Ideational Theory: A Fruitful Terrain of Fertilization for Comparative Politics and Comparative Public Policy

The advent of ideational theory is mostly the product of research cross-fertilization between scholars of comparative politics and comparative public policy. Beginning in the early 1990s, a generation of scholars from both subfields sounding each other overcame initial skepticism to build one of the most remarkable achievements in political science theory in recent times. This paper sheds light on the main theoretical and methodological approaches that undergird the concept and describes how the distinct insights of public policy and comparative politics were woven together to build this fine tapestry. First, ideational scholars dealt with the "what" question and then, the "how much".

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1. Introduction

The development of ideational theory gave way to a paradigmatic shift in the social sciences. Social sciences including political sciences were dominated by “grand theories” in the post-war period, such as Marxism, structural functionalism, rational choice theory. Over time, the interest of scholars shifted from macro-level of socio-economic theorizing to the micro or meso level. The scholars were questioning the philosophical grounds of social science regarding the formation of social order departing from dominant positivist explanations.

Although positivism remained for a long time the "orthodox consensus" in social science methodology, the scholarly interest was shifting to the role of individual actors or groups, their practices and beliefs. Rainbow and Sullivan (1987) challenged the positivist methods and shifted the scientific interest to subjectivity. The interpretative turn in the social sciences meant the growing influence of ethnomethodology, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Not only positivist and objectivist perspectives were criticized by intreprativists, but a post-positivist philosophy of science has developed (including for example Kuhn and Lakatos) (Mottier 2005: 5).
The world of politics at those times was characterized by the emergence and rise of major international organizations and the decline of power of nation states. This included the emergence of such organizations as OPEC and the fall of cheap energy, rise of UN, emergence of European cooperation and growing influence of transnational corporations. These forms of meso-level cooperation were not unnoticed by the political scientists. Ideational theory entered the fold with the publication of Hall's Paradigm shift (1993) but also Keohane and Goldstein (1995). The concept of “ideas” as a basis of choice in policymaking was formulated and grounded based in the new-institutionalist perspective.

The paper analyzes how ideational theory as a subfield developed and the contribution of different scholars mainly from comparative politics and comparative public policy but also international relations. We argue that the processes of decoupling and embedding are important in explaining the expansion of the theoretical approach. White in his structuralist account of market conceptualizes embedding and decoupling as major mechanisms of social change (White 2008: 138). According to White, “Embedding is mutual discipline that shifts out of chaotic crisscrosses of attempts at control. Embeddings seed on now this happenstance and now that one, but once established they can induce continuance of the discipline through repetition and imitation” (2008: 72). In other words, embedding is a meso-level spontaneously reproduced form of social order, which enables continuity in the social field.

Decoupling is converse to embedding. As White defines it “Social life begins with triggering of identities, each of which comes from embedding a discipline of constituents but which then is decoupled in seeking control in its ties” (2008: 73). This means, actors identities in the field are influenced by the present embeddings, but as they are also positioned in the social structure, they seek to have higher level of control and do this by distancing from the context. That is, “the discipline for an identity embeds its constituents while simultaneously offering them decoupling as some insulation from and brokering to the context” (White 2008: 73). Decoupling thus is complementary to coupling.

The paper is structured around the following contributions:

- Peter Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State” (1993)
2. **The context of the development of ideational theory**

In the emergence of ideational theory, the School of Government at Harvard University, its younger and senior scholars, played an important role. Throughout the 1970-1980, two prominent scholars in political sciences were teaching and researching there. These were Samuel Beer and Stanley Hoffman. It is characteristic of them, that they had a strong background in history and were interested in the analysis of processes of social change, and therefore, in the formation of social order. They represented the old tradition of historical institutionalism, which can be tracked back to Polanyi. A trained historian, political journalist and speechwriter to President Roosevelt, Beer had completed a doctorate in political science. In his work, he analyzed revolutions and accounted for factors such as history, philosophy and politics. The revolutions he considered included among others Protestant Reformation and French Revolution.

