Constructivism and the Crisis: Questioning Theory and Rhetorical Distanciation

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, political commentators and some scholars argued that this would lead to another ‘Bretton Woods Moment’ (see Helleiner 2010). Much as policymakers had met at a New Hampshire resort in 1944 to remake the international economic order, so too, the argument went, policymakers would seize upon the opportunity created by the failings of neoliberal financialisation to rewrite the rules of global capitalism. The Bretton Woods settlement had reflected an ‘embedded liberal’ compromise between domestic Keynesianism (to mitigate against the economic dislocations of the interwar years, which were seen as responsible for the rise of extremist politics and ultimately the war) and a liberal trading system, underpinned by a system of fixed exchange rates and controls on speculative capital flows (Ruggie 1982). In much the same way, the early days of the more recent crisis saw the proliferation of Keynesian economic analysis of its consequences and remedies (e.g. Leijonhufvud 2009), with bodies such as the G-20 ‘challenging the spirit of Keynes’ in their calls for stimulus packages and a tighter regulation of global financial markets (Grabel 2011: 20; see also G20 2009). Both this ‘Keynesian’ and the new ‘Bretton Woods’ ‘moments’, however, were very short-lived; the G-20 and its constituent members soon returned to calling for fiscal rectitude (a refrain more commonly associated with the neoliberal paradigm of economic management) while those who had hoped for a remaking of global financial and economic governance were disappointed at the meagre progress being made towards this objective (Helleiner 2010: 619; Grabel 2010: 21).
This ‘strange non-death of neo-liberalism’ (Crouch 2011) has been the subject of a considerable literature in International Political Economy (IPE) of late. The contribution here of constructivist IPE has been particularly significant, where several authors have touched upon the ‘resilience of neoliberalism’ as an ideational paradigm guiding policy (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013; Blyth 2013). Vivien Schmidt and Mark Thatcher (2013), for instance, have postulated five possible explanations for this state of affairs, including neoliberalism’s adaptability, its (at best) partial implementation, its strength in policy circles, its promotion by powerful interests and, finally, its institutional embedding.

Our argument in this paper, however, is that this proliferation of work itself points to a limitation in much of the current literature. While constructivist scholars have made an important contribution in (re)stating the case for studying ideas and meaning in IPE, many of their accounts have been premised on a potentially problematic view of the ‘paradigmatic’ break as driving social and political change (see Blyth 2002; Hay 2002). In this sense, the ideational continuity witnessed after the recent crisis has posed a significant conundrum for such accounts, which often have been premised on the idea that such moments of ‘radical uncertainty’ – in which actors are no longer certain of their preferences – lead actors to reappraise their interests and form new expectations (Blyth 2002). The lack of such a ‘reappraisal’ in the current context, or its very short-lived nature (if we take the ‘Keynesian moment’ to represent a potential paradigmatic shift), fundamentally challenges the view that change in the international political economy is characterised by ‘epistemic breaks’.

A similar ‘paradigmatic’ reading has also permeated constructivist interpretations of the management of the Eurozone crisis (e.g. Blyth 2013; Howarth and Rommerskirchen 2013). The fault lines here have been drawn between German advocacy of ‘ordoliberalism’ – associated, above all, with the notion of price stability to ensure a stable market order (on ordoliberalism, see Berghahn and Young 2013) – and those actors (such as France) allegedly taking a more pro-growth, Keynesian position. The problem here is that such positions have been adopted in an ‘uneven but persistent’ fashion in public discourse (Howarth and Rommerskirchen 2013: 750) rather than consistently as emphasis on a ‘paradigmatic reading’ would suggest. In other words, writers within this tradition have found that actors have pragmatically tailored their message to different audiences, rather than dogmatically clinging to particular ideational constructions.

