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# 1. The constructivist turn in EU public policy approaches

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## INTRODUCTION

Current theoretical approaches to analyse the European Union's policymaking are more pluralistic than they were in the 1980s. New conceptual frameworks were added to the theoretical triangle built by federalist, neo-functional and intergovernmentalist approaches and modified the scholarly view on why, and in particular how, European policies were made and implemented. Among those frameworks, constructivism took an important position by the end of the 1990s (Christiansen et al. 1999).

The constructivist turn allowed for asking new questions with regard to European integration such as how cognitive frames shape policies in the specific institutional context of a multi-level polity? Why do actors act as they do, beyond purely cost-benefit-based analysis, or in other words why do they define policy problems in a specific way? To what extent is this linked to specific political, historical, institutional and, last but not least, territorial/spatial contexts, as the editors of this volume underline? The answers to these questions helped to understand European integration, not only as a federalist system, functionalistic spillover project, or an intergovernmental entity whose progress is dependent on member state interests, but as a complex political system in which interests were embedded in cognitive frames. If we understood these fundamental and ever changing cognitive frames, we would then understand why governmental, non-governmental and institutional actors sometimes pushed integration forward, and sometimes hindered it.

While the constructivist turn in European studies did not only 'hit' the study of public policies but also the analysis of politics and the European political system as a whole, this chapter is primarily centred on the usefulness and the limits of constructivist approaches for the analysis of public policymaking in the EU.

The use of the term 'constructivist turn' or 'ideational turn' in public policy gives the impression that there is a coherent conceptual framework. As with other theoretical approaches, this is not the case. Constructivist accounts have taken various forms and can be understood from different vantage points reaching from post-positivist constructivists who explore actor's discursive practices denying that discourses have a reality behind them, to 'conventional' constructivists whose aim is to analyse how socially constructed facts do indeed influence politics (Diez 1999; Checkel 2001; Genyies and Smyrl 2008; Gofas and Hay 2010; Béland and Cox 2010). This chapter offers a view centred on the conventional constructivist framework, as other chapters in this Handbook concentrate on post-positivist and discursive approaches.

The chapter starts from a definition of constructivism and then turns to the advantages and limits of constructivist approaches in public policy studies at the EU level. A last part

will offer an actor-centred perspective, which tackles parts of the critiques that have been addressed to constructivist approaches.

## WHAT IS CONSTRUCTIVISM?

Constructivist approaches in the field of public policy focus on the social construction of policy problems, in other words, the construction of frames of reference on which policymaking is based. Constructivists argue that actors' preferences and derived policies are shaped within a particular framework of meaning and are not exogenously given. The main question is how ideational factors (world views, ideas, collective understandings, norms, values, cognitive schemes etc.) influence political action (Checkel 1993; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Hall 1993; McNamara 1998; Berman 1998; Wendt 1999; Cox 2001; Blyth 2002; Hay and Rosamond 2002; Fischer 2003; Parsons 2003, 2010; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Culpepper 2008; Genyies and Smyrl 2008; Gofas and Hay 2010; Abdelal et al. 2010; Béland 2016).

On the most general level, constructivism refers to the assumption that social norms and frameworks on which reality is based are constructed and redefined through permanent interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Actors' interests cannot be understood as deduced from a solely material structure, as rational choice approaches would argue (Elster 1989). Rational choice derives preferences exogenously by specifying properties (position, resources, etc.) across actors and how different values of properties imply different preferences. Constructivists, on the contrary, assume that social, political and economic contexts structure these interests, thus actors and structures are co-constituted – one of the most central terms in constructivist research. In other words, the way we think about the world makes the world as we perceive it. Thus, constructivists have a very different understanding of how interests change. For materialists, actors' interests evolve as changes in their environment alter their situation. Constructivists, or idealists, on the other hand, assume that interests change as agents alter their understanding of their changing world and recalculate their priorities (Béland and Cox 2010).

To reflect on the importance of this co-constitution of agents and structures one can refer to a basic idea of sociological institutionalism – namely the distinction between two logics: a logic of appropriateness, and a logic of consequentialism (see March and Olsen 1998; for a less constructivist and more sociological perspective see March and Olsen 1984, 1989). Whereas the logic of consequentialism treats agents and structures as two distinct features that explain political processes (the goal of action is to maximise one's own interests and preferences), the logic of appropriateness allows for the conceptualising of this co-constitution of actors and structures. The logic of appropriateness

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

Thus, acting according to a logic of appropriateness is more a question of behaving correctly in policymaking processes, in line with criteria established by a society or a group, than maximising one's preferences.

The logic of appropriateness refers to ideas (Béland 2009), or, in other words to the ‘collective understandings of social facts’, as the primary source of political behaviour. These ‘claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions’ (Parsons 2002, p. 48), influence policy development in two ways (Béland 2009, p. 702). On the one hand, they help to construct the problems and issues that enter the policy agenda, and on the other, they frame the basic assumptions that influence the definition of those problems as well as the positions during the decision-making and implementation process.

A third way to conceptualise the factors that influence the result of human interaction has emerged from the beginning of 2000. In his *logic of arguing (or communicative action)*, Risse (2000) suggests considering the processes of argumentation, deliberation and persuasion as a distinct mode of social interaction, instead of opposing material (interests) and ideal variables (world views) being central factors influencing actor behaviour and, subsequently, political outcomes. This logic occupies the middle ground between strategic bargaining (*logic of consequentialism*) and rule-guided behaviour (*logic of appropriateness*). It starts from the assumption that human actors engage in truth-seeking with the aim of reaching mutual understanding. This, however, is only possible if actors are prepared to change their world views, values and interests (Risse 2000, p. 1).

The logic of arguing must be understood as a conceptual continuum. On this continuum we find, on the one hand, the Habermasian idea of arguing as truth-seeking behaviour, and, on the other, the assumption that actors use arguments in a strategic mode in order to justify their identities and preferences. From this perspective, actors engaging in ‘rhetorical action’ (Schimmelfennig 2000) are not ready to change their own beliefs due to a ‘better argument’. Jobert’s distinction between debates taking place in either forums or arenas illustrates this continuum empirically (Jobert 1998). In this regard, arenas are spaces of confrontation between divergent world views, a sort of battleground where what matters is being convincing in your argument. Forums, however, are spaces of argument where institutional compromises are negotiated. Thus, strategic behaviour is framed and made possible by norms (‘collective expectations about behaviour for a given identity’; Jepperson et al. 1996, p. 54) – an idea we find in actor-centred constructivist approaches which will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

## CONSTRUCTIVISM IN EU PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS

Constructivist approaches in public policy analysis offer a series of tools