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Constructivism and public policy approaches in the EU: from ideas to power games

Sabine Saurugger

ABSTRACT The aim of this contribution is to critically analyse the strengths and pitfalls of constructivist public policy approaches in European Union (EU) studies and to develop avenues for further research. Four conceptual frameworks are more specifically discussed: (1) sociological institutionalism; (2) discursive institutionalism; (3) approaches based on socialization and learning; and finally (4) actor-centred constructivism. When the constructivist turn in international relations ‘hit’ European integration theories, the large epistemological tent under which constructivists gathered centred schematically around two puzzles: how ideas, norms and world views were established; and how and why they mattered. Recently, actor strategies and economic rationality have been reintroduced into constructivist accounts. This actor-centred constructivism is very much based on the idea that in order to understand how actors think and how their ideas count in policy-making, one must take into account the way actors use ideas strategically. This contribution argues that this perspective allows us to reach beyond the dichotomy opposing rational choice and more interpretative approaches and helps us to best understand how ideas influence policy processes.

KEY WORDS Cognitive frames; constructivism; European Union; ideas; public policy; strategic constructivism.

INTRODUCTION

Constructivist approaches have mushroomed since the 1990s in theoretical accounts of various areas of European integration (Christiansen *et al.* 1999; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2006; Rosamond 2000; Risse 2004, 2009; Surel 2000). In the field of public policy these approaches focus on the social construction of policy problems or frames of reference on which policy-making is based. The main question is how ideational factors (worldviews, ideas, collective understandings, norms, values, cognitive schemes, etc.)¹ dominate political action (Abdelal *et al.* 2010; Berman 1998; Blyth 1997, 2002; Checkel 1993; Cox 2001; Culpepper 2008; Fischer 2003; Genyies and Smyrl 2008; Gofas and Hay 2010; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Hall 1993; McNamara 1998; Parsons 2002, 2010; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Wendt 1999).

However, the widespread use of the term ‘constructivist turn’ or ‘ideational turn’ in public policy gives the impression there is a coherent conceptual framework. This is not the case. Constructivist accounts have taken various forms and can be understood from different vantage points reaching from post-positivist constructivists, who explore the discursive practices that make certain norms in the European Union (EU) possible in the first place (Checkel 2006; Diez 1999), to ‘conventional’ constructivists, whose aim is to analyse how ideational factors influence policy outcomes (Béland and Cox 2011; Genyies and Smyrl 2008; Gofas and Hay 2010). My purpose is not to propagate an overarching theory of constructivism in European public policy. Rather, I seek to map common ground as well as differences among scholars engaged in the four constructivist public policy perspectives that can be found in EU studies: (1) sociological institutionalism; (2) discursive institutionalism; (3) approaches based on socialization and learning; and finally (4) actor-centred constructivism. Consistent with the overall aim of this collection, the objective here is to explore the extent to which these perspectives help us to better understand the ambiguity and complexity of policy-making processes in the EU. Discussing them in turn is crucial in order to give the flavour of diversity that exists, but also to highlight the progression of constructivist thinking in these areas. While each sociological and discursive institutionalism did not necessarily develop in direct competition to the other, each evolved in ways that sought to address some of the limitations of others. The categories built in this contribution are not airtight; rather, their boundaries are contested, as are the main concepts around which they revolve.

This contribution argues that interest in ideational aspects of policy-making processes make constructivist approaches particularly useful at explaining policy outcomes in a context of high issue complexity. While in policy processes in general actors often have not a clear and well-articulated set of preferences (Zahariadis 1999, 2003) or, better, have contradictory preferences which are embedded in specific values and worldviews, this situation is even more acute at the European level where the amount and the nature of informal linkages, as issue complexity is defined in this collection, is very high (Zahariadis 2013). The result is an uneven integration in the EU across issues based on different worldviews and a large number of diverse rules. It is the influence of these worldviews on policy-making processes that constructivist public policy perspectives are able to better explain.

