



Journal of European Public Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpp20>

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Published online: 16 Jun 2009.

To cite this article: Daniel Béland (2009) Ideas, institutions, and policy change, Journal of European Public Policy, 16:5, 701-718, DOI: [10.1080/13501760902983382](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760902983382)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501760902983382>

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Ideas, institutions, and policy change

Daniel Béland

ABSTRACT Seeking to amend historical institutionalism, this article draws on the political science literature on ideas and the sociological literature on framing to discuss three ways in which ideational processes impact policy change. First, such processes help to construct the problems and issues that enter the policy agenda. Second, ideational processes shape the assumptions that affect the content of reform proposals. Third, these processes can become discursive weapons that participate in the construction of reform imperatives. Overall, ideational processes impact the ways policy actors perceive their interests and the environment in which they mobilize. Yet, such processes are not the only catalyst of policy change, and institutional constraints impact the politics of ideas and policy change. This claim is further articulated in the final section, which shows how national institutions and repertoires remain central to the politics of policy change despite the undeniable role of transnational actors and processes, which interact with such institutions and repertoires.

KEY WORDS Discourse; ideas; institutions; interests; policy; politics.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, historical institutionalism has become one of the foremost approaches to policy development in advanced industrial countries (e.g. Immergut 1998; Lecours 2005; Orloff 1993; Pierson 1994; Skocpol 1992; Steinmo *et al.* 1992; Weaver and Rockman 1993).¹ For example, in his book *Dismantling the Welfare State?*, Paul Pierson (1994) stresses the enduring weight of existing policy legacies on the ‘new politics of the welfare state.’ In recent years, other historical institutionalist scholars have attempted to shift the focus of research from institutional inertia to policy change (e.g. Campbell 2004; Capano and Howlett 2009; Hacker 2004; Peters *et al.* 2005; Schmidt forthcoming; Thelen 2004). Grounded in a constructivist perspective (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966), this article amends the historical institutionalist approach to policy change with a theoretical framework that underscores the role of ideational processes. In doing so, the article follows the path of institutionalist scholars like Victoria Hattam (1993), who suggest that, as distinct causal factors, both ideas and institutions can strongly impact politics and policy development (on this issue, see Parsons 2007; Schmidt forthcoming).

In order to emphasize the relationship between ideas, institutions, and perceived interests, this article draws on the political science literature on ideas and the sociological literature on framing processes. This integrated framework

fills three major explanatory gaps of historical institutionalism, which concerns the selection of the issues policy-makers choose to address, the particular content of policy proposals, and the construction of reform imperatives. Thus, as a response to these shortcomings, the article stresses three major ways ideas – defined as ‘claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions’ (Parsons 2002: 48) – impact policy development. First, such processes help to construct the problems and issues that enter the policy agenda. Second, ideational processes shape the assumptions that impact the content of reform proposals. Third, these processes can become discursive weapons that participate in the construction of reform imperatives. Drawing on the social movement literature about framing, it is argued that value amplification is a key aspect of the social and political construction of such imperatives. Overall, this article shows how ideational processes affect the ways policy actors perceive their interests and the environment in which they mobilize.

Focusing primarily on advanced industrial countries, the article shows that ideas have a major role in shaping policy change but do not constitute the only possible source of change. Ideas only become a decisive causal factor under specific institutional and political conditions. For example, not only the lack of appropriate framing resources but the presence of strong institutional obstacles can weaken the capacity of political actors to promote successfully the adoption of a concrete policy alternative. An excellent way to assess the enduring impact of national institutions on ideational processes and policy change is to turn to the growing literature on transnational actors, something that is done in the final section. As argued, despite the undeniable role of such actors, national institutions and repertoires remain a key structuring element of the politics of ideas and policy change.

