

Institutionalisation is not internalisation: The 'bricoleur' and his toolkit as an alternative vision of agency*

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Abstract: An argument that has done much to secure the status of ideational explanations in political science is that institutionalised ideas structure actors' identification of their interests as well as the interests of their political adversaries. Despite its strength in arguing for the importance of ideas, the focus on institutionalisation of ideas has had as an unfortunate consequence that often actors implicitly or explicitly are believed to internalise ideas, in effect making it difficult to understand how actors are able to change the ideas and institutions they themselves uphold. Drawing on cultural sociology and ideational theory, the paper introduces the 'bricoleur' as an alternative vision of agency. It is argued, first, that actors cannot cognitively internalize highly structured symbolic systems, and ideas are thus outside the minds of actors. Second, using the cognitive schemas at their disposal, actors construct strategies of action based on the pre-constructed ideational and political institutions. Third, actors have to work actively and creatively with the ideas and institutions they use, because the structure that actors work within does not determine the actors' response to new circumstances. Fourth, as a vast number of ideational studies have witnessed to, actors face a complex array of challenges in getting their idea to the top of the policy agenda, which makes it all the more important to act pragmatically, putting ideas together that may not be logically compatible but rather answer to political and cultural logics. In sum, agency often takes the form of bricolage, where bits and pieces of the existing ideational and institutional legacy is put together in new forms leading to significant political transformation.

Introduction

The ideational turn of the last twenty years has made ideas a variable that is difficult to pass by in silence. When even rationalist scholars like North (1990), Denzau and North (1994), Goldstein and Keohane (1993) and Scharpf (1997) acknowledge that ideas are important in our understanding of political action, ideational studies can surely be said to have had considerable influence on political science. Mehta (2010) goes as far as arguing that “given the ubiquity of ideas in all facets of everyday life, the burden of proof lies on the critics to show that ideas do not matter, rather than on proponents to show that they do” (p. 33). One argument that has done much to secure the status of ideational explanations in political science is that the institutionalisation of ideas has significant

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effect on actors' identification of their interests as well as the interests of their political adversaries. On short form, the argument usually goes as follows: The existing institutional and ideational equilibrium is disrupted, typically by an exogenous shock, political actors then set out to find new ideas, and the winners of the political battle of ideas institutionalise their own ideas, which then stabilise political interaction for a long time to come. The important implication that follows is that we cannot derive the interests of actors from their institutional position, but rather have to analyse which ideas actors use to identify their interests (Blyth, 2003).

While this work has been vital in putting forward the ideational case – perhaps even swaying some of the sceptical political scientists accustomed to pure interest-based explanation – the focus on institutionalisation of ideas also carries certain analytical weaknesses. This paper will take charge with one of these weaknesses, namely that when focusing so strongly on the institutionalisation of ideas we often come to understate the transformative potential actors hold in processes of ideational and institutional change. To many this critique might come as a surprise, since ideas were first introduced into political science to explain the change that institutional theory had such difficulties to account for within the premises of their stability-oriented theories – as well as to provide actor-centred explanations of change (Blyth, 1997; Schmidt, 2009b). How then can it be that ideational theories often end up with the same problem of exogenising the explanation of change and in consequence removing the drive for change from agents? One answer is that the institutionalisation of ideas is often confused with internalisation of ideas. When it is argued that ideas are institutionalised, it most often means that actors cannot imagine things differently, and the only way this ideational foundation can be destabilised is through crisis brought on from the outside. In this perspective, ideas are internalised by actors, who are not able to think critically or strategically about the ideas they hold. This naturally leads to an *ideational punctuated equilibrium model* (Seabrooke, 2009), where significant change only occurs following exogenous shocks (cf. Lieberman, 2002; Carstensen, 2010a). As the literature review below seeks to demonstrate, the internalisation of ideas is most clearly present in Hall's (1993) theory of policy paradigms, but the same tendencies are found also in newer ideational theory that focus on the institutionalisation of ideas.

Building on the insights of ideational research, the paper proposes a solution to this problem: introducing the bricoleur and his toolkit as an alternative vision of agency. Ontologically the argument is based on the insight from cognitive psychology that actors cannot cognitively internalize highly structured symbolic systems, and ideas are thus outside the minds of actors. Ideas instead function as a resource that actors draw on to make sense of the world they inhabit as well as to persuade other actors of the appropriateness of an idea or policy. Consequently, actors are able to think critically about the ideas they use and put them together in ways that strategically support

their purpose. This resonates with the vision of agents as bricoleurs, who creatively combine bits of pieces of several legacies. In this perspective, ideational and institutional change is a process of dynamic innovation.

