

DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALISM:
THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF IDEAS AND DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

The newest ‘new institutionalism,’ discursive institutionalism, lends insight into the role of ideas and discourse in politics while providing a more dynamic approach to institutional change than the older three new institutionalisms. Ideas, as the substantive content of discourse, consists of three levels—policies, programs, and philosophies—and two types—cognitive and normative. Discourse, as the interactive process of conveying ideas, comes in two forms—the coordinative discourse among policy actors and the communicative discourse between political actors and the public. Both ideas and discourse are situated in institutional context, understood in terms of the background information provided by the three older new institutionalisms as well as in more specific ‘meaning’ contexts. The institutions of discursive institutionalism, moreover, rather than external rule-following structures, are simultaneously structures and constructs internal to agents whose ‘background ideational abilities’ within a given ‘meaning context’ explains how institutions are created and exist and whose ‘foreground discursive abilities’ following a ‘logic of communication’ explains how institutions change or persist. Finally, interests are subjective ideas which are neither ‘objective’ nor ‘material’ although they are real while norms are dynamic, intersubjective constructs rather than static structures.

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The turn to ideas and discourse in political science has come to constitute a fourth ‘new institutionalism,’ distinct from rational choice institutionalism (RI), historical institutionalism (HI), and sociological institutionalism (SI), which I call ‘discursive institutionalism’ (DI). Political scientists whose work fits this rubric tend to have four things in common. First, they take ideas and discourse seriously, even though their definitions of ideas and uses of discourse vary widely. Second, they set ideas and discourse in institutional context, following along the lines of one or another of the three older new institutionalisms, which serve as background information. Third, they all also put ideas into their ‘meaning’ context while they see discourse as following a ‘logic’ of communication, despite differences in what may be communicated how and where. Finally, and most importantly, they all take a more dynamic view of change in which ideas and discourse serve to overcome obstacles which the more equilibrium-focused and static older three institutionalisms posit as insurmountable. What differentiates discursive institutionalists (DIs) the most from one another, in fact, is not their basic approach to ideas and discourse but rather the kinds of questions they ask and the problems they seek to resolve, which tend to come from the institutionalist tradition(s) with which they engage.

Despite the fact that political scientists have for a while now been exploring the explanatory power of ideas and discourse, the term used to define this approach, discursive institutionalism, is itself of very recent vintage (see Schmidt 2002a, 2006a, b). Moreover, although others have used the very same term (see Campbell and Pedersen 2001) or similar ones, such as ideational institutionalism (Hay 2001), constructivist institutionalism (Hay 2006), or strategic constructivism (Jabko 2006), they have tended to focus much more on the ideas that are the substantive content of discourse than on the interactive processes involved in discourse. In addition, not all scholars who have turned to ideas and discourse go so far as to posit a fourth such institutionalism (e.g., Campbell 2004—but see Campbell and Pedersen 2001). This is mainly because their purpose is to blur the boundaries among all three older institutionalisms, and to show how ideas and discourse can serve to advance knowledge in the social sciences across methodological approaches. This is a worthy goal, and one I share. But I think it necessary also to recognize the distinctiveness of approaches which have ideas and discourse as their focus, and this despite the fact that discursive institutionalists often speak less to one another than to those who sit in the older ‘new institutionalism’ in which they themselves have roots.

Within discursive institutionalism, moreover, although political scientists in recent years have generated lots of ideas about ideas, they have engaged in comparatively little discourse about discourse. Why the turn to ideas? Why the reticence on discourse?

For many political scientists, the turn to ideas has been a useful corrective to the limits of all manner of new institutionalist approaches and a tacit acknowledgement of their difficulties in explaining change. Importantly, large numbers of ‘new institutionalists,’ whether rational choice, historical, or sociological institutionalists, have sought to use ideas to counter the static and overly deterministic nature of institutions in their explanations. The tipping point between

those approaches to ideas which remain within the confines of any one of the three older new institutionalisms and those which move into DI is fuzzy, but we can situate it at the point at which the turn to ideas undermines the basic premises of the older new institutionalism, i.e., that institutions are in stable equilibria, with fixed rationalist preferences (RI), self-reinforcing historical paths (HI), or all-defining cultural norms (SI).

The reticence of many of these self-same political scientists to add discourse to their consideration of ideas stems primarily from past usage of the term, which conjures up exaggerated visions of postmodernists and post-structuralists who are assumed (often unfairly) to interpret ‘texts’ without contexts and to understand reality as all words, whatever the deeds. But without using some term like ‘discourse,’ that is, a term which refers to talking about one’s ideas, how does one discuss the process of putting one’s ideas across? Discourse, as defined herein, is stripped of postmodernist baggage to serve as a more generic term which encompasses not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed. Discourse, in other words, refers not just to what is said (ideas) but also to who said what to whom, where, when, how, and why (discursive interactions). Defined in this way, discourse is not just about ‘text’ (what is said) but also about context (where it was said when, how, and why); and it is not only about structure (what is said or where it was said how) but also about agency (who said what to whom).

But if the great innovation of discursive institutionalism is its ability to explain change (and continuity), then the main question is: How does it do so? And more generally, what is the explanatory power of ideas and discourse?

The first half of the article begins with an examination of the wide range of approaches to ideas and discourse in political science, without at this stage differentiating among them in terms of institutionalist tradition. First, we identify ideas both in terms of their levels of generality—as policies, programs, and philosophies—and types of content—cognitive and normative. Second, we define discourse not just as the representation of ideas but also as the interactive process of exchanging ideas which appears in two basic forms: the ‘coordinative’ discourse among policy actors and the ‘communicative’ discourse between political actors and the public. Throughout this section, moreover, we consider what makes for successful ideas and discourse, along with the methods that serve to demonstrate their transformative power and, thereby, their causal influence.

The second part of the article sets ideas and discourse into ‘new institutionalist’ perspective, by contrasting discursive institutionalism with the three older new institutionalisms in terms of institutions and institutional change, interests and uncertainty, and norms and relativism. First, we define institutions in DI as simultaneously structures and constructs internal to agents whose ‘background ideational abilities’ and ‘foreground discursive abilities’ make for a more dynamic, agent-centered approach to institutional change than in the three other new institutionalisms. DI thereby helps HI in particular to explain, rather than just describe, change. Second, we show that interests in DI are ‘subjective’ rather than either ‘objective’ or ‘material,’ as in RI, but nonetheless ‘real.’ Third, we demonstrate that although DI has much in common with SI, norms in DI are more dynamic constructs. We end with a discussion of how to conceive of the relationship of discursive institutionalism to the other three new institutionalisms.

My overall argument is that discursive institutionalism is a distinctive approach which contributes to our understanding of political action in ways that the older three institutionalisms cannot. As such, it at the very least adds another institutionalist approach to our methodological toolkit. But even more than this, it provides insight into an area of political action that political scientists have for a long time neglected, largely because they could not account for it within the limits of their own methodological approaches. The result is that they have ignored some of the biggest questions in politics, the questions which political philosophers down the ages have puzzled over, such as the role of ideas in constituting political action, the power of persuasion in political debate, the centrality of deliberation for democratic legitimation, the construction and reconstruction of political interests and values, and the dynamics of change in history and culture. Moreover, they have given up the opportunity to weigh in on the substantive issues of political life, leaving to journalists and think-tanks the battle of ideas with regard to the policy questions of the day. For policymakers and politicians in particular, the very idea that one would need to make a plea for taking ideas and discourse seriously would appear ludicrous, because this is at the very center of what they do, that is, generate ideas about what should be done and then communicate them to the more general public for discussion and deliberation. This essay on discursive institutionalism, in short, takes it as a given that ideas and discourse matter, in order to focus on the more interesting set of questions for political scientists, which is how, when, where, and why ideas and discourse matter.

THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF IDEAS AND DISCOURSE

The difference between scholars who speak of ‘discourse’ and those who limit themselves to ideas is primarily one of emphasis. Those scholars who focus exclusively on ideas tend to leave the interactive processes of discourse implicit as they discuss the ideas generated, deliberated, and legitimized by public actors—as the ‘carriers’ of ideas. Those scholars who speak of discourse address explicitly the representation of ideas (how agents express what they are thinking of doing) and the discursive interactions through which actors generate and communicate ideas (to whom they say what they are thinking of doing) within given institutional contexts (where and when they say it). But whether they emphasize ideas or discourse, such scholars employ a range of methods to demonstrate the transformative power of ideas and discourse, that is, to show how they exert a causal influence in political reality and, thereby, engender institutional change (or continuity).

The Nature of Ideas

Defining ideas, the substantive content of discourse, is no easy task because there are so many ideas about ideas. They go from ideas as switches for interests, road maps, or focal points (Goldstein and Keohane 1993) to ideas as strategic constructions (Jabko 2006) or strategic weapons in the battle for control (Blyth 2002) to ideas as narratives which shape understandings of events (e.g., Roe 1994) or as ‘frames of reference’ (Jobert 1989; Muller 1995) to ideas as collective memories (Rothstein 2005) or national traditions (Katzenstein 1996).

Political scientists’ uses of ideas tend to occur at three main levels of generality (see also Mehta n/a). The first level encompasses the specific policies or ‘policy solutions’ proposed by policymakers for debate and adoption. The second level of ideas encompasses the more general programs that underpin the policy ideas. These may be cast as ‘paradigms’ that reflect the

underlying assumptions or organizing principles orienting policy (Hall 1993, Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5); as ‘frames of reference’—‘*référentiels*’—that enable policy actors to (re)construct visions of the world that allow them to (re)situate themselves in the world (Jobert 1989, Muller 1995); as ‘programmatic beliefs’ (Berman 1998) that operate in the space between worldviews and specific policy ideas; as ‘policy cores’ which provide sets of diagnostics and prescriptions for action (Sabatier and Jenkins 1993); or as ‘problem definitions’ that set the scope of possible solutions to the problems that policy ideas address (Mehta n/a). These programmatic ideas are at a more basic level than the policy ideas because they define the problems to be solved by such policies, the issues to be considered, the goals to be achieved, the norms, methods and instruments to be applied, and the objectives and ideals which all in all frame the more immediate policy ideas proposed as solutions for any given problem. At an even more basic or deeper level of ideas are the ‘public philosophies’ (Campbell 1998), ‘public sentiments’ (Campbell 2004), ‘deep core’ (Sabatier and Jenkins 1993); worldviews and ‘*Weltanschauung*’ which frame the policies and programs with a deeper core of organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society. While both the policy ideas and programmatic ideas can be seen as in the ‘foreground,’ since these tend to be discussed and debated on a regular basis, the philosophical ideas generally sit in the ‘background,’ as the underlying assumptions which are rarely contested except in times of crisis (see Campbell 2004: 93-4).

Policies, programs, and philosophies tend to contain two types of ideas: cognitive and normative, which are intertwined and therefore separable only for analytic purposes. Cognitive ideas elucidate ‘what is and what to do,’ normative ideas, ‘what is good or bad about what is’ in light of ‘what one ought to do.’ Cognitive ideas—also sometimes called causal ideas—provide the recipes, guidelines, and maps for political action and serve to justify the policies and programs by speaking to their interest-based logic and necessity (see Jobert 1989, Hall 1993, Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5). Cognitive ideas speak to how (first level) policies offer solutions to the problems at hand, how (second level) programs define the problems to be solved and identify the methods by which to solve them, and how both policies and programs mesh with the deeper core of (third level) principles and norms of relevant scientific disciplines or technical practices. Normative ideas instead attach values to political action, and serve to legitimize the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness (see March and Olsen 1989). Normative ideas speak to how (first level) policies meet the aspirations and ideals of the general public and how (second level) programs as well as (first level) policies resonate with a deeper core of (third level) principles and norms of public life, whether the newly-emerging values of a society or the long-standing ones in the societal repertoire (Schmidt 2000, 2002, Ch. 5).

The big question for scholars of ideas is why do some ideas become the policies, programs, and philosophies that dominate political reality while others do not. The standards and criteria they propose for evaluating ideas tend to differ according to level.

For the first level of ideas, scholars identify a range of purely political scientific factors that help explain why specific policies may succeed and why they change. On policy success, the main question for scholars is: What specific criteria ensure the adoption of a given policy? Peter Hall (1989) speaks of the need for policy ideas to have administrative and political viability in addition to policy viability while John Kingdon (1984) argues that policies must come together with the other two critical streams of problems and politics for a policy idea to be

adopted. Other ideational factors at play include the role of national traditions in making a policy more or less acceptable, as when state identities structure national perceptions of defense and security issues (Katzenstein 1996) and the role of national values and political culture in the adoption of trans-national policy ideas, such as the very different ways in which the word ‘precariousness’ is understood and used (or not) in Germany and the UK by contrast with France, Italy, and Spain (Barbier 2004). There is equally the matter of expertise linked to the validation of ideas by research institutes and think-tanks (Rich 2004, Campbell and Pedersen n/a). The element of timing is also a factor in policy success, which helps explain why Scandinavian welfare states remain distinct (Cox 2001); as is generational turnover, although this cannot account for the fact that certain ideas may persist from one generation to the next, as in Austria and Japan with regard to World War II, while others may shift radically within a generation, as in Germany in the 1980s (Art 2006).

But although these criteria all help identify the necessary factors for policy adoption, they can’t delineate the sufficient factors, in particular those things that don’t get onto the agenda, since the selection bias of most such studies is toward successful ideas (see discussion in Mehta n/a). Moreover, such criteria often do little to specify the ideational processes by which old ideas fade and new ideas come to the fore. And finally, studies of policy ideas and discourse tend to have a built-in bias that seems to assume that ‘good’ ideas—meaning those that appear more relevant to the problem at hand, more adequate to the task, and more appropriate to the needs of society—succeed while ‘bad’ ideas fail. But, in fact, sometimes good ideas fail and bad ideas succeed. How to respond to all of these issues? For answers we need to go on to the second level and third level of ideas, since scholars who focus on programmatic and philosophical ideas tend to offer more general theories about ideational success and change over time.

Scholars who concentrate on the second level of ideas often look to the philosophy of science for the criteria that would explain success and change in programs and the policy ideas that emerge from them (e.g., Jobert 1989, Hall 1993, Schmidt 2002, pp. 222-5). These scholars generally liken programmatic ideas to ‘paradigms’ following Kuhn (1970), and they link success not only to the viability of a program’s policy ideas but also to the program’s long-term problem-solving potential. Thus, they may describe the revolutionary ‘third order’ change occurring in the UK under Prime Minister Thatcher, who replaced the paradigm of Keynesianism with monetarism (Hall 1993) and the similar such revolutionary change in France by Mitterrand with the ‘great U-turn’ in macroeconomic policy by contrast with Blair’s ‘renewal’ of Thatcher’s neo-liberal paradigm and Schröder’s attempt to ‘recast’ the paradigm of the social market economy in Germany (Schmidt 2002, Ch. 6).