IDEAS AND POLICY CHANGE

Historical institutionalism and the issue of policy change

In its purest, non-ideational form, historical institutionalism is grounded in the assumption that historically constructed institutions (i.e. public policies and formal political institutions) create major constraints and opportunities that affect the behavior of the actors involved in the policy-making process. According to Theda Skocpol, ‘This approach views the polity as the primary locus for action, yet understands political activities, whether carried on by politicians or by social groups, as conditioned by institutional configurations of governments and political party systems’ (Skocpol 1992: 41). Such an approach recognizes the autonomy of political actors while directly taking into account the impact of previously enacted measures on policy development (Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998; Steinmo *et al.* 1992; Weaver and Rockman 1993). Overall, historical institutionalism focuses on asymmetrical power relations and the impact of long-term institutional legacies on policy-making (Hall and Taylor 1996).

In recent years, historical institutionalists have offered comprehensive theoretical accounts on how policy institutions change over time (e.g. Campbell 2004; Clemens and Cook 1999; Hacker 2004; Peters *et al.* 2005; Pierson 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Thelen 2004). In *How Institutions Evolve*, for example, Kathleen Thelen (2004) sketches a systematic theory of policy change, where one of the most compelling aspects is a critique of the 'punctuated equilibrium model' based on the assumption that long episodes of institutional inertia follow rare 'critical junctures' during which exogenous shocks provoke massive, path departing institutional transformations. Although she does not reject the concept of 'critical junctures', Thelen argues that most forms of policy change take place outside such 'critical junctures', and that they often take an incremental form.

Historical institutionalism sheds much light on the conditions of policy change because it stresses the weight of previously enacted policies and the institutional mediation of interests. However, in its non-ideational form, this approach leaves several questions unanswered (e.g. Merrien 1997; Peters *et al.* 2005), and one can stress three explanatory gaps, which all point to the potential impact of ideas on policy change. First, historical institutionalism says relatively little about agenda-setting and the construction of the problems and issues policy actors seek to address. For example, although it is related to economic and institutional conditions, 'unemployment' is largely an ideational construction stemming from debates among economists and social reformers. 'Unemployment' can only move on the agenda once it has been defined as a significant social and economic problem (Walters 2000).

Second, historical institutionalism 'is better at specifying the opportunities and constraints that political institutions create than at explaining the policy choices that occur within this "political opportunity structure"'. Political institutions embody the rules of the game that political actors follow as they seek their goals. They do not necessarily tell us what goals those actors have or what issues they deem important' (Béland and Hacker 2004: 45). This issue is important because it points to the specific *content* of policy proposals that actors promote within concrete institutional settings. Purely institutionalist arguments can seldom explain such content by referring only to policy legacies and formal political institutions (Lieberman 2002). For instance, studying these institutional factors may help to explain why a policy alternative is defeated or enacted but it can seldom account for the reasons why actors conceived and made sense of this alternative in the first place. Failing to analyze the changing assumptions of actors as they affect the formulation and diffusion of new policy proposals makes it harder for scholars to understand the potential content and direction of policy change. For example, it is difficult to grasp the politics of health care reform without tracing the origins and development of regulatory ideas such as 'internal market' and 'managed competition' (Hacker 1996).

Third, as argued below, policy-making is not only about institutional legacies but also about the strategies political actors develop to convince interest groups and the population at large to support their policy alternatives. Although

historical institutionalist scholars often pay attention to these issues in their empirical work, their theoretical framework seldom emphasizes their role in a systematic manner (Schmidt forthcoming). Not paying close attention to the construction of reform imperatives may obfuscate major aspects of the politics of policy change. For example, analyzing the discourse of actors like Martin Luther King Jr. is crucial to understanding why, during the 1960s in the United States, black activists and their political allies effectively pushed for the recognition of their civil rights. Although the landslide electoral victory of the Democratic Party following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy helped Congress to pass major civil rights legislation in 1965, this change in policy would have been impossible without the crusade of civil rights advocates who made a strong moral case for reform (Ownby 2002).