The structuralism of ideational theory

The paradigm approach

One piece that came to have great impact on the ideational turn of the 1990s was Hall's (1993) seminal paper on policy paradigms and social learning. It forcefully argued that politicians and officials use interpretive frameworks – paradigms – that specify “not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing” (p. 279). In his description of how policy paradigms work, Hall (1993) draws an analogy to Thomas Kuhn's (1970a) science paradigms. With inspiration from Kuhn, first and second order change can be viewed as ‘normal policy making’. During this period policy is adjusted incrementally and routinely without challenging the structure of a given policy paradigm. In contrast, third order change is marked by a radical break with the usual terms of policy making, which leads to a rupture in the policy field. Analogous to Kuhn's (1970a) vision of paradigm change within science, Hall (1993) argues that a shift in a policy paradigm is most likely preceded by policy experimentation and the accumulation of anomalies – that is, “developments that are not fully comprehensible, even as puzzles, within the terms of the paradigm” (p. 280). The attempts to stretch the terms of the paradigm to explain these anomalies in the end undermine the authority of the paradigm. Policy making thus follows a specific kind of trajectory of punctuated equilibria: long periods of stability are occasionally ruptured by sudden changes following a paradigm shift (see Hall, 1993: 291, n63).

Hall's approach to policy paradigms encounters some of the same problems as Kuhn's science paradigms. One of these problems is that actors are not granted real critical faculty. As argued by Watkins (1970), Kuhn's paradigms have such a sway over scientists that they do not have a critical sense of the paradigm they adhere to. Or as Laudan (1977) argues: “Because Kuhn makes the core assumptions of the paradigm immune from criticism, there can be no corrective relationship between the paradigm and the data” (p. 75). Thus, scientists can only be critical of their paradigm when they have already left it behind (cf. Kuhn, 1970b: 6-7). Because Hall uncritically embraces a Kuhnian understanding of paradigms¹, he also imports Kuhn's over-systemic understanding of

¹ In a footnote Hall (1993) acknowledges that Kuhn's arguments are controversial but in the same breath argues that the theory remains “highly suggestive and potentially even more applicable beyond the natural sciences” (p. 294, n24). This is a quite remarkable statement considering, as Schmidt (2008a) notes, that philosophers and historians of

actors (Schmidt, 2008a). Much of the trouble starts with Hall's argument that paradigms are incommensurable, which in effect grants paradigms monopoly over the minds of actors. Another problem with Hall's theory is that actors do not possess a critical sense of the ideas they hold. This is seen most clearly in his argument that the taken-for-grantedness of paradigms makes them “unamenable to scrutiny as a whole”. This understanding of actors as essentially passive followers becomes most problematic, when we turn to Hall's theory of ideational change: Both during 'normal policymaking' and 'paradigm shifts' actors are unable to change the ideational structure of the paradigm. During 'normal policymaking' actors adjust instruments and their setting, but this does not amount to ideational change: Ideas are placed at the core of the paradigm where they structure both goals, instruments and settings, so actors cannot challenge the ideas of the paradigm without challenging its overall structure, which is impossible considering that the paradigm is “unamenable to scrutiny as a whole”. Thus, the only way ideational change can occur is through paradigm change. In this case, it is not the actors that function *inside* a paradigm that bring about the new paradigm. When a certain amount of anomalies have shown that the paradigm is no longer able to provide solutions to the problems of the policy field, actors with an *altogether different* paradigm will seek to delegitimize the existing (failing) paradigm with their own view of the world, often precipitated by a change in power. In effect we end up with a model with ideational structures that actors are unable to change, because they cannot think outside the structure. Hall's structuralist conception of ideas would obviously be less of a problem had scholars inspired by Hall (1993) only used paradigms metaphorically or to label certain historical periods. However, we see numerous studies using Hall's paradigm approach in explanations of ideational stability and change without noting the theoretical problems pointed out above (for example Beland, 2005; Hay, 2004; Albrekt Larsen and Goul Andersen, 2009).

Institutionalisation as internalisation

The predominant focus on the institutionalisation of ideas and the use of *ideational punctuated equilibrium models* has further strengthened the emphasis on actors' dependence on – and sometimes even internalisation of – ideas. One example is Parsons' (2003) analysis of the ideational and institutional construction of interests in the building of the European Union². In his analysis of how community-oriented ideas were institutionalised over time, blocking other ideas from organising the political project of the European Union, Parsons (2003) provides strong arguments about how ideas gain political influence through their institutionalisation. However, we are told only little about how ideas change or how actors work with (and perhaps around) ideas. It seems

science have generally insisted that their explanations apply poorly to the social sciences and that Kuhn (1970a: 163-4) himself doubted that 'paradigmatic science' explained change in the social sciences. .

² Other examples are Hall (1989), Steinmo (2003) and to some degree Culpepper (2008).

clear that Parsons understands actors as both strategic and interest-oriented (cf. Parsons, 2007: 98), but it remains unclear to what degree actors are able to think critically about the ideas they employ. Maybe the reason is that Parsons (2003) explicitly focuses on how we can most clearly demonstrate that ideas matter relative to interests, i.e. by arguing that ideas structure actors' perception of their interests. Despite the effort to support the argument that ideas matter, then, a microtheory about how actors actually work with ideas – besides depending on them for mutual cooperation and identifying their interests – is missing.

