

# Policy Change and Discourse in Europe: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

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Since the mid-1980s, the European Union, together with its member states, has undergone a major process of transformation. First with the race to the single market by 1992, then with the run-up to European Monetary Union (EMU) by 1999, and now with enlargement, the EU has seen an explosion of new policies with a panoply of new practices in the context of an expanding European economy and an emerging European polity.

In attempting to describe, understand and explain the EU's transformative experiences, the study of policy change in Europe has also undergone dramatic transformation. Empirically, from an almost exclusive focus on European integration, that is, on the process of building a European space in terms of EU-level policies, practices and politics, scholars have added a concern with Europeanisation, that is, with the impact of European integration on member state policies, practices and politics. Conceptually, on top of the 'first generation' studies centred on explaining the process of formation of a European sphere, where scholarly debates divided over whether the EU was fundamentally intergovernmental or neo-functional and, more recently, liberal intergovernmentalist, supranational, multi-level, or network-based, we now have a 'second generation' of studies that concentrates instead on the process of national adjustment to the EU. These scholarly debates differ over which factors best explain policy change in the process of adjustment – whether external pressures and problems, the 'fit' between EU-level policies and national policy legacies and preferences, actors' problem-solving capacity in a given political-institutional setting, or ideas and discourse (see Héritier 2001; Cowles *et al.* 2001; Featherstone and Radaelli 2003). Methodologically, the study of European policy change has also become increasingly split among those who emphasise interest-based rationality and game-theoretic behaviour; institutional path-dependencies and historically-shaped patterns of development; social constructions of action, culture and identity; or, most recently, ideas and discourse.

In this volume, we take the empirical concerns, theoretical concepts and methodological approaches of the two generations of studies as our starting point, to reflect on the process of policy change in terms of both European integration and Europeanisation. Rather than taking sides in the theoretical or methodological debates, to promote one or another approach, we support a pluralistic approach to policy change in Europe, arguing that only by considering all possible factors from a variety of methodological perspectives can one get a more complete explanation of policy change. We follow the ideational turn in theoretical policy analysis, but instead of arguing for ‘ideas all the way down’ institutions and interests, we look at ideational variables in the context of institutional and/or interest-based variables (Blyth 2002; Radaelli 1995). This said, we emphasise discourse (rather than the more general notions of ‘ideas’ or ‘knowledge’) in this volume mainly because it is a relatively new approach, largely missing from explanations of European integration and Europeanisation, which can do much to complete our understanding of the process of policy change.

Discourse we define in terms of its content, as a set of policy ideas and values, and in terms of its usage, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication (see Schmidt 2000a; 2000b; 2002b). We argue that discourse must be set in institutional context, not only as one factor among a range of salient factors, but also in terms of its institutional setting, that is, in terms of the vast range of rules – culturally framed, path-dependent, or interest-based on the national level, institutionally agreed at the EU level – that affect policy-making in any given socio-political setting. As such, our approach to discourse represents another form of ‘new institutional’ analysis – which we call ‘discursive’ institutionalism (see Schmidt 2002b) on a par with the other three institutionalisms – rational choice, historical and sociological (Hall and Taylor 1996). But we claim no greater exclusivity for discursive institutionalism than for any of the other institutionalisms, nor do we assume that discourse is always the critical factor to take into account. Discourse, just as any other factor, sometimes matters, sometimes does not in the explanation of policy change. The question is when does discourse matter, that is, when does it exert a causal influence on policy change, say by redefining interests as opposed to merely reflecting them (see Schmidt 2001; 2002a), and when are other factors more significant? These, however, are all matters for empirical investigation.

The articles in this volume are divided between those that focus primarily on the process of European integration, that is, on the formulation of EU-level policies in the international and European arenas (security and defence, international trade and agriculture), and those which concentrate

mainly on the process of Europeanisation, that is, on the effects of European policies in the national arena (banking, telecommunications and immigration). Our focus is obviously on public policies, hence we do not deal with the politics and polity dimensions of both European integration and Europeanisation. Additionally, it is important to note that while we analytically separate the two processes for purposes of categorisation, empirically they are connected. European integration leads to the formulation of policies that impact on member states. Depending on the type, strength and timing of impact, member states generate feedback and political responses that affect the trajectory and content of integration. In any case, EU policies are not produced in a vacuum, but in an arena where EU institutions and member states project their interests and discourses. In some cases, the very substance of EU policy is ambiguous, or based on new modes of governance (such as the open method of co-ordination), which do not assume fully coherent, linear and ordered policy descending from Brussels onto the member states. Hence our analytical distinction does not pre-empt richer empirical analysis on the interplay between European integration and Europeanisation (Radaelli 2003a).

While some articles explore the range of factors in European policy change, with discourse as one among a number of such factors (e.g., telecommunications and banking), others take ideas and discourse as their organising principle, with the other mediating factors seen as background conditions (e.g., security and defence, international trade, agriculture and immigration). Moreover, the articles use a mix of methods. For example, while some combine a rationalist approach focused on interest-based behaviour (e.g., international trade, telecommunications) with discourse, others embed discourse in a more historical-institutionalist account of path dependencies (e.g., banking), while yet others make soft rational choice assumptions about interest-based behaviour and sociological-institutionalist references to cultural norms in a primarily discursive approach (security and defence, agriculture, immigration).

In this introductory essay, we proceed by first outlining the main factors identified in the literature used to explain policy change in Europe, including discourse. We then discuss the problems with such approaches, and the relationship between institutional learning, policy change and discourse. Next, we define and contextualise discourse, and finally we discuss its causal influence. Throughout, we use examples from the articles in illustration. We leave the substantive arguments about what we have learned about policy change in Europe to the Conclusion.

## FACTORS IN POLICY CHANGE IN EUROPE

To explain policy change under conditions of European integration and/or Europeanisation, the various approaches in the literature can be summarised in terms of five main mediating factors. These are the policy problems that establish the need for change, the policy legacies that may or may not 'fit' proposed policy solutions, the policy preferences that may or may not change in light of the problems and proposed solutions, the political-institutional capacity of actors to respond to the problems through new policy initiatives even if these reverse policy legacies and preferences, and the discourse that serves to enhance capacity by altering perceptions of problems and legacies and by influencing preferences.