Bringing in ideational processes

A growing number of scholars – including institutionalist ones – have emphasized the central role of ideas and related discursive processes in politics and policy change (e.g. Anderson 2008; Béland and Cox forthcoming; Berman 1998; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Bhatia and Coleman 2003; Bleich 2002; Blyth 2002; Campbell 1998; Cox 2001, 2004; Dobbin 1994; Edelman 1971; Fischer 2003; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Hajer 2002; Hall 1993; Hansen and King 2001; Jenson 1989; Kay 2009; Larsen and Anderson 2009; Lieberman 2002; Mendelson 1998; Palier and Sural 2005; Parsons 2003; Pedriana and Stryker 1997; Richardson 2000; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Schmidt 2002a; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Schön and Rein 1994; Seeleib-Kaiser and Fleckenstein 2007; Skowronek 2006; Genieys and Smyrl 2008; Somers and Block 2005; Stone 1997; Sural 2000; Weir 1992; Taylor-Gooby 2005; Wendt 1999; White 2002; Yee 1996; Zittoun 2009). A good way to survey ideational analysis is to distinguish the different ways in which ideas can explain crucial aspects of policy development. This section begins with a brief discussion of key aspects of the political science scholarship on the role of ideas before exploring the sociological literature on framing processes, especially value amplification.

Ideas and policy change

Drawing on the existing political science literature, one can argue that ideas impact policy change in three main ways, which roughly correspond to John Kingdon's (1995) problem, policy, and political streams, respectively.² First, ideas participate in the construction of the issues and problems that enter the policy agenda. As Kingdon (1995) argues, the policy agenda is necessarily narrow as political actors, journalists, and citizens cannot focus their attention on numerous issues and problems simultaneously. Thus, ideas about what the most pressing issues of the day help actors to narrow down the list of issues on the policy agenda. In other words, ideas participate in the construction of the social, economic, and environmental problems that political actors may

address (Stone 1997). This social and political construction of problems is related to policy legacies, as actors regularly assess the impact of existing programs on such problems. Overall, the construction of policy problems is tied to institutional logics (Weir 1992).

Second, ideas can take the form of economic and social assumptions that either legitimize or challenge existing institutions and policies. Peter Hall's work on policy paradigms illustrates the role of such assumptions in policy-making (Hall 1993). According to him, a policy paradigm is 'a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing' (Hall 1993: 279). For Hall, policy paradigms guide learning processes through which existing policy legacies are evaluated and criticized. Such learning processes are not purely detached and technocratic in nature, which means that political struggles can directly impact them (King and Hansen 1999). For example, in the field of economic policy, neo-liberalism is a broad and influential policy paradigm that constitutes the intellectual and ideological background of contemporary policy debates and learning processes (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002).³ Assumptions such as those embedded in policy paradigms change over time, especially in periods of high uncertainty. In such a context, actors may turn to alternative ideas in order to solve the new puzzles they face. This ideational logic is a potential source of policy change (Blyth 2002).

Third, as Mark Blyth puts it, ideas can become powerful ideological weapons that 'allow agents to challenge existing institutional arrangements and the patterns of distribution that they enshrine' (Blyth 2001: 4). These ideas form a public discourse that, through framing processes, can help to convince policy-makers, interest groups, and the general population that change is necessary (Schmidt 2002a). This is what Robert H. Cox labels 'the social construction of the need to reform.' 'In a political environment the advocates of reform need to employ strategies to overcome the skepticism of others and persuade them of the importance of reform' (Cox 2001: 475).

Framing and value amplification

In order to explore one of the key ways in which this construction of reform imperatives occurs, it is necessary to draw on the sociological literature on ideational processes. For decades, sociologists have explored the role of ideas and culture in politics and policy-making (for a survey see Camic and Gross 2001; Mehta forthcoming). A major stream of the sociological literature on ideas stresses the profound influence of deep cultural assumptions on political behavior and policy decisions (Steensland 2006). For example, German sociologist Birgit Pfau-Effinger (2005) argues that cross-national differences in basic cultural assumptions about the economic, political, and social world can explain major social policy variations from one country to another. In her view, cultural values and ideals that are dominant in a particular country 'restrict the spectrum of possible policies of a welfare state' (Pfau-Effinger 2005: 4). Focusing instead

on the mobilization by political actors of existing cultural symbols to construct reform imperatives, the following discussion draws on another key stream of sociological research: the analysis of framing and value amplification.