Our contribution in this paper is to develop an alternative constructivist approach to studying the Financial and Eurozone crises. This is not premised on a ‘paradigmatic’ reading of the resilience of neoliberalism or of the debates between alleged Keynesians and ordoliberals.
Rather, we draw on Michel Meyer’s (2008) philosophy of questioning and theory of rhetoric to arrive at a framework for studying political action in terms of ‘rhetorical distanciation’ – or the negotiation of distance. Rather than just constituted by ideas *qua* ideas, as in many of constructivist approaches considered above, this distance is constituted by the Aristotelian triad of *ethos* (the self), *pathos* (the audience), and *logos* (the discourse or logic of argumentation). The aim is to move away from a theory in which ideas are the primary drivers of social change, to one in which the constructivist concern for ideas is incorporated *within* a theory grounded in the pragmatic concerns of everyday politics, situated in context.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we provide a theoretical rationale for moving beyond theories of the epistemic break. We then provide an overview of Meyer’s philosophy of questioning and theory of rhetoric in section 3, showing how it allows us to move towards a new constructivist theory of politics. In section 4 we then set out our framework for conceptualising political action in terms of rhetorical distanciation. We conclude in section 5 with some reflections on the applicability of such a framework to the current crisis.

2. Moving beyond the ‘epistemic break’

We commence from the starting point of a constructivist/discursive institutionalist position on politics and International Political Economy (IPE) (see, for example, Blyth 2002; Hay 2002; Schmidt 2008). We have good reasons for accepting this as an epistemological framework. The linguistic turn – whether one views it through the perspective of *verstehen* social sciences, symbolic interactionism, or analytic philosophy of language (Searle 1969) – shows us that meaning matters. Firstly, in interrogating the world, observation is theory-dependent (this applies as much to the natural sciences as to the social sciences). Our understanding of reality depends, in part, upon the questions we ask of it. Secondly, social actors use symbols to communicate with one another and to organize society, and these symbolic exchanges are amenable to multiple interpretations. Social interactions are communicative exchanges that involve interpretations through language by individuals, both of material reality and of the discourse and actions of other social actors. Their ideas about the world matter because they structure their interpretations to at least some degree. And, because language is polysemeous, multiple interpretations are always possible: ‘Stability in a word’s meaning is not something to be assumed, but always something to be explained’ (Richards 1936: 11). Social reality is thus constructed through the generation of meanings which come to be commonplace and thus
stable orientations towards society. Ideas are important in that they provide ready-made answers to questions and thus a stock of ‘automatic’ responses to problems encountered (Schutz 1972).

However, constructivism in IPE has been criticized for its emphasis on epistemic breaks as explanations of political change. In making the case for a historical institutionalist framework based on the notion of path dependence, Dave Marsh, for example, (2010: 98-9) argues that ‘[w]e must resist the idea that stability is replaced by change, in response to crisis, which leads to stability, which is replaced by change, in response to crisis, in a continuing iterative process’. A more sympathetic critique is offered by Leonard Seabrooke (2007: 799-800), who argues that ‘the stress is [on] top-down, elite-driven change’ without due regard for the role of the public in shaping ‘institutional change through everyday action’ (for more on this tradition of ‘everyday IPE’, see Hobson and Seabrooke 2007). These criticisms are well-made and constructivists must respond to them. Does history really proceed by epistemic breaks? To take a seminal argument on paradigm shifts, Peter Hall’s explanation of ideological change in British government made a strong case for a paradigm shift, in arguing that changes in British macroeconomic policymaking during the 1970s and 1980s were driven ‘by events that proved anomalous within the terms of the prevailing paradigm […] giv[ing] rise to policy failures that discredited the old paradigm and led to a wide-ranging search for alternatives’ (Hall 1993: 291). However, critics pointed out that it hardly constituted a significant epistemic break: whatever change there may have been in macroeconomic policymaking this was not simply a case of neatly replacing ‘Keynesianism’ with a new ‘monetarist’ paradigm as argued by Hall (Oliver and Pemberton 2004), and could be instead be characterised as a more messy and pragmatic process of ‘domestic statecraft’ (Bulpitt 1986). Similarly, Thatcher’s policies in other areas did not mark a significant break with the past (Marsh 2010: 93). Even the French revolution, the archetypal social paradigm shift, was long in genesis and the embedding of its radical new organisation of politics and society (see, for example, Skocpol 1979). Paradigm shifts certainly do occur, and set in place new ideas that exert influence over many areas of politics, but the question remains as to whether those ideas are a cause of change, a result of it, or a mixture of both.