The first three constructivist perspectives analysed in this contribution – sociological and discursive institutionalism, and approaches based on socialization and learning – either explicitly or implicitly insist on the clear difference between rationalist and constructivist thinking. They reject the assumption that material factors are the main independent variable, as rational choice scholars claim (Mueller 2003), and argue that ideational factors frame the understanding of these material factors (for an in-depth debate of this ‘intellectual topography of ideational explanations’, see Gofas and Hay [2010: 3]). These ideational factors shed light on the influence of ‘world views’, mechanisms of

identity formation, and principles of action in public policy analysis. The fourth perspective – actor-centred constructivism – attempts to transcend this dichotomy (Blyth 2002; Hall 1993; Jabko 2006; McNamara 1998; Parsons 2002; Surel 2000) and helps us not to underestimate the forms of mobilization to which these factors are subject.

Indeed, the idea of the strategic behaviour of actors has found its way back into constructivist approaches centred on public policy. The assumption of this ‘actor-centred’ constructivism is to understand how worldviews, which provide the cognitive background in which actors evolve, are at the same time used by actors to strategically achieve their goals. In this perspective, ideas and norms do not solely constitute the environment in which actors are embedded (constitutive logic), but are also tools consciously used by these same actors to attain their goals (causal logic). This allows us not to obscure the fact that power is unequally distributed amongst actors. At the same time, this branch of constructivism is no longer exclusively centred on cognitive factors as opposed to materialistic factors: both must be taken into account (Gofas and Hay 2010). My argument here is consistent with this idea: only approaches that succeed in combining both logics, a constitutive and a causal one, provide the necessary tools to understand policy processes in the European Union.

In line with the aims of this collection, the contribution attempts to be both a critique of constructivist approaches to public policy in EU studies and provide avenues that might help us to combine rationalist and idealist logics. It does so in three parts: a first part will present the main questions that constructivist approaches address in the field of public policy research in general; a second part will then more precisely present the specific issues and concerns in particular approaches to EU policy studies; before presenting in a third and last part an agenda for future research.

CONSTRUCTIVISM IN PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS

On the most general level, constructivism refers to the assumption that social norms and frameworks on which reality is based are constructed and redefined through permanent interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Actors’ interests cannot be understood as deduced from a solely material structure, as rational choice approaches would argue (Elster 1989; Mueller 2003). Rational choice derives preferences exogenously by specifying properties (position, resources, etc.) across actors and how different values of properties imply different preferences. On the contrary, constructivists assume that social, political and economic contexts structure these interests; thus, actors and structures are co-constituted – one of the most central terms in constructivist research. In other words, the way we think about the world makes the world as we perceive it. Thus, constructivists have a very different understanding of how interests change. For materialists, actors’ interests evolve as changes in their environment alter their situation. Constructivists, or idealists, on the contrary, assume that

interests change as agents alter their understanding of their changing world and recalculate their priorities (Béland and Cox 2011).

The importance of this co-constitution of agents and structures is reflected by the opposition of two logics: a logic of appropriateness; and a logic of consequentialism (in particular March and Olsen [1998]; for a less constructivist and more sociological perspective, see March and Olsen 1984, 1989). Whereas the logic of consequentialism treats agents and structures as two distinct features that explain political processes (the goal of action is to maximize one's own interests and preferences), the logic of appropriateness allows for the conceptualizing of this co-constitution of actors and structures. The logic of appropriateness is:

a perspective that sees human action as driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behaviour, organized into institutions. Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. (March and Olsen 2004: 2)

Thus, acting according to a logic of appropriateness is more a question of behaving correctly in policy-making processes, in line with criteria established by a society or a group, than maximizing one's preferences (Ostrom 1999).

The logic of appropriateness refers to ideas (Béland 2009), or, in other words to the 'collective understandings of social facts', as the primary source of political behaviour. These 'claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions' (Parsons 2002: 48), influence policy development in three ways (Béland 2009: 702). First, they help to construct the problems and issues that enter the policy agenda; second, they frame the basic assumptions that influence the content of reform proposals; finally, ideas can act as discursive tools that shape reform imperatives.

To what extent does this help us to better understand, on the one hand, issue complexity, and on the other, the ambiguity of EU public policy making? Not paying attention to the embeddedness of actors in cognitive frames may obfuscate major aspects of policy-making. Not only is it important that policy decision and policy reforms have been taken, but also why the agents of policy processes sometimes do not react as expected. Their rationality is embedded in specific cognitive frames that must be understood in order to make sense of, sometimes, ambiguous behaviour.