Stanley Hoffmann was a graduate of Science Po in Paris, he began his professional career with a monograph on French intellectual and political history: France Since the 30's (1974). Both Beer and Hoffmann had a significant influence on Peter Hall when he was writing his doctoral thesis at Harvard University. Jack Hayward, professor of Politics and Professorial Fellow at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford, also exerted influence on Hall when he was a PhD student too. Jack Hayward was a political economist who was studying on Keynesian economic policy and economic and political history of France, including the French Revolution.

Another prominent doctoral student who was influenced by Hoffmann was Robert Keohane, who went on to co-author one of the most central monographs in the ideational theory - “Ideas & Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change” (1993).

What was common to them was their in-depth analysis of the impact of cultural factors on significant transformations in economic and political order. This focus on history defined the shift from a positivist perspective of realism. Already in 1983, Keohane had criticized the dominant realist perspective in his book “After hegemony”. He claimed that

“[we need]… theories that attempt to explain rules, norms, and institutions [that] help us to understand how to create patterns of cooperation that could be essential to our survival. We need to respond to the
questions that Realism poses but fails to answer: How can order be created out of anarchy without superordinate power; how can peaceful change occur?” (1983: 533, cited from Ward 1985: 344).

At that time, he championed the realist account in political science, including Marxism, dependency theory, and macro-economic versions of liberalism. He used them as grounds from which he developed his neorealist account of international politics. In addition to the aspect of military power and hegemony, he introduced the concept of cooperation as an important mechanism in our increasingly “interdependent world”. Cooperation, he argued, was supported by self-interested actions, but also by cooperation regimes as a kind of more general “logics” of conduct. “International regimes are composed of beliefs, rules, practices and expectations about behavior in the international system.

Moreover, he underscored a problem that will become central to ideational theory: the controversy between self-interested, “egoist” action, and action based on ethical predispositions and values in the political sphere.

This book showed a departure from macro-level to the meso-level analysis of social order. The latter was emerging out of cooperation between individual actors. It questioned the dominant assumptions in the political science by going back to the basic philosophical assumptions about social organization and benefiting from the related fields of history and culture studies. In addition to that, he directed a new focus on individual actors and their interactions for which he felt there was a need for accounting in the decision-making process. This theoretical building block was imported from the growing field of institutional economics (“mesoeconomics”), where bounded rationality or the psychological implications was paramount at that time.

3. The Conceptualization of Ideas

The analysis of major publications in the subfield shows that the theory really took off in the fields of comparative public policy, comparative politics and international relations. The collaboration between the authors was underpinned by their attempts at refining the general principles of ideational theory in the form of cross-referencing and the organization of colloquiums. However, the influences from other disciplines, which can be seen, for example, in the extensive citing of DiMaggio and Powell (1991), one of the most influential works in social sciences in the recent decades, were the case. For the formulation of the theory redefining an actor was important. As Berman notes, “In pluralist and Marxist analyses, for example, societal pressures and economic interest were the key determinants of policy outcomes.” (Berman 2013: 219). Thus, the state itself remained a black box (ibid.).
Hall was a doctoral student of Hoffmann an author of the seminal article Policy Paradigm (1993) in which he exposed his three-tiered order of policy change. A Harvard-trained political economist specializing in advanced industrial countries. This influence from economists was essential for conceptualizing an actor and their rationality in the ideational theory. Hall formulated a new approach to political behavior in which: “state and affiliated political institutions as actors, rather than just pushed by stronger societal processes” (ibid.). The next question he addressed was whether state was a unified actor or individual politicians, policy experts should be seen as agents, and what motivates those actors (ibid.). Similarly to other applications of new institutionalism, the political science has adopted a concept of path-dependency. This was instrumental for explaining ideas, as actors’ interpretations of the situations, by referring to their past experiences, both on micro and meso level. Hall developed a concept of policymaking as social learning. It was about “state actors’ interpretation of both past and present events, as well as their selective screening of information, exerted a crucial impact over political outcomes” (Berman 2013: 220).