The use of the philosophy of science can only go so far, however (see Schmidt 2002, pp. 217-25). Unlike in science, where programmatic success is judged by scientists alone, in society, programmatic success is judged not just by social scientists but also by citizens. This is why the success of a program depends not just on the presence of cognitive ideas capable of satisfying policymakers as to the robustness of the solutions provided by the program. It also depends on the presence of complementary normative ideas capable of satisfying policymakers and citizens alike that those solutions also serve the underlying values of the polity. Moreover, whereas ideational change in science results from internal processes, when the Kuhnian paradigm expires

because it has exhausted its explanatory potential, ideational change in social science and society results also from external processes and events which create a receptive environment for new ideas.

The difficulties in establishing criteria for first and second level ideas, that is, for policies and programs, are even greater once we turn to the third level of ideas, that is, for the philosophies that underlie policies and programs. Because these ideas are at a deeper level than the others, and often left unarticulated as background knowledge, proving that a particular set of ideas constitutes a public philosophy can be problematic, and even more so if one intends to trace its development over time and its eventual replacement by another. The identification of such public philosophies has often been the domain of macro-sociologists. The most notable is of course Max Weber, whose work has inspired numbers of political scientists. More recently we could cite Pierre Bourdieu (1994), who presents public philosophies as the '*doxa*' or vision of the world of those who, in dominating the State, impose their vision on the rest of society, Michel Foucault (2000), who provides an equally radical view of the ideational domination of the powerful, and Antonio Gramsci (1971), with his notion of hegemonic discourse. And yet, often in any given society, at a very basic level, 'everyone knows' what the basic philosophy or worldview is, even if they may not be able to define it very precisely or describe how it developed or changed. This is why political scientists also often use methods based on comparative case studies and 'process-tracing'—which demonstrate how such ideas are tied to action by serving as guides to public actors for what to do as well as sources of justification and legitimation for what such actors do (see Berman 1998, 2006, Blyth 2002).

Examples of comparative case studies include Peter Hall's (1989) edited volume illuminating the philosophical as well as programmatic reasons for why advanced industrialized countries on both sides of the Atlantic did (or did not) adopt Keynesian economic ideas; Ken Dyson's (2002) edited volume elucidating why European Union (EU) member-states joined (or not) the euro; and Frank Dobbin's (1994) study of the differing underlying philosophical ideas about the role of the state in the economy which ensured that the building of the railroads was state-led in France whereas in the United States it was led by private actors. Examples of process-tracing include Sheri Berman's (1998) historical contrast between the German Social Democrats, who capitulated before Nazism in large measure because they could not think beyond their long-held Marxist ideas, and the Swedish Social Democrats, who succeeded in not only fighting fascism but also in creating a social democratic state because they were free of any such ideational legacy and able to reinvent socialism; Kate McNamara's (1998) account of European monetary union, which posited a three-step learning process of, first, policy failure, second, the search for new ideas that led to a neo-liberal consensus on monetarism and, third, the adoption of the German exemplar; and Marc Blyth's (2002) analysis of the role of foundational economic ideas at moments of economic crisis first in 'embedding' liberalism in the 1930s and then 'disembedding' it beginning in the 1970s in Sweden and the United States.

Another such method involves directly addressing the causal influence of discourse, showing that ideas can be an independent variable by demonstrating that no other structural factors—in particular those following from the three older new institutionalisms, whether in terms of 'objective' rationalist interests, historical path dependencies, or cultural norms—can account for the clear changes (or continuities) in interests, paths, or norms signaled by political

actors' expressed ideas and intended actions (e.g., Berman 1998, pp. 16-19, Blyth 2002, Parsons 2003). Thus, for example, Craig Parsons (2003) first shows why other new institutionalist accounts of European integration cannot explain outcomes before he traces the processes by which French leaders' ideas and discourse about constructing the institutions of the European Union became the institutionalized ideas which constrained subsequent French leaders' ideas, discourse, and actions.

Despite the problems, then, there are a variety of ways in which political scientists establish ideational success. But this leaves us with one fundamental problem. We still have no way of considering the process by which such ideas go from thought to word to deed, that is, how ideas are conveyed, adopted, and adapted, let alone the actors who convey them to whom, how, where, and why. This raises the question of agency, and how ideas are translated into words and action, which brings us to the concept of discourse.

The Dynamics of Discourse

'Discourse' is a more versatile and overarching concept than ideas. In using the term, we can at one and the same time indicate the ideas represented in the discourse—which may come in a variety of forms as well as content—and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed—which may be carried by different agents in different spheres. The discursive processes alone may help explain why certain ideas succeed and others fail—because of the ways in which they are projected to whom and where—although the discourse itself, as representation as well as process, also needs to be evaluated as to why it succeeds (or fails) in promoting ideas. It is therefore a pity that political scientists have largely avoided the term because of its original uses in postmodern literary criticism and philosophy, and stick to 'ideas' in their own discourse even when their own ideas are also about 'discourse.'

In the representation of ideas, any given discourse may serve to articulate not only different levels of ideas—policy, programmatic, and philosophical (see Hajer 2003)—and different types of ideas—cognitive and normative—but also different forms of ideas, whether as narratives, myths, frames, collective memories, stories, scripts, scenarios, images, and more. The 'terms' of the discourse, in Bill Connolly's (1983) sense of "institutionalized structures of meaning that channel political thought and action in certain directions," are multiple. Thus, discourse may intersperse technical and scientific arguments with more generally-accessible narratives that fit together the specialists' arguments with accounts of events, emblematic cases, and even doomsday scenarios 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 (see Schmidt 2002, Ch. 5). Moreover, discourse can be highly varied in its use of ideas. For example, in the case of European market integration, Nicolas Jabko shows that actors used a repertoire of 'strategic ideas' of the market to present it as a constraint and inescapable reality in the financial arena, as a norm to be desired in the energy sector, as a space in structural policies focused on regional economic development, and as a talisman representing a new source of discipline in Economic and Monetary Union (Jabko 2006, Ch. 3).

Discourse is not only about what you say, however; it is also about to whom you say it in the process of policy construction and political communication in the "public sphere" (see Habermas 1989, 1996). The interactive aspect of discourse is important because it makes ideas

dynamic, by showing how, why, and where the carriers of ideas convince others (or not) to take up their ideas. Political scientists tend to divide with regard to which part of the public sphere they investigate, whether the policy sphere in which policy actors engage one another in a ‘coordinative’ discourse about policy construction or the political sphere in which political actors engage the public in a ‘communicative’ discourse about the necessity and appropriateness of such policies (see Schmidt 2002a, Ch. 5, 2005).

In the policy sphere, the ‘coordinative discourse’ consists of the individuals and groups at the center of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas. These are the policy actors—the civil servants, elected officials, experts, organized interests, and activists, among others—who seek to *coordinate* agreement among themselves on policy ideas, which scholars have shown they may do in a variety of ways in a wide range of venues. Thus, the coordinative discourse may be the domain of loosely connected individuals united in ‘epistemic communities’ in trans-national settings on the basis of shared cognitive and normative ideas about a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992). It may consist of more closely connected individuals who share both ideas and access to policymaking, whether in “advocacy coalitions” in localized policy contexts in California (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), in “discourse coalitions” in national settings across extended time periods, as in the ideas of ‘ordo-liberalism’ which underpinned Germany’s postwar social market economy (Lehmbruch 2001), or in “advocacy networks” of activists in international politics focused on issues of human rights, the environment, or violence against women (Keck and Sikkink 1998). But the coordinative discourse may also contain individuals who, as ‘entrepreneurs’ (Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996, Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) or ‘mediators’ (Jobert 1989, Muller 1995) serve as catalysts for change as they draw on and articulate the ideas of discursive communities and coalitions.