First of all are the problems that act as pressures for EU policy change. These problems may come from the international arena, affecting the EU and its member states as a whole, and/or they may come from the purely European arena, as EU policies themselves pose problems for member states. In macro-economic policy, for example, the economic pressures stemming from the increasing volatility of the currency markets beginning in the early 1970s were the main force behind the creation of an integrated European monetary sphere, which culminated in EMU in the late 1990s. In European security and defence, the pressures for change were related to shifting US policies with regard to NATO in the 1990s and promoted the beginnings of greater European integration through CESDP – the Common European Security and Defence Policy – while the threat of terrorism related to the attacks of 11 September 2001 have made this an even greater imperative, but a much more complicated project (Howorth, in this volume). In international trade and agriculture, the pressures came largely from the United States and its push for greater trade liberalisation, and led to EU policies that sought to shift the focus of international trade negotiations and to reform agriculture (Van den Hoven, in this volume; Fouilleux, in this volume). In telecommunications, the spur for change came from the global challenges of technological change and economic competition as well as from the EU Commission, intent on opening up national telecommunications monopolies to competition in the effort to create a European market (Thatcher 1999; *idem*, in this volume). In immigration, the pressures for change came from the increasing flow of immigrants and asylum-seekers looking for jobs and safe havens in member states with often quite different regimes as well as from EU attempts to work out a common immigration policy (Geddes and Guiraudon, in this volume). However, the problems may instead be generated by purely

internal crises, as in the case of banking in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK and Germany, with little direct pressure by the EU (Busch, in this volume).

It is important to note, however, that not all EU policies, whether coming in response to international or internal European pressures, pose problems for member states, but only those that demand major change in national policies. This generally depends upon the ‘goodness of fit’ between the proposed EU policy and long-standing national policy legacies (Cowles *et al.* 2001; Héritier 2001; Börzel and Risse 2003). Obviously, the better the fit of national policies with EU policies, the more likely that a country will have fewer problems absorbing the EU policy; the worse the fit, the greater the need for a transformation in national policies. For example, while Germany, which saw its monetary policy patterns generalised throughout the EU, absorbed most changes related to European monetary integration with little difficulty, in France commitment to European monetary integration, along with vulnerability to globalisation pressures, led to the ‘great U-turn’ in monetary policy in 1983, whereas in Italy, the Maastricht criteria for entry into the European Monetary Union demanded a major shift in budgetary discipline in the mid-1990s. Among our cases, one of the clearest contrasts is in immigration policy, where the UK had a high goodness of fit with EU initiatives and France a very low one, requiring transformation of French policy, allowing absorption by the UK (Geddes and Guiraudon, in this volume). In telecommunications policy, similarly, the UK’s high goodness of fit ensured that it absorbed EU policy, whereas the lack of fit of France as well as Germany and Italy led to transformation (Thatcher, in this volume). But ‘goodness of fit’ has several limitations (see Radaelli 2003a). One important point is that fits and misfits are politically constructed: apart from extreme cases, there is no absolute match or mismatch (Goetz 2002). It is up to political actors at the EU and national levels to determine what a good fit is. This often means that interpretation, inter-subjective understandings and discourse shape the notion of ‘goodness of fit’ – a point to which we will turn below, explaining how discourse may operate on all mediating factors.

Actors’ preferences also matter, since policy change depends as well upon how readily principal policy actors and/or the public are able to countenance reform in cases where EU policy is likely to reverse national policy legacies. Where preferences in favour of traditional policies remain fixed, change may be blocked. Preferences can change, however, as in the case of France, Germany and Italy with regard to the transformations in telecommunications policy (Thatcher, in this volume). In electricity, by contrast, whereas Germany changed its preferences in the course of

negotiations, and went on to transform the sector through deregulation that went way beyond what was required by EU policy, the French remained true to their traditional preferences and legacies, with inertia in terms of electricity reform the result, as they did nothing more than comply with the minimum requirements of the EU directive (Eising and Jabko 2001; see also discussion in Schmidt 2002c).

Even where preferences remain opposed to EU policies that do not fit with policy legacies, however, policy change may nevertheless occur. This depends upon countries' political institutional capacity to act, even if the policy changes reverse policy legacies and preferences. This factor encompasses the political interactions – based on party politics, elections, interest coalitions and the like – as they play themselves out within different institutional settings, and constitute actors' 'problem-solving capacity' (Scharpf 1997). Such settings include, for example, single-actor systems such as the UK and France, where the executive has the capacity to impose its decisions – subject, however, to electoral sanctions and protest in the streets (especially in France); or 'multi-actor systems' such as Germany, Italy, as well as the EU, where the executive does not have the power to impose, and therefore must negotiate with the wide range of policy actors involved. These differences in political-institutional setting help explain not only the differences in the process of Europeanisation, for example, why multi-actor Germany was able to negotiate the transformation of the telecommunications sector with a wide range of actors whereas single-actor France imposed it. They also shed light on the European integration process, where single-actor France and the UK are generally better able to project their preferences on the EU, as in the cases of security and defence and agriculture, than Germany.

These four mediating factors tend to be the main ones considered by social scientists in both first and second generation studies of policy change in Europe. As such, they miss out on the final, fifth factor, which we believe essential to understanding the dynamics of policy change: discourse. Discourse helps create an opening to policy change by altering actors' perceptions of the policy problems, policy legacies and 'fit', influencing their preferences, and, thereby, enhancing their political institutional capacity to change. Most notable among the cases in this volume are Prime Minister Blair's discourse, which unblocked a policy area that had seen little movement throughout the post-war period, when Blair argued that a new European security and defence initiative was necessary in light of changing US defence priorities with regard to NATO, (Howorth, in this volume). Also significant was Commission officials' discourse that

produced a major shift in trade policy priorities from trade liberalisation to development (Van den Hoven, in this volume) and in agricultural policy from production support schemes to sustainable development (Fouilleux, in this volume). EU policy, moreover, has itself also often been used in the discourse to promote policy change. For example, German and French capacity to reform in telecommunications policy was enhanced by discourses that directly referred to EU institutional requirements and competitive pressures (Thatcher, in this volume). By contrast, French capacity to transform national immigration policy was enhanced by a discourse that described the changes in purely French terms, without reference to the EU (Geddes and Guiraudon, in this volume). By the same token, however, French leaders' inability to come up with a purely French discourse that would serve to alter views of the obligations of the Republican state in the 'service publique' (general interest utilities and infrastructural) services stymied reform in areas other than telecoms, such as electricity, as noted above.