Other analyses have done more to theorise about agency. One example is Marcussen's (2000) study of the institutionalisation of certain macroeconomic policy ideas in the building of European monetary union, which further specifies the psychological mechanisms that structure actors' use of ideas. Marcussen focuses on actors' limited cognitive ability to handle complexity and their need for cognitive consistency. This psychological basis supports Marcussen's (2000) ideational punctuated equilibrium model, where ideas are institutionalised and remain stable for years until a perceived shock challenges the existing knowledge structures and creates an ideational vacuum, where policy entrepreneurs get their chance to present new ideas to policy makers. Ideas are 'sticky', because “once cognitive schemas are *internalized* something extraordinary, such as a new external shock, is needed in order to destabilize the *dominant* and *consistent* schemas that motivate the policy-maker” (p. 16, italics added). Marcussen (2000) presents two visions of agency: one of actors that are dependent on ideas for consistency and 'cognitive relief', and one of actors that use ideas strategically to protect their (socially constructed) interests. Interestingly the divide between dependence and reflexivity seems to be between policymakers and policy entrepreneurs – that is: the position of the actor determines the degree to which the actor is able to think strategically and reflexively about the ideas he or she uses. This is problematic, not least because sometimes policymakers are also policy entrepreneurs, and how do they then relate to ideas?

Other discursive institutionalists have done more to attach real transformative agency to their theories of ideational change. One example is Blyth (2002), who in his five-step sequential model of ideas and institutional change argues that ideas have different causal effects in different periods. In the first period – in moments of crisis – ideas reduce uncertainty by providing an interpretation of the nature of crisis as a first step to construct new institutions. In this process, actors are very dependent on ideas, because the high degree of uncertainty surrounding economic crisis makes actors unable to act without ideas. In the second period, where ideas through the construction of common 'causal stories' make collective action and coalition-building processes possible, and in the third period, where actors use ideas as weapons in the struggle to delegitimize existing institutions, actors seem more reflexive about their use of ideas. In the two subsequent periods we return to a less reflexive actor: In the fourth period, ideas function as institutional blueprints in that they

“dictate the form and content of the institutions that agents *should* construct to resolve a given economic crisis” (Blyth, 2002: 40, italics in original) and in period five where the institutional setup tells agents what possible futures to expect and in this way reinforces the ideas that created the institutions in the first place. Blyth's model is helpful in bringing us beyond the structuralism of Hall's policy paradigms, because Blyth conceptualises actors as both dependent on the ideational structure and able to think about their own role inside this structure. However, though we are able to coax out the contours of a more or less active agency, the relation between ideas and actors remains underspecified, which attests to the central analytical and theoretical role institutions have been assigned at the expense of active agency.

Schmidt (2002) is probably the one ideational institutionalist who comes closest to building a theoretical framework, where the driving force of ideational change is placed with actors. Schmidt (2002) thus provides a clear argument for why actors have to think critically and strategically about their own ideas: in any political system interest seeking actors are forced to relate to other actors – be it their party, members of government, the opposition, etc. – as well as the general public, and in this process compromising is a necessity. This is what Schmidt names the 'interactive dimension' of discourse. Here Schmidt focuses on two stages of interaction: The coordinative stage of discourse, where “the discourse generally offers a common language through which the different groups central to the policy process can talk to one another and a common vision in terms of which they can iron out their differences” (Schmidt, 2002: 233); and the communicative stage of discourse, where “the ideas developed in the coordinative realm by key policy actors...are translated into the communicative realm” (Schmidt, 2002: 235) of the general public. By focusing on the interactive dimension of political discourse – and by distinguishing between ideas and discourse – Schmidt (2002) forcefully argues that actors are able to think outside the ideas they use to make sense of the world.

Despite its many merits, however, Schmidt's (2002) theoretical framework suffers from the important weakness that she too ends up with an equilibrium-oriented theory of ideational change that places the decisive drive for change outside agency. Though Schmidt (2002) admits of the possibility of ideational change of a first or second order outside times of crisis³, she a bit surprisingly follows Hall's (1993) argument that comprehensive discursive and ideational change – that is, third order change – always happens through crisis and only very rarely. In this way Schmidt's (2002) theory of ideational change in important ways resembles Hall's (1993) ideational punctuated equilibrium model. Though Schmidt (2002) conceptualises actors as sentient and strategic, the impetus for really significant change is placed at some distance from agents, because it is the occurrence of a perceived crisis that sets the stage for transformative change. Despite these

³ Remember that Hall argues that ideas and discourse can change only through third order change (cf. above).

caveats, the point remains that Schmidt does much to place agents and ideas central in processes of policy change. And as it will be argued below, her recent work on discursive institutionalism proves helpful in building an ideational approach that places agents centrally in processes of ideational change.