In the political sphere, the ‘communicative discourse’ consists of the individuals and groups at the center of political communication involved in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimization of political ideas to the general public. These consist of political actors who, as political leaders, government spokespeople, party activists, ‘spin doctors,’ and more, *communicate* the policy ideas and programs developed in the context of the coordinative discourse to the public for discussion and deliberation in a mass process of public persuasion (see, e.g., Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996). But it encompasses other political actors as well, including members of opposition parties, the media, pundits, community leaders, social activists, public intellectuals, experts, think-tanks, organized interests, and social movements, among others who, often organized in the ‘policy forums’ of ‘informed publics’ (Rein and Schön 1994) and the ‘public of organized private persons’ (Habermas 1989) as well as in the ‘strong publics’ of opposition parties, members of legislatures, and political commentators (Eriksen and Fossum 2002), *communicate* their responses to government policies, engendering debate, deliberation, and ideally, modification of the policies under discussion. Finally, the general public of citizens and voters to whom this communicative discourse is directed also contribute to it, in particular as members of civil society, through grass-roots organizing, social mobilization, and demonstrations, as members of ‘mini-publics’ in citizen juries, issues forums, deliberative polls, and the like (see Goodin and Dryzek 2006), and as members of the electorate, whose voices are heard as the subjects of opinion polls, surveys, focus groups, as well as, of course, as voters—where actions speak even louder than words.

The arrows of discursive interaction often appear to be going from top down, as policy elites generate ideas in different policy sectors which political elites then communicate to the public—often weaving them together into a ‘master’ discourse which presents an (at least seemingly) coherent political program that provides a ‘vision’ of where the polity is, where it is going, and where it ought to go—after which they ‘mediate’ the ensuing public debates. There is an extensive literature, in fact on how elites shape mass public opinion by establishing the terms of the discourse and by framing the issues for the mass media and, thereby, for the mass public more generally (e.g., Zaller 1992; see discussion in Art 2006, Ch. 2). The arrows can also go from bottom up, however, in the discursive interactions of social activists, feminists, and environmentalists in national and international arenas (e.g., Keck and Sikkink 1998). The arrows can even remain solely at the level of civil society, in ‘public conversations’ (Benhabib 1996), communicative action in the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989), or ‘deliberative democracy’ in the supranational sphere (Dryzek 1990, 2000).

Equally importantly, there may be no arrows between coordinative and communicative discourses. This is when coordinative policy ideas remain part of ‘closed debates,’ kept from public view for fear that they would not be approved—the case of some of the more progressive immigration policy reforms (Guiraudon 1997)—or because the issues are highly technical and therefore don’t capture the sustained interest of the public, as in the case of banking reforms (Busch 2004). But it is also the case when political leaders’ communicative discourse differs from the coordinative because they fear negative public reaction for unpopular policies. This is a frequent occurrence in the European Union (Schmidt 2006a, Ch. 1), as when, as Jolyon Howorth (2004) notes, the concept of a European ‘army’ was essentially accepted by Prime Minister Blair in the coordinative EU and national discourses but denied (as a label for that development) in his communicative discourse once Fleet street (the tabloid press) raised the alarm. Finally, because public debates cannot be controlled by any one political actor or set of actors, even when a discourse starts from the top, it very often escapes political leaders’ control. In the case of Germany, for example, David Art (2006) shows that when conservative Chancellor Kohl sought to ‘normalize’ ideas about the country and its Nazi past, the debate he launched quickly became an opportunity for all manner of political actor to weigh in on the issues, ultimately ensuring that the discourse initiated by the left became the basis for a ‘political correctness, German style’ that silenced potential antisemitic and right wing extremist speech.

Discursive processes of coordination and communication, thus, are another way of showing why ideas may succeed (or fail). But discourse, like ideas, sometimes matters to the success of ideas, sometimes not. There are, after all, always ideas and discourse, most of which tend to reinforce existing realities and only some of which promote change. The question, then, is when does discourse exert a causal influence by promoting change, whether by way of its representation of ideas or by the discursive process by which it conveys those ideas?

In the representation of ideas, discourse contributes to the success or failure of ideas first of all in terms of how it articulates the substantive content of ideas. What makes for a successful discourse, in fact, encompasses a lot of the same things that make for successful ideas: relevance to the issues at hand, adequacy, applicability, appropriateness, and resonance. But beyond this, a discourse is likely to benefit from a certain amount of consistency and coherence across policy

sectors to be credible, although a modicum of vagueness or ambiguity is also to be expected (see Radaelli and Schmidt 2004). Vagueness helps in particular in the context of international diplomacy, when the same discourse can be ‘read’ in radically different ways, as in the case of Britain and France with regard to the concept of a ‘European army’ (Howorth 2004). Moreover, the coherence of a discourse can add to its strength, even when it uses ideas for different strategic purposes in different contexts—as in the case of the ‘double discourse’ of the European Union Commission in agricultural policy which, as Eve Fouilleux (2004) explains, used the very same discourse of ‘multifunctionality’ at the international level to defend the EU from outside pressures for change, at the EU level to push for member-state reform. Expectations of consistency and coherence, moreover, can lead to what Frank Schimmelfenning (2001) has termed ‘rhetorical entrapment,’ which is how political actors who do not change their preferences nevertheless feel obliged to follow the policy implications of discourses they have accepted in the past. This speaks to the fact that discourse is a lot more than talk. It can not only commit the speakers themselves to action, it can also set the terms of the discourse as well as of action for their successors. Thus, not only did French political leaders find themselves having to honor their predecessors’ commitments, as noted above (see Parsons 2003), they also found themselves trapped by their predecessors’ communicative discourse, in particular de Gaulle’s initial legitimating ideas about European integration (Schmidt 2007b).

The interactive processes of discourse may also exert a causal influence beyond what discourse does in representing ideas. Most generally, discourse serves not just to express one set of actors’ strategic interests or normative values but also to persuade others of the necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action. Some, following Habermas (1989, 1996), see such an interaction as one in which we need to distinguish ‘arguing,’ which involves persuasion, from ‘bargaining,’ which stands for strategic action (e.g., Risse 2000). Although nicely evocative as a distinction, most discursive interactions actually involve both ‘arguing’ and ‘bargaining’ since one can argue to defend one’s interests just as well as be strategic in persuading others as to the appropriateness of one’s viewpoint (see Radaelli and Schmidt 2004). Equally importantly, although discourses are most often successful if true, coherent, and consistent, they need not be. Successful discourses can be manipulative, they may distort the ‘facts’ or even invent them, they may lie, they may be ‘happy talk’ or ‘spin’ to obscure what political leaders are really doing, and they may even be vehicles for elite domination and power, as Bourdieu, Foucault, and Gramsci maintain. But this is where public debates in democratic societies come in, since they can serve to reveal the ‘bad ideas’ of the particular discourse of any given political actor or set of actors. Thus, for example, David Art (2006) demonstrates the causal influence of public debates when he links the failure of the extreme right in Germany to the far-ranging public debates, together with protests and social mobilization, which isolated and delegitimized extreme right parties, and its success in Austria to the lack of any such extensive debate or social action. Political leaders’ discourse alone, however, can have a major impact, as I show in a matched pair of cases in which all factors are controlled for other than the discourse. Lasting public acceptance for neo-liberal reform in the UK was due in large measure to the communicative discourse through which Prime Minister Thatcher sought to persuade the public of what she believed as she reformed; its lack of acceptance in New Zealand had much to do the lack of communicative discourse of political leaders beginning with Finance Minister Douglas, who assumed that people would come to believe what he believed after he reformed (Schmidt 2000, 2002b).

