context also matters. If ‘sentient’ (thinking and speaking) agents are the drivers of change, and their ideas (what they think 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). Institutions here, therefore, are not the incentive structures of rational choice institutionalists, to which ‘rational’ actors mechanically respond as unthinking agents, like mice responding to interest-based stimuli; nor are they the path-dependent structures of historical institutionalists, to which ‘historical’ actors respond by blindly following rules, like mice running through mazes. Rather institutions for discursive institutionalists constitute the setting within which ‘sentient’ agents are the thinking agents who develop their ideas for action that they convey through discourse. The institutional setting, moreover, constitutes both that which structures agents’ ideas, discourse, and actions and that which is constructed by agents’ ideas, discourse and actions (Schmidt 2008, 2010a).

The institutional context is first of all the ‘meaning context’ in which ideas 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 UK and Ireland, where leaders sought to present it as a challenge to rise to (Hay 2001; Hay and Smith 2005), let alone between these countries and a country like France, in which leaders spoke 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, Toulmin (1958; Toulmin et al., 1979, pp. 15-16) 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 pre-established and the ‘forum’ is an ad hoc creation dependent upon the players and the circumstances, pre-negotiations 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 deliberation is more open by contrast with the arenas in which bargaining is the focus.

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. These can be seen as on a continuum from “simple” to “compound” polities, depending on the degree of concentration or dispersion of governing activity. In “simple” polities, in which governing activity tends to be channeled through a single authority by way of majoritarian representative institutions, statist policy making, and unitary states, such as in Britain and France, the communicative discourse to the general public tends to be much more elaborate than in “compound polities,” in which governing activity tends to be dispersed among multiple authorities by way of proportional representation systems, corporatist policy making, and/or federal or regionalized states, such as in Germany and Italy, which makes for a more elaborate coordinative discourse among policy actors (Schmidt 2000, 2003, 2002, pp. 239-50, 2006, pp. 223-31). Institutional setting helps explain why simple polities like France and the UK, in which 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, which tend to have more elaborate coordinative discourses among policy actors – so as to reach agreement among the much wider range of actors involved in negotiating reform (Schmidt 2000, 2002, 2006). The differences in contexts also helps explain how the battle of ideas on welfare state reforms take shape, given the greater need for a coordinative discourse in Germany (where the state political entrepreneurs need to bring the social partners into agreement), a communicative discourse in the UK (where the state political entrepreneurs needs to persuade the general public), and both coordinative and communicative discourses in France (where state political entrepreneurs need to bring both the social partners and the general public on board) (Schmidt 2009).

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 that 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 that they give power to their ideas. 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; Mintrom 1997). Moreover, actors can gain power from their ideas even where they may lack the power of position—as in the case of social movements. But actors also gain (or lose) power to the extent that their ideas 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 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). Among the latter, Pierre Bourdieu (1994), for example, argues that the *doxa*, or worldview, of elites who dominate the state creates the *habitus* that conditions people to see the world in the way chosen by elites. Foucault (2000) similarly suggests the impossibility of escape from the ideational domination of the powerful. I would not go so far, since 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 through elite-dominated ideas, foreground discursive abilities enable those self-same people to reason about and critique those ideational structures—a point also brought out by Gramsci (1971) when emphasizing the role of intellectuals (see discussion in Schmidt 2008). But this is not to suggest that therefore simply recognizing and talking about 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.

But even for those with structural power and position, ideas inform their exercise of power, and changes in their ideas also result in policy change. One unfortunate example is the British East India Company's shift in the nineteenth century away from a conceptualization of Indians as 'civilized,' and therefore worthy of a certain measure of autonomy and self-governing capacity, to one in which Indians were portrayed as hardly civilized at all, as primitive (notably, this was the brainchild of James Mill, the utilitarian who was the close collaborator of Bentham, for whom only economic ideas about utility calculations mattered). One could offer a rational choice institutionalist account of this, by noting the instrumental manner in which these new ideas became the interest-based rationale for dispossessing the Indians of their power by a new group in the East India Company. But this is to suggest that all were aware of what they were doing. Rather, for the vast majority of actors, the shift in conceptualization became a whole new way of seeing Indians, structuring their thoughts about India, which changed politics in the UK and power relations in India (Rudolph n/a; see also Dalrymple 2003). Changing philosophical ideas of those with power and position, in short, can lead to shifts in policies and program that can be deleterious to those without power or position, regardless of the ideas and discourse of the powerless and position-less. It would take another hundred years before Gandhi would force those in power to listen, through everyday practices of non-violent resistance.

CONCLUSION

Discursive institutionalism, in sum, is an analytic framework concerned with the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in institutional context. The ideas it elucidates may be cognitive or normative, 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, story telling, collective memories, and more. The discursive interactions may involve policy actors in 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 developed in the coordinative discourse. The directional arrows of these discursive interactions may come not only from the top down through the influence of the ideas of supranational or national actors but also from the bottom up through the ideas and discourse of local, national, and/or international 'civil society' and social movement activists.

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 and discursive interactions. 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, and the ideas and discourse that seek to make sense of all such realities.

Speaking of change, or discourse, moreover, is a key element in the dynamics of policy transformation. It helps explain the timing of change, both at critical junctures *and*

incrementally, as well as at different levels of ideas—policy, program, philosophy. But much also depends upon the content of the ideas and discourse related to change and continuity, and which can change incrementally as different elements are added to a ‘web’ of ideas. The ‘sentient’ agents in such processes are equally important, whether engaged in coordinative policy discourses or communicative political discourses that may go in many directions, whether from top to bottom, top to top, bottom to top, or at the bottom. The institutional context in which they interact is also important, not only for the meaning-based logics of communication in any given setting but also the formal institutions, since power and position also matter in terms of ideas and discourse as well as structural constraints.

But once we have defined the field in which speaking of change helps explain policy transformation, what is next? Coping with change. This takes us from the question of how the agents of change alter policy and politics into the question of how these self-same agents, along with the publics who experience the changes, adapt to the small, slow changes as well as to the big, rapid changes that affect their everyday lives. But this is a very different topic.

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