Conclusion

With the eagerness to show that ideas indeed matter, an underestimation of the capacity of actors to create transformative change has almost unnoticeably followed. As we saw above, many ideational studies either understate the creative and critical faculty of actors or leave out further considerations on the matter. As a result, what is often missing in ideational theories is the 'micro- foundations' of macro-historical patterns that specifies how actors are able to change otherwise stable macro-cultural norms and ideas (Schmidt, 2008b). This is remarkable considering that just about any ideational scholars within political science would acknowledge that ideas do not matter when actors do not use them (to mention a few: Risse, 1994; Berman, 1998; Blyth, 2002; Beland, 2005). However, without providing a micro-foundation that tells us how sentient actors actively use ideas to try to attain what they perceive to be in their interest, it is difficult to associate processes of change with actors. In an effort to solve this problem – while at the same time building on the existing literature on ideas and politics – this paper proposes to use the vision of the actor as a 'bricoleur' with a 'toolkit' of ideas, institutions and strategies to work with.

The bricoleur and his toolkit

In many ideational theories and analyses, then, ideas seem so strongly internalised that they tell actors what to believe, value or choose in specific situations. As Jacobs (2009: 255) argues, “most arguments about ideational effects seem to leap directly from the content of an idea to the content of actors' beliefs, goals, and policy preferences”. Thus, a process of top-down reasoning – applying general ideational templates to specific situations – is often implicitly suggested to structure the decisionmaking of political elites. But is it reasonable to suggest that political elites, often supported by expert officials and a reasonable amount of informational resources, are not – in the light of new information, puzzles and their political strategies – reflexive about the ideas they use? The general understanding in ideational analysis of actors' use of ideas shows some affinity with classic sociological theories of belief systems and culture, where culture is viewed as a 'seamless web', “unitary and internally coherent across groups and situations” (DiMaggio, 1997: 264). The clearest example is Hall's (1993) policy paradigms that frame actors' understanding of the world without allowing actors to pose critical questions to the paradigm in times of 'normal policymaking'.

However, sociology has moved well beyond the idea that culture and ideas are internalised by actors through their socialization. Instead, cultural sociology increasingly

“depicts culture as fragmented across groups and inconsistent across its manifestations. The view of culture as values that suffuse other aspects of belief, intention, and collective life has succumbed to one of culture as complex rule-like structures that constitute resources that can be put to strategic use” (DiMaggio, 1997: 265; cf. Swidler, 2003: 12).

The toolkit approach

The focus on actors' strategic use of ideas and culture is instructive for the effort to infuse ideational theory with a stronger sense of agency. An interesting approach in this regard is the 'toolkit'-theory – represented primarily by Swidler (1986, 2003) – which argues that “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action' ”(Swidler, 1986: 273). Toolkit theory proposes a relatively 'lean' model of the actor, which is seen as tightly interfaced with an external environment made up of culturally based and loosely structured symbols, frames, scripts, institutions, etc. (Lizardo and Strand, 2010). Tool kit theory suggests - and empirical evidence appears to support the argument (DiMaggio, 1997; Lizardo and Strand, 2010) – that actors cannot cognitively internalize highly structured symbolic systems. As Martin (2010: 2) puts it: “If one wants to define culture as something complex then it is not going to be inside of people, because people are extremely simple”. An important implication follows: Toolkit theory does not require that the social agents reproduce an internal model of whatever is conceived by the researcher to be external (Lizardo and Strand, 2010: 5) – or in other words: culture is not inside the minds of actors (Swidler, 2000).

How, then, do agents act in spite of their limited cognitive capacities? They rely on the resources offered by existing cultural institutions. Thus,

“People do not build lines of action from scratch, choosing actions one at a time as efficient means to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links. Culture influences action through the shape and organization of those links, not by determining the ends to which they are put” (Swidler, 1986: 277).

The pre-fabricated links work through schemas that actors employ to handle informational complexity. Schemas thus help actors choose which information to use, most often ignoring information that fits awkwardly with the schema; bias which pieces of reality are paid attention to;

process new information more efficiently (but in no way necessarily 'correctly'); and create a degree of coherence in beliefs and attitudes (see DiMaggio, 1997; Jacobs, 2009; Martin, 2010). The schemas are not tightly structured, though. There is for example strong evidence that long-term memory involves not so much storing a tape of an event, but a network of concepts and ideas (Martin, 2010). When actors process information they create connections between different parts of their memory:

“we might remember seeing an auto accident as 'car' + 'crash' + 'tree' + 'child' + 'happened'....and 'car' might be linked to 'black' + 'limousine' + 'fast' and so on. The problem is that many of these same elements have multiple other linkages, and the difficulty may be understood as drawing the proper boundary whereby we stop traversing connections” (Martin, 2010: 5)

Storage thus occurs through sets of connections, and the difficulty actors experience in processing information – at least in connection to long-term memory – is a problem of limiting the relevant connections that pieces of information create in our heads⁴.

Culture is a resource – a toolkit and not a coherent system – that exists outside the mind of actors, and the use of culture thus demands some creativity and critical faculty on part of the actor. The logic that governs cultural practice is inherently practical: “the fit among cultural practices is due to their common link to practical problems generated within an institutional order” (Swidler, 2003: 198). Or as political theorist Mark Bevir (1999) puts it: “The human capacity for agency implies that change originates in decisions made by individuals, not in the inner logic of various traditions” (p. 223). The tradition or cultural structure that the actor is part of does not determine the actors' response to problems or new circumstances, because the structure cannot fix the limits of its own application – culture can only guide, not determine, how it is used by actors (Bevir, 1999; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). Instead, actors, using the cultural resources at their disposal, are forced to practice their own creative faculty to solve the problems that confront them.