Finally, institutional context also matters. The importance of the formal institutional context can be elucidated by the way in which different forms of discourse may be emphasized in different institutional settings. For example, in ‘simple’ polities where governing activity tends to be channeled through a single authority—primarily countries with majoritarian representative institutions, statist policymaking, and unitary states like Britain and France—the communicative discourse to the general public tends to be much more elaborate than the coordinative discourse among policy actors. This is because policies decided without much consultation with the most affected interests require legitimation to the general public, without which governments are likely to face sanctions ranging from interest group protest to loss of public confidence and loss of elections. By contrast, in ‘compound’ polities where governing activity tends to be dispersed among multiple authorities—countries with proportional representation systems, corporatist policymaking, and/or federal or regionalized states like Germany and Italy—the coordinative discourse among policy actors tends to be much more elaborate than the communicative discourse to the public. This is because it is difficult to communicate in anything more than vague terms to the public the results of the negotiations among the many policy actors involved without jeopardizing any of the compromises made in private among policy actors (Schmidt 2002a, pp. 239-50, 2005, 2006a, pp. 223-31). An exception among compound polities is the United States, since it has a strong communicative discourse as a result of its majoritarian politics and presidential system along with a strong coordinative discourse as a result of its pluralist processes and federal structures—although these often work at cross-purposes.. The highly compound European Union, by comparison, has the weakest of communicative discourses as a result of the lack of an elected central government—and its dependence on national leaders to speak for it—and the strongest of coordinative discourses, given its highly complex, semi-pluralist processes and quasi-federal structures (see Schmidt 2006).

Formal institutional context thus also has an impact on where and when discourse may succeed. But context with regard to more specific institutional settings should also not be forgotten. Discourses succeed when speakers address their remarks to the ‘right’ audiences (specialized or general publics) at the ‘right’ times (timing) in the ‘right’ ways, that is, in ways deemed convincing in cognitive terms (because justifiable) and persuasive in normative terms (because appropriate and/or legitimate). In short, successful discourses are all about ‘getting it right’ in terms of a given ‘meaning’ context according to a given ‘logic of communication,’ to be elaborated below.

IDEAS AND DISCOURSE IN INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

The ‘new institutionalism’ which emerged in the mid 1980s in response to an overemphasis on agency without structure (i.e., rational choice methodology) or, worse, on agency without sentient agents or structures (i.e., behaviorism), brought ‘institutions back in’ in an effort to right the balance. In so doing, the new institutionalists may have tipped the balance too far in the other direction. The problem for all three of the older new institutionalisms is that in their effort to develop explanations that took account of institutions, the institutions they defined have had a tendency to be overly ‘sticky’ while the agents (where they exist) have been largely fixed in terms of preferences or fixated in terms of norms. The turn to ideas and discourse by scholars in all three of the new institutionalisms represents their effort to unstick

institutions and to unfix preferences and norms. In so doing, however, those who really took ideas and discourse seriously, whom we label here as discursive institutionalists (whether or not they would label themselves as such), have challenged the basic premises of the older new institutionalisms both in terms of ontology, about what institutions are and how they are created, maintained, and changed; and epistemology, about what we can know about institutions and what makes them continue or change with regard to interests and norms.

Institutions and Institutional Change

For the most part, the three older new institutionalisms treat institutions (once created) as given, whether as continuing structures (the historical regularities of HI) or as the context within which agents act (the incentive structures of RI or the cultural norms of SI). As objects of explanation, moreover, such institutions are external to the actors, as rules about acting in the world that serve mainly as constraints, whether by way of RI's incentives that structure action, HI's paths that shape action, or SI's norms that frame action. Action in institutions in the three older institutionalisms, therefore, conforms to a rule-following logic, whether an interest-based logic of calculation, a norm-based logic of appropriateness, or a historically-based logic of path dependence. But if everyone follows rules, once established, we can explain continuity in institutions, but how do we explain change? This subordination of 'agency' (action) to 'structure' (rules) is the key problem for the three older new institutionalisms, and why all manner of new institutionalists have turned to ideas and discourse in recent years.

DI treats institutions at one and the same time as given, as structures which are the context within which agents think, speak, and act, and as contingent, as the results of agents' thoughts, words, and actions. As objects of explanation, such institutions are internal rather than external to the actors, serving both as structures (of thinking, saying, and acting) that constrain actors and as constructs (of thinking, saying, and acting) created and changed by those actors. As a result, action in institutions, instead of being the product of agents' rationally calculated, path-dependent, or norm-appropriate rule-following, is better seen as the process by which agents create and maintain institutions through the use of what we will call their '*background ideational abilities*,' which underpin agents' ability to act within a given meaning context. But it does not stop here, because such institutional action can also be predicated upon what we will call the '*foreground discursive abilities*' through which agents may change (or maintain) their institutions. This represents the logic of communication which is at the basis of agents' capacity to think, speak, and act outside their institutions even as they are inside them, enabling them to deliberate about the institutional rules even as they use them, and to persuade one another to change those institutions or to maintain them. It is the combination of agents' background ideational and foreground discursive abilities which helps account for why DI is better able to explain institutional change (and continuity) than the older three institutionalisms.

Most political scientists who take ideas and discourse seriously intuitively assume that institutions are simultaneously structure and construct (agency) in which agents have both background ideational and foreground discursive abilities, and they generally use the structural accounts of any one or more of the three older institutionalisms as background information. But they rarely articulate it. This is as true for DIs engaging with the RI tradition as it is for those in the HI tradition. In fact, only DIs working in the SI tradition have done much to elaborate on the ontological issues, influenced by continental philosophers and macro-sociologists like Bourdieu

(1994), Foucault (2000), Habermas (1989, 1996), and Anthony Giddens (1984). Alexander Wendt (1987, pp. 359-60), for example, whose ‘structurationalist’ theory derives largely from the work of Giddens, sees social structures as having “an inherently discursive dimension in the sense that they are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that agents bring to their actions,” while agents and structures are “mutually constitutive.” But what does this mean? And how can one establish this duality without falling into the trap where one emphasizes structure over agency, or agency over structure?

Although philosophers in the continental tradition have done the most to address these questions, I turn first to the work of a philosopher in the analytic tradition, John Searle, mainly to show that one need not go only to continental philosophy to gain similar kinds of insights on the construction of social reality. Searle (1995) defines ‘institutional facts’ as those things which exist only by way of collective agreements about what stands for an institution, which are consciously created by people through words and action but which may become unconscious once they are constituted not only because people are born into them but also because they use them as part of a whole hierarchy of institutional facts which itself evolves as people use institutions. For Searle (1995, pp. 140-45), this hierarchy of institutional facts makes up the structure of constitutive rules to which agents are sensitive as part of their ‘background abilities’ which encompass human capacities, dispositions, and know-how related to how the world works and how to cope with the world. Such background abilities are thus internal to agents, enabling them to speak and act without the conscious or unconscious following of rules external to the agent assumed by RI rationalist calculation, HI path-dependence, or SI norm appropriateness.

The concept of background abilities is not unique to Searle, as he himself acknowledges. He sees it as the focus of Wittgenstein’s (e.g. 1968) later work and notes that it is present in Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘*habitus*’ (Searle 1995, pp. 127-32). Bourdieu’s ‘*habitus*’ is in fact quite similar to Searle’s ‘background abilities,’ in that he sees human activity as neither constituted nor constitutive but both simultaneously, as human beings act “following the intuitions of a ‘logic of practice’” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 11). In psychology, the theory of cognitive dissonance also comes close to what we are talking about here, at least insofar as it refutes assumptions about the rule-following nature of behavior, because it shows that people generally act without thinking of any rules they may be following, but then check what they are doing against the various rules that might apply, with consciousness about the rules coming into play mainly where cognitive dissonance occurs, that is, when the rules are contradictory (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999).