SPECIFIC ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES TO EU PUBLIC POLICY

Based on these general elements, constructivists analysing EU public policies have developed four conceptual perspectives, each of which concentrates on specific aspects of policy making. Two are more specifically linked to institutionalist approaches, and two deeply anchored in social constructivism and

Table 1 Constructivist approaches to public policy

	<i>Sociological institutionalism</i>	<i>Socialization and Learning</i>	<i>Discursive institutionalism</i>	<i>Actor-centred constructivism</i>
Elements explaining change	Informal institutions, identity, shared experiences, cognitive frameworks	Formal and informal institutions	Informal institutions, discourses and ideas	Formal and informal institutions, rational calculation.
Subject of analysis	Cultural standards and cognitive frameworks	Actors' attitudes in decision-making processes	Ideas and discourses	Rational calculation framed by embeddedness in formal and informal institutions
Logic of explanation	Logic of social conventions	Socialization and learning	Communication	Strategic calculation

sociology: (1) sociological institutionalism; (2) socialization and learning; (3) discursive institutionalism; and (4) actor-centred constructivism. The last approach is rooted in one of the central critiques of constructivist approaches – i.e., the absence of considerations about authority and power. This last approach has become one of the most promising conceptual frameworks in EU public policy research, as it allows for the considering of both the strategic interests of actors as well as their embeddedness in cognitive structures. Thus, actor-centred constructivism goes beyond the opposition between agent behaviour based on a logic of consequentialism and that based on a logic of appropriateness. Both logics co-exist and influence the attitudes of actors in policy-making processes.

Table 1 summarizes the four constructivist accounts of EU public policy approaches, through three specific features that will be explained in more detail in the remaining specific sub-sections of this contribution: elements explaining change; the subject of analysis; and the logic of explanation.

Sociological institutionalism

In both institutionalist approaches to constructivist public policy concepts, institutions are understood as rules, norms and strategies (Ostrom 1999: 37). Sociological institutionalism is not a constructivist perspective as such but contains elements constructivists have used extensively, and thus makes it necessary to include it in this debate. In a certain sense, it seems to be a source on which

constructivists in EU public policy have built the three other constructivist perspectives. It more specifically derives from the different conceptualizations of organizational sociology and puts particular emphasis on the cognitive dimensions of institutional actions. These cognitive dimensions can be understood through four attitudes in particular: logic of appropriateness; logic of consequentialism; isomorphism; and mimesis (Peters 2005). The two logics have been discussed above and, as we have seen, have tremendously influenced debate in public policy studies in general.

The third element, isomorphism, results from social processes of emulation and diffusion. Sociological institutionalism argues that in policy-making processes actors replicate organizational models collectively sanctioned as appropriate and legitimate (Dimaggio and Powell 1991; March and Olsen 1984, 1989). Three mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change can be identified: coercion; mimesis; and normative pressures. Coercive isomorphism refers to pressure from other organizations, mostly the government, via public subsidies, upon which institutions are dependent. Coercive isomorphism can also be exercised by cultural expectations stemming from society as institutions conforming to expectations from the outside. In EU studies, the main research on coercive isomorphism has concentrated on the European Commission. A specific example in the context of European integration is the reaction of European institutions to the alleged legitimacy deficit of their policy processes. These criticisms, voiced by European societies through negative referenda outcomes, led to the introduction of a number of new democratic instruments at the European level. According to research based on sociological institutionalist perspectives, the concept of legitimacy or its deficit must be understood as an inter-subjective property that 'operates through individuals via cognitive scripts' (Goetze and Rittberger 2010: 37; Bartolini 2005). It thus helps to understand that the legitimacy deficit is not an unchangeable fact but a shared cognitive framework that structures agents' attitudes in policy-making processes. Another empirical example of this approach can be found in studies on the collective institutional cultures. For instance, controversies inside the European Commission, the European Parliament or agencies have been explained through the establishment of divergent collective values or cognitive frames which make the defence of specific positions possible (Christiansen and Tonra 2004; Cini 1996; Fouilleux 2004; Jachtenfuchs 2001).