The necessity of active cognitive work on behalf of actors also means that agency carries critical potential. Because culture and ideas do not form a coherent whole – but are rather constituted by contradictions, tensions and overlap – scepticism, ranging from suspended judgement, to doubt, to outright rejection is a usual, not exceptional, response to culture (Swidler, 2003: 14). Moreover, to actually use culture, actors need to appropriate new beliefs to their existing

⁴ From a philosophical perspective, Searle (1999) also argues that consciousness is relationally structured: “One has conscious states such as pains and thoughts only as part of living conscious life, and each state has the identity it has only in relation to other such states (...) My mental states are internally related to each other in the sense that in for a mental state to be that state with that character it has to stand in certain relation to other states” (p. 42).

set of beliefs to use them for their own purposes. In improving their heritage by making their beliefs more relevant to contemporary issues, actors often do respond selectively to it. They accept some parts of it, modify some, and reject others (Bevir, 1999: 202). In this way we are far from Hall's (1993) actors who are not able to critically scrutinise the paradigm they subscribe to.

The toolkit approach to agency may thus serve as a further specification of Schmidt's (2008c) thoughtful distinction between 'background ideational abilities' – that underpin agents' ability to make sense of the world through general human capacities, dispositions and know-how – and 'foreground discursive abilities' “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” (p. 314). The main argument of Schmidt (2008c) – “that institutional design is not destiny” (p. 317) and that agents are able to think critically about the institutions they use and to change these same structures – is thus very much in line with the toolkit approach defended in this piece.

To sum up, what are the main characteristics of the toolkit approach? We may point out three characteristics:

- 1) It argues that culture is not internalised by actors, but rather that actors use cultural skills and resources to pragmatically handle problems that confront them.
- 2) It argues that actors use culture in a non-dogmatic way, where different parts of culture that may often at first sight be contradictory and incoherent are put together and used by the actor.
- 3) It argues that actors are critical of the ideas they use, especially when these ideas are granted special attention or when contradiction is strong and problematic for further action.

Though actors do not ‘contain’ ideas, differences remain between how eagerly actors question ideas. Or put differently, certain ideas about how things work are in practice unquestionable, others unquestioned, and still others open to question⁵. In this regard we may distinguish between concrete policy ideas that actors continuously present and debate in the political system; programmatic ideas that are related to a certain policy area and provide definitions of problems and solutions; and public philosophies that form the normative and cognitive backbone of a polity (cf. Mehta, 2010). In principle all these kinds of ideas are open to questioning, rearrangement and bricolage – the meaning of them are never settled (Carstensen, 2010a) – but actors will use them differently according to how fundamental they are for their understanding of politics, culture and society. Thus,

⁵ I am indebted to XX for making me aware of the following distinctions.

public philosophies are often unquestionable – that is an important reason why we consider them public philosophies in the first place – whereas policy ideas, as part of the everyday functioning of the political system, are continuously questioned and debated. Programmatic ideas – working on a kind of meso-level – may remain unquestioned for considerable periods of time and then become part of a political controversy that puts its entire foundation in question. This does not mean that public philosophies are internalised by actors, but rather that they are used differently than programmatic ideas and policy ideas. These distinctions do not obscure the point that actors are able to think critically and creatively about how they may use macro level ideas like public philosophies in a strategic way, e.g. in the framing of their programmatic ideas.

The bricoleur

Toolkit theory thus offers a vision of agents that generate strategies of action based on the available loosely structured cultural resources – ideas, institutions, habits, norms, etc. This understanding of actors resembles another vision of agency used by sociologically inclined political scientists: the actors as a 'bricoleur' (especially Campbell, 2004). The bricoleur is "someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (Levi-Strauss, 1996 [1962]: 16-17), loosely translated: an odd job man. When the 'bricoleur' tries to solve a problem, the tools and materials he uses are not defined by the problem at hand, but instead picked from the existing repertoire of instruments. Thus, when trying to change or altogether reconfigure institutions, actors' choices are to a large degree fixed by the set of existing institutional principles and practices, and so "the new institutions that actors build resemble the old ones by virtue of their containing many elements from the past" (Campbell, 2004: 70; see also Campbell, 2010). Using the image of the bricoleur to explain evolutionary development in economic governance, Campbell (1997) argues that the concept of bricolage emphasises "the innovative and creative side of institution building by drawing our attention to the fact that bits and pieces of *several* legacies...are creatively combined in a variety of new ways...the concept of bricolage captures how institution building is a process of *dynamic innovation*" (p. 22, italics in original).

Bricolage is thus part of any actors' handling of new and old knowledge. As Freeman (2007) argues, actors work across different epistemological domains, "piecing together' what they know from different sources in different ways" (p. 485). The actor uses instruments

"as he or she goes, keeping them until they might be used. Each is shaped in part by its previous application but remains inevitably underdetermined, imperfectly understood, open to manipulation for whatever purpose is at hand" (Freeman, 2007: 486).