Discourse, in sum, is one among several factors involved in policy change. When considered in the context of the process of Europeanisation, it can be seen as contributing to 'policy learning', to use the concept most often employed by social scientists concerned with explaining policy adjustment in the face of crisis-inducing problems and the failure of past policy solutions (see Hemerijck and Schludi 2000).

#### EUROPEANISATION, INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING AND DISCOURSE

One of the most intriguing aspects of the analysis of discourse concerns the way in which it helps establish a link between institutional analysis and learning in the debate on Europeanisation (Radaelli 2003a). In this debate, the main question is how to approach the study of Europeanisation and its impact on domestic institutions, whether from the top down or the inside out.

##### *Policy Learning and the Bias Induced by a Focus on Effects*

Recent research on Europeanisation distinguishes between 'absorption' or simple institutional learning (that is, learning limited to coping mechanisms) and 'transformation' or, in international relations language, thick learning, which takes place when institutions move on to a different logic of political behaviour. Thick learning effects lead to what has been described in various guises as reflexive understanding (Dobuzinskis 1992), deutero learning (Bateson 1973), or institutional development (Laird 1999).



There are two difficulties raised by the analysis of simple learning versus institutional development. One problem is that to cast the discussion of Europeanisation exclusively in terms of its effects (simple learning or institutional development) presupposes that there are effects. Put differently, there is a serious risk of prejudging the significance of European Union (EU) policy, whether in terms of the constraints it generally places on member states or in terms of its effects on those member states. Any consideration of EU decisions shows that the decisions themselves have very different rules for compliance (see Schmidt 2002c), from highly specified rules that countries are required to follow to the letter (e.g., the Maastricht criteria in the run-up to EMU or certain kinds of environmental standards); to less specified rules that countries have more leeway in following (e.g., the regulatory regimes for telecommunications or electricity); to suggested rules (e.g., in the European Employment Strategy or in tax competition – Radaelli 2003b); to no rules at all, as in mutual recognition. This means that EU policies themselves exercise different degrees of institutional pressure for change on member states.

Moreover, whatever the compliance rules, EU decisions generally have a very different impact in any given country, depending upon the mediating factors outlined above. Where EU policy poses a significant problem for a polity, by challenging long-standing policy legacies and long-held preferences, it can be useful to analyse its effects in terms of policy learning, whether simple learning – because policy actors resort to coping mechanisms, and respond with inertia to the pressures – or thick learning – because transformation occurs, with the EU policy serving to alter national policy as it galvanises new interest coalitions and empowers some actors as opposed to others (Héritier 2001). However, where the EU policy poses only a minimal problem, because of a goodness of fit between the EU policy and national policy legacies and preferences, analysis in terms of learning is not very useful, since absorption of the EU policy is the natural outcome, and ‘simple learning’ the only reasonable response. This was clearly the case of Germany in terms of European monetary integration and of the UK with regard to telecommunications and immigration policy.

Another problem with the focus on the effects of EU decisions is that it may lead the researcher to adopt a top-down logic in which the only aim is to find out the domestic effects of independent variables defined at the EU level. In this top-down perspective, the problem of domestic policy-makers is all about putting into practice European policy. This is a managerial, chain-of-command logic. By contrast, we would argue for an ‘inside-out’ or ‘bottom-up’ perspective (Radaelli 2003a). This can be done in a variety of



ways. One possible way is the one outlined above – through a consideration of the mediating factors involved in policy adjustment, including the policy problems, policy legacies, policy preferences, political-institutional capacity and discourses of actors confronted with a particular EU decision and a given set of compliance rules. But this approach is still somewhat tainted by the top-down perspective, since it takes the EU decision as the point of departure of the study (to avoid saying ‘independent variable’), and what happens at the domestic level as following from that decision, whereas the process is much more complex, given among other things the involvement of national actors in the EU decision itself, as part of the process of European integration.

Another approach is more historical, by tracing temporal sequences to show when key decisions were made (time), the sequences of decisions (timing) and the speed (tempo) (Dyson 2002). Institutional development is a process, not a single episode in time. The implication is that one should seek to trace sequences of events in policy adjustment and, drawing upon Elmore’s suggestions for bottom-up research, look at the individual and institutional choices ‘that are the hub of the problem to which policy is addressed, to the rules, procedures and structures that have the closest proximity to those choices, to the policy instruments available to affect those things’ (Elmore 1981: 1). With this ‘bottom-up perspective’ on Europeanisation, one can, for example, see if and when EMU played a role in the logic of national economic policy-making – or even changed this logic (Radaelli 2002).

This emphasis on the ‘bottom-up’ perspective is even more appropriate for EU policies such as the European Employment Strategy in which the EU simply provides a platform for benchmarking and the diffusion of best practices (Trubek and Mosher 2001). The best way to see whether the open method of co-ordination has produced effects in domestic employment policy (and wider domestic effects in terms of changes in the institutions of the labour market) is not to trace down best practices from Brussels to domestic settings, but to analyse what goes on at the level of policy-makers ‘at the hub’ of national and subnational employment policy puzzles and answer the question whether best practice and benchmarking provide resources, cognitive drives, or are just irrelevant.

One advantage of this research strategy – to conclude on this point – is that it does not separate artificially EU activity as ‘policy’ and domestic choices as ‘implementation’. Another advantage is that the strategy is actor-centred. However, this can create a problem because one has to demonstrate that the investigation of the institutional effects of Europeanisation can

accommodate an actor-sensitive analysis. If Europeanisation changes the way institutions think (this being the core component of institutional transformation or thick learning), where is the scope for actor-centred analysis? Can empirical analysis shed light on how institutions think? Or, alternatively, should one look for 'post-empirical' approaches to detect the transformations of the deep institutional structures (e.g., by using institutional anthropology, varieties of system analysis *à la* Luhmann, analysis of non-decisions and 'what is not said')? But can we afford to neglect agency? The problem with institutional thinking is that institutions, strictly speaking, do not have cognitive capacities of their own. This is why we turn to discourse.