Finally, mimesis, a variant of isomorphism, is thought to occur mostly through the migration of professionals from one organization to another. In a context of uncertainty and limited rationality, institutions have a tendency to imitate one another. Sociological institutionalism has convincingly shown that research in this area is interested in the transfer of institutional forms such as independent agencies or the European Central Bank, from the national to the European level (Wonka and Rittberger 2011). Thus, common understandings are established in policy-making through processes of emulation and diffusion, and, in fact, diminishing issue complexity.

Socialization and learning

Similar to the hypotheses developed by the mimesis aspect of sociological institutionalism, but without the identification of a clear role model as offered by sociological institutionalist perspectives, socialization and learning approaches look for evidence of socialization within the European integration process (Checkel 1999; 2001; 2003; 2005; 2006; Zürn and Checkel 2005). Socialization occurs when norms, worldviews, collective understandings are internalized, and subsequently are codified by a group of actors (Risse 2009; Schimmelfennig 2000).

Based on this assumption, a large number of analyses have been carried out on the socializing role of European institutions. If a large proportion of policy outcomes results from exchanges between actors and can be understood as strategic bargaining, certain processes analysed from this viewpoint do not make any sense.

Constitutive dynamics of social learning, socialization, routinization and normative diffusion, all of which address fundamental issues of agent identity and interests, are not adequately captured by strategic exchange or other models adhering to strict forms of methodological individualism. (Checkel 1999: 545)

The central research object here is not so much the construction of a European identity in the broader sense. Instead, the research concentrates on the influence the collective acceptance of certain standards of behaviour exerts on the policy-making processes (Beyers 2005; Checkel 2001; Hooghe 2005; Tallberg 2002).

Sympathetic critiques of this research insist on the fact that learning and socialization processes are phenomena which must be rigorously studied in order to understand the moment at which a norm becomes a general reference and is not just an idea or ideological position of one single individual (see also Radaelli and Dunlop 2013; Saurugger 2010). Empirical research mainly concentrates on specific professional groups active in the EU realm, such as European civil servants, the committee of permanent representatives (COREPER), members of interest groups (Checkel 2003; Hooghe 2000, 2005; Lewis 2005, 2008), or specific policy fields such as those in which the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) is particularly prominent: gender mainstreaming; life-long learning flexicurity; or activation (Zeitlin 2005). Through continuous interaction, actors in groups of actors share a number of common values, which, in turn, influence their positions in decision-making processes.

On the one hand, this conceptualization of learning has two advantages. First of all, it shows that certain actors do not only succeed in imposing their interpretation of social phenomena or their norms as hegemonies because they have the necessary authority or because a window of opportunity opens up. Their arguments are persuasive because they have managed to create a common understanding of a problem and thus hold a legitimate position through the broader social context in which they are embedded (Dimitrova and Rhinard 2005; Jobert and Muller 1987).

The second advantage is the ability to integrate one of the major challenges of research into European integration, i.e., thinking about the multitude of levels where reality is constructed. Reality is constructed by the individual, the group to which it belongs, the media or, more generally, the messages that are transmitted on several levels: locally; regionally; nationally; Europe-wide; or more internationally. Issue complexity, which has been identified as a problem in the collection, seems to decrease in the fields where socialization occurs.

However, one of the main questions that remains is to understand why a large number of bargaining processes still seem not based on a shared understanding of the problem (i.e., the Economic and Monetary Union [EMU] crisis, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, or the budget negotiations), although governmental representatives have co-operated for more than 50 years in Brussels. Can the explanation be found on the level of analysis? In other words, can we observe learning and socialization processes in which common worldviews are constructed only in small and very technical groups, whereas intergovernmental bargaining remains focused on national collective understandings?

Discursive institutionalism

A relatively new form of constructivist institutionalism applied to public policy studies developed at the end of the 1990s. It is summarized by Vivien Schmidt under the label of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008; for first conceptualizations, see Fairclough 1992; Hay 2004; Hay and Rosamond 2002; Peters 2005). Discursive institutionalism investigates changes of paradigm and reference sets of public policies through ideas which are perceived as central variables of research.