Not rarely do officials need to combine what from a rationalist view point are incommensurable types of knowledge, which makes it necessary to cast different understandings as more coherent than they really are. The ability to combine ideas so they look immediately commensurable becomes all the more important in ensuing political struggles over the forthcoming ideational and institutional setting.

When actors are confronted with phenomena that apparently are inexplicable within the premises of their existing ideas and beliefs, they draw on ideas already present in their set of beliefs. Ideas provide us with a worldview that structures our perception of the world, and we cannot suddenly put this worldview aside to take on wholly different ideas. Like bricoleurs, actors thus recombine ideas and hook novel ideas to old ones to get new answers to their problems. Actors can on the one side think reflectively about the ideas they use and combine them in new ways in their effort to reduce uncertainty and complexity, and on the other side they cannot reject the ideas that for years have structured their intersubjective communication about a policy area.

The bricoleur in a political context

How may we then support the claim that actors, rather than internalise ideas, use them as a resource, picking from their toolkit of ideas without dogma? As discussed above, cognitive psychology has provided us with the ontological starting point that actors are not able to hold complex, coherent belief systems, and cultural sociology forcefully argues that in fact culture is not a coherent system without contradictions – it is not a 'seamless web'. How is this helpful in the effort to construct a theoretically satisfying model of agency in ideational analysis? An obvious way forward is to draw on what we already know from the existing ideational literature to see how our vision of actors as bricoleurs with toolkits fits with the results ideational analysis has provided. Put simply, the following review suggests that research has rather consistently demonstrated that to get an idea to the top of the political agenda, it is necessary to work creatively with it and adjust it according to a long list of demands – and conversely that actors working within the confines of a Kuhnian paradigm will find it difficult to succeed with their political aspirations.

Political and institutional constraints on 'successful' ideas

More than twenty five years ago, Kingdon's (1984) seminal agenda setting theory forcefully argued that for a policy idea to succeed, three 'streams' have to be joined: the problem stream, the policy stream and the political stream. Put simply, an issue has first to be defined as a problem worth of political attention, a policy community needs to respond with a solution to the problem and the solution must be politically viable, i.e. able to attract the support of a majority. Those relatively rare moments where the three streams join – that is, when a 'window of opportunity' appears – are

conducive to the presentation of new policy ideas by policy entrepreneurs. The 'multiple streams' model employs a picture of a 'primeval soup' where ideas float around, confront one another and combine and recombine through actors' attempts to get them on the policy agenda – a vision of agency that resembles the strategic bricoleur with a toolkit of ideas. Moreover, we get our first clue to which constraints actors are confronted with in the political system: in the effort to get their idea to the top of the agenda, policy entrepreneurs have to balance between multiple demands, both in relation to the technical, administrative, political and historical-cultural viability of their policy idea. To appreciate the range of demands on actors, these constraints may be fleshed out further.

First, and perhaps most importantly, there exists an abundance of political factors that affect the success of an idea, and we may only name a few of them. A new idea needs to fit the overall goals of the ruling parties as well as the interests of potential coalition partners, such as opposition parties or interest organisations (Hall, 1989). To get the attention of other actors, an agent may attach his or her idea to a salient problem and in this process

“(1) provide cognitive arguments capable of satisfying policy-makers as to the robustness of the solutions provided by the policy programme and (2) provide normative arguments capable of satisfying policy-makers and citizens alike that those solutions respond to the real problems of the polity in ways that serve its underlying values, as elaborated in the policy discourse” (Schmidt, 2002: 221)

By arguing for the necessity of the idea – with due attention to the interest policymakers have in power and re-election – ideas can be useful in ironing out differences between coalition partners, because they provide a common ground to negotiate from (Culpepper, 2008). It is thus an important task for actors to mould ideas in such a way that other actors – coalition partners as well as adversaries – come to accept it. Another factor actors have to take into consideration is who 'owns' an issue (Beland, 2007; Mehta, 2010): Some parties have much credibility in certain policy areas – such as Social Democrats in connection to the welfare state, or bourgeois parties in connection to 'sound fiscal policy' – which provides the electoral advantage that the party benefits from emphasising the issue. Actors have to take this into consideration, when they present a new idea, because it has great bearing on their credibility, and a new idea should be framed in accordance with the policy image of the party. These are obviously only examples of the political circumstances actors have to take into consideration, but it underscores the multiplicity of demands on actors, when they develop and present ideas.

