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**DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALISM:
UNDERSTANDING POLICY IN CONTEXT**

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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 shows the relevance of discursive institutionalism to policy studies in a critical vein by considering both the wide range of ideas in discourse and the ways in which “sentient” (thinking and speaking) agents articulate such ideas as policy actors in a “coordinative discourse” of policy construction and as political actors in a “communicative discourse” of political legitimation. The chapter also elaborates on the dual nature of the institutional context by considering not just the external formalized institutions that constrain action but also the structures and constructs of meaning. These help explain not only how agents are able to create and maintain institutions via their “background ideational abilities” but also how they change or maintain institutions via their “foreground discursive abilities” of communication. 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. Finally, it also theorizes about the nature of the power of ideas, in particular through discourse.

“Discursive institutionalism” gives a name to the very rich and diverse set of ways of explaining political and social reality that are focused on the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse in institutional context.¹ The purpose of this chapter is to offer an account of discursive institutionalism that indicates its relevance to policy studies in a critical vein. The question of how ideas and discourse change in an institutional setting is particularly important in the case of policy ideas, whether they change rapidly in the face of emerging events and opportunities or become institutionalized in policy programs, and whether they become forces resistant to change or form the basis for radical ideational transformation. Discursive

¹ Discursive institutionalism represents a fourth ‘new institutionalist’ approach in political science, in contrast to the three older “new institutionalisms”—rational choice, historical, and sociological. 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.

institutionalism, moreover, draws attention to the way agents can gain critical distance from the institutions in which they are situated, so as to encourage democratization in discourse and deliberation and/or to expose elite domination and power. Of key significance in this regard is the relationship between two spheres – that of coordinative policy construction and that of communicative policy legitimation – since what is at stake in this connection is the relationship between elites and the general public. Overall, discursive institutionalism is an approach to understanding in context the interplay of policy relevant ideas, discourse, and institutions.

Discursive institutionalism calls attention to the significance of approaches that theorize about ideas and discourse in their many different forms, types, and levels as well as in the interactive processes of policy coordination and communication by which ideas and discourse are generated, articulated, and contested by ‘sentient’ (thinking, speaking and acting) agents. As an umbrella concept, it encompasses a wide range of approaches focused on ideas—as in the “ideational turn” (Blyth 1997) or “ideational constructivism” (Hay 2006)—as well as discourse. Discourse encompasses not just the representation or embodiment of ideas—as in discourse analysis (following, say, Foucault 2000, Bourdieu 1990, or Laclau and Mouffe 1985) but also the interactive processes by and through which ideas are generated in the policy sphere by discursive policy communities and entrepreneurs (e.g., Hajer 1993; Sabatier 1993; Haas 1992) and communicated, deliberated, and/or contested in the political sphere by political leaders, social movements, and the public (e.g., Habermas 1989; Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996; Zaller 1992; Dryzek 2000; Wodak 2009).

The institutionalism in the name underlines the importance of considering ideas and discourse in institutional context—both in terms of the meaning contexts as well as the formal (or informal) institutional contexts that are the main objects of concern of the three older institutionalism, 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 or they may themselves be the objects of inquiry. 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.

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 such ideas 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.

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 or epochs (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 the shared meanings on which people act (Stone 1988).

Scholars differ also with regard to the types of ideas and discourse they investigate. The comparative politics and comparative political economy literature tends to be more concerned with cognitive ideas and discourse 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 and discourse 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 and discourse, whether fast or slow, incremental or abrupt, differences among scholars have much to do with the level of generality they consider (see Schmidt 2008, 2010a). At the most immediate level, scholars have long tended to focus on policy ideas. They have tended to portray them as changing most rapidly 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 the intermediate level of policy programs mostly depict 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 over-arching set of ideas for which a “paradigm-shift” produces incommensurable or revolutionary 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 2002).

Finally, philosophical ideas are generally situated at the deepest level of ideas, and therefore the most long lasting. They are also often seen as more based in the political sphere than in the policy sphere, as broad concepts tied to normative values and moral principles (Weir 1992:169), whether seen as “global frames of reference” (Muller 1995), structures of ‘discourse’ (Foucault 2000), ‘hegemonic discourse’ (Gramsci 1971), or ideologies that set an all-encompassing perspective on reality (Freeden 2003). Here, the danger is to assume that philosophical ideas never change at all, rather than looking 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: 21) or historians (e.g., Hunt 1984; Nora 1989).