While ideas are still identified as mechanisms of political change, discursive institutionalism attempts to solve the causality question: precisely how do ideas influence public policies? The main question is thus not how discursive practices make certain EU norms possible in the first place, as post-positivists would ask (Diez 1999), but how worldviews influence policy outcomes. The answer to this second question is straightforward: ideas require the existence of a vehicle or a carrier. Discourse is identified as the main instrument of change. In this logic it is important to focus on the content of ideas and the interactive process which brings them to a head and which communicates them to the public. Thus, discursive institutionalism traces the process from the emergence of ideas, through their dissemination and finally their legitimization (Wincott 2004).

For instance, at the European Union level, the European Commission has attempted to increasingly build up a discourse to legitimize its policies and reforms to compensate for the alleged democratic deficit the EU has been accused of since the beginning of the 1990s (Fouilleux 2004). While the German and French attempts to reform their telecommunications policy were

enforced by discourse that directly referred to EU institutional requirements, the reform in French immigration policy did not refer to European pressure (Geddes and Guiraudon 2004; Thatcher 2004).

The problem of making sense and understanding the impact of issue complexity of EU policy-making on policy outcomes here is addressed by concentrating on actors' discourses. Discursive institutionalism is more a research method than a conceptual framework: it attempts to measure how worldviews, ideas, collective understandings make their way into policy outcomes.

The problem the approach faces is twofold: to determine whether discourse really can be the independent variable; and to distinguish between ideas and strategies. As with sociological institutionalism, establishing causal links between the different phenomena is extremely difficult. The solution offered by discursive institutionalism is thus to concentrate on correlations between variables instead of insisting on causality (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004).

The second difficulty – differentiating between ideas and strategies in discourse – has been tackled head-on by actor-centred constructivists, who do not distinguish between ideas and strategies but argue that ideas, as well as any other argument, can be used strategically in a negotiation.

Actor-centred constructivism

The main problem when using one of the three approaches presented above is the fact that power relations and the strategic behaviour of policy agents somehow seem secondary, if they appear at all.

Since the end of the 1990s, a group of scholars has attempted to accommodate the limits of previous constructivist conceptualizations of EU politics, referring to the fact that the strategic considerations of the actors involved were largely ignored in constructivist approaches. Whilst these researchers agree with the general constructivist assumption on the fact that the individual ideas and beliefs of an actor are constructed, they emphasize the importance of taking into account *how specific actors use these ideas*. The central question to which actor-centred constructivism seeks to find an answer is to understand how precisely ideas count in policy outcomes. It is interesting to underline here that actor-centred constructivists rather consistently use the term 'ideas' throughout their research. Ideas are considered to be explanatory factors in their own right. But as Mark Blyth notes, constructivist perspectives – which include in our case in particular socialization and learning approaches as well as discursive institutionalism – have for too long opposed interests and ideas and considered them to be radically different and unrelated concepts (Blyth 2002; see also McNamara 2006).

How do ideas frame interests, and how can one describe the practices of actors and the development of public policy through this framing process? When and why, for example, do European public officials evoke the neoliberal paradigm in their messages, and when and why does this idea not find its way into official documents and discourse? These questions lead to identifying the agents who

pay attention to certain ideas and not to others, as well as the reasons why certain decisions are made at a specific period and not at another (Zahariadis 2008). In other words:

Since structures do not come with an instruction sheet, economic ideas make such an institutional resolution possible by providing the authoritative diagnosis as to what a crisis actually is and when a given situation actually constitutes a crisis. They diagnose ‘what has gone wrong’ and ‘what is to be done’. (Blyth 2002: 10; see also Hay 1999, 2004)

Ideas are considered as malleable objects – they can be used for strategic purposes. The purely rhetorical use of these notions underestimates the forms of mobilization and instrumentalization to which these frames have been subject (Surel 2000). It is, in a certain sense, rather trivial to say that these strategies are socially constructed. However, in saying this, it is important to understand that actors must create broad coalitions around common strategies in order to carry out major reforms.

Research based on this perspective is particularly important in the field of the European political economy. The main question here is why and how a convergence of beliefs around economic and political solutions to specific European problems has emerged (Abdelal *et al.* 2010; Berman 1998; Blyth 2002; Clift and Woll 2012; Hall 1993; Jabko 2006, 2010; McNamara 1998, 2006; Meyer and Strickman 2011; Parsons 2002; Woll 2008).