The starting point of this discussion is the concept of 'rhetorical frames.' In contrast to the lower profile 'action frames' that inform policy practice and everyday life behavior, rhetorical frames point to 'the persuasive use of story and argument in policy debate' (Schön and Rein 1994: 32). As for the concept of repertoire, it refers to a relatively coherent set of cultural symbols and political representations mobilized during social and political debates to frame the issues and shape the public's perceptions (Marx Ferree 2003).⁴ Because policy-makers must justify their political and technical choices, there is a need for 'symbols and concepts with which to frame solutions to policy problems in normatively acceptable terms through transposition and bricolage' (Campbell 1998: 394). From this angle, the construction of reform imperatives often takes the form of rhetorical frames appealing to shared cultural understandings.⁵

Perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to understand the relationship between culture and framing processes comes from the sociological literature on social movements. Drawing in part on the seminal work of Erving Goffman (1974), sociologists working on social movements have studied framing processes in a systematic way in order to better understand the social and political construction of reality surrounding social mobilization (Benford and Snow 2000; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Schneider 1997). From this perspective, 'movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers' (Benford and Snow 2000: 613). Like other students of social movements, Robert Benford and David Snow stress the strategic nature of framing processes according to which movement actors pursue particular political and organizational goals. Yet, for them, cultural factors impact the appeal and mobilizing potency of framing processes. For example, 'if the values or beliefs the movement seeks to promote or defend are of low hierarchical salience within the larger belief system, the mobilizing potential is weakened considerably and the task of political education of consciousness raising becomes more central but difficult' (Snow and Benford 1988: 205). Inversely, compelling references to a value or belief central to a society's cultural repertoire are likely to increase the potential effectiveness of framing processes. Although this is not the only determinant of frame resonance, the relationship between these processes and value salience is crucial. But as suggested by Snow *et al.* (1986), actors involved in framing processes can do more than just refer to a value or a belief central to a society's cultural repertoire. Through the value amplification logic, framers can actively promote and embellish a specific value to justify the actions proposed in its name. 'Value amplification refers to the identification, idealization, and elevation of one or more values presumed basic to prospective constituents but which have not inspired collective action for any number of reasons' (Snow *et al.* 1986: 469). For example, a value taken for granted or clichéd can be revived through intense framing efforts

depicting this value as morally essential and timeless. More importantly, as suggested below, political actors can rework the meaning of a well-known value or principle in order to legitimize policy change.⁶

Discussing value amplification without explicitly using the concept, the work of Vandna Bhatia and William D. Coleman (2003) on health politics in Canada and Germany during the 1990s underscores the central role of framing processes in policy-making while demonstrating that paying close attention to them explains policy episodes that a purely institutionalist approach cannot account for on its own. From an historical institutionalist standpoint, one would expect that the more unified and state-centered Canadian health care system would be easier to reform than Germany's fragmented Bismarckian social insurance schemes. Yet, as Bhatia and Coleman show, while the two countries faced the same basic economic and demographic pressures in the 1990s, it is Germany that undertook comprehensive health care reform. The most decisive factor: the mobilization by Social Democrats (SPD) of a compelling discourse about solidarity, a value embedded in German culture, politics, and history (Stjernø 2005). Value amplification processes that broadened the meaning of solidarity successfully legitimized the elimination of 'corporatist barriers between social groups' (Bhatia and Coleman 2003: 726). This situation contrasted with the one witnessed in Canada, where proponents of structural health care reform failed to formulate a coherent, value-driven discourse about the necessity to reform health care, which would have helped to weaken support for the existing system (Bhatia and Coleman 2003: 732–3). As these two scholars demonstrate, ideational factors like value amplification – not institutional variables – largely explain differences in policy outcomes between Canada and Germany during the 1990s. Overall, this example shows the limits of historical institutionalism in explaining specific episodes of policy change while stressing the need to pay close attention to ideational processes like value amplification.