The first problem with the theory of the epistemic break is accounting for individuals’ knowledge of new paradigms. Returning to the philosophical level helps to reveal the contradictions of the epistemic break theory of history, exemplified in the Popper-Kuhn debate. Kuhn (1970) argued that the philosophy of science could not account for scientific progress in incremental terms. He claimed that major discoveries constitute great leaps, paradigm shifts in knowledge, which open up whole new bases upon which normal science then proceeds. The ‘punctuated equilibrium’ theory of IPE approximates the same kind of logic, in which major
shifts occur and then ‘normal’, incremental actions dominate in between. Popper objected to Kuhn’s reasoning, pointing out the paradigm shifts of the kind Kuhn proposes were logically unintelligible: those working within one paradigm of knowledge could not possibly conceive of an alternative paradigm, nor could they recognize it even if they found it. Although science does make major discoveries, the theory of the epistemic break is a logical paradox. And, as a practical description of science, it does not resonate with the advent of major discoveries that are the result of combinations of incremental changes and the introduction of new ideas.

In practice, we know that politics change direction, just as scientists make major discoveries. What is at issue is the theory of how these things take place. We argue that the problem lies in conceiving of the world in propositional terms, such that change is conceived as caused by a shift from one type of knowledge or set of ideas to another. For example, individual political actors would have difficulty really construing what putting an entirely new paradigm of economic governance would look like. They may speculate, but rarely would decision-makers really put faith in an untested set of ideas to remake society as a whole. More usually, incrementalism is just as normal as major upheavals, with both occurring at the same time, and often for specific reasons linked to specific policy areas. Paradigm shifts usually only appear after historical reflection in which a whole set of events can be reinterpreted for what is common to them. This does not mean that it was ideas which solely drove the changes, i.e., caused them, at the time. Paradigm shifts do indeed occur, but they are insufficient as an explanation of change in practice. Paradigm shifts are a consequence of change, not a cause. The competition of ideas at times of social upheaval does contribute to the direction of political change, but these should not be conceptualized as an underlying, propositional basis of knowledge. Rather, knowledge is based in practical and pragmatic rationalities, as well as based in sets of ideas. To cast ideas, ideologies, or paradigms as the basis of reality is to reify them into propositions that divide the world into incommensurable epistemes. In reality, we are able to understand ideas across paradigms because we can relate all knowledge to our own, even if we do not ‘agree’ on their precise meaning.

But there is also a second problem with the epistemic break theory of social change. This arises from applying epistemology directly to the interpretation of social action, i.e., using a philosophical framework as an explanatory framework for social actors, rather than developing a theory of practical reasoning, which reflects the reality of social action (see, for example, Bourdieu 2000). In everyday life, individuals often act through routinized practices, ways of acting in the world that constitute responses to external challenges and conduct made through the immediate consciousness. This does include sets of guiding ideas. However, it is also more
than this. Practical reasoning involves intuitive thought, employing a sense learned through the course of experience, rather than using the reflexive capacities of consciousness. Practical action incorporates all kinds of social and cultural influences and is ingrained, along with guiding ideas, into ways of working within organizations, institutions and even national cultures. A constructivist account needs to be theorized at the everyday level, in which ideas and strategies are intermingled with political actors’ intuitive, practical knowledge about how to proceed in complex circumstances. Furthermore, these practices are conducted in relation to other social actors. Individuals occupy positions in regard to others in their field, and seek to take positions, strategically and rhetorically, in their own interests. Again, this does not entail a ‘rational actor’ theory of strategy. Rather, the sense of one’s position in regard to others is learned through culture as much as through knowledge of institutional power. In other words, constructivism needs to incorporate a relational element at its heart, rather than allow ideas, as epistemes, to be what unites or divides disparate, individualized actors.