While these scholars develop different hypotheses and might not be comfortable with being called actor-centred constructivists, they agree on the basic assumption that, even if the international environment confronts political leaders with a set of challenges, this does not automatically mean that the ‘correct’ or ‘best’ answer, which, without doubt, would solve the problem, will be forthcoming. However, where these authors differ is in the degree of independence the carriers of ideas have. For one group of scholars, the understanding of economic, political and social challenges, their interpretation and their analysis is filtered by cultural and ideal structures in which political actors operate. In order to be visible, ideas must serve the interest of the dominant actors by strengthening their position in the game (Béland 2009; Hall 1993; McNamara 1998; Parsons 2002). Another group considers ideas as weapons that can be used quite independently from the position of the actor itself (Blyth 2002; Jabko 2006).

However, the difficulty of showing the empirical influence of ideas remains. One of the problems is to be found in the dichotomic (Janus-faced) nature of ideas (Parsons 2002). Sometimes the beliefs of actors guide their actions and sometimes perceived beliefs only rationalize strategies that can be chosen for other reasons. Empirically distinguishing between the two situations is rather difficult and can only be done by establishing causality. This causality allows the sequence of decisions and paradigm changes to be made visible.

Thus, actor-centred constructivism introduces sociological methods, concentrating on the study of individual actors or groups of actors, which are aimed to help in the understanding of the power games that take place between actors in public policy. Craig Parsons, in particular, argues that, in order to observe the influence of ideas, it is crucial to consider the agenda-setting power of the actor in question. In his analysis of the success of integration ideology in relation to the confederal or intergovernmental model developed by the 'founding fathers' of European integration, Parsons offers a micro-sociological study of French debates on this issue, as well as of the interactions between European partners in the 1950s (Parsons 2002).

The analysis of the intensified European economic regional integration process starting from the 1980s uses a similar research design (Jabko 2006). Here European integration is studied from the angle of economic governance. The observation is based on the dual economic and political change in Europe and on the definition of a political strategy of 'market gain' developed by European actors and, in particular, the European Commission. This strategy is based on the idea of a common market, a concept which is sufficiently multi-tasking to bring together all the European actors' ideologies around a single project: the construction of the single market and the Economic and Monetary Union, the driving force behind the European Commission's political strategy. This 'silent revolution' in Europe over time brought together a broad coalition of European actors. Through the use of what he calls 'strategic constructivism', Jabko emphasizes two paradoxical aspects of the European Union: the parallel emergence of intergovernmental economic governance; and the strengthening of powers at the European level. According to Jabko, the European Union is not just a marketing tool serving neoliberal ideologies. The European Commission is an active agent developing a specific understanding of neoliberalism not as a homogenous paradigm but a discursive notion allowing for different interpretations and strategies guiding economic policies.

Actor-centred and, more precisely, 'strategic constructivism' attempts to tackle critiques expressed by opponents of constructivist approaches focusing, on the one hand, on who the carriers of ideas and norms are, and on the other, how their power relations shape the policy outcomes under scrutiny. Economically rationalist thinking is brought back into the analysis and linked to the use actors make of these ideas. Agents are purposeful actors, embedded in ideational structures, which they use according to their interests.

Actor-centred constructivism thus allows us to deal particularly well with two issues found in EU policy-making in particular: on the one hand, the complexity of policy-making processes; on the other, legitimation issues. There are, however, a number of pitfalls that actor-centred constructivists might take into account when further developing their research.

Complexity

The combination of a constructivist and rationalist research design makes actor-centred or 'strategic' constructivist perspectives particularly interesting in public

policy studies aimed at explaining the EU, given the complexity of decision-making at this level. As stated in the introduction, actors often lack a clear and well-articulated set of preferences in policy processes, and have contradictory preferences which are embedded in specific values and world views.

While these characteristics are central elements in the analysis of the complexity of contemporary societies in general, the notion of complexity seen by actor-centred constructivists goes beyond the difference in positions or interests. While these differences undoubtedly exist, these scholars question the origin of these differences and find them in different world views of social groups. Contemporary social systems, which are both agents of social change through public policies and addressees of these changes, are characterized through functional differentiation. Agents evolve in different subsystems at the same time and their interests are therefore influenced by a multitude of values and ideas.