Hall’s work was central to the formation of the ideational theory as they presented a formulation of a new approach based on introducing and justifying its central category - the concept of ideas. Following Berman, “Hall found that in these third-order cases, policymaking was determined not merely by reaction to past policy but was instead heavily influenced by new ideas and broader societal conflicts and debates” (ibid.).

After Hall, culture did not become as paradigmatic as power/interest and new institutionalist perspectives in the study of complex causal relations, the question was no more “if” broadly speaking it mattered but “how”. There were accusations of epiphenomenalism or being the product of materialist factors, difficult to source and a proliferation of concepts (Ekengren 2011; Rueschemeyer 2006: 227).

Scholars referred to ideas as “frames” (Schön & Rein 1993), “social constructivism” (Wendt 1992), “référentiel” (Jobert & Muller 1987). “Ideas” are defined differently (Skogstad & Schmidt 2011; Berman 2013: 7-10; Béland and Cox 2010), however, it is common for all ediationalist scholars that they identify their level of analysis as middle range.

The conceptualizations came together with the application of the theory to many different empirical aspects, those they might be very context-specific. However, scholars agreed on the dyadic structure of the ideas. On the one hand, their cognitive dimension or “the perception of the problems and on the other hand, norms evaluation. The former one refered to “the perception of the problems and the suggestions of likely paths to be taken” (Bleich 2003). The latter one
was meaning norms evaluation or “the ability of actors to judge on the basis of values and norms whether a choice in a given situation is bad or good” (Goldstein & Keohane 1993; see also Lepsius 1990, Rein & Schön 1991; Braun & Busch 1999:12-13; Inglehart & Klingemann 1978; Bleich 2003, Jacobs 2014).

Ideas made the core of the concept of agency in ideational theory. The evolution and impact of ideas on political life were traced. The main obstacle in tracing ideas was to explain causality: a causal factor CX was said to rely on a causal factor CY which in turn relied on a causal factor CZ (Bennett 2008: 705; Kingdon 1995; King, Keohane & Verba 1994: 86). Taking into account the complex nature of ideas and structural duality of culture and agency, scholars should have been explained “policy outcomes with reference to frames [ideas], and then by exploring the most significant and proximate causes of those frames” (Bleich 2003: 187). This was meaning introducing a concept similar to that of institutional logics in new institutionalist sociology in the analysis. The notion of ideas is still not fixed. That is why nowadays ideational theorists propose to set “pragmatic limits” by evaluating the resources available for their research, the degree of confidence that will be sufficient, and “the rapidity with which the evidence converges in support of a particular explanation” (George and Bennett 2005: 05).

The fact that younger scholars, in comparison to the older ones, have background only in political sciences, such as Schmidt, indicates the institutionalization of the ideational theory and other middle-range theories at the departments of political sciences. The variety of influences from other disciplinary fields, such as the new economic sociology or social network analysis shows the penetrability of disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences and undoubted legitimacy of the more holistic interpretivist paradigm. For example, Schmidt applies the concept of embeddedness to enrich the understanding of ideas. Ideas are embedded in individuals, groups and institutions (Schmidt 2009) and embodied by ‘policies, programs, and philosophies’ (Schmidt 2008: 303). In terms of White’s mechanism of embedding and decoupling, identities in the field became more flexible with the decline of grand theories. Questioning the dominant assumptions and embedding the theories into the related disciplinary (sub)/fields made possible the expansion of ideational theory. However, the embedding was with contexts other than specific political sciences domain. Therefore, the identities of scholars became blurred and the subfield “ideational theory” very fragmented. Decoupling from the context of political science by questioning its major assumptions was chaotic also because of holistic and research-specific application of the theory. That is why, to strengthen their identity, ideational scholars have also to strengthen the positions of the approach in political science. In other words, embed it in the
political science so that the approach can be (re)-produced as a uniform way to address empirical problems.