Such remarks about value amplification should not suggest that it is the only major ideological weapon political actors can mobilize in order to construct reform imperatives. For example, in a recent article about US welfare reform, Margaret Somers and Fred Block analyze how conservatives like Charles Murray successfully advocated the idea that the welfare state creates social problems instead of solving them in order to construct the need for conservative reforms such as the 1996 US welfare legislation (Somers and Block 2005). Their analysis stresses the central role of what Albert Hirschman calls the 'perversity thesis': the discourse according to which state intervention generates perverse effects that undermine the existing social and economic order (Hirschman 1991).

How ideas interact with other factors

Arguing that turning to ideational processes like value amplification helps to explain key policy episodes is not to say that ideas constitute the sole locus of policy change. Ideas become politically influential in part because they interact with powerful institutional forces and political actors (Hansen and King 2001). For that reason, the study of ideational processes must pay close attention to the

political actors and institutions with which they interact. High-profile actors such as elected officials, political parties, and even interest groups and social movements are often instrumental in the propagation of policy ideas and rhetorical frames. Institutional forces create major constraints and opportunities that affect both the behavior of these actors and the diffusion of their ideas. For example, decentralization and institutional fragmentation can empower business actors opposing progressive economic and social ideas, as it was the case in the United States before the New Deal (Hacker and Pierson 2002).

Although the concrete economic and institutional position of policy actors affects the way they mobilize and understand their interests, two actors who occupy the same basic economic and institutional position can have contrasted views about what their interests are (King 1973). This situation is especially common in periods of high uncertainty, when existing institutional arrangements are less likely to determine the behavior of key political actors (Blyth 2002). During periods of high uncertainty and beyond, ideational processes help actors to define their interests (Blyth 2002; Genieys and Smyrl 2008; Hay forthcoming; Jenson 1989; King 1973; Steensland 2006; Schön and Rein 1994; Stone 1997; Weir 1992; Wendt 1999). As Colin Hay puts it, 'Conceptions of self-interest provide a cognitive filter through which the actor orients herself towards her environment, providing one (of several) means by which an actor evaluates the relative merits of contending potential courses of action' (Hay forthcoming: 24). The idea of 'cognitive filter' extends to framing processes, as political actors make great efforts explaining to the population and various pressure groups why it is in *their* interest to support or oppose concrete policy alternatives. Such discourse about interests can have major political consequences and even shape policy outcomes. For example, in 1994, 'President Clinton's universal health insurance plan was defeated because various opponents used the strategy of portraying concentrated costs to rally support from a variety of interests who might otherwise have benefited from the plan' (Stone 1997: 226). Overall, ideas are not mere epiphenomena in part because they help to shape the goals, identities, and perceived interests of political actors (Campbell 2004).

Recognizing that ideas are not purely epiphenomenal should not hide the fact that at least three related factors may constrain the impact of ideational processes on policy change.⁷ First, as mentioned above, specific ideas are more likely to become politically influential when powerful actors like a major political party decide to promote them. As students of agenda-setting have pointed out, many potentially relevant policy ideas 'go nowhere' largely because no influential policy entrepreneur is willing to actively promote them (Hacker 1996; Kingdon 1995). But one should note that, under some conditions, particular ideas can empower traditionally weak actors. During the 1960s, for example, civil rights and anti-racist ideas helped thousands of Black women to successfully mobilize to fight racial discrimination in the US social assistance system (Nadasen 2005). Second, the mobilization of major constituencies such as business organizations and labor unions may jeopardize reform attempts. Yet, as the above