Second, as a central part of the political viability of an idea, the idea has to appeal to the public, or at least as large a part of the voters as possible. The obvious reason is that politicians to

gain re-election have to attend to – or at least make it look like they attend to – the interests of their constituents. No politician in his or her right mind presents unpopular policies without backing it up with elaborate discourse. The communication of policy to the larger public demands different talents than communication between elites behind closed doors. In the communication to the public the focus is on providing a 'master' discourse with regard to the country's present and future that legitimises government policy (Schmidt, 2002: 235). It is possible to create policies that propose cutbacks and retrenchment without losing an election, but it is often necessary to create a discourse about crisis (Hay, 2001) or 'the need to reform' (Cox, 2001) to convince the 'armies of beneficiaries' (Pierson, 1994) that reform is necessary. This is most effectively done by combining ideas that carry broad cultural appeal (Beland, 2007; Campbell, 2004: 104). In the effort to construct an effective discourse politicians also need to uphold a degree of consistency in their use of ideas, and the demand for consistency might 'entrap' actors to follow the policy implications of discourses they have accepted in the past but no longer wish to endorse (Schmidt, 2007; Schmidt, 2008c; Carstensen, 2010b). Considering that public debate is immensely complex and very difficult to control by politicians (Art, 2006; Legro, 2000), communicating effectively with the public is a daunting task for any politicians. This is clearly witnessed by the explosion in the use of communication experts by governments and political parties.

Third, concerning the administrative viability of an idea, a number of historical institutionalists (e.g. Hall, 1989; Weir, 1989) have argued that ideas can be expected to gain wider acceptance if the bureaucracy of a polity is open to them, which would depend on factors like how well the new ideas fit with existing institutions and routines in the administration; the resources available in the bureaucracy to adopt new ideas; and the openness of state bureaucracy to the ideas of academia (see Weir and Skocpol, 1985). From a sociological perspective translation theory has argued that ideas need to be accommodated to the national context, where actors have to be very selective about the parts of an idea they choose to put together to form a consistent new idea. Ideas are not frozen cultural objects that are transferred from one country to another (Kjær and Pedersen, 2001; cf. Campbell, 2010) – rather actors have to adjust the meaning structure of the idea with due consideration of the knowledge regime of the polity (Campbell and Pedersen, 2010).

Fourth, the extent to which the new policy ideas fit with the cultural tradition and public sentiment – the normative assumptions that exist at the backbone of a polity – influences its chances of success (Campbell, 2004; Katzenstein, 1996; Cox, 2004). The political culture thus constrains decisionmaking and institutional change by limiting the range of programs that the political elite is likely to perceive as acceptable and legitimate both to their constituents and themselves. Public sentiment both impacts on how actors perceive the world they inhabit, as well as how new ideas can be legitimised by actors. The important implication is that

“When actors succeed in pressing programs for change into practice this is often heavily mediated by already existing discourse structures – both normative and cognitive – in the sense that actors translate new ideas into practice in ways that remain consistent with the old discourse” (Campbell, 2004: 109).

To gain acceptance from the public as well as political adversaries, then, actors need to frame their ideas within the ideational structure of the political culture of the polity (Cox, 2004; cf. Beland, 2009).

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that the institutional position of an actor greatly influences how the actor should approach the promotion of a policy idea. There are many relevant types of actors in ideational policy processes: decisionmakers, state bureaucrats, epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) and advocacy-coalition networks (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), more loosely coupled networks (Campbell, 2010: 99), interest groups like business and trade associations (Campbell, 2004), social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000), officials from international organisations, etc. The strategy an actor chooses thus needs to fit the position of the actor. An actor outside parliament is for example more free to articulate new and controversial ideas, because the actor does not need to concern him- or herself with re-election – the actor might rather speak on behalf of whoever is paying the salary. In other words, some actors are freer to present new ideas than other – and perhaps in turn much less influential in deciding if the idea is actually put to use.

The strategic importance of ideational heterogeneity

To sum up: actors have many matters to attend to when trying to promote new policy ideas. All these constraints attest to the importance of combining different ideational elements in a strategic way. Rather than dogmatically following the prescriptions of a policy paradigm, actors have to work creatively and pragmatically with the ideational, political and institutional resources at hand. This point has been argued forcefully in the social movement literature (Benford and Snow, 2000; see also Beland, 2009). Depicting actors as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning, the necessity of weaving together different – and sometimes internally contradictory – frames into a coherent master frame is emphasised. There are many strategies that actors can follow, such as utilizing symbols or causal stories that support one's definition of the problem; tying one's definition to widely accepted cultural symbols; linking across problem definitions to expand the scope of the conflict and thus involve more groups; etc. A strategy of combining different ideas can also be an effective strategy for politicians. Jabko (2006: ch. 3) has for example shown how in the case of European market integration, political actors used a

repertoire of ideas about the market to present the market as an inescapable reality in the financial arena; as a norm to be desired in the energy sector; as a space in structural policies focused on regional economic development; and as a symbol of a new source of discipline in the Economic and Monetary Union (see also Carstensen, 2010a).

From a rather different theoretical perspective, institutional scholars like Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Campbell (2004; 2010) have argued that multiple institutional settings may exist side by side within a policy field - “bits and pieces of previously attempted models and parallel paths – that actors can use to fashion new institutional arrangement” (Campbell, 2010: 99). Actors can use this institutional heterogeneity strategically to create displacement, layering, drift, conversion and exhaustion in the institutional setting and in this process change institutions (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Although these kinds of theories somewhat downplays the influence of ideas by often not explicitly referring to 'ideas' as a variable (Schmidt, 2010), they still support the argument that the ideas contained in institutions can function as a resource for actors in their effort to mould new ideas into policy.