This leads us to a third limitation of current constructivist accounts, their implicit methodological individualism, which in turn limits the possibility of a truly relational account. Current constructivist accounts presume actors operate according to individual preferences (see, for example, Blyth 2002), rather than through their relations with others. Thus, even the ‘strategic-relational framework’ within constructivist institutionalist accounts of politics (see Hay 2002; Jessop 2007) takes account of shared ideas but not action in relational terms, that is, in which individual actions are explained through a practical logic based in relations with others. In contrast, the questioning theory we develop below takes the social relation as the base element, not the subject nor its ideas nor material production. Strategic relationality can also, therefore, be more than just rational, strategic action, but also incorporate unreflexive actions, instinctive manoeuvres made in regard distance from others. In the case of the Eurozone crisis, we will see how this produces incrementalism rather than radical ideological change.

An alternative theory of constructivism is thus required on two counts. Firstly, it should reject the epistemic break and articulate a more attenuated logic of social change, in which paradigm shifts are a consequence of change, and thus ideas are but one element in the process. In other words, it should logically explain how new paradigms are arrived at without reifying them such that the changed set of ideas is entirely known in advance of its realization. Secondly, it must provide a realistic account of politics in practice, which accounts for the practical strategies and unreflexive actions inherent in their modes of action and worldviews.
We argue that Michel Meyer’s (2008, 2010) philosophy of questioning and theory of rhetoric is a new philosophical approach and analytical framework that supports these ends. By developing a questioning theory of political negotiation, we articulate a constructivist view that maintains its central features and also addresses criticisms in regard to constructivist explanations of political change. We explain how this logic of questioning incorporates ideas but without making this the basis of the theory of political practice. Questioning theory supports the reconceptualization of the logic of change by reconfiguring it through a logic of question and answer. This takes us beyond the ‘epistemic break’ theory of political change and also provides an account of political practice consistent with contemporary social theory, which emphasizes the importance of routinized actions equally with reflexive strategizing. Furthermore, it does so within a relational account, in which actors’ are situated in context, their actions always conducted relative to others’ positions in socio-political space. Thus, questioning theory is not only able to improve constructivist IPE but also integrate it with economic sociology. It explains negotiation in practice through a theory which places rhetoric in the foreground as the real-world device through which political actors negotiate distances between one another. This parsimonious theory provides a more comprehensive theory of negotiation by distinguishing between the rhetorical level of discourse and the other determinants of socio-political distance, measured by policy position, institutional and economic power.

What is the basis of the questioning framework? Instead of a social ontology, we use Meyer’s philosophy to base our analytical framework on a social problematology. This conceives of the social world as made up of questions and questioners, answers and answerers. Individuals and organizations are questioners who face problems that concern other questioners. The most fundamental question is the social question itself, our relations with others. The meaning of problems is a question of interpretation, and the questioning of them constructs their meaning. Indeed, the formulation of problems is already a partial answer, so problem framing constitutes a political act. At the same time, intersubjectivity is possible because questioners can share problems even if they interpret them differently and promote different solutions – they need not agree upon ideas in order to understand them, because knowledge is based upon understand questions as entailing different answers, rather than being fixed in incommensurable epistemes. What is more, from a scholarly point of view, this theory of social action is consistent with our questioning of the world, about which we establish answers, and through social science methods we can establish more rigorous theories which adequately answer more interrelated questions. The analytical framework is thus reflexively secured because the theory of questioning reflects
our questioning practice. This account of constructivism is thus grounded in a reflexively secure philosophy of questioning that also resonates with the reality of everyday questioning by social actors, and their treatment of the world through questions, or problems. It also handles the poststructuralist critique of constructivism – that it presumes fixed identities to social subjects, and is therefore ‘authoritarian’ or unethical – by construing social actors as inherently problematic, engaged in a continual project of producing their identity as questioners, through questioning, and thus with the agency to reflexively question themselves and reach new answers. As a framework for questioning society, the questioning approach is consistent in theory and practice, provides a (hermeneutic) logic of intersubjective meaning in which the world is constructed but in which there is, nonetheless, social scientific knowledge because robust theories answer all the relevant questions to a problem.