The ideational processes by which agents create and maintain institutions, whether we use Searle, Bourdieu, or cognitive psychology to ground them, can be summarized by the concept of ‘*background ideational abilities*.’ But while this generic concept is useful in signifying what goes on in individuals’ minds as they come up with new ideas, it still does not explain much about the processes by which institutions change, which is a collective endeavor. For this, we need another key component in human interaction which helps explain such change: discourse.

We undersell DI if we equate the ontology of institutions with background ideational abilities alone, and do not take account of what I call ‘*foreground discursive abilities*,’ that is,

peoples' ability to think and speak outside the institutions in which they continue to act. For this, we could turn for support to Habermas (1989, 1996), with his concept of 'communicative action.' But it is also in line with much of the literature on 'discursive democracy' and 'deliberative democracy' (e.g., Dryzek 1990, 2000), which is all about the importance of discourse and deliberation in breaking the elite monopoly on national and supranational decision-making. Even though Searle (1995) does not talk about any such 'foreground abilities,' one could argue that he too is open to this discursive side, given his view of the importance of language, in particular of 'speech acts,' and his insistence that institutional change can not only be unconscious, as agents start to use the institutions differently, but also conscious, when they 'decide' to use them differently. The main point of all these philosophers is that discourse as an interactive process is what enables agents to 'decide' to change institutions, because the deliberative nature of discourse allows agents to conceive of and talk about institutions as objects at a distance, and to dissociate themselves from them even as they continue to use them. This is because discourse works at two levels, at the every-day level of generating and communicating about institutions, and at a meta-level, as a kind of second order critical communication among agents about what goes on in institutions, enabling them to deliberate and persuade as a preliminary to action.

These foreground discursive abilities also provide a direct response both to the older new institutionalists who emphasize structural rule-following over agency and to continental philosophers who sometimes assume a more deterministic ideational rule-following, such as Bourdieu (1994), who argues that the '*doxa*' or vision of the world of elites who dominate the State creates the '*habitus*' which conditions people to see the world in the way they (the dominant) choose, or Foucault (2000), who suggests the impossibility of escape from the ideational domination of the powerful. Foreground discursive abilities enable people to reason, debate, and change the structures which they use—a point also brought out by Gramsci (1971) with his emphasis on the role of intellectuals in breaking the hegemonic discourse.

Thus, by combining background ideational abilities together with foreground discursive abilities, DI puts the agency back into institutional change, by explaining the dynamics of change in 'structures' through 'constructive' discourse about ideas. In so doing, DI also provides an answer to the problems of HIs in particular, both in accounting for agency and in explaining the dynamics of institutional change (see Schmidt 2007a).

One of the main problems with HI, in fact, is that despite the 'history' in its title, it tends to be rather ahistorical, by explaining change mainly by reference to critical junctures or 'punctuated equilibrium' (Krasner 1988) or by giving it very limited play through path dependence, with its 'lock-in effects' and 'positive reinforcement' mechanisms (Pierson 2000). DIs in the HI tradition also often explain change as coming at critical junctures—as periods of "third-order change" (Hall 1993); of 'critical moments' in which 'collective memories' are made and/or changed (Rothstein 2005, Ch. 8); of 'critical junctures' when public debates serve to reframe how countries 'come to terms with the past' (Art 2006); of 'great transformations' when ideas serve to recast countries' political economic policies (Blyth 2002); or of moments when a 'window of opportunity' (Kingdon 1984) opens and the search for a new policy program begins. But whereas for HIs such critical moments are unexplainable times when the 'structures' shift, for DIs these moments are the objects of explanation through ideas and discourse, which lend

insight into how the structures are reconstructed. Importantly, however, DIs also consider change in a more evolutionary manner, as when Sheri Berman (2006) traces the slow transformation of socialists into social democrats as their political ideas shifted in the effort to find workable and equitable democratic solutions to the economic challenges of globalizing capitalism.

Even recent innovations in HI (e.g., Streeck and Thelen 2005), which elaborate on the incremental processes of change resulting from actors' use of mechanisms of layering, conversion, interpretation, mainly describe such change rather than explain it by reference to what actors themselves think and say that lead to change. In fact, when HIs concern themselves with agency, they have tended to turn either to RI for a calculus-oriented agency or to SI for a culture-oriented one (see Hall and Taylor 1997), and they have thereby ended up with another kind of static, equilibrium-focused explanation (see Schmidt 2006b, 2007a). This is why in recent years, increasing numbers of HIs have turned to ideas and discourse for agency. Thus, for example, Desmond King (1999) focuses on the role of ideas and knowledge in the making of illiberal immigration policy in Britain and the US; Robert Lieberman (2004) has combined institutions and ideas in his history of racial incorporation in America; and Margaret Weir (2006) has argued that organized labor's efforts to redefine itself as a political actor in the US and to build new coalitions can best be explained by considering the cognitive and relational factors that show how organizational leaders 'puzzled' and 'powered' over questions of identity, alliances, and values as well as interests.

The question here is how complementary are these approaches, that is, how well do the historical rules and regularities brought out in HI investigations serve as background information for DI explanations of agency, and to what extent does assuming that HI analysis elucidates structures while DI illuminates agency (as per Lieberman 2004) paper over very real differences between these two approaches. In my own investigation of democracy in Europe (Schmidt 2005, 2006a), I show that while a HI explanation of the differential institutional impact of European integration on simple polities like Britain and France vs. compound polities like Germany and Italy helps explain the potential challenges to these countries' organizing principles of democracy, it does not account for their responses because institutional design is not destiny. Only by adding a DI explanation of the role of legitimating ideas and persuasive discourse in promoting (or not) public acceptance of the European Union can we fully understand national responses to European integration.

Interests and Uncertainty

In RI, the turn to ideas has also been relatively recent, as a way of solving problems that explanations in terms of interests alone could not, such as shedding light on how preferences are created and how they may change. The turn to ideas has only gone so far, however, because RIs continue to assume that preferences remain fixed, that 'objective' interests are analytically separable from 'subjective' ideas, and that ideational explanation is useful only when and if explanation in terms of 'objective' or 'material' interests is insufficient (e.g., Goldstein and Keohane 1993—see critiques by Blyth 2002, Gofas and Hay n/a).

For DIs generally—and in this they are in agreement with SIs—the fundamental flaw with RIs' approach to ideas is that it assumes that rationality is mainly instrumental, that

‘objective’ or ‘material’ interests exist, that they are separable from ideas, and that they can also represent the ‘incentive structures’ for rational action. Against such instrumental rationality, Raymond Boudon (2003) summarizes the arguments of many DIs as well as SIs when he contends that actors are not motivated by self-interest alone but rather have a wider range of reasons for acting—including moral, prudential, and ‘axiological’ (norm-based)—many of which are not commonplace, do not have consequences for others, and do not directly affect their own self-interest. Rationality for Boudon (2003, p. 18) is ‘cognitive’ rather than instrumental, such that action needs to be explained in terms of its meaning to the actor, as grounded in a system of reasons (similar to our ‘meaning context’) which the actor sees as ‘strong.’ And in this cognitive system, as most DIs agree, one cannot talk about ‘objective’ interests as opposed to ideas because all interests *are* ideas and because ideas *constitute* interests, such that all interests are ‘subjective’ (see Hay 2006).