example of President Clinton's health insurance plan suggests, ideas about interests can impact such a mobilization. Third, as historical institutionalism suggests, the fragmentation of political power and the presence of enduring policy legacies can become strong obstacles to reform, even when reformers succeed in putting together a coherent set of new policy ideas (Pierson 1994). For example, in Switzerland, the constitutional structure creates multiple veto points that make legislative change and policy innovation more difficult to achieve than in most other European countries. This is true because, in order to implement a new policy idea, Swiss politicians need to gather massive popular support, which is not the case in other countries (Bonoli 2000: 2; see also Immergut 1992). As for policy legacies, they can explain why some widely debated ideas promoted by influential actors are never implemented. For example, programs that generate large and rather unified armies of beneficiaries are potentially harder to transform or abolish than policies that create smaller and more diffuse constituencies. The work of Paul Pierson on the politics of welfare state reform in Britain and the United States during the 1980s provides ground to this claim (Pierson 1994). Such examples point to the relationship between ideas and institutions in policy change. Turning to the potential impact of transnational processes on policy change will further clarify this relationship.

TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS, NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND REPERTOIRES

An interesting way to underscore the enduring role of national institutions and repertoires in the politics of policy change is to revisit the growing literature on transnational actors and ideational processes. Rather than offering a detailed review of this ever expanding literature, this brief section formulates a few general remarks about the relationship between national and transnational actors and processes that should inform future research on ideas and policy change. This discussion focuses mainly on advanced industrial countries.

Policy ideas frequently cross national borders through the transnational actions and discourses of academics, politicians, international organizations, and think-tanks. The diffusion of policy ideas and concrete policy alternatives largely transcends national borders, and transnational networks and actors like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank help to spread them around the world (e.g. Chwieroth 2007; Deacon 2007; Bøås and McNeil 2004; Orenstein 2008; Stone 2008). Among others, students of policy transfer like David P. Dolowitz and David Marsh (2000) have examined the role of these actors in the transnational diffusion of policy ideas, lessons, and proposals.⁸ A significant aspect of this literature is the distinction between voluntary and coercive transfer, which refers to policy ideas imposed from the outside upon national actors. For Dolowitz and Marsh, however, 'it is better to conceptualize transfer as lying along a continuum that runs from lesson-drawing to the direct imposition of a program, policy or institutional arrangement on one political system by another' (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000: 13). This

more subtle understanding of the distinction between voluntary and coercive transfer is adapted to the study of the European Union (EU), and scholars like Claudio Radaelli (2000) have shown how the policy transfer literature contributes to our understanding of policy change within the EU. This type of scholarship on the EU is grounded in the recognition that, since the 1980s, transnational policy networks and institutions have played a growing role in processes of ideational diffusion (Moreno and Palier 2005). Beyond the issue of policy transfer, a growing literature has explored the discursive construction of EU norms and policies. An alternative to rational choice theory, this constructivist literature points to the key role of ideas and discourse in European integration and policy change (e.g. Checkel 2004; Christiansen *et al.* 2001; Parsons 2003).

The recognition that many policy ideas spread beyond national borders should not obscure the fact that, as far as country-level politics is concerned, national boundaries and institutions remain central to the politics of policy change around the world (Brooks 2005; Campbell 2004; Orenstein 2008; Weyland 2005). First, despite the development of major transnational policy networks (Stone 2008), national institutions and policy legacies still weigh heavily on the production of expertise and social learning. This is especially the case in advanced industrial countries, where national-level expertise capacity is typically stronger than in less developed countries (Orenstein 2008). Yet, even within the advanced industrial world, major institutional variations shape the politics of expertise. For example, private think-tanks play a much greater role in the United States than in France, where the state remains the most central source of policy expertise (Campbell and Pedersen forthcoming; Rich 2004).