This brings us to the second dimension of the framework, the theory of questioning in society. This is based in a theory of Rhetoric. Meyer provides a general definition of rhetoric: ‘rhetoric is the negotiation of distance between individuals in regard to a given question’ (Meyer 2008: 21). First, the basis of this theory is that it stipulates a relationship between questioners, which incorporates the context within the perspective of the interlocutors. In social situations, when individuals encounter one another, there is always a question of the distance that lies between them. This may be great, such as between individuals of different cultures who are unknown to one another, or small, as between work colleagues or closer still, family members. But there is always a distance between them, which constitutes a question, or problem. They then treat this question of distance through a substantive question, for example, treating a common problem, working on a shared project. The discursive treatment of this question then implies an answer to the social question, which is to maintain, reduce, or increase the distance between them. Second, the relational dynamic between the questioners is conceived in terms of rhetoric. An individual, Ethos, relates to another listener, or audience, Pathos, via a question, Logos. The distance (delta) between them in terms of the question is equivalent to the distance between ethos and pathos, expressed in the following logic: $\Delta L = \Delta (E-P)$ (Meyer 2008: 22). Essentially, this is a new form of social theory, in which rhetorical concepts are used to characterize dynamical movements in society as variable distances, conceived as questions and negotiated through discourse, i.e., rhetorically.

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1 Rhetoric is the practical dimension of political discourse. We refer to Meyer’s theory of Rhetoric with an uppercase ‘R’, because this includes all forms of rhetorical discourse, including argumentation and even poetics. We use a lowercase ‘r’ rhetoric as a specific mode of figurative discourse, in which answers are generate through implication, for example, in the ideological content of literal discourse.
Towards a new constructivist theory of politics

Meyer's theory is unusual, and uses unfamiliar concepts, but it has many advantages for the constructivist theory of politics. Firstly, it is a highly parsimonious definition. In a very simple formula, he provides a theory that is meant to apply to all communications, from literal political argumentation to the most figurative, symbolic discourse, such as satire. It covers language in all contexts, from political speeches to arguments about law and institutional regulation, so it incorporates the whole terrain of what is known as ‘discourse’ approaches. But it also makes an important advance on these approaches by distinguishing between rhetoric and discourse in general. That is, it allows for a ‘surface’ level of negotiation that is distinct from a deeper level of socio-political reality, but without reducing rhetoric to trivia, as discursive curlicues. This is important, because the property of rhetoric to ‘spin’ arguments is crucial in political practice. Rhetoric enables a speaker to state something pleasing that ameliorates underlying differences with her audience, or to exaggerate apparent differences when party policy positions are, in fact, very similar. Rhetoric is vital in political strategy (Martin 2013). Users of language often want to make subtle distinctions, as well as make important adjustments for context and audience, therefore accounting for the rhetorical is essential for constructivist approaches to account for everyday discourse, practical politics. In fact, the theory makes clear that ideas are implicated through speech and actions, such that we cannot conclude that it is ideas which drive actions. Interpreting the ideational content of discourse and actions is a retrospective characterization, an interpretation of reality, which is not to be confused with the cause of those statements and actions.

Secondly, in every instance of communication, this reworking of Aristotle’s famous triptych incorporates all the crucial dimensions of politics in the one relationship: ideas and values (ethos), questions and the world (logos), and emotions and identity (pathos). It thereby renders a constructivist perspective in which social actors: 1) generate reality through questions and answers, while at the same time allowing for the independence of the world, because discourse does not make the actual world, but interprets it through questioning; 2) incorporate ideas questioning without making of them an episteme that underpins all interpretations, thereby overcoming the (theoretical) problem of incommensurability; and 3) incorporating the passions, or emotions, within a logical framework, which includes emotional reactions to political manoeuvres as well as the dimension of identity as a form of affective attachments to social characteristics and relative position in society. Thirdly, and related to the previous aspect, the
theory does not ontologically separate out the content of discourse from its performance. It tells us that they can be treated differently in practical discourse, but these two elements are intrinsically related via the question-answer logic, in which two questions are linked together, one responding to, and partially resolving, the other. In sum, therefore, the linking of explicit questions to implicit distances means that both the content and performance of language can be accounted for and inter-related: the act of discourse has meaning, but so does the content. And both have meaning in their implications for negotiation of socio-political distances.