Interest-based behavior certainly exists, then, but it involves ideas about interests which may encompass much more than strictly utilitarian concerns. As Nicolas Jabko (2006) shows in his discussion of the political strategy for uniting Europe, ideas can certainly be used strategically in political life to advance certain interests against others, but such strategic ideas are rarely reducible to instrumental interests arrived at through utilitarian calculi; instead, they draw from a larger repertoire of ideas, in his case, about the European Single Market. Moreover, as Leonard Seabrooke (2006) demonstrates, behavior even in an arena that seems to demand the most interest-based calculations of costs and benefits, the international financial markets, economic social norms come into play, serving as the social sources of states’ international financial power.

But if interests are subjective and norm-driven, then the RI assumption that they can serve as ‘neutral incentive structures’ is also flawed, and especially so when RIs assume that narrowly instrumental behavior can lead to the establishment of ‘credible institutions.’ For Bo Rothstein (2005, pp. 137-66), institutions, rather than neutral structures of incentives or (worse) the immutable products of ‘culture’ that lead to inescapable ‘social traps,’ are better understood as the carriers of ideas or ‘collective memories.’ As such, they can be the objects of trust or mistrust, and are therefore changeable over time as actors’ ideas and discourse about them can change in response to changes in their performance.

However, if everything is related to ideas and discourse, with no ‘neutral incentive structures’ or ‘objective’ and material’ interests, one might think that DI leads to some sort of extreme idealism in a radically uncertain, immaterial world. Far from it. Most DIs do not deny the existence of material reality, they just oppose the conflation of material reality and interests into ‘material interests.’ Material reality is, rather, the setting within which or in response to which agents may conceive of their interests. As such, DIs problematize the RIs’ whole notion of ‘objective’ material interests by theorizing interests as subjective responses to material conditions; and they take the actual responses to material reality as their subject of inquiry (see Schmidt 2006b; Hay 2006; Gofas and Hay n/a).

We are left with two final questions: what is material reality? And how do we deal with risk and uncertainty in a material world? RIs tend to assume a correspondence view of the world, i.e., that material reality is out there for agents to see, and that scholars are in the business

of discovering it. DIs range widely from those who hold something akin to such a correspondence view, for example, through a kind of ‘rump materialism’ determining a hierarchy of needs in economic life (Wendt 1999, pp. 109-10), and those who don’t, who assume that most of reality is constructed by the actors themselves beyond a very basic level (e.g., Hay 2006, Blyth n/a).

But to ask if material reality exists is the wrong question: We do better to ask what is material and ‘real’ and what is real even if it is not ‘material.’ Institutions, for one, may be ‘real’ because they constitute interests and cause things to happen even though they are socially ‘constructed’ and thus not material in a visible, ‘put your hand or rest your eyes on it’ kind of concrete sense. Searle (1995) can prove helpful in elucidating this point when he distinguishes between ‘brute facts’ like mountains, which are material because they exist regardless of whether sentient (intentional) agents acknowledge their existence or have words for them, and ‘social facts,’ of which ‘institutional facts’ are a subset. Institutions are not material because they do not exist without sentient agents; but they are real, with causal effects, like money.

To get clearer about questions of certainty or uncertainty, but from a different vantage point, we could turn to philosophers of language or statistical mathematics. In the philosophy of language, Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1972) makes a little-noticed but important distinction between two kinds of language-games, those based on our experience and those based on our pictures of the world. Language-games based in our everyday experiences in the world ordinarily admit of no doubts and mistakes—such as knowledge of one’s own name, address, actions, and history; of the number of hands and toes one has; and of the meaning of the words one uses. By contrast, language-games based in our pictures of the world, which often follow from our (social) scientific interpretations of the world—such as belief in the existence of the earth one hundred years ago, in the events of history, in the temperature at which water boils—always allow for doubts, mistakes, and even gestalt switches or radical conversions, 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). Nassim Taleb and Avital Pilpel (2003—see discussion in Blyth n/a) make a similar point when they demonstrate that the world in which we live is a lot more uncertain than the world of risk economists and RIs generally assume, given the ‘problem of the non-observability of probability generators,’ that is, the impossibility of knowing let alone statistically predicting the effects of all the forces that may have an impact on economic and political realities.

What does this mean for political scientists? That our own generalizations may have varying degrees of certainty, depending upon their objects of knowledge and explanation. But how do we operationalize this? And where is the line between RI and DI? Mark Blyth (n/a) provides the beginnings of an answer when he distinguishes between RI notions of uncertainty—which are really about ‘risk’ because agents assume some kind of stable, directly observable world out there that they can perceive more or less well and in which they can calculate the subjective probability of the likely outcomes of their preferences, such as a generator of outcomes like the US Congress—and real (Knightian) ‘uncertainty.’ This is when agents are not simply unsure about how to achieve their interests but unsure of what their interests are in a world that is not stable and not directly observable, as with a generator of outcomes like the global economy, in which we do best to make sense of actors’ policies, say, about flexible labor

markets and free trade, in terms of a given programmatic set of ideas and discourse. According to Blyth, much of social science is part of this latter, more uncertain world in which ideas are fundamental to explanation, and which is at odds with the older new institutionalists' taken-for-granted assumptions about institutional equilibrium, linear causality, exogenous forces for change, and normality. As a result, although Blyth would accept RI interest-based explanation as perfectly adequate to the task in certain instances, he finds that, for the most part, it represents expressions of social scientists and social actors' desires for a certain world rather than the world itself.

But what, then, does this tell us about the relationship between RI and DI. It suggests at the very least that RI can serve as background information to DI in two ways: First, when RI appears sufficient to the explanation of human action, its account of 'interest-based ideas' can serve as a shortcut to that which can be expected (although not predicted), given what we know about human rationality (and irrationality). Second, when RI fails to explain, it can serve as a jumping off point for DIs, indicating what they could usefully investigate and might do a better job explaining in terms of ideas and discourse. This does not mean, however, that we should turn to ideas only when RI does not explain, the view of those who see ideas as switches or focal points. Following this logic would imply that DI explains only the unexpected, by accounting for unique events in terms of individuals' ideas and discourse. But in fact, DI may also explain the expected in unexpected (for RI) ways as well as the seemingly irrational, by analyzing words and actions according to the ideational rules and discursive regularities in a given 'meaning' context following a particular 'logic of communication' rather than according to analysis based on rationalist interests following a logic of calculation. This applies not just to individual actions—expected as well as unexpected—but also to the institutions themselves.

Norms and Relativism

In SI, we cannot talk about a turn to ideas or even discourse as such, since SI is all about ideas and discourse, in particular with regard to questions of norms, cognitive frames, and meaning systems, and the ways in which they are created and changed. What distinguishes SIs from DIs working in the SI tradition is more a difference of degree than kind, and depends upon the extent to which ideas are treated as dynamic constructs (DIs) or as static structures (SIs). The difficulty in distinguishing between the two, in international relations in particular, is that scholars on either side of the static/dynamic divide call themselves 'constructivists' because they see identity and interests as endogenous and socially constructed, in contrast with the 'neo-utilitarians,' or RIs, for whom identities and interests remain exogenous and given (see Ruggie 1998, p. 864). John Ruggie clarifies the distinction when he notes that SI constructivists like Katzenstein and his colleagues (1996) "cut into the problem of ideational causation at the level of 'collective representations' of ideational social facts and then trace the impact of these representations on behavior. They do not, as Weber tried, begin with the actual social construction of meanings and significance from the ground up" (Ruggie 1998, pp. 884-5).