Second, as Vivien Schmidt argues using the example of economic and social policy, national institutions largely shape the types of policy discourse political actors can adopt in order to frame reform imperatives successfully. According to Schmidt, single-actor systems such as Britain, where politicians make the main policy decisions, favor the domination of 'communicative discourse' (aimed at convincing the population to support reform) over 'coordinative discourse' (aimed at convincing 'social partners' to support reform). Inversely, multi-actor institutional systems like Germany, in which politicians must seek agreements with 'social partners,' favor the domination of 'coordinative discourse' over 'communicative discourse' as state officials must convince business and labor officials that reform is necessary (Schmidt 2002a).

Third, policy alternatives diffused through transnational networks are implemented at the national level through processes of symbolic and institutional *translation*. According to John L. Campbell, symbolic translation 'involves the combination of new externally given elements received through diffusion as well as old locally given ones inherited from the past' (Campbell 2004: 80). The old elements to which Campbell refers consist of existing institutional and ideational legacies, including what is described above as a cultural repertoire. Drawing on this repertoire, reformers and other political actors

must frame the policy alternatives they put forward, including those diffused through transnational policy networks, in order to sell them to the public and to key interest groups. In general, the transnational diffusion of policy ideas is related to translation processes through which policy alternatives are adapted to a particular symbolic and institutional national context. In other words, as Campbell and a growing number of historical institutionalist scholars have argued, territorially bounded institutions and repertoires help to translate and filter transnational trends, including ideational ones (e.g. Campbell 2004; Paul *et al.* 2003). For example, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his administration introduced social insurance to the United States in 1935, they made sure to reframe this German – Bismarckian – invention as a policy grounded in ‘American values’ like hard work and self-reliance. This transformation of social insurance took the form of a closer relationship between benefits and contributions that seemed appropriate not only to the US cultural context but to the then limited fiscal capacity of the federal government (Leff 1983). From this perspective, President Roosevelt adapted the idea of social insurance to both the US cultural *and* institutional context (Béland 2005). Another example of translation is the way Danish policy-makers recently incorporated neo-liberal elements to their social-democratic model of economic regulation. ‘The result was a new, decentralized but still negotiated and corporatist form of decision-making ... [according to which neo-liberalism] was translated into Danish practices rather than replacing them’ (Campbell 2004: 165–6). These examples suggest that national institutions and repertoires can filter the influence of transnational actors and ideas on country-level policy change.

Overall, national institutions and repertoires are enduring aspects of the contemporary advanced industrial world existing alongside – and interacting with – transnational actors and processes (economic, ideational and otherwise). National actors, boundaries, and territorial logics remain central to the politics of policy change despite the influence of transnational actors and processes (e.g. Campbell 2004; Harvey 2003; Orenstein 2008). This general remark should not hide potentially major variations in institutional and ideological autonomy from one country to another, as well as the fact that less developed countries are more vulnerable on average than developed ones to financial and ideological pressures stemming from transnational actors and processes (Orenstein 2008). The recognition that national institutions and repertoires remain influential should not obscure this reality, which is related to well-known forms of economic, social, and political inequality between countries and regions of the globe (Hurrell and Woods 1999). For example, international organizations like the IMF and the World Bank may have a greater capacity to influence policy outcomes in less developed countries that depend extensively on outside expertise and financial support. However, there is strong evidence that, even in less developed countries, transnational actors are not simply imposing new policy ideas from the outside (Ağartan 2007). Under most circumstances, transnational actors must collaborate with national bureaucrats and

politicians to secure the adoption – and the successful implementation – of the policy ideas they promote (Orenstein 2008).

CONCLUSION

Calling for a more systematic integration of existing sociological and political science literatures on ideas, institutions, and policy change, this article amends historical institutionalism in order to fill three major explanatory gaps. Discussing why these gaps can prevent a purely institutionalist approach from explaining key aspects of the politics of policy change, the article discusses three main ways in which ideational processes impact policy outcomes. First, such processes help to shape the reform agenda and the problems actors seek to address. Second, these processes impact the content of reform proposals and policy agendas. Third, ideational processes such as value amplification participate in the construction of reform imperatives. At the broadest level, ideational processes shape the ways actors perceive their environment and their interests. Yet, as evidenced above, ideational processes are not the only locus of policy change, and institutional constraints impact the politics of ideas and policy change. Under most circumstances, national institutions and repertoires remain central to the politics of policy change despite the undeniable role of transnational actors and processes, which interact with such institutions and repertoires. From this perspective, recognizing the central role of transnational actors and processes goes hand in hand with the acknowledgement that national institutions and repertoires remain central to the politics of policy change in advanced industrial societies and even beyond.