The analytical benefits of a toolkit approach

Despite their internal differences, what the above studies of the role of ideas in politics collectively suggest is that actors indeed work inside complex systems with many – oftentimes contradictory – demands. Though most actors by intuition know their way around the political system, the ideas they hold still need to be applied to the concrete tasks actors try to solve, and they thus have to work creatively with the ideas they want to use. The studies also suggest that if actors want to gain success in the political arena they do best not to adhere to a policy paradigm like Hall's (1993). Though such a paradigm provides great consistency – which is an advantage in the coordination and communication of policy – it is inherently inflexible and thus not very strategically useful. Using the toolkit approach we see both how it is difficult to imagine that actors actually follow a paradigm because of their cognitive limitations, but also that it would be strategically unwise to do so.

What analytical purchase does the toolkit approach provide as a foundation for ideational analysis? First, like other discursive institutionalist approaches (Schmidt, 2008c), the approach presented in this paper does not emphasise ideas at the expense of interests. To the contrary it starts from the assumption that actors are a-rational: though actors are strategic and oriented towards the attainment of political power, “there is no clear rational course of action in the absence of interpretative filters” (Parsons, 2007: 98). However, it does not follow that we can derive the interests of actors from their institutional position. Instead we must analyse the ideas actors use to understand, why they act as they do. With the toolkit approach in hand we can argue that actors are strategic while simultaneously dependent on ideas to make sense of the world they inhabit.

Second, the toolkit approach directs our attention towards actors. It does so by placing ideas outside the minds of actors. This analytical move lays bare that the cognitive limitations of actors makes them dependent on ideas, but the ideas do not dictate how actors respond. When it is no longer possible to derive actors' motivations from a set of ideas that are identifiable in society, we must instead look to how ideas are actively and oftentimes creatively used by actors. We all agree that only actors can change structures, but only if we grant them critical faculty will they be able to take on the task of using ideas to restructure the structures they are part of. By underlining the heterogeneity of ideas and institutions, the impetus for change is placed with actors. The use of a toolkit approach also makes it necessary always to refer to actors and not just stating that an idea exists and then comparing it to the actions of policymakers. Instead of identifying a set of reified ideas and check to what degree it corresponds to the discourse or actions of an actor, we must start with the actor to investigate how policymakers actively use the ideas at their disposal.

Third, the approach helps explain both change and stability. The problem of actors' lack of rationality in decisionmaking has traditionally been solved by pointing to the ideas they hold, which are then argued to help agents act consistently. In effect, it has been difficult to explain change without referring to an external check. With the toolkit approach it is possible to explain both stability and change by referring to actors' continual use and reframing of the ideational, political and institutional resources at hand. In contrast to paradigm-oriented theories that focus our attention on the 'big bangs' of politics, the toolkit approach emphasises the continuity of politics. It does so, however, while allowing for continual change in the system. Despite the political, institutional and cultural setting of a system, actors are thus able to rearrange the system in a strategic and creative way to fit their interests.

Conclusion

Travelling along different but complimentary theoretical roads, we end all the way back at Lindblom's (1959) actors, who spend most their time 'muddling through'. More than 50 years after its publication, the article seems as relevant as ever, because it provides a realistic picture of how actors handle the formidable task of governing. Rather than ranking preferences, identifying all relevant policy alternatives, and then choosing the policy that maximises these preferences, a policy maker will instead more or less consciously choose a goal, review the couple of policy alternatives that occurs to him – probably well known from earlier policy making processes – and then make a choice. According to Lindblom (1959), the lack of intellectual capacities and sources of information as well as money and time renders a rational policy making process impossible and instead through successive limited comparisons decisionmakers build out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degrees. By basing new policy on existing policy, the reliance on theory is greatly

reduced, and the “test of a 'good' policy is typically that various analysts find themselves directly agreeing on a policy” (p. 81). In this perspective, the actor cannot depend on a paradigm, because the actor focuses on the political viability of the policy and which policies are already in place. This is a pragmatic agent and it resembles the vision of agency put forth in this piece.

The insight that political actors and officials work pragmatically to solve problems rather than follow the stringency of theory also applies to ideational studies. Rather than implementing ideas in actors – much like rational choice has implements rationality in largely irrational actors – we should acknowledge that though actors depend on ideas, they are able to reflect critically about the ideas they use – and combine them indiscriminately of which paradigm they each belong to. Put simply, ideas are used, *not* internalised; actors use ideas, they are not used by them. This does not mean that ideas matter any less than argued by scholars focused on the institutionalisation ideas. It just means that we should reconsider what it means that an idea is institutionalised. It does *not* mean that ideas are so thoroughly internalised that actors cannot think outside the ideational structure. It does, however, mean that actors combine and re-combine the ideas they have at hand – most often those institutionalised in society, at other times new ideas – in the tremendously complex task of governing a polity. Employing this understanding of the relation between ideas and actors helps us understand both how ideas stay in place for a long time as well as change.

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