4. Ideational Theory between Comparative Politics and Comparative Public Policy

The next generations of ideational theorists represented by Sheri Berman, Erik Bleich, Jal Mehta graduated from the Department of Government at Harvard where Hall has been active as a professor. There were exceptions e.g. Consuelo Cruz from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Daniel Beland from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). The former realize the importance of ideas from “Policy Paradigms…” (1993) by Hall. The latter by neorealist and pragmatist studies, including Keohane and Goldstein (1993). They further developed the theory in their synthetic applications by benefiting from insights from related fields and through applying the theory to the new contexts of political action in their empirical work.

Sheri Berman carried out her work in the context of political history and democratization. Berman argued that ideas were equally capable of initiating an outcome or being independent variable. Therefore she argued for bidirectional causation. According to Berman, ‘the crux of the matter [in resolving multilinearity] lies in distinguishing between situations where ideas govern actions and situations where decision makers consciously or unconsciously use the language of ideas to justify policy choices made on other grounds’. To do so, Berman suggested to identify whether an idea held at time T had an effect at time T-1 (1994: 42-44). She did this kind of analysis in her study of the German and Swedish Social Democratic Parties during the interwar period (1998). In that study she found out that ideas were the were a causal factor in Klaus Kausky’s decision to adhere to a conservative brand of social democracy and refuse any cross-party agreement in Germany. This was the opposite in case of Sweden (Hjalmar Branting). The decision of the German leader, Kausky, was co-responsible for the collapse of Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazi regime.

The mechanisms that underpinned the processes of decision making and the formation of ideas were conceptualized differently by various scholars, which showed a lack of consensus on this important matter. Few authors have analyzed theory building at a macro level. One of the exceptions is Berman (Berman 2001, Berman 2013). Based on empirical case studies, Berman developed a model that predicates that the chances of success of programmatic beliefs (ideas) increase with the prominence of a carrier (agent) in the political system Berman (1998). Prominence was defined by power the agent wields. Similarly as in the new institutionalist
studies in sociology, agents ensured their institutionalization by cooperation with allies, i.e. like-minded individuals. In doing so, agents attempted to reduce “agency loss” as they delegate their power and achieve compliance vis-a-vis the principal (Jacobs 2014; Bendor et al. 2001). The limitation of Berman’s conceptualization was that she did not lay emphasis on the political structures involved. Bleich did this in his studies on immigrant integration issues (2003: 28). Immigration studies is currently a rapidly growing thematic focus in the subfield.

Erik Bleich graduated from the Department of Government at Harvard University in 1999. At Harvard, Bleich did research on international ideas, gatekeepers and domestic policies in France and Britain. Bleich’s was studying race relations policies with the focus on anti-semitism and anti-racism in Britain and France from 1960 to the 1990s. In his research he developed the concepts of “gatekeepers” and “ideas-frames”. By gatekeepers he meant policymakers who can take a final decision regarding the enactment of particular policies. Ideas-frames are formed by the gatekeepers' priors or “ideational assumptions that affect their attitudes to change. When a new idea was running contrary to the gatekeepers’ priors, it was unlikely that it will be implemented” (2003: 82). If the ideas of gatekeepers were favorable, the policy idea could have been formed immediately. If they were negative, failure was almost unavoidable. In federal systems, policy entrepreneurs could find a way to promote and put in practice their ideas. Structure was formed by the arrangement of gatekeepers and spatial alignment. The zero-sum game was the case when there was one or many gatekeepers aligned sequentially.

For Bleich the agency potential of agents was central, meaning their ability to challenge and transform the political structures. The gatekeeper in his theory was static, whereas Berman's “carrier” was mobile policy entrepreneur. Both types of actors were located inside the machinery of government. This differentiated them to public intellectuals - the opinion leaders, who were “likely to operate from the civil society or university (Beeson & Stone 2013: 2; see also Howe 2006: 36).