All constructivist perspectives seem at first sight particularly apt to address the problems of issue complexity that arise in contemporary systems of governance, and more particularly in the EU. As underlined in Zahariadis's introduction to this collection, issue complexity makes agreements between policy-makers difficult, not only because more people need to agree but also because decision-makers will be more likely to contest the framing of the debate. Actor-centred constructivists aim to uncover rather than to assume rationality of policy agents in their research.

While the first generations of constructivist approaches to EU studies developed frameworks to explain issue complexity more than institutional complexity in the EU, the development of actor-centred constructivism has allowed for reintroducing tools that address this issue. Higher institutional complexity gives rise to potential conflict. A high number of actors with overlapping and often conflicting competencies increase the possibility of power struggles for control of agendas and resources.

At the same time, this new generation of constructivist perspectives continues to include ideas and world views as central causal factors in the explanation of the decision-making processes. However, they insist on the fact that ideas, worldviews or norms do not exist independently from the users of these ideas and the institutional conditions in which they are embedded. Thus, world views, norms or ideas 'do not float freely' as Thomas Risse-Kappen (1994) has so pertinently observed. One of the main problems here is the question of methodology. How shall we analyse the interdependence between ideas and interests, both of them more generally embedded in specific worldviews?

Legitimation

Beyond the treatment of the complexity of social systems, constructivist approaches are equally useful to explain legitimation strategies actors pursue in policy-making processes. This is important, as in both political and academic debates the question of legitimate and accountable governance in the European Union has become a crucial issue since the mid-1990s. The influence of ideas, of

'world views', of 'ways of seeing things', of frames or more generally of representations is at the centre of these approaches. In this sense, public policy is understood as the result of the interaction between individuals whose interests are not only based on a rational cost–benefit calculation, but must be understood as something that is embedded in specific social representations, values and norms in which the actor evolves. General constructivist approaches in public policy aim at helping us understand why some proposals have more legitimacy in a debate than others at a given time:

Politicians, officials, the spokesmen for societal interests, and policy experts all operate within the terms of political discourse that are current in the nation at a given time, and the terms of political discourse generally have a specific configuration that lends representative legitimacy to some social interests more than others, delineates the accepted boundaries of state action, associates contemporary political developments with particular interpretations of national history, and defines the context in which many issues will be understood. (Hall 1993: 289; see also Surel 2000)

This conceptualization does not exclude behaviour based on cost and benefit analysis. However, this attitude only occurs when actors have chosen the instruments available to them in order to pursue a specific objective. Again, and this seems somewhat circular, these objectives, however, are influenced through cognitive and normative frames available to them. In this sense, 'actors always perceive the world through a lens consisting of their pre-existing beliefs' (Sabatier 1998: 109). These pre-existing beliefs, as Sabatier calls them, norms or cognitive frames are not homogenous. Conflict amongst actors within these frames constantly occurs, as well as amongst actors who have adopted different frames in negotiations leading to public policies. These conflicts thus allow us to explain why policies change, instead of insisting on their normative embeddedness and their ensuing static character.

This understanding of ideas and cognitive frames, particularly developed in constructivist approaches, allows the legitimacy of public policies to be conceptualized differently. Legitimacy thus is no longer an absolute value but must be understood in the light of a permanent framing process in which different ideas about legitimacy confront each other: the legitimacy of public policies becomes the process of legitimation of public policies (Jobert and Muller 1987). This research field has gained in importance since the beginning of the 1990s, when the debate on the democratic deficit of the European Union became an important issue. Why European and domestic actors adopt positions in the European debate was analysed in the light of their understanding of the European democratic space and not only as a cost–benefit attitude. It is here where strategic constructivism encounters a limit: if ideas become purely a weapon (Blyth 2002) or a strategic tool (Jabko 2006), then the legitimacy of a policy process is nothing more than a lure. It is methodologically challenging to analyse at the same time the influence of ideas as a strategic tool and the influence of the political, social or economic context in which these ideas occur. The

link between the logic of consequentialism and the logic of appropriateness which is so well argued for by strategic constructivists, however, is methodologically difficult to realize. Is there a way forward to solve these issues?