Fourthly, questioning theory advances upon existing constructivist accounts by providing a new relational approach, one which has distinct advantages. Firstly, it is relational because the questions that are treated between individuals are always related to their relative socio-political position. This means that even the most routine communication has political implications, even if it simply affirms existing distances. This constructivism can thus incorporate geopolitical power differentials as well as the distancing properties of regulatory regimes. In terms of the Eurozone crisis, we can see that distance incorporates geopolitical distance, as expressed in diplomatic relations, economic power in terms of trade relations, distance as regulated by legal regimes, such as European and international law, or even ideas of symbolic distance between cultures. These distances include such things as the material factors of economic production, but do so in far as they construct distances between firms, economies and nations. Even institutionally-determined distances are also interpreted by the parties to such a relationship, so on the whole they are amenable to variable meaning for individuals, who integrate them into their own ideational frameworks and practical reasoning. Also, in treating organizations as questioners, this does not reify organizations, because these are put into question in discursive exchanges, and can therefore potentially be altered by them. This is further borne out in the conceptualization of the world as constructed in regard to specific questions. That is, one individual may think and behave differently in regard to the same question, negotiated with different actors, or with the same actor in regard to different questions. Secondly, this theory does not reduce relationality to pure, rationalistic strategy. Actors can certainly engage in strategic reflection and action, but they also, often, act instinctively, in terms of preconceived, accepted ideas (ethos) and their identification with others (pathos), for example, conception of, and attachment to, a European identity. By situating political actors in social context, it presumes they are embedded in a relational, socio-political space and engaged in political negotiations that often preclude time for reflective analysis and informed action. It is a theory of society in which actors operate heuristically, as much as reflectively. In both these respects, questioning theory is a theory of social action at the micro-level, of each single encounter. It does not require the
upholding of macro-social epistemes for it to be valid. Rather, it is a theory of experience in which relational interactions generate the whole. As social scientists, we certainly can reflect upon the whole, giving it meaning by interpreting aggregated questions and answers, and also seeing how social actors might do the same and thus form ideas about the world, but the theory has the virtue of being built upon the fundamental level of individual social experiences. In this sense it could be said to be a more comprehensive ‘strategic-relational’ approach than that developed in the constructivist institutionalist literature (see Hay 2002; Jessop 2007) in so far as the parties are integrated into the relationship, rather than ontologically distinct from it and able to arrive at independent, rational calculations of their interests.

This has important implications for advancing constructivist political analysis. First, it deals with the problem of ideas in political change. Remember that, in questioning theory, individuals negotiate in regard to a question. Discursive exchanges involve ideas, but these are not sets of propositions which determine all subsequent meanings within them, as paradigmatic ideologies which preclude the possibility of alternative interpretations. Clearly, ideas are crucial in that they frame problems and thereby propose specific answers, however, they are only one aspect of intersubjective questioning exchanges. To propose that ideas structure individual positions is to work from a framework that is both epistemically driven and methodological individualistic. When the basis of discourse is the underlying question of distance, what counts is how ideas impact upon distance, whether they position individuals in proximal or distal relation. And this must be incorporated along with a range of other elements that also impact upon distance. Law and regulations, institutional rules, political cultures, diplomacy and leadership styles are equally important in political negotiations. The questioning theory combines all these elements into the parsimonious, foundational concept of negotiating distance. Equally, ‘structural’ features such as economic power and cultural norms can be integrated as well. Ideas thus matter in political change, but they are not the essence of explanation. What matters in explaining change is the construction of distances, such that the world emerges as an artefact of the problems posed and the solutions reached through the negotiation of distances. And, furthermore, these distances are constructed through multiple lines of questioning, not by some grounding idea, a guiding solution to questions, which underpins and directs all interactions. Ideologies are at work, certainly, but as an element within a larger pragmatic questioning rationality. Individuals and institutions, corporations and states can hold conflicting ideas upon the same questions, without logical contradiction.