### *The Role of Discourse in Institutional Learning*

Discourse can serve to bridge the gap between institutional and actor-centred analysis, that is, between structure and agency. We have neither the space nor the desire to enter the debate between the advocates of institutional thinking, who focus mainly on structures, and the methodological individualists, who are more concerned with agency, although we accept that this is an important divide in how we tackle research questions. But it is fair to say that institutional thinking *à la* Douglas does not produce all the answers we need. After all, if the structure changes – as the hypothesis of institutional development argues – there must be some political processes through which specific actors have modified the structure. In political life at least, structures are not metaphysical. Thus, in order to avoid the fallacy of the metaphysical pathos of institutional analysis (Di Maggio 1988), we will need to connect – rather than to separate – institutional change and actor-centred analysis.

It is at this point that the consideration of discourse is decisive. Discourse is central because it assists in the attempt to integrate structure and agency – and thus to explain the dynamics of change. Discourse is fundamental both in giving shape to new institutional structures, as a set of ideas about new rules, values and practices, and as a resource used by entrepreneurial actors to produce and legitimate those ideas, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication. After all, policy change in the EU is not simply the result of top-down institutional and outside-in economic pressures but is rather the result of decisions by political leaders taken after deliberation on alternative policy choices. At any critical political juncture over the last ten years or so (think only of three very different examples: EMU, telecommunications liberalisation, security and defence), policy-makers had more than ample opportunity for choice.

But how, then, to define discourse and to situate it in terms of the literature on ideas and discourse as well as other research traditions?

#### DEFINING DISCOURSE

In what follows we offer a very broad definition of discourse in an effort to encompass the wide range of approaches taken in this volume, and in keeping with our emphasis on pluralism. Discourse, as defined herein, represents both the policy ideas that speak to the soundness and appropriateness of policy programmes and the interactive processes of policy formulation and communication that serve to generate and disseminate those policy ideas (see Schmidt 2000a; 2000b; 2002b). This definition is deliberately wide enough to encompass most approaches in the literature on ideas and discourse, without prejudging the kind of ontological or epistemological approach to be taken.

#### *The Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Discourse*

We choose to use the word discourse rather than, say, language, narrative, or communicative action mainly because we find that the meaning of discourse can encompass all of these. But given our choice of words, one might assume that our ‘ontology’ – that is, our underlying assumptions about the nature of social and political reality – privileges post-modern analysis, or prefers social constructivism over positivism. In fact, in our definition of discourse, we try not to prejudge this, albeit with three important caveats. First, although post-modernists and some social constructivists would argue that ‘reality is discursively constructed’, this does not imply that analysis should be limited to discourse. Neither does it imply that one should approach discourse as an ‘object’ by dissecting texts and deconstructing speeches, thus missing the basic fact that political discourse may conceal substance under rhetorical smoke. Sometimes words reflect action, and sometimes they obscure or even belie action. Additionally, discourse is always situated in broader institutional contexts, with institutions and culture framing the discourse, defining the repertoire of acceptable (and expectable) actions. Moreover, interests also matter, as do the material conditions and hard economic variables that may serve to drive change. In comparative political economy, for example, discursive accounts of economic policy strategies in the context of globalisation can prove elusive if they are not related to the empirical analysis of globalisation – whether seen as external pressures resulting from international economic competition or from international regulatory competition and/or co-

operation. By the same token, however, empirical analyses which simply assume that globalisation pressures logically entail policy change fail to see that policy change itself generally follows from the discourses representing those pressures as economic imperatives for change (see Hay and Rosamond 2002).

Second, we think that for researchers with a policy-analytic orientation, the debate on social constructivism (both in international relations and more recently in European integration) misses the point in relation to the epistemological issues of policy analysis – or the ways in which knowledge about social and political reality is best acquired. Since the seminal work of Lindblom, Wildavsky, and Cohen, March and Olsen, we have been aware of the role of perceptions, social interpretations and the politics of problem definition in policy controversies. In this sense, the door for social constructivism is not just ajar – it is fully open. The argument that policy reality is socially interpreted is simply a point of departure for more sophisticated ontologies and philosophies of science, such as realism (as defined by Lane 1996). Thus, although we welcome social constructivist arguments, we do not wish to encourage the umpteenth debate on the ‘pro and cons’ of this approach.

Third, our emphasis on discourse is compatible with different epistemological approaches to the study of the policy process, along a continuum from positivist approaches in which ideas may be mainly seen as reflecting the strategic interests of actors to constructivist approaches in which ideas are seen to constitute interests.<sup>1</sup> Among positivist approaches, one of the clearest cases for the importance of ideas in choosing among interests is made by Goldstein (1993), who argues that under conditions of uncertainty, ideas behave like switches (or ‘road maps’) that funnel interests down specific policy directions, serving as filters, focal points, or lenses that provide policy-makers with strategies. Haas (1992) veers towards constructivism by arguing that under conditions of uncertainty interests themselves become uncertain and, therefore, open to redefinition or ‘reconstruction’ by new ideas framed by new knowledge. Other theorists go even further than Haas, however, to suggest that interests are so framed by culture, and not just knowledge, that they cannot be separated from the context in which their ideas are given meaning (Katzenstein 1996; March and Olsen 1995).

### *Discourse as a Set of Ideas*

The scholarly literature on discourse as a set of ideas contains a wide array of approaches, some of which tend more towards the positivist end of the

continuum, others towards the more constructivist end. The more positivist approaches see ideas as representing the necessary conditions for collective action, by serving to redefine economic interest and to reconfigure interest-based political coalitions (see Hall 1989; 1993; Blyth 1997; Parsons 2000). The more constructivist approaches instead see ideas as constituting the policy narratives, discourses and frames of reference which serve to (re)construct actors' understandings of interests and redirect their actions within institutions (see Radaelli 1999; Doty 1996; Milliken 1999; Jobert 1992; Muller 1995; Muller and Surel 1998). For yet others, however, whether situated more towards the positivist or constructivist end of the continuum, ideas reflect the national identities, values, norms and collective memories that serve to shape the incentive-based push of interests or the path-dependent pull of institutions (Schmidt 2000b; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Rothstein 2000).

Among the contributions in this volume, Mark Thatcher's tends towards the positivist side, with ideas serving to legitimise the interest-based decisions of governmental and business actors in telecommunications policy. Eve Fouilleux's tends towards the more constructivist, with EU-level actors seeking to reconstruct national and international actors' understandings of their interests and to redirect their actions in agricultural policy by way of a new 'référentiel' or frame of reference. And Adrian van den Hoven is somewhere between the two, with a positivist underlay of interest-based behaviour challenged by a constructivist overlay in which ideas serve to reconstruct interests in international trade.