In future research about policy change, scholars should further explore the relationship between national and transnational ideational processes while paying systematic attention to institutional factors. A major way to undertake this task is to launch more small-N comparative analyses featuring counterfactuals and negative cases. The work of Vivien Schmidt on welfare state adjustment is an example of this type of comparative research on the relationship between ideas and institutions in policy change (Schmidt 2002a). While undertaking this type of comparative research, scholars should draw a clear analytical line between ideational and institutional processes in order to assess their respective explanatory power (Parsons 2007). Beyond developing new comparative case studies, scholars could explore a major theoretical issue by questioning the very meaning of the concept of policy change in light of the ideational and constructivist literatures discussed above. For example, instead of defining policy change in purely objectivist terms, students of ideas and institutions could pay greater attention to the ways in which actors *perceive* change.⁹ Additionally, scholars could develop a more subtle vision of policy change that better replaces concrete policies in their broadest institutional and ideologically context. A potential starting point for such a project is Jacob Hacker's work on policy drift, which suggests that a transformation of the context in which a policy operates can reshape both its meaning and its concrete societal impact

even when its formal rules remain stable (Hacker 2004). From this perspective, one can imagine major policy change taking place without any formal legislative revision. Although Hacker's concept mainly focuses on how incremental changes to the economic and social environment can alter the meaning of existing policies, it is possible to imagine an ideational interpretation of policy drift that would stress that a transformation of the discursive policy landscape can alter the meaning and the impact of apparently stable policy landscapes. This type of theoretical discussion could inform new empirical research about the relationship between ideas, institutions, and policy change. Rethinking this relationship is one of the most central tasks of contemporary policy analysis, within and beyond the institutionalist tradition.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs Program. The author thanks Fred Block, Mark Blyth, Silke Bothfeld, Robert Cox, Jørgen Goul Andersen, Angela Kempf, Christian Albrekt Larsen, Joya Misra, Sascha Münnich, John Myles, Ann Orloff, Tasleem Padamsee, Bruno Palier, Jill Quadagno, Ruben Sierra, Robin Stryker, Alex Waddan, Nicola Yeates, and the three reviewers for their useful suggestions.

NOTES

- 1 For a broad discussion about the unity and the diversity of the institutionalist tradition, see Hall and Taylor (1996); Hay and Wincott (1998); Théret (2000).
- 2 Other ideational typologies are available in the existing literature on ideas and politics (e.g. Campbell 2004; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Mehta forthcoming; Schmidt 2002b).
- 3 This example should not obscure the fact that the term 'paradigm' can give the illusion that policy ideas necessarily form a coherent system of beliefs, which is not always the case (Wincott forthcoming).
- 4 Cultural repertoires are not homogeneous entities that reflect only one political and social tradition, and political actors from opposite camps can refer to the same symbols to legitimize their decisions and seek popular support (Tishler 1971).
- 5 Frames, like institutions, are embedded in long-term processes, and ideas available in a society's cultural repertoire can have a long history (Somers and Block 2005).
- 6 Actors opposing a particular reform proposal can also engage in counter-framing strategies aimed at convincing other actors and the public at large that reform is unnecessary or even dangerous (Hirschman 1991).

- 7 This discussion is partially inspired by Walsh (2000).
 8 For a critique of the concept of policy transfer see James and Lodge (2003).
 9 Yet, as opposed to what some scholars have recently argued (Zittoun 2009), it would be a mistake to reduce policy change to the perceptions of actors.

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