This means that paradigmatic shifts are an outcome of change, an influence upon it, not its source. Ideas are only part of the story. What matters is who says what to whom (ethos and
pathos, rather than just logos) and how actors deal with relative distances. At the same time, this remains a constructivist view because the world is generated through intersubjective questioning. In other words, we don’t focus on unintended consequences but on purposive actors. But rather than a paradigmatic shift what we see is a series of incremental changes through the negotiation of distance. In some cases, this results in a paradigm shift or major historical turn. But history itself does not proceed by epistemic breaks. Instead, ideas intersect with the practical rationality of dealing with problems between individuals in time, in context.

4. Rhetorical ‘distanciation’: interpreting political action as the negotiation of distance

The questioning analytical framework enables us to develop a methodology for interpreting political action in terms of distanciation. By this new term, we mean the general negotiation of distance, as opposed to ‘distantiate’, which means putting something or someone at a greater distance. Distanciation involves the setting of distances – that, in social context, must be ‘interpreted’ – which vary along a continuum, from the closest distances (personal relationships) to great distances, in which parties are radically opposed to one another, as in war. It can also refer to the absence of interest in a question by one party, in which there is neither agreement nor opposition marking the distance between individuals. Rhetoric is used to negotiate distances, politics is the attempt to move distances, and society is marked by more or less stable distances, established by institutions, norms and culture. Social change and globalization has meant that distances are less stable than they used to be, making them more amenable to political change and hence requiring the greater involvement of rhetoric, particularly as the number and scope of interactions has increased.

Distanciation is an interdisciplinary framework. However, we want to make the framework amenable to analysis, we reduce the concept of distance to its simplest logic; the negotiation of distance between individuals via rhetoric renders the distance between them either greater (+), lesser (−), or maintains it (=). At a base level, this promises to be a handy empirical methodology. It means we can reduce some of the interpretive requirements by reducing distanciation to three directional categories. This is not to say that one couldn’t make more refined judgements about the degree of distanciation in more proximal or distal trajectories. However, it would be difficult to develop a coherent ordinal scale of interpretation in which the points on the scale would be meaningful. Such an approach would be more interpretive, categorizing distances using subjective criteria. Nonetheless, this schema remains interpretive because it requires some level of observer judgement. Indeed, the limitation is put in place by the
intrinsic properties of Rhetoric; the rhetorical properties of discourse allow actors to disguise their intentions, therefore, determining the implicit meaning of explicit political language requires interpretation. Can we really know whether political actors are ‘sincere’ in their argumentation, or whether they intend to deceive an audience? In the case of analysing explicit argumentation, which often occurs in politics, we have more empirical evidence to work from. However, as far as understanding the ideational meaning of discourse goes, it is only history that can give us the answers to such questions. However, we can endeavour to develop a robust analysis by relating a number of questions and answers together, and by articulating the logical possibilities contained in our methodology. This approach is enhanced because this set of analytical categories enables us to relate Rhetoric to other aspects of politics through the concept of distanciation.

Given that we can also interpret other political actions in a relational manner, we can develop an integrated analysis of political negotiation in terms of distance. This combines the analysis of rhetoric and argumentation with other political actions, for example, policy positions and spending decisions. In so doing, we can also distinguish between instances in which rhetoric corresponds to other distanciating moves, and instances in which the direction of rhetorical distanciation departs from other actions. In some cases, rhetoric and policy position may be consistent, but in other cases rhetorical distanciation may vary from other distanciations, for example, a policy move that increased the distance between two actors accompanied by rhetoric affirming that the relationship was still strong. To take a hypothetical example from the Eurozone crisis, the head of the ECB might allow the Greeks more leeway on repayment (\(\cdot\)), but simultaneously issue tough rhetoric about responsibility (\(\times\)). This makes for a combination of distanciating possibilities, which support a more comprehensive analysis of the full strategic dimensions of political negotiation. So, a \(+/+\) combination would obviously be a very clear increase in political distance, and very strong, as would a \(-/-\), e.g. a trade agreement signed with ceremony and more inclusive partnership rhetoric. But combinations such as \(+/=\) or \(+/-\) would be more complex, and alert us to the symbolic politics at play. This methodology uncovers the political legitimation of unpopular policies. Rhetoric can thus be analysed alongside a range of policy measures to develop an overall picture. This formula allows us to combine ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ distanciation, without dividing them up epistemologically as empirical reality versus rhetorical appearance. Instead, it gives rhetoric its due for its importance in that, as symbolic politics, it has a real impact on political distanciation. At the same time, it adequately accounts for the rhetorical-discursive aspect of other actions, such as policy choice, which is made through language and thus has a symbolic resonance as well.
5. Conclusion