### *Discourse as an Interactive Process*

The literature on discourse as an interactive process also has a wide span. First, it encompasses studies of the individuals and groups at the centre of policy construction who generate the ideas that form the bases for collective action and identity. While some scholars focus on the loosely connected individuals united by a common set of ideas in 'epistemic communities' (Haas 1992), others target more closely connected individuals united by the attempt to put those ideas into action through 'advocacy coalitions' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) or 'discourse coalitions' (Hajer 1993; Singer 1990), while yet others single out the individuals who, as 'entrepreneurs' (DiMaggio 1988; Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) or 'mediators' (Muller 1995; Jobert 2003), draw on and articulate the ideas of discursive communities and coalitions for the policy community. Still others, however, focus on the 'rhetorical action' (Schimmelfennig 2001) or the 'co-ordinative discourse' of the key

policy actors responsible for policy construction (who may of course be influenced by the ideational entrepreneurs and discursive communities and coalitions of which they may also be members) (Schmidt 2000b; 2002b).

Among our authors, Adrian van den Hoven shows how the 'rhetorical action' of an ideational entrepreneur in the EU Commission – Pascal Lamy – managed to transform the bases for discussion in international trade negotiations. Eve Fouilleux similarly describes how a small group of actors in the Agriculture Directorate-General were able to take advantage of an opening created by international trade pressures to introduce an innovative set of ideas in agricultural policy, a sector that had previously been entirely blocked. And Jolyon Howorth demonstrates how the presence of a coherent epistemic community (as in France) or an elaborate co-ordinative discourse among policy actors (as in Germany) by contrast with the UK can make all the difference with regard to public acceptance of new security and defence initiatives.

The interactive dimension, however, also includes studies of the use of ideas in the process of public persuasion. These may focus on electoral politics and mass opinion (Mutz *et al.* 1996), when politicians translate the ideas developed by policy élites into the political platforms that are put to the test through voting and elections. But they also involve the more general discourse of democratic governance (March and Olsen 1995) and 'communicative action' (Habermas 1996) that frame national political understandings and deliberations; the more specific deliberations in the 'policy forums' of informed publics (Rein and Schön 1991) about the on-going policy initiatives of governments; and the 'communicative discourse' of political actors who present the policy programme developed in the context of the co-ordinative discourse to the general public as well as more informed publics for discussion, deliberation and, ideally, modification (Schmidt 2000a; 2002b).

In this volume, although public communication and deliberation are not the primary focus of any of our authors, given our emphasis on Europeanisation and policy change, it is nevertheless a significant factor in a number of cases. Andrew Geddes and Virginie Guiraudon, for example, show how differently member state governments frame the communicative discourse on EU-related reforms of immigration policy so as to fit with national concepts and values, with France, in particular, couching the reasons for reform exclusively in terms of French concepts and values, with no mention of the EU as the impetus for reform. Moreover, the problems countries experienced with regard to EU-related policy initiatives often come at the communicative stage of discourse, either because political

actors have difficulty persuading the general public of the appropriateness of reform, as in the case of France in the telecommunications area (see Thatcher, in this volume), or because there is too much of a disconnect between the co-ordinative discourse and the communicative, as in the case of the UK with regard to security and defence (see Howorth, in this volume).

Our definition of discourse, in short, tends to cover most approaches to ideas and discourse. It serves as a kind of umbrella definition which assumes that it is necessary not only to explore the ideational dimension of discourse – that is, the ideas and values that represent the cognitive and normative aspects of meaning creation – but also the interactive dimension – both the élite processes of policy formulation and the mass processes of communication and deliberation with informed and general publics.

#### CONTEXTUALISING DISCOURSE

Discourse cannot be examined in isolation. It needs to be understood in institutional context – thus the term ‘discursive institutionalism’. And this means that discourse should be considered not only in terms of the other mediating factors that affect policy change, but also in terms of the rules that frame ideas and discourse in different political-institutional settings.

##### *The National Institutional Setting*

The institutional context is constituted by the vast range of rules – formal and informal, laws as well as social and political norms and conventions – that set actors’ common frame of reference and help shape not only actors’ perceptions and preferences, but also their modes of interaction (see Scharpf 1997). These vary greatly across countries and time, and include such things as the political rules of conduct, whether consensual, competitive, or conflictual; the political governance structures, whether unitary, federal, or consociational; the governance processes, whether pluralist, corporatist, or statist; the industrial relations regime, whether co-ordinated, fragmented, or decentralised; or welfare state values, whether individualist, universalist, or family-oriented. These are the institutional norms and arrangements that set the parameters of what people talk about as well as of who talks to whom in the process of policy-making. They presuppose the cultural norms, historical path dependencies and interest-based behaviours that affect policy-making in a given socio-political setting.

To offer only one example of the way in which the national-institutional context may affect the discourse, we take the case of how governance



arrangements influence the very locus of the discourse. Countries in which power is concentrated in the executive, such as Britain or France – ‘single-actor’ systems characterised by unitary states with ‘statist’ policy-making processes and majoritarian politics, where policy formulation is the purview of a restricted governmental elite – are most likely to have an elaborate ‘communicative discourse’ focused on persuading the general public of the necessity and appropriateness of policies developed with little outside input. By contrast, countries in which power is more dispersed, such as Germany or the Netherlands – ‘multi-actor’ systems characterised by federal states with corporatist processes and proportional representation systems, where a large number of policy actors have input into policy formulation – are more likely to have an elaborate co-ordinative discourse, where policy actors tend to concentrate more on reaching agreement among themselves and on persuading their own constituencies of the agreement’s necessity and appropriateness than in communicating such agreements to the wider public. This has been shown to be the case for most economic policy sectors as well as welfare reform (Schmidt 2000b; 2002b). And it remains true for the cases presented in this volume.