CONCLUSION: FUTURE AGENDAS

We have seen that constructivist approaches in public policy are particularly well suited to explaining the complexity of the policy process. While the first generation of constructivist approaches (sociological and discursive institutionalism, as well as socialization and learning) in EU public policy helped in particular to understand the *issue* complexity of European policies, actor-centred constructivism allowed the introduction of tools to conceptualize *institutional* complexity. The assumption that ideas could be used strategically by EU agents constitutes an extremely useful instrument to overcome the artificial dichotomy between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequentialism. This becomes particularly clear when we think about the German and French governments' attempts to establish an economic government in the European Union as an answer to the economic and financial crises since 2009. Their positions are both embedded in their national history and influenced by their economic preferences in a globalized market.

The continued insistence of constructivist accounts in general on the multiplicity of actors' positions framed by their institutional, cognitive or cultural embeddedness, the fact that policy outcomes are not based exclusively on economic rational calculations, or, finally, the significant role played by the socialization processes of actors on policy outcomes helps to better understand policy processes.

The crucial role played by the contextualization of processes, i.e., the fact that they are embedded in a certain social, political or economic context, based on an important number of variables that cannot be reduced to a simple linearity between interests and outcomes, advocated by constructivist approaches, leads to a rather detailed research protocol and precise statements on policy processes.

However, there are a number of challenges with which constructivist approaches in EU public policy are confronted:

- Methodological challenges referring to the fact that research based on micro-sociological studies or even detailed case studies a number of constructivist scholars call for (see Béland 2009) do not seem entirely sufficient to understand the extent to which the embeddedness of actors explains their positions in policy negotiations, or the final policy outcome. Understanding the attitudes of specific Directorates-General (DGs) or groups of actors in policy-making does not help us to understand the EU integration process in general. It helps us to understand details, but not in which direction the European integration process might be heading in general. Which macro-sociological worldviews (if there are any) influence the policy results? And what does this mean for a supranational governance system in the global context?

- The establishment of a correlation between ideas, norms or world views and policy outcomes is still not entirely convincing. The central criticism voiced by Andrew Moravcsik (1999), that ideas constantly float around (albeit not freely) in political as well as policy processes and that it is therefore vain to try to understand these often contradictory variables which do not significantly influence policy outcomes, still echoes in constructivist research. While strategic constructivists attempt to introduce economically rational elements in their embeddedness research, other constructivist approaches insist on the long-term and learning factors in order to explain policy outcomes. Norms, ideas, informal institutions, belief systems or world views are, however, extremely difficult to define and thus to operationalize in order to understand their influence in the policy process.
- Finally, some constructivist public policy approaches are in danger of becoming so concentrated with small-scale case studies that they forget to be interested in the bigger picture of European integration. This is particularly true of sociological and discursive institutionalist frameworks which might gain in importance if they were to address larger questions than the precise influence of socialization or of discourse on specific policy outcomes. Thus, understanding the discourse of one specific expert group in one policy area, such as mad cow disease, will only inform us on the use of ideas and norms in one historically contingent negotiation process at the EU level. Widening the research scope of these approaches might lead to more general comments and less evidence-based research, as norms, ideas or worldviews can be catch-all terms if not precisely defined.

Thus, the future agenda of constructivist approaches calls for a large-scale empirical research programme in which norms, rules, world views and cognitive frameworks are clearly defined and in which correlations between these views and policy outcomes can be more clearly established. Large-scale research can take two forms. First, as a longitudinal analysis presenting a history of the EU in which policy processes, beyond the moments of crisis, such as treaty negotiations, are analysed. Second, as a research design that concentrates on a comparison, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods (i.e., Ragin 1987), between specific policy areas which are analysed in detail. Both research designs would go beyond pure description. Research based on actor-centred or strategic constructivism seems, for the time being, most promising in this respect, as it allows both strategic thinking and cognitive contextualization to be taken into account.

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NOTE

- 1 While all these terms have very specific definitions, they are used by a majority of constructivist approaches dealt with in this article as synonymous. A detailed differentiation would go way beyond the scope of this article.

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