

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 are the substantive content of discourse. They exist at three levels—policies, programs, and philosophies—and can be categorized into two types, cognitive and normative. Discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas. It comes in two forms: the coordinative discourse among policy actors and the communicative discourse between political actors and the public. These forms differ in two formal institutional contexts; simple polities have a stronger communicative discourse and compound polities a stronger coordinative discourse. The institutions of discursive institutionalism, moreover, are not external-rule-following structures but rather are simultaneously structures and constructs internal to agents whose “background ideational abilities” within a given “meaning context” explain how institutions are created and exist and whose “foreground discursive abilities,” following a “logic of communication,” explain how institutions change or persist. Interests are subjective ideas, which, though real, are neither objective nor material. Norms are dynamic, intersubjective constructs rather than static structures.

INTRODUCTION

The turn to ideas and discourse in political science has come to constitute a fourth “new institutionalism.” I call it discursive institutionalism (DI), distinct from rational choice institutionalism (RI), historical institutionalism (HI), and sociological institutionalism (SI). Political scientists whose work fits the DI 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 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 take a more dynamic view of change, in which ideas and discourse overcome obstacles that the three more equilibrium-focused and static older institutionalisms posit as insurmountable. What most clearly differentiates discursive institutionalists from one another 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.

Although political scientists have been exploring the explanatory power of ideas and discourse for a while now, the term used to define this approach, discursive institutionalism, is of very recent vintage (see Schmidt 2002a, 2006a,b). Although others have used the same term (see Campbell & 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 institutionalism (e.g., Campbell 2004—but see Campbell & 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 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 that focus on ideas and discourse—even though 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 DI, 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 new institutionalist approaches and a tacit acknowledgment 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 that remain within the confines of any one of the three older new institutionalisms and those that belong to 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 reluctance of many of these same political scientists to add discourse to their consideration of ideas stems primarily from past usage of the term. “Discourse” 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 that 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 post-modernist baggage to serve as a more generic term that encompasses not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed. Discourse is not just ideas or “text” (what is said) but also context (where, when, how, and why it was said). The term refers not only to structure (what is said, or where and how) but also to agency (who said what to whom).

But if the great innovation of DI 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 examines 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, I identify ideas both in terms of their levels of generality (policies, programs, and philosophies) and type of content (cognitive and normative). Second, I discuss the two basic forms of discourse: the coordinative discourse among policy actors and the communicative discourse between political actors and the public. Throughout this section, I consider the attributes of 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 DI with the three older new institutionalisms. Points of contrast include definitions 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 HI. Next, we show that interests in DI are “subjective” rather than either “objective” or “material,” as in RI, but nonetheless “real.” Third, we show 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 DI to the other three new institutionalisms.

My overall argument is that DI is a distinctive approach that contributes to our understanding of political action in ways that the older three institutionalisms cannot. At the very least, it 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 long 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 that political philosophers through 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 passed 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. To policy makers and politicians in particular, the very notion that one would need to make a plea for taking ideas and discourse seriously would appear ludicrous, because the very essence of what they do is to generate ideas about what should be done and then communicate them to the general public for discussion and deliberation. This essay on DI, 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, namely how, when, where, and why ideas and discourse matter.

THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF IDEAS AND DISCOURSE

The difference between scholars who use the term 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 legitimated by public actors, the carriers of ideas. Those scholars who speak of discourse address explicitly the representation of ideas (how agents say what they are thinking of doing) and the discursive interactions through which actors generate and communicate ideas (to whom they say it) 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 (see Goodin & Tilly 2005, Pt. IV). Ideas have been seen as switches for interests, road maps, or focal points (Goldstein & Keohane 1993); as strategic constructions (Jabko 2006) or strategic weapons in the battle for control (Blyth 2002); as narratives that shape understandings of events (e.g., Roe 1994) or as “frames of reference” (Jobert 1989, Muller 1995); and 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 J. Mehta, unpublished manuscript). The first level encompasses the specific policies or “policy solutions” proposed by policy makers. The second level encompasses the more general programs that underpin the policy ideas. These may be cast as paradigms that re-