In the telecommunications sector, for instance, Thatcher (1999, and *idem*, in this volume) finds that although both France and Germany transformed their policies in response to the EU directive, in Germany this came about through an elaborate co-ordinative discourse in which the key policy actors, including government, business and labour, deliberated on the reform. In France, by contrast, the more restricted co-ordinative discourse between government and industry was supported by an elaborate communicative discourse directed at the general public as well as at the potentially disruptive unions. Busch (in this volume) describes a similar pattern in banking policy between Germany and the UK, with the difference that in this more technical arena neither country had much communicative discourse. The pattern even holds in a policy area such as defence and security, where national security considerations that promote the concentration of decision-making power in the executive would lead one to expect a thin co-ordinative discourse and a more elaborate communicative discourse in all countries. Howorth (in this volume) finds that Germany has a much wider co-ordinative discourse among relevant policy actors than Britain or France, where decisions about security and defence are the domain of a very small policy élite – although the communicative discourse is rather elaborate in all three countries. There are differences, however, even between the two single-actor countries: whereas in France the government managed to forge an epistemic community encompassing key

policy actors, informed publics and the media, thus ensuring a positive reception to the government's communicative discourse about the new European defence policy following the St Malo agreement, the absence of any epistemic community or any prior attempt to build one meant that the British government's communicative discourse generated great controversy.

*The EU and International Institutional Settings*

Complicating these discursive processes within the national context, moreover, is the growing importance of the European context across policy sectors. In the terms developed above, we could characterise the EU as a multi-actor systems in which trans-European co-ordinative discourses among policy actors overlap with the national ones on policy formulation, while mostly leaving to national political actors the communicative discourse to national publics. Because the EU governance system is multi-actor in the fullest sense of the term, given the EU-, national- and regional-level governmental and non-governmental actors involved in policy-making, the co-ordinative discourse tends to be most elaborate, as a multiplicity of actors focus on reaching agreement among themselves. By contrast, the communicative discourse is quite thin, mainly because EU institutional actors have great difficulty speaking directly to national publics, given the lack of a common language, a common media, an elected president and a European public.

At least for the moment, much of what passes for EU communicative discourse is filtered through national leaders and policy actors, with the exception of sensational moments (e.g., Commission President Prodi's criticism of the Stability and Growth Pact criteria as 'stupid'). Fouilleux (in this volume), however, rightly points out that the EU Commission, under increasing attack since the early 1990s for its perceived democratic deficit, has been seeking to increase its legitimacy by building a communicative component into its co-ordinative pronouncements and texts on new policy initiatives. These communicative elements play a dual role: at the same time that they serve to reassure the public about the impartiality and transparency of the policy process itself – and as such can be seen as discourse directed more at issues related to polity rather than policy – they are also intended to appeal directly to national publics on the policy issues, and thereby to exert pressure on national leaders.<sup>2</sup> The main thrust of the EU Commission's policy discourse, however, remains in the co-ordinative realm, addressed to the networks of governmental and non-governmental actors involved in policy construction at the EU level, even as many of these self-same actors are also part of another set of discursive co-ordinative as well as

communicative interactions at the national level, deliberating about how to respond to EU-level policy formulation or how to implement nationally the EU policies already decided.<sup>3</sup> The balance in these national-level discourses, however, have themselves changed significantly in some sectors as a result of the EU-level discourse. In biotechnology, for example, the deliberations in single-actor systems at the national level involve much wider co-ordinative discourses than one might traditionally expect, as national governments no longer monopolise information or decision-making on issues that have dynamised large numbers of the public (Coleman 19xx[3]). In other areas, however, where decision-making is more centralised at the EU level, such as in international trade, the co-ordinative discourse in multi-actor systems may become much thinner, without any necessary expansion of the communicative discourse.

Some sectors add yet another level of discourse, though, thereby increasing the complexity of the discursive interactions. These include the international trade sector as well as the agricultural policy sector when it comes to international agreements. In this latter context, intriguingly, Foulleux (in this volume) finds complexity not only in the interactive processes but also in the projection of ideas. In the EU Commission's discourse, which focuses on the multi-functionality of agriculture as the basis of a so-called European model of agriculture, the same discourse has one function at the national level and the reverse at the international. At the national level, the EU's discourse seeks to promote reform of EU agricultural policy by replacing the old system of subsidies (based on the principle of who produces more – or has more land – earns more public support) with new support schemes (dealing with non-commodity functions such as rural development, land planning and environment). At the international level, by contrast, it seeks to avoid reform and to escape WTO retaliation measures that would force the EU to engage in a politically unacceptable cut-off of payments, by arguing that multi-functionality as a political objective will produce de-coupled and non-trade-distorting instruments. In this case, institutional setting makes for differences not only in the interactive processes related to discourse, but even in the ideas projected in the discourse.

#### THE CAUSAL INFLUENCE OF DISCOURSE

So far, we have sought to show 'how discourse matters', that is, how it affects policy change; 'why discourse matters', that is, why it is to be taken seriously in the explanation of policy change; and 'where discourse

matters', that is, in relation to institutional settings and mediating factors. But we have yet to discuss 'when discourse matters', that is, when it exerts a causal influence on policy change by serving to reconceptualise interests, reshape institutions and reframe culture, and when it does not, by serving only to reinforce interests, institutions and culture. For this, we need first to explore the power of ideas in the discourse, the interplay of ideas and discourse in the interactive process, to conclude with the methodological issues involved in demonstrating the causal influence of discourse.

### *The Power of Ideas and Discourse*

This is a question that takes us beyond the discussion of the nature of the ideas in the discourse to a focus on the power of ideas. Here, there are of course a lot of imponderables (from the point of view of political science) such as speakers' persuasive powers based on rhetorical eloquence or on psychological 'interactivity'. But if we focus not on personality, but on the persuasive power of the ideas in the discourse itself, then the question becomes: what criteria for success? After all, the representational approach to discourse does little on its own to help explain why a discourse and policy programme gain acceptance or not. That the narrative tells a good story or that the metaphors are evocative is not sufficient. The story the discourse tells and the information it provides must also appear sound, the actions it recommends doable, the solutions to the problems it identifies workable, and the overall outcomes appropriate.

Put another way, borrowing from the philosophy of science, this means that the discourse does better if it contains cognitive arguments that demonstrate the policy programme's relevance, applicability and coherence; and normative arguments that resonate with long-standing or newly-emerging values, and that complement rather than contradict the cognitive arguments (Schmidt 2000a; 2002b). Thus, for example, the success of the French communicative discourse on defence policy after St Malo is related not just to the discursive interactions that produced a supportive epistemic community, but also to the ideas which spoke to the necessity of a common European policy today, while resonating with post-war goals and values that had long favoured a separate European defence policy. This contrasted with the British discourse, where the problems resulting from the failure even to attempt to build a supportive epistemic community were compounded by the fact that, however cognitively sound, the ideas flew in the face of post-war values that prized the transatlantic relationship above all else, and jealously guarded British sovereignty against European encroachments (Howorth, in this volume).