Having set out our framework in the preceding section, we conclude in this paper by providing an overview of how this might be applied in the context of the Eurozone and Global Financial Crises. Turning to the former, in contrast to the emerging consensus in the ‘constructivist’ literature that this can be conceptualised in terms of a ‘paradigmatic’ clash between proponents of ordoliberalism on one hand (e.g. Germany, the ECB) and Keynesians on the other (e.g. France) (Blyth 2013; Howarth and Rommerskirchen 2013), a problematological approach centred on the notion of ‘rhetorical distanciation’ does a far better job of capturing the complexities of Eurozone crisis management. Rather than reifying the ideas qua ideas held and deployed by such actors (which would occupy the place of logos in Aristotelian triad), we argue that what matters is the practical rationality of negotiating the crisis. In other words, we need to bring in the ethos (i.e. the actor speaking/acting) and the pathos (the audience) into our explanation to show that the Eurozone crisis is best conceived of as a series of questions in a problematological sense, which have to be negotiated (through a process of rhetorical distanciation) between various actors. Ideas are not defining epistemes but a shared ethos that contributes to the distance between actors. Ideas are important in that they stand for actors, and if they are shared then they reduce distances and support the agreement on answers to substantive questions.

Our starting point here is the finding that there are important ‘inconsistencies’ in the position taken by several key actors in the debate if we view them from a paradigmatic perspective. Not only have neither Germany nor the ECB spoken/acted in a purely ‘ordoliberal’ fashion, acting in a manner which is contrary to the precepts of the framework (especially in the case of the ECB’s promise to do ‘whatever it takes to save the euro’, see Wishart 2012), but their position has also fluctuated over time (see, for example, van Esch 2012). This is of course not to say that an ordoliberal paradigm cannot be identified in such actors, but rather that their actions are not reducible to it. By refusing to project interpretations upon actors that are based on paradigmatic understandings we similarly avoid postulating the Eurozone crisis as a paradigmatic conflict of ideas. Rather, our argument is that ideas (and, ultimately, paradigms) are just as much generated by practice (referring here to the process of rhetorical distanciation) as the other way around. The logic of it is that action, as an answer, potentially refers to more than question, so similar actions can satisfy otherwise competing politico-economic paradigms. Hence, stimulus measures can satisfy both Keynesian demand management and provide a practical underpinning of banking stability. This may provide some answers as to why a ‘Keynesian moment’ in global
economic management was so short-lived, as it coincided with the then pressing concern with ‘bailing out the banks’ and preventing a financial meltdown.

What ultimately mattered, in these cases, was the message that the move sent to various audiences about their relations with one another. On one hand, this was that states would underwrite banks and as a result that the intention was for the Eurozone to cohere. Only by looking at the two levels of action, ideas and their practice, can we understand the on-going process of negotiation and adjustment, without pre-conceiving of the trajectory in a crude cause-effect manner, pre-determined by the choice of economic paradigm. Throughout the crisis, what mattered was the negotiation of distances and the key question of whether means to maintain close distance – such as the Euro in the case of the Eurozone – would survive. Rhetorical means negotiated distances in a highly problematic and uncertain context, such that distances waxed and waned in dynamic fashion throughout the crisis, and continue to do so. Other distances must be considered as well, such as between the Eurozone members and the non-Eurozone members of the EU; and between the financial institutions of the EU and the markets. We will trace these various distanciations of the crisis in an endeavour to put ideas in their right place.

References