fect the underlying assumptions or organizing principles orienting policy (Majone 1989; Hall 1993; Schmidt 2002a, 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 “programmatically beliefs” (Berman 1998) that operate in the space between worldviews and specific policy ideas; as “policy cores” that provide sets of diagnostics and prescriptions for action (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993); or as “problem definitions” that set the scope of possible solutions to the problems that policy ideas address (Mehta, unpublished manuscript). 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 ideals that frame the more immediate policy ideas proposed to solve any given problem. At an even more basic level are the “public philosophies” (Campbell 1998), “public sentiments” (Campbell 2004), or “deep core” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993)—worldviews or *Weltanschauung* that undergird the policies and programs with organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society. Whereas both policy ideas and programmatic ideas can be seen as foreground, since these tend to be discussed and debated on a regular basis, the philosophical ideas generally sit in the background as underlying assumptions that are rarely contested except in times of crisis (see Campbell 2004, pp. 93–94).

Policies, programs, and philosophies tend to contain two types of ideas: cognitive and normative. Cognitive ideas elucidate “what is and what to do,” whereas normative ideas indicate “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 policies and programs by speaking to their interest-based logic and necessity (see Jobert 1989; Hall

1993; Schmidt 2002a, 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 legitimate the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness (see March & 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; 2002a, ch. 5).

The big question for scholars of ideas is why 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? Hall (1989) speaks of the need for policy ideas to have administrative and political viability in addition to policy viability; 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 transnational policy ideas, such as the

very different ways in which the word “precariousness” is understood and used (or not) in Germany and the United Kingdom by contrast with France, Italy, and Spain (Barbier 2004). Equally important is the matter of expertise linked to the validation of ideas by research institutes and think-tanks (Rich 2004; J.L. Campbell & O. Pedersen, unpublished manuscript). The element of timing is also a factor in policy success, which helps explain why Scandinavian welfare states remain distinct (Cox 2001). Another factor 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 cannot 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 by J. Mehta, unpublished manuscript). 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 and third levels 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; Majone 1989; Hall 1993;

Schmidt 2002a, pp. 222–25). These scholars generally liken programmatic ideas to the “paradigms” of Kuhn (1970) or the “research programs” of Lakatos (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 United Kingdom under Prime Minister Thatcher, who replaced the paradigm of Keynesianism with monetarism (Hall 1993), and the similar revolutionary change wrought in France by Mitterrand with the “great U-turn” in macroeconomic policy, by contrast with Blair’s “renewal” of Thatcher’s neoliberal paradigm and Schröder’s attempt to “recast” the paradigm of the social market economy in Germany (Schmidt 2002a, ch. 6).

The use of the philosophy of science can only go so far, however (see Schmidt 2002a, pp. 217–25). In science, programmatic success is judged by scientists alone; in society, programmatic success is judged not only by social scientists but also by citizens. The success of a program does not just depend on the presence of cognitive ideas capable of satisfying policy makers that a given program will provide robust solutions. It also depends on the presence of complementary normative ideas capable of satisfying policy makers 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 that 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—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, it is difficult to prove that

a particular set of ideas constitutes a public philosophy. It is even more difficult to trace over time the development of one philosophy and its eventual replacement by another. The identification of such public philosophies has often been the domain of macrosociologists. The most notable is of course Max Weber, whose work on the ideas predominant in society has inspired numerous political scientists. More recent is the work of Bourdieu (1994), Foucault (2000), and Gramsci (1971), who present public philosophies as the ideas of the powerful who dominate society. And yet it is often the case in a given society that, at a very basic level, “everyone knows” what the basic philosophy or worldview is, even if they may not be able to define it 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”—methods that demonstrate how such ideas are tied to action. These ideas serve as guides to public actors for what to do, as well as being the sources of justification and legitimation for what such actors do (see Berman 1998, 2006; Blyth 2002).

The literature includes several outstanding examples of such case studies and process-tracing. Hall’s (1989) edited volume illuminates the philosophical as well as programmatic reasons why advanced, industrialized countries on both sides of the Atlantic did (or did not) adopt Keynesian economic ideas. An edited volume by Dyson (2002) elucidates why European Union (EU) member states adopted or rejected the euro. Dobbin’s (1994) study concluded that the differing underlying philosophical ideas about the role of the state in the economy ensured that the building of the railroads was state-led in France whereas in the United States it was led by private actors. Berman (1998) draws a historical contrast between the German Social Democrats, who capitulated to Nazism largely because they could not think beyond their long-held Marxist ideas, and the Swedish Social Democrats, who succeeded not only in fighting fascism but also in creating a social

democratic state because they were free of any such ideational legacy and able to reinvent socialism. McNamara's (1998) account of European monetary union posits a three-step learning process: first, policy failure; second, the search for new ideas that led to a neoliberal consensus on monetarism; and third, the adoption of the German exemplar. Blyth (2002) analyzes the role of foundational economic ideas at moments of economic crisis in Sweden and the United States, first in "embedding" liberalism in the 1930s and then "disembedding" it beginning in the 1970s.