DI 'constructivists' in the SI tradition encompass all those who engage dynamically with the construction of ideas and discourse. In international relations, these include, for example, scholars such as Alexander Wendt (1987, 1999), discussed above; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), who examine the diffusion of international norms to developing countries; and Thomas Risse (2001), who considers the ways in which different European

countries successively constructed and reconstructed their state identities and ideas about European integration. In comparative and international political economy, they encompass Rawi Abdelal (2006), who elaborates on the ways in which the rules for global finance changed not because of a Washington consensus but, rather, because of a 'Paris consensus' in which European policymakers conceived and promoted the liberal rules now structuring the international financial markets; Colin Hay (2001) and Ben Rosamund (Hay and Rosamund 2002), who detail the ways in which political leaders crafted discourses about the challenges of globalization to legitimate neo-liberal reform at home; and Leonard Seabrooke (2006), who shows how states' influence in the international financial order is based not on the resources of its elite financial actors but, rather, on the legitimacy that emerges from its everyday dealings with ordinary people in lower income groupings. Significantly here, Seabrooke (2006, Ch. 2) shows that states develop international financial capacity not because they have a persuasive top-down 'master' communicative discourse by political leaders to the masses or even a successful top-to-top coordinative discourse among state and financial elites influenced by discursive coalitions and entrepreneurs. Rather, states develop such capacity on the basis of the legitimacy they gain through a very bottom-up communicative discourse consisting of the deliberative interactions and contestations between state actors and economic actors with incomes below the median level.

Questions related to which way the arrows go, whether from top-down, top-to-top, or bottom-up, and who is seen as the carriers of ideas, are important ones. The main problem with the top-down ideational and/or discursive process is that legitimization is seen as hierarchical, with elites in charge and 'entrepreneurial actors' in 'moments of uncertainty' jumping through 'windows of opportunity' to bring about produce a shift in ideas. As John Campbell (1998, p. 383) notes, this leaves the rest of us as "institutional dopes blindly following the institutionalized scripts and cues around them." For Seabrooke (2006, pp. 4-42), the problem is also that such top-down approaches end up presenting legitimacy as more of a condition tied to specific ideas rather than as a process of on-going contestation in deliberative discursive processes.

DIs in the SI tradition share with constructivists of all stripes the rejection of the RI emphasis on the individual in favor of a more collective approach to the creation of ideas, with intersubjective meanings underpinned by culture and norms, ensuring that SIs, including DIs in the SI tradition, make no universalistic claims about rationality. Moreover, if DIs who engage with the RI tradition can be seen to focus on cognitive rationality, then DIs working in the SI tradition can be described as emphasizing 'normative' rationality.

But because they are often focused on explanation within cultures rather than across them, and on normative ideas rather than interest-based (cognitive) ideas, DIs in the SI tradition (as well as SIs more generally) are sometimes accused of an implicit relativism in which the question is raised as to whether they can make any cross-national generalizations at all, or even if there is anything mutually recognizable across culture. Thus, for example, Kathryn Sikkink (1991) was criticized as leaving herself open to relativism because she saw everything as socially constructed within a given culture (see Jacobsen 1995). In fact, generalizations are possible even when one takes a strongly normative and culture-based view of rationality, by invoking similarities as well as differences in cultural norms and identities. One could argue even here that certain ideas and norms are more universal than others—going back to Wittgenstein, those

based on ‘experience-games’ as opposed to ‘picture-games.’ Moreover, there are certain bases to human rationality which allow for universalism, illustrated in Wittgenstein’s (1968, II, xi, p. 223) famous observation: “if a lion could talk, we would not understand him.” And it is also the case that if all interests and norms are ideas, and all ideas are ‘constructed,’ it is just as possible, although not as easy, to construct international ideas about interests and norms—what is the 20th century notion of human rights, after all, if not that (see Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999)? The point, in short, is that norms are intersubjective and discursively constructed and, as such, can for the most part be understood across cultures even when they are not shared.

Norms, moreover, are everywhere. This is argued most forcefully by philosophers and macro-sociologists like Foucault, Bourdieu, and Gramsci with regard to the inevitability of elite domination of norm construction. But we need not take as radical a view of power to make the point that ideas and values infuse both the exercise and the study of power, as Steven Lukes (2005) shows. We can apply this argument to RI as well, since critics within that tradition themselves note that RIs do little to question the institutional rules within which rational actors seek to maximize their utility, instead mostly assuming them to be good (Moe 2003, p. 3) and/or efficient (North 1990). The problem with ignoring the values embedded in our research, and believing that our work is value-neutral and, thereby, ‘objective,’ is not only that it may skew research findings. It is also that political scientists lose an important opportunity to engage with politics, which is clearly all about values. This comes out most sharply in the world of think-tanks, in which conservative think-tanks which produce unabashedly political and value-laden research have gotten a much bigger bang for their buck in Washington than more progressive think-tanks, which seek to be (or at least to appear to be) more value-neutral and objective (see Rich 2004).

CONCLUSION

The objects of discursive institutionalist explanation, in sum, consist of both ideas and discourse. Ideas differ in levels of generality—whether specific to policy, encompassing a wider program, or constituting an underlying philosophy—and types—as cognitive ideas that are constitutive of interests and normative ideas that appeal to values. Discourse serves not just to represent ideas but also to exchange them through interactive discursive processes of coordination among policy actors in policy and program construction and of communication between political actors and the public in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of those ideas, against a background of more overarching philosophies. Institutional context also matters both in terms of formal institutional context, with simple polities tending to have a more elaborate communicative discourse, compound polities a more elaborate coordinative discourse, and of more specific ‘meaning’ contexts.

DI differs from the three older new institutionalisms in terms of its logic as well as its objects of explanation. First, institutions in DI, rather than serving as external ‘structures’ for rule-following, are simultaneously structures and constructs internal to the agents themselves, whose ‘background ideational abilities’ enable them to act in any given meaning context to create and maintain institutions at the same time that their ‘foreground discursive abilities’ enable them to communicate critically about those institutions, to change (or maintain) them. Institutional change in DI, therefore, as opposed to in HI, is dynamic and explainable across time through agents’ ideas and discourse rather than largely static because of path dependent

structures and unexplainable critical moments. Secondly, interests in DI, as opposed to in RI, are neither ‘objective’—because interests *are* ideas and, as such, subjective—nor ‘material,’ which is not to give way to total uncertainty or to deny that there is a material reality out there because subjective interests as well as institutions can be ‘real’ even if not ‘material.’ Third, norms in DI, as opposed to in SI, are dynamic constructs rather than static structures, while the intersubjectivity of normative ideational constructions and discursive interactions guards against relativism.

The final question we have to answer is: Can we have our cake and eat it too? That is, can we accept discursive institutionalism without rejecting the other three institutionalist approaches? I would like to think so. Political reality is vast and complicated. No one methodological approach is able to explain it sufficiently. Each gets at a different piece of reality, at different levels of abstraction, with different kinds of generalizations, and different objects and logics of explanation. It is for this reason that discursive institutionalism can treat the results of the three other institutionalist approaches as background information, either by accepting these as taken-for-granted, common-sense ideas and discourse about political reality which serve as background assumptions to further inquiry or by problematizing such results as that which is to be investigated. I have previously appealed to methodological tolerance by suggesting that political scientists ‘give peace a chance’ (Schmidt 2006b), by abandoning their methodological wars in order to explore the boundaries between their methodological approaches. I reiterate this here, and hope that with a clearer view of approaches that take ideas and discourse seriously, political scientists will begin to think once again about how to explain the fullness of political reality, using a mix of institutionalist approaches.

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