The differences in the way agents were conceptualized reflected uncertainty in political processes and, the situation that “no political analysis has ever been ontologically neutral... whether we choose to conduct our analysis in terms of identities, individuals, social collectivities, states, regimes, systems, or some combination of the above (Hay 2006: 79-80). Yet, empirical and ontological diversity were no barriers to generalization. Epistemology investigated the conditions under which “knowledge is transferable between different settings for political analysis and hence whether we can legitimately generalize between “‘cases’” (Ibid: 84-85). If this was not the case, the theory under consideration became too fragmented and the empirical studies based on it lacked robustness. This shows that decoupling was the case in the
field, whereas no sufficient embedding. Scholars were justifying the application of a vague theory in empirical studies by the fact of reliance on abstraction and categorization, for example the use of Sartori’s empirical universals (2005), and claimed establishing reliable overarching frameworks for operationalization. However, this was not sufficient for embedding the approach back in political sciences. The forms of agency and structure displayed by Bleich, Berman and other authors’ models can be construed as accidental therefore they have successfully demonstrated the salience of ideas despite the variations observed. However, for further development of the subfield the elaboration of a specific methodology was important.

Alan Jacobs graduated from the Department of Government at Harvard University and dedicated his efforts to the operationalization of theory and research methods. The dissertation he defended in 2004 was titled “Governing for the Long Term: Democratic Politics and Policy Investment”. His work has influences from game theory and econometrics. He is collaborating with Scott Matthew who specializes on electoral behavior, associate professor at the Department of Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada. Jacobs is the scholar who attempted overcoming the problem of high differentiation in the subfield of ideational theory by formulating a specific methodology of empirical analysis. This was possible in the collaboration with scholars from other fields.

For Jacobs (2014) the flexibility of the theory was an advantage for empirical analysis. While a crisp theory enhanced theory specification, one that was overly deterministic may have not been sensitive enough to detect ideational factors. Still, there were challenges for theory development in relation to multicollinearity and the difficulty of measuring ideas. Jacobs (2014) suggested five variables for analysis: discourse analysis, tracing the ideational path, content analysis of policy outcome, within-unit covariation over time and within-unit covariation across sectors. The scope of analysis should have been expanded in both time range and level of analysis. He argued that was not enough to study only “individual elites’ statements and behavior at key moments of choice, but also continuity and change, information flow, “sequences of events, and movements of actors across institutional settings and over considerable stretches of time” (2015: 42). The process aspect were also introduced by Bleich’s (2003) in his attempt to analyze injunction to study ideas before, during and after policymaking and Hay, who was writing about actors being able to “modify, revise or reject their original intentions” (2001).

Jahn Metha graduated from the Department of Government at Harvard and works in the field of comparative education policy. As a sociologist, he is working on developing unified international benchmarks in education. His figure shows the diversity of applications of the ideational theory and links to other fields. However, the embedding of the theory in the political
sciences domain becomes weaker as soon as scholars identities are blurred too and the methodologies applied are not theory-specific.

5. Conclusion

The advent of ideational theory was influenced by the paradigmatic turn in social sciences and the growing importance of cooperation in policy. The scholars in the field who initiated this middle range theory had a background in history, cultural studies and in economics, which enabled them to question the basic assumption about agency in politics and causality, thus, made a decoupling from the dominant approaches possible. Having a multidisciplinary background is one of the ways for expanding the theory into other contexts, that is, embedding it in new subfields. The works of new institutionalists in sociology and economics (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), as well as historical institutionalists (Polanyi 1957), were especially influential. However, these works although structured by the major issues and concepts of the theory, became highly fragmented. “Definitions and actors [were] vague and understandings of motivation and causality continue to be somewhat unclear and confused” (Berman 2013, p. 218). This showed a need for embedding the theory in the political sciences back again and strengthening the positions of ideational theory in the specific for political sciences domain – addressing the issues of political life. Scholars of a younger generation attempted to raise the explanatory power of the theory by developing a specific research methodology, and by this make it into a distinct approach. They did it in cooperating with scholars from other disciplinary fields but the cooperation between scholars of comparative politics and comparative public policy could be more instrumental in strengthening the positions of the theory in the field of political science.

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