Another method involves directly addressing the causal influence of discourse. Some scholars (e.g., Berman 1998, pp. 16–19; Blyth 2002, Parsons 2003) show that ideas can be an independent variable by demonstrating that no other structural factors can account for the clear changes (or continuities) in interests, paths, or norms signaled by political actors' expressed ideas and intended actions. In particular, they rule out those structural factors that follow from the three older new institutionalisms: narrowly defined rationalist interests, historical path dependencies, and cultural norms. For example, 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 that 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, which brings us to the concept of discourse.

The Dynamics of Discourse

Discourse is a more versatile and overarching concept than ideas. By using the term discourse, we can simultaneously 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 help explain why certain ideas succeed and others fail because of the ways in which they are projected to whom and where. But 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—narratives, myths, frames, collective memories, stories, scripts, scenarios, images, and more. The "terms" of the discourse, in Connolly's (1983) sense of "institutionalized structures of meaning that channel political thought and action in certain directions," are multiple, patterning how arguments are made as well as which ideas are represented. Moreover, 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 2002a, ch. 5). In addition, discourse can be highly varied in its use of ideas. For example, in the case of European market integration, Jabko

(2006, ch. 3) shows that actors used a repertoire of “strategic ideas” of the market to present it (*a*) as a constraint and inescapable reality in the financial arena, (*b*) as a norm to be desired in the energy sector, (*c*) as a space in structural policies focused on regional economic development, and (*d*) as a symbol of a new source of discipline in the Economic and Monetary Union.

Discourse is not only what you say, however; it includes to whom you say it, how, why, and where in the process of policy construction and political communication in the “public sphere” (see Habermas 1989, 1996). Political scientists tend to focus on a particular part of the public sphere; some investigate the policy sphere, in which policy actors engage one another in a “coordinative” discourse about policy construction, while others look at 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 individuals loosely connected in “epistemic communities” in transnational settings on the basis of shared cognitive and normative ideas about a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992). Alternatively, it may consist of more closely connected individuals who share both ideas and access to policy making. Examples include “advocacy coalitions” in localized policy contexts, as in water policy in California (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993); “discourse coalitions” in national settings across extended time pe-

riods, as in the ideas of “ordo-liberalism” that underpinned Germany’s postwar social market economy (Lehmbruch 2001); and “advocacy networks” of activists in international politics focused on issues of human rights, the environment, or violence against women (Keck & Sikkink 1998). But the coordinative discourse may also contain “entrepreneurs” (Fligstein & Mara-Drita 1996, Finnemore & Sikkink 1998) or “mediators” (Jobert 1989, Muller 1995) who serve as catalysts for change as they draw on and articulate the ideas of discursive communities and coalitions.

The communicative discourse occurs in the political sphere. It consists of the individuals and groups involved in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of political ideas to the general public. In a mass process of public persuasion, political leaders, government spokespeople, party activists, “spin doctors,” and more communicate the policy ideas and programs developed in the coordinative discourse to the public for discussion and deliberation (see, e.g., Mutz et al. 1996). But the communicative discourse 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. These and other actors, often organized in the “policy forums” of “informed publics” (Rein & 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 & 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. As members of civil society, they engage in grass-roots organizing, social mobilization, and demonstrations; as members of “mini-publics,” they express themselves in citizen juries, issues forums, deliberative polls, and

the like (see Goodin & Dryzek 2006); and as members of the electorate, their voices are heard in opinion polls, surveys, focus groups, and, of course, elections—where actions speak louder than words.