But we also have to distinguish between the discourse prior to the acceptance of a policy programme and the discourse once a policy programme is implemented. After all, it is one thing for a discourse to appear relevant, applicable and coherent when it is situated primarily in the realm of ideas. But when its policy recommendations are put into action, a certain amount of incoherence in the discourse – vagueness in description, passing over in silence the areas which do not fit the discourse and so on – may be natural, and even necessary to ensure the continuation of the policy programme (Fouilleux 2001). The questions here, then, are how much disconnection between the discourse and the policy programme can be acceptable or even beneficial to their survival. What makes a discourse and/or a policy programme ultimately fail? External events that undermine the applicability and relevance of the policy programme? Internal contradictions in the discourse itself? Too big a disconnect between the discourse and the policy programme, that is, between words and actions (but how big is too big)? (Schmidt 2002b: 225–30). For most EU member states, European policy initiatives represented the most significant ‘external event’ or challenge to national policy programmes and discourses.

It is also important to distinguish between the power of ideas *ex ante*, or before a policy decision is taken, and *ex post*, once it is taken. Much of the attention of scholars has been on the causal influence of ideas and discourse in the formulation of policy (see Goldstein 1993; Haas 1992; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). But there is also much to consider with regard to the influence of discourse at the policy implementation stage, once a decision has been taken. Here, interestingly enough, even scholars who dismiss ideas and discourse as having any *ex ante* causal influence on policy decisions are sometimes willing to concede that they have an *ex post* influence. Majone, for example, finds that even if ideas are mainly rationalisations of decisions taken on the basis of interests, they are significant once a policy decision is made, in order to legitimate it to the public. After all, in democracies political leaders have to explain to parliaments and electors why they do the things they do. And discourse, he finds as a result, serves three *ex post* functions: it provides conceptual foundations for what would otherwise appear a series of disjointed decisions; it institutionalises ideas; and it makes communication among the players possible, thus transforming one-shot games into iterated games (Majone 1989; 2001).

Discourse can be seen to do even more than this, however. As March and Olsen (1995: 45, 66) put it, discourse serves to explain political events, to legitimate political actions, to develop political identities, to reshape and/or reinterpret political history and, all in all, to frame the national political

discussion. In other words, discourse need not be seen only as the means to legitimate decisions *ex post* based on the interplay of interests – although it may indeed limit itself to this. Nor need it serve only to determine choices among possible interests (as Goldstein would argue), or even to frame the interests of policy actors (as for Haas). It can also serve to transform the ideas and values of a nation. For example, although one may question the *ex ante* transformative power of Prime Minister Thatcher's neo-liberal discourse or even its *ex post* influence during her first term, it is clear that as her policies began to take hold, altering people's experiences of work and welfare, the discourse performed a real legitimating function, by providing the public with a positive way of thinking and talking about their new experiences – so much so that Labour could only be elected once it had itself embraced essential aspects of neo-liberalism in its discourse and policy programme of the 'third way' (see Schmidt 2001).

There is also an interesting link between discourse and identity (as argued in Radaelli 2002). The discourse on EMU in Italy, especially in 1996–97 (the crucial years that enabled Italy to qualify for the single currency) was not just an attempt to further national economic interest, it was also an exercise in the politics of collective identity. Collective identity determines not only what 'we' are and where 'we' come from but also what can and cannot be achieved. By reacting bitterly to the scepticism of some EU partners and by arguing for economic measures (such as the Euro-tax and the finance bill for 1997) beyond the territory of what was considered politically acceptable and economically sound, Italian policy-makers drew a bold line between 'us' and 'them', turned the path to EMU into a manifestation of what Italy could achieve, and eventually forged collective identity. This 'collective identity' exercise was remarkable in a state that was going through a serious political crisis in the 1990s (Radaelli 2002).

Yet for discourse to exert a causal influence we need not always demand transformation. Rather, we would do better to distinguish between the degree and kind of change that discourse helps produce – for example, whether a discourse brings about first-order change in a policy 'paradigm', in which only the policy instruments are replaced; second-order change, where the objectives change; or third-order, where the core of the policy paradigm as a whole shifts (Kuhn 1970; Hall 1993; Schmidt 2002b: 222–4). Moreover, discourse may have a causal influence because the ideas it conveys become part of the common understanding of the issue, such that policy actors cannot act without addressing its concerns, even if they do not agree to the policy. The ideas may matter, in other words, even if old interests trump new ideas. And, of course, we cannot conclude this section

without noting that old ideas may also exert a causal influence, impeding change by crowding out new ideas and reinforcing entrenched interests, as in the case of the banking sector in Germany (Busch, in this volume).

*Ideas and Interests in the Interactive Process*

This takes us on to questions involving not just when discourse exerts a causal influence, that is, when it projects transformative ideas, but how it exerts a causal influence. Here we need to ask about the interactive process within any given institutional context not only in terms of the quality of the deliberation, but also the quantity of participation. On the quantity of participation, most democratic theorists assume, ideally, that the more participants, the better – as in Habermas' (1989) view of deliberative democracy. But, in practice, sometimes less is better, because the extensive public airing of certain issues can lead to less progressive results. In immigration policy, for example, in countries where the deliberation went beyond the 'venues' of closed debates among policy élites, experts and 'attentive publics' to capture public attention, no amount of communicative discourse by the government could succeed in convincing the public of the value of more progressive immigration policy in the context of the more open, highly politicised debates (Guiraudon 1997; 2000).