As for scholarly analyses of change 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 discourse are tied to action by serving as guides to public actors for what to do and as sources of justification and legitimation for what such actors do (see Berman 1998; Blyth 2002). In addition to tracing empirically the ideas and discourse 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. Bevir (2010) argues that such an ‘interpretive’ social science should take the place of ‘modernist’ social science as well as its concept of ‘governance,’ in order to develop ‘decentered’ narratives that make better sense of the meanings people give to their actions through their ‘webs of belief’ that develop historically as political traditions.

Yet another way of thinking about ideational continuity as well as change is through the concept of resilience. Schmidt and Thatcher (2013) use this concept to analyze the development of neo-liberalism in its many different forms at different levels over time, but in particular since the 1980s. They propose five lines of analysis to explain the resilience of neo-liberal ideas. First, the flexibility of neo-liberalism’s core principles has made it highly adaptable and mutable across time, countries, and policy sectors—e.g., from the conservative rollback of the state to free up the markets in the 1980s to the social-democratic roll-out of the state to enhance the markets in the 1990s and early 2000s, and then to the ramp up of supranational ‘stability’ rules of the EU in the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis. Second, the gaps between neo-liberal rhetoric and reality may actually promote neo-liberal resilience by serving the next generation of neo-liberal politicians as a rallying cry, say, when exaggerated promises to radically reduce the welfare state

or cut taxes are not fulfilled. Third, the strength of neo-liberal discourse in debates—or the weakness of alternatives—is another source of resilience, often because neo-liberal ideas may appear more commonsensical than, say, neo-Keynesian ideas, even though they have proven economically disastrous time and again. Fourth, neo-liberal resilience also stems from the power of coalitions of interests in the strategic use of neo-liberal ideas to promote their own interests, whether they believe in neo-liberalism or not. And finally, the force of institutions in the embedding of neo-liberal ideas is also a source of neo-liberal strength, since once institutionalized such ideas are very difficult to dislodge.

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 can provide great value to the analysis of the content of ideas and how they change (and continue) over time. 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 (Foucault 2000; see also Pedersen 2011). 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 are 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. 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 “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; 2012, 92-95).

This means that institutions—or structures—are socially constructed. As Searle (1995) explains, although “institutional facts”—such as property, money, marriage, governments, human rights, and cocktail parties—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, 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.

But where then is agency? 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 enable them to speak, argue and act without the conscious or unconscious following of rules external to the agent assumed by the older neoinstitutionalists by way of rationalist calculations, historical path-dependencies, or normative appropriateness. This concept of background abilities is also present in Bourdieu’s notion of the “*habitus*” (as Searle 1995:127-32 acknowledges). 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, since 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).

But although the concept of such “background ideational abilities” helps us to explain what goes on in individuals’ minds as they come up with new ideas or follow old ones, 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 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. Discourse as an interactive process is what enables agents to consciously change institutions, because the deliberative nature of discourse allows them to have ideas of and talk about institutions as objects at a distance, and to dissociate themselves from them to critique them even as they continue to use them.

Calling this interactive externalization of agents’ internal ideational processes “foreground discursive abilities” offers 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 decision making while ensuring democratic access. 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 the term also 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.

The epistemological questions raised by this ontological discussion of sentient agents’ ideational and discursive abilities 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 that they cannot know anything for certain once they give up the independence of structures—or materialism—because 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, with a correspondence view of the world that assumes that material reality is out there for agents to see, and that scholars are in the business of discovering it (e.g., Wendt (1999:109-10). Others (e.g., Gofas and Hay 2010) try to straddle the divide between materialism and constructivism through “critical realism” (Bhaskar 1979/1998), worried that if there is 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. Yet others sit on the constructivist side of the divide, assuming 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.

To ask if material reality exists (correspondence vs. noncorrespondence) is the wrong question, however. 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 or ‘social facts’ and thus not material in a visible, ‘put your hand or rest your eyes on it’ kind of concrete sense, which constitute what Searle (1995) calls ‘brute facts.’

Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1972) suggests further answers to our questions by differentiating between different kinds of knowledge and certainty based in different “forms of life,” as expressed through “language-games” (see discussions in Schmidt 2008, 2010b, 2012: 97-100). He makes a little-noticed but important distinction between language games based on our experience in the world and those based on our pictures of the world. Language-games based on everyday experience are ones for which radical uncertainties rarely occur, such as knowledge of one’s own name and history, the numbers of hands and toes one has, the meaning of the words one uses. The kind of certainty is one in which we don’t doubt that the mountain will disappear if we look away, such that anyone expressing such uncertainty would be assumed not to know the meaning of the words themselves, or not rational.

By contrast, language-games based on our pictures of the world tend to involve knowledge closer to the kind found in (social) science, which can involve radical uncertainty akin to shifts in “paradigms” and “cosmologies.” 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).

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. 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)?

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.

INTERACTIVE PROCESSES OF DISCOURSE

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 elucidate the “discursive production of reality” by groups of policy actors who construct the new social idea or narratives engage, as in the case of acid rain policy in the country. Discourse coalitions are also used by Gerhard Lehbruch (2001) 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. Notably, the members of the discourse coalitions themselves need not share all the same ideas, beliefs, goals, or interests in order to promote a common policy program (see Jobert 2003). Rather, discourse coalitions may be engaged in constant argumentation in their efforts to develop the ideas 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, while 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, the Republican discourse coalition bested them 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 (2014) 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 Brussels. Most importantly, however, national differences remain paramount, with the production and diffusion of policy ideas following from nationally specific modes of organization, cooperation or competition, and partisanship.

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 (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, the framing has generally been

personalized in terms of a rogue player rather than generalized as a deeper critique of the international banking system, as in the case of the Barings bank debacle (Hudson and Martin 2010), or when 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 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 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.

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).

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, and their coordinative discourses among policy actors are necessarily more elaborate, given the wide range of actors involved (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, whether discourse coalitions, as in the case of acid rain (Hajer 1993) or social movements, as in the case of the whales (Epstein 2008).

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 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. But this is not to suggest that therefore simply recognizing, contesting, and thereby seeking to delegitimize the power of elites' ideas necessarily changes the structures of power and the power of position or coercion. Structural power is also the power not to listen, and to impose.

The different ways of thinking about the discursive power of ideas can be systematized in three basic ways: power *through* ideas, power *over* ideas, and power *in* ideas (Carstensen and Schmidt n/a). First, and perhaps most commonly analysed within discursive institutionalism, ideational power *through* ideas occurs when actors have the capacity to persuade other actors of the cognitive validity and/or normative value of their worldview through the use of ideational elements. Second, ideational power *over* ideas is manifested as the capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas. This may occur both directly, say, by elite actors' coercive power to impose their ideas, and indirectly, by actors shaming opponents into conformity—as when social movements' activism pushes elites to adopt their ideas—or resisting alternative interpretations—as in the power of neo-liberal economic experts to shut out neo-Keynesian alternatives. Third, and finally, ideational power shows itself when certain ideas enjoy authority in structuring thought or institutionalizing certain ideas at the expense of other ideas—as in analyses following Foucault, Bourdieu, or Gramsci. Here ideational power concerns the ways that historically specific structures of meaning or the institutional setup of a polity or a policy area enhances or diminishes the ability of actors to promote their ideas. This also fits with historical or sociological institutionalist approaches to ideas.

CONCLUSION

Discursive institutionalism offers a way to understand policy in the context of ideas, discourses, and institutions. We focus attention not only on the content of ideas and discourse, which comes in a wide variety of forms and types at different levels and different rates of change, but also on the interactive processes of discourse. The “sentient” agents in such processes engage in discourses of coordinative policy construction and communicative policy legitimation 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. Such a contextual understanding challenges approaches that see policies only in piecemeal terms as potential solutions to specific problems. Discursive institutionalism is a way of opening up a wider perspective in order to recognize policy studies as contributing to a larger assessment of current social conditions and the ways they might be effectively addressed.

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