The arrows of discursive interaction often appear to go from the top down. Policy elites generate ideas, which political elites then communicate to the public. Political elites often interweave the coordinative and communicative discourses into a master discourse that presents an at least seemingly coherent political program. The master discourse provides a vision of where the polity is, where it is going, and where it ought to go. The political elites then mediate the ensuing public debates. There is an extensive literature 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 (e.g., Zaller 1992; see discussion in Art 2006, ch. 2). The arrows can also go from the bottom up, however, as in the discursive interactions of social activists, feminists, and environmentalists in national and international arenas (e.g., Keck & 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 important, there may be no arrows between coordinative and communicative discourses. Coordinative policy ideas may remain in closed debates out of public view, either because they might not be approved—as in the case of some of the more progressive immigration policy reforms (Guiraudon 1997)—or because the issues are too technical to capture the sustained interest of the public, as in the case of banking reforms (Busch 2004). The lack of connection between spheres of discourse is a frequent occurrence in the European Union (Schmidt 2006a, ch. 1). As Howorth (2004) notes, the concept of a European army was essentially accepted by Prime Minister Blair in the co-

ordinative EU and national discourses, but the “army” label was denied in his communicative discourse once Fleet Street 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, Art (2006) shows that when conservative Chancellor Kohl sought to “normalize” ideas about the country’s Nazi past, the debate he launched quickly became an opportunity for all manner of political actors 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.

Tracing discursive processes of coordination and communication is a way of showing why ideas may succeed or fail. But discourse, like ideas, sometimes matters to that success and sometimes does not. There are, after all, always ideas and discourse, most of which tend to reinforce existing realities and only some of which promote change. When does discourse exert a causal influence by promoting change—first, in terms of its representation of ideas, and second, as the discursive process by which it conveys those ideas?

Discourse contributes to the success or failure of ideas first of all by how it articulates their substantive content. 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, the credibility of a discourse is likely to benefit from consistency and coherence across policy sectors, although a modicum of vagueness or ambiguity is also to be expected (see Radaelli & Schmidt 2004). Vagueness especially helps 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). The coherence of a discourse can add

to its strength even when it uses ideas for different strategic purposes in different contexts. An example is the “double discourse” of the European Union Commission on agricultural policy, in which the discourse of “multifunctionality” was used at the international level to defend the EU from outside pressures for change and at the EU level to push for member-state reform (Fouilleux 2004). However, expectations of consistency and coherence can lead to “rhetorical entrapment” (Schimmelfennig 2001): 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 demonstrates that discourse is a lot more than talk. It can not only commit the speakers themselves to action, it can also constrain the ideas, discourse, and actions of their successors. Thus, not only did French political leaders find themselves having to honor their predecessors’ commitments, as noted above (see Parsons 2003), but 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 a need to distinguish “arguing,” which involves persuasion, from “bargaining,” which is a strategic action (e.g., Risse 2000). Although this is an evocative distinction, most discursive interactions actually involve both arguing and bargaining; one can argue to defend one’s interests while being strategic in persuading others as to the appropriateness of one’s viewpoint (see Holzinger 2004, Radaelli & Schmidt 2004). Equally important, although discourses are most often successful if true, coherent, and consistent, they need not be any of these things. Suc-

cessful discourses may be manipulative, 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 (1990), Foucault (2000), and Gramsci (1971) argue. But this is where public debates in democratic societies come in. They can expose the bad ideas of the particular discourse of any political actor or set of actors. For example, 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, that isolated and delegitimated extreme right parties, and links 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 neoliberal reform in the United Kingdom 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 with 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).

The formal institutional context also has an impact on where and when discourse may succeed. Different forms of discourse may be emphasized in different institutional settings. In “simple” polities, where governing activity tends to be channeled through a single authority—primarily countries with majoritarian representative institutions, statist policy making, and unitary states such as 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 governments that tend to impose policies without much consultation with the most affected

interests face sanctions ranging from interest group protest to loss of public confidence and loss of elections if they fail to provide a sufficiently legitimating communicative discourse about those policies to the public. By contrast, in “compound” polities, where governing activity tends to be dispersed among multiple authorities—countries with proportional representation systems, corporatist policy making, and/or federal or regionalized states such as 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 they make in private (Schmidt 2002a, pp. 239–50; 2005; 2006a, pp. 223–31). An exception among compound polities is the United States, which 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, thanks to its highly complex, quasi-pluralist processes and quasi-federal structures (see Schmidt 2006a).