On the quality of the deliberation, scholars often distinguish between whether the interactive process promotes 'bargaining', with deliberations narrowly focused on interests, or 'arguing', through deliberations that may prove transformative of interests (see Risse 2000). For this, it is useful to distinguish between 'arenas' and 'fora', distinctions inspired *inter alia* by Bruno Jobert (1992; 1995), where arenas can be seen at the bargaining end of a continuum at the other end of which is arguing in fora. Another way of thinking about this is to see fora as the places where the individuals involved in epistemological communities, discourse coalitions, advocacy coalitions and the like interact in the generation of ideas, and to see arenas as the places where policy actors with the power to formulate policy engage one another in a co-ordinative discourse, fed by the ideas of the fora. Fouilleux (in this volume), for example, maps the interactions in the fora in which the ideas about agricultural policy reform develop, arguing that this has the defining influence on subsequent bargaining in policy arenas, by constituting the ideational frame within which the policy actors then bargain about reform. Adrian van den Hoven (in this volume) similarly suggests that Commissioner Lamy's 'rhetorical action' in the 'forum' of ideas set the terms for bargaining in the international trade 'arena'.



The question with regard to the causal influence of discourse, then, is when do policy fora set the ideas of the discursive deliberations in arenas and when, under 'arena' conditions, does discourse have a causal influence. This requires not only an analysis of the substantive content of the discourse, to see what forum ideas proved successful both cognitively and normatively, but also of the discursive interactions among policy actors, in order to consider whether the outcomes follow not just from the power of interests, but from the power of ideas. In international trade and agricultural policy, it would appear that the ideas contained in the discourse were in fact successfully developed by entrepreneurial actors in policy fora, but that in the policy arena old interests trumped the new ideas.

In policy change, however, the public sphere is also at issue. This is because policy-making is not just a matter of policy actors in arenas who take on board the concerns of the 'forum of public rhetoric' along with those of scientific fora and so forth (see Fouilleux 2001; Jobert 1995). It is also a question of political actors winning elections on the basis of policy ideas developed in fora and decided in arenas which they must legitimate to the public – the general public that can sanction the government through votes and/or protests in the street as much as through the informed publics in policy fora. But winning or losing elections is not enough to assess the influence of discourse in any one policy area, since elections are contingent on such a vast range of factors in a number of different policy areas.

The interactive process of policy-making, in short, is a complicated one – requiring exploration not only of the theoretical concepts, as we have tried to do here, but also, most importantly, of empirical cases. But this raises the question of methodology.

### *Methodology*

How does one go about the empirical analysis of discourse? This is no easy task. Empirical discourse analysis is generally supported by tools such as content analysis (press and speeches, hearings, etc.), semi-structured interviews with politicians and policy experts, the examination of temporal causal sequences and the 'bottom-up' approach to Europeanisation described above. Particular approaches to discourse, moreover, often include recommendations for specific tools for analysis, as in the case of policy narratives (Roe 1994). To assess the influence of discourse, however, a focus on the substantive content of the discourse is generally not enough. One first may want to sort out the factors at play, of which discourse is only one, as noted above. But when looking specifically at discourse itself, one needs to consider not only the ideas represented in discourse, but also the

interactive discursive processes involving those most responsible for policy-making, for example, by engaging in elite-tracing, participant-observation and other studies of the policy-formulation process. The responses of the public are equally important, and can be evaluated through public opinion polls, surveys, election results, newspaper editorials, the statements of interest group leaders, opposition parties and so forth. Institutional context also needs to be taken into consideration. For example, in 'single-actor' systems where the communicative discourse is most elaborate, the causal influence of discourse is most likely to be ascertainable *ex post*, in the responses of the general public over time to the policy. By contrast, in 'multi-actor' systems in which the co-ordinative discourse is most elaborate, the causal influence is more likely to be seen *ex ante*, in whether or not there is any agreed policy (Schmidt 2001; 2002a).

It may also be useful to set up research designs that can test for the influence of discourse. One such approach would be to take reasonably matched pairs of cases, in which all factors remain constant other than the discourse. This can be done by contrasting the policy experiences of different countries with similar background conditions in terms of economics, values, events, institutions and/or politics, or by taking one country at different times, where only the discourse changes. For example, in the case of welfare state reform, the presence or absence of a convincing discourse (by which we mean one that meets the various criteria for success outlined above) has been a significant factor in public acceptance or rejection of social policy initiatives, whether in matched pairs of countries, such as Britain *vs.* New Zealand and the Netherlands *vs.* Germany, or in the cases of one country at different times, such as France under Prime Minister Jospin in the late 1990s *vs.* his predecessor Juppé, and Italy under Prime Minister Dini in 1995 *vs.* his predecessor Berlusconi in 1994 (see Schmidt 2000b; 2002a).

But in all this it is important to note that in looking for causal influence discourse can never be *the* factor that explains policy change, or *the* cause. Leaving aside the question of whether any one factor can be *the* cause – we believe none can be – discourse is in any event a more complicated factor than most, since it cannot be easily separated from the interests that find expression through it, from the institutional interactions that shape it, or the cultural norms that frame it. But discourse can be the most important among a range of factors, *a* cause, and a defining one, since it may serve to reconceptualise interests, chart new institutional paths and reframe cultural norms (Schmidt 2001; 2002c). However, as noted above, it may also do little more than reflect interests shaped by institutions and framed by

culture. The reason we ask ‘when does discourse matter’, in short, is not because we question whether it matters – it always does, since there is always discourse. It is because discourse is often the missing factor in political scientific studies of policy change, without which our understanding of policy change is much the poorer.

## CONCLUSION

Discourse, in short, is an important factor in the explanation of policy change in the process of policy change in Europe. It helps to overcome the structure–agency divide and, thereby, to explain the dynamics of change by lending insight into how actors in different institutional contexts with new ideas may overcome entrenched interests, institutional obstacles and cultural impediments to change. But it cannot be considered in isolation. It is one among a number of possible factors and perspectives. The empirical investigation of how, where and when it matters (or not) follows.

## NOTES

1. We will not address the arguments of scholars on both extremes of the continuum, that is, the positivists who dismiss ideas out of hand, as merely the reflection of interests, and the constructivists who dismiss interests out of hand – since these do not advance our own research agenda.
2. In the ‘polity’ arena, by contrast with most policy arenas, there is an EU-level communicative discourse, in particular with regard to the issue of the EU’s democratic future. Although the discourse was begun by national leaders, starting with Joschka Fischer’s push for a federal Europe in 1999, it has throughout been focused on the European public as a whole as much as national publics, and EU-level institutional actors have been active interlocutors.
3. For the differential impact of the EU-level co-ordinative discourse on single-actor and multi-actor discursive interactions, see Schmidt 2002b.

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