More specific institutional settings are also important. Discourses succeed when speakers address their remarks to the right audiences (specialized or general publics) at the right times in the right ways. Their messages must be both convincing in cognitive terms (justifiable) and persuasive in normative terms (appropriate and/or legitimate). A successful discourse “gets it right” in terms of a given “meaning context” according to a given “logic of communication.” This suggests not only that the ideas in the discourse must “make

sense” within a particular ideational setting but also that the discourse itself will be patterned in certain ways, following rules and expressing ideas that are socially constructed and historically transmitted (but more on this below).

IDEAS AND DISCOURSE IN INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

The so-called new institutionalism 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). The new institutionalists brought institutions “back in” in an effort to right the balance, but they may have tipped it 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,” and 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 I call discursive institutionalists (whether or not they would label themselves as such), have challenged the basic premises of the older new institutionalisms. The challenge is both ontological (about what institutions are and how they are created, maintained, and changed) and epistemological (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). Such institutions are thereby external to the actors collectively. Institutional rules about acting in the world 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 new institutionalisms conforms to a rule-following logic, whether an interest-based logic of calculation, a norm-based logic of appropriateness, or a history-based logic of path dependence. But if everyone follows rules, once established, how do we explain institutional change? And how do we explain agency? RI, HI, and SI effectively leave us with "unthinking" actors who are in an important sense not agents at all.¹ This subordination of agency (action) to structure (rules) is the key problem for HI, SI, and RI, and it is why all manner of new institutionalists have turned to ideas and discourse in recent years.

DI simultaneously treats institutions as given (as the context within which agents think, speak, and act) and as contingent (as the results of agents' thoughts, words, and actions). These institutions are therefore internal to the actors, serving both as structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors. As a result, action in institutions is not seen as the product of agents' rationally calculated, path-dependent, or norm-appropriate rule-following. Instead, it is the process in which agents create and maintain institutions by using what I call their background ideational abilities. These underpin agents' ability to make sense of and in a given meaning context, that is, in terms of the ideational rules or "rationality" of that setting. But institutional action can also be predicated on what I call foreground discursive abilities, through which agents may change (or maintain) their institutions. These discursive abilities represent the logic of communication,

which enables agents to think, speak, and act outside their institutions even as they are inside them, to deliberate about institutional rules even as they use them, and to persuade one another to change those institutions or to maintain them. And it is because of this communicative logic that DI is better able to explain institutional change and continuity than the older three new institutionalisms.

This said, DI can be seen as complementary to the other three institutionalisms. Institutions—whether understood as RI's incentive-based structures, HI's historically established patterns, or SI's socially constituted norms—frame the discourse. They define the institutional contexts within which repertoires of more or less acceptable (and expectable) ideas and discursive interactions develop. As such, the older three new institutionalisms could be seen to provide background information for what one normally expects, given the structural constraints, as opposed to what one often gets—the unexpected—which may better be explained by DI. Importantly, DI can explain the unexpected not just because it can account for unique events by reference to individuals' ideas and discourse, but also because the unexpected may actually be expectable when analysis is based on a particular set of ideational rules and discursive regularities in a given meaning context following a particular logic of communication—rather than being based on rationalist interests following a logic of calculation, historical regularities following a logic of path dependence, or cultural norms following a logic of appropriateness.

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 one or more of the three older institutionalisms as background information. But they rarely articulate it. This is as true for discursive institutionalists engaging with the RI tradition as it is for those in the HI

¹I thank Robert Goodin for this suggestion.

tradition. In fact, only discursive institutionalists working in the SI tradition have done much to elaborate on the ontological issues, influenced by such continental philosophers and macrosociologists as Bourdieu (1994), Foucault (2000), Habermas (1989, 1996), and Giddens (1984). Wendt (1987, pp. 359–60), for example, whose “structurationist” 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 of emphasizing structure over agency or agency over structure?

Although philosophers in the continental tradition have done most to address these questions, I turn first to the work of Searle, a philosopher in the analytic tradition, for similar kinds of insights on the construction of social reality. Searle (1995) defines “institutional facts” as those things which exist only through collective agreement about what stands for an institution. Although such facts are consciously created by sentient agents through words and action, people may quickly lose sight of this, not only because they grow up assuming the existence of such facts but also because the whole hierarchy of institutional facts 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 (knowledge of how the world works and how to cope with it). Such background abilities are internal to agents, enabling them to speak and act without the conscious or unconscious following of external rules 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 concept of background abilities, in that he sees human activity as neither constituted nor constitutive but both simultaneously. Human beings act “following the intuitions of a ‘logic of practice’” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 11). The theory of cognitive dissonance in psychology 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. Consciousness about the rules comes into play mainly where cognitive dissonance occurs, that is, when the rules are contradictory (Harmon-Jones & 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. This generic concept is useful in signifying what goes on in individuals’ minds as they come up with new ideas, but it does not explain much about the processes by which institutions change, which is a collective endeavor. It also underemphasizes a key component in human interaction that helps explain such change: discourse.

We undersell DI if we equate the ontology of institutions with background ideational abilities alone, neglecting foreground discursive abilities (people’s 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 about the importance of discourse and deliberation in breaking the elite monopoly on national and supranational decision making while ensuring

democratic access to such decision making. Even though Searle (1995) does not talk about foreground abilities, one could argue that he too is open to this discursive side. He recognizes the importance of language, in particular of “speech acts,” and he insists that institutional change can be not only 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 philosophies is that discourse as an interactive process is what enables agents to change institutions, because the deliberative nature of discourse allows them 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 everyday level of generating and communicating about institutions, and at a meta-level, as a second-order critical communication among agents about what goes on in institutions, enabling them to deliberate and persuade as a prelude to action.

These foreground discursive abilities also provide a direct response both to proponents of the older new institutionalisms, who emphasize structural rule-following over agency, and to continental philosophers and macro-sociologists who imply ideational rule-following. Among the latter, Bourdieu (1994) argues that the *doxa* (worldview) of elites who dominate the state creates the *habitus* that conditions people to see the world in the way chosen by the elites; and Foucault (2000) suggests the impossibility of escape from the ideational domination of the powerful. Foreground discursive abilities enable people to reason, debate, and change the structures they use—a point also brought out by Gramsci (1971), who emphasizes the role of intellectuals in breaking the hegemonic discourse.

Thus, by combining background ideational abilities 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 reference to history in its title, it tends to be rather ahistorical. Change is explained mainly by reference to critical junctures or “punctuated equilibrium” (Krasner 1988), or history is given very limited play through path dependence, with its “lock-in effects” and “positive reinforcement” mechanisms (Pierson 2000). Discursive institutionalists in the HI tradition also often explain change as coming at critical junctures—periods of “third-order change” (Hall 1993); “critical moments” in which “collective memories” are made and/or changed (Rothstein 2005, ch. 8); critical junctures when public debates serve to reframe how countries “come to terms with the past” (Art 2006); “great transformations” when ideas serve to recast countries’ political economic policies (Blyth 2002); or moments when a “window of opportunity” (Kingdon 1984) opens and the search for a new policy program begins. But whereas for historical institutionalists such critical moments are unexplainable times when structures shift, for discursive institutionalists these moments are the objects of explanation through ideas and discourse, which lend insight into how the historically transmitted, path-dependent structures are reconstructed. Importantly, however, discursive institutionalists also consider change in a more evolutionary manner. The literature includes some notable examples. 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. Crawford (2006) charts the development of the idea of trusteeship from the discourse of colonialism to that of contemporary international institutions.

Even recent innovations in HI (e.g., Streeck & Thelen 2005) that elaborate on

the incremental processes of change resulting from actors' use of mechanisms of layering, conversion, and interpretation mainly describe such change rather than explain it by reference to what actors themselves think and say that leads to change. In fact, when historical institutionalists concern themselves with agency, they tend to turn either to RI for a calculus-oriented agency or to SI for a culture-oriented one (see Hall & Taylor 1996), 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 historical institutionalists have turned to ideas and discourse for agency. King (1999) focuses on the role of ideas and knowledge in the making of illiberal immigration policy in Britain and the United States; Lieberman (2005) combines institutions and ideas in his history of racial incorporation in America; and Weir (2006) argues that organized labor's efforts to redefine itself as a political actor in the United States and to build new coalitions can best be explained by considering how organizational leaders "puzzled" and "powered" over questions of identity, alliances, and values as well as interests.

How complementary are these approaches? Do the historical rules and regularities brought out in HI investigations serve as unquestionable background information for DI explanations of agency? If we assume that HI analysis elucidates structures and DI illuminates agency, to what extent are we papering over the differences between these two approaches? My investigation of democracy in Europe (Schmidt 2005, 2006a) shows that a HI explanation of the differential institutional impact of European integration on simple polities such as Britain and France versus compound polities such as Germany and Italy helps describe the challenges to these countries' organizing principles of democracy, but 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 EU can we fully understand national responses to the EU.

Interests and Uncertainty

In RI, the turn to ideas has also been relatively recent. It has shed light on problems that could not be solved in terms of interests alone, such as how preferences are created and how they may change. The turn to ideas has only gone so far, however, because rational choice institutionalists 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 & Keohane 1993; see critiques by Blyth 2002, Gofas & Hay 2009).

For discursive institutionalists generally—and in this they are in agreement with sociological institutionalists—the fundamental flaws of RI's approach to ideas are its assumptions 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, Boudon (2003) summarizes many DI as well as SI arguments 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, so action needs to be explained in terms of its meaning to the actor, as grounded in a system of reasons (similar to meaning context) that the actor sees as strong. And in this cognitive system, as most DI scholars agree, one cannot distinguish objective interests from ideas; all interests are ideas, and ideas constitute interests, so all interests are subjective (see Hay 2006).

Interest-based behavior certainly exists, but it involves ideas about interests that may encompass much more than strictly utilitarian concerns. As 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 Seabrooke (2006) demonstrates, even in the international financial markets—an arena that seems to demand the most interest-based calculations of costs and benefits—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, especially when rational choice institutionalists assume that narrowly instrumental behavior can lead to the establishment of credible institutions. Rothstein (2005, pp. 137–66) argues that institutions should not be seen as neutral structures of incentives or (worse) immutable products of culture that lead to inescapable “social traps,” but 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 and no 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 discursive institutionalists 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. Discursive institutionalists problematize RI's 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 & Hay 2009).

We are left with two final questions: What is material reality? And how do we deal with risk and uncertainty in a material world? Rational choice institutionalists 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. DI positions range widely, from those who hold something akin to a correspondence view—for example, through a kind of “rump materialism” determining a hierarchy of needs in economic life (Wendt 1999, pp. 109–10)—to those who assume that most of reality is constructed by the actors themselves beyond a very basic level (e.g., Hay 2006; M. Blyth, unpublished manuscript).

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 may be real in the sense that they constitute interests and cause things to happen, even though they are socially constructed and thus not material in a “put your hand or rest your eyes on it” sense. Searle (1995) helps elucidate this point when he distinguishes between “brute facts” such as 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, like money, they are real and have causal effects.

To clarify questions of certainty or uncertainty related to social facts, we could turn to Wittgenstein. His *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 on 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 100 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 language games 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, §§ 211, 234). Taleb & Pilpel (2003; see discussion by M. Blyth, unpublished manuscript) make a similar point when they demonstrate that the world in which we live is a lot more uncertain than the world generally assumed by risk economists and rational choice institutionalists. This is because of 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? It means that our own generalizations may have varying degrees of certainty, depending on their objects of knowledge and explanation. But how do we operationalize this? And where is the line between RI and DI? Blyth (unpublished manuscript) provides the beginnings of an answer when he points out that RI notions of uncertainty are really about risk, because agents assume some directly observable world 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 in the US Congress. Under real (Knightian) un-

certainty, agents are not simply unsure about how to achieve their interests but unsure of what their interests are in a world that is not directly observable, such as in the global economy. Here, we do best to make sense of actors’ policies, say, about flexible labor markets and free trade, in terms of their programmatic ideas and discourse in response to their perceptions of the challenges of globalization. For Blyth, much of social science exists in this 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 an 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 explain human action, it can be seen as providing DI with a shortcut by way of its account of “interest-based ideas,” which are nothing more than the range of responses to material realities that 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 DI, indicating what discursive institutionalists could usefully investigate and might do a better job explaining. 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. DI may also explain the expected in unexpected (for RI) ways as well as the seemingly irrational, by analyzing ideas and actions in a given meaning context.

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 sociological institutionalists from discursive institutionalists working in the SI tradition is more a difference of degree than kind. The difference is the extent to which ideas are treated as dynamic constructs (DI) or as static structures (SI). The difficulty in distinguishing between the two, especially in international relations, 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 rational choice institutionalists, for whom identities and interests remain exogenous and given (see Ruggie 1998, p. 864). Ruggie clarifies the distinction when he notes that SI constructivists such as Katzenstein (1996) and his colleagues “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. 884–85).

DI constructivists in the SI tradition are all those who engage dynamically with the construction of ideas and discourse. In international relations, these include, for example, Wendt (1987, 1999), discussed above; Finnemore & Sikkink (1998), who examine the diffusion of international norms to developing countries; and Risse (2001), who considers how different European countries successively constructed and reconstructed their state identities and ideas about European integration. In comparative and international political economy, DI constructivists include Abdelal (2006), who contends that the rules for global finance changed not because of a

Washington consensus but because of a “Paris consensus,” in which European policy makers conceived and promoted the liberal rules now structuring the international financial markets; Hay (2001) and Hay & Rosamond (2002), who detail the ways in which political leaders crafted discourses about the challenges of globalization to legitimate neoliberal reform at home; and Seabrooke (2006), who shows that a state’s 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 their political leaders have a persuasive top-down “master” communicative discourse for the masses, nor even because of 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 bottom-up communicative discourse consisting of the deliberative interactions and contestations between state actors and economic actors with incomes below the median level.

Important questions are related to which way the arrows go—top-down, top-to-top, or bottom-up—and who is seen as the carrier of ideas. The main problem with the top-down ideational and/or discursive process is that legitimation is seen as hierarchical, with elites in charge and entrepreneurial actors jumping through windows of opportunity in moments of uncertainty to produce a shift in ideas. As 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 with such top-down approaches scholars end up presenting legitimacy as a condition tied to beliefs more than as a process of ongoing contestation in deliberative discursive processes.

Discursive institutionalists 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. Therefore, sociological institutionalists, including discursive institutionalists in the SI tradition, make no universalistic claims about rationality. Moreover, if discursive institutionalists who engage with the RI tradition can be seen to focus on cognitive rationality, then discursive institutionalists working in the SI tradition can be described as emphasizing normative rationality.

But because they often focus on explanation within cultures rather than across them, and on normative ideas rather than interest-based (cognitive) ideas, discursive institutionalists in the SI tradition (as well as sociological institutionalists more generally) are sometimes accused of an implicit relativism. 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 cultures. Sikkink (1991) was criticized as leaving herself open to charges of 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—those based on Wittgenstein’s “experience games” as opposed to “picture games.” Moreover, there are certain bases to human rationality that allow for universalism, illustrated in Wittgenstein’s (1968, II, xi, p. 223) famous observation that “if a lion could talk, we would not understand him.” And 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 twentieth-century notion of human rights,

after all, if not that (see Risse et al. 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 macrosociologists such as 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 (Lukes 2005). We can apply this argument to RI as well, since even critics within that tradition note that rational choice institutionalists 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 therefore 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 is most obvious in the world of think-tanks: 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 consist of both ideas and discourse. Ideas differ in levels of generality: They may be specific to policy, encompass a wider program, or constitute an underlying philosophy. They also differ in type: Cognitive ideas are constitutive of interests and normative ideas appeal to values. Discourse serves not just to represent ideas but also to exchange them through interactive processes of

(a) coordination among policy actors in policy and program construction and (b) communication between political actors and the public in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of those ideas, against a background of overarching philosophies. Institutional context also matters—both the formal institutional context (simple polities tend to have a more elaborate communicative discourse, compound polities a more elaborate coordinative discourse) and the more specific meaning context.

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. Agents' background ideational abilities enable them to act in any given meaning context to create and maintain institutions while their foreground discursive abilities enable them to communicate critically about those institutions and so 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. Second, interests in DI, as opposed to in RI, are neither objective (because interests *are* ideas and, as such, subjective) nor material. However, the discursive institutionalist is not giving way to total

uncertainty or denying 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. Here, the intersubjectivity of normative ideational constructions and discursive interactions guards against relativism.

Can we have our cake and eat it too? That is, can we accept DI 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 DI can treat the results of the other institutionalist approaches as background information. Such results may be taken for granted as common-sense ideas and discourse about political reality, or may be problematized and investigated. I have previously suggested that political scientists "give peace a chance" (Schmidt 2006b), abandoning their methodological wars in order to explore the boundaries between their methodological approaches. I reiterate this appeal here. But I also maintain that only with a clearer view of approaches that take ideas and discourse seriously can political scientists begin to explain the fullness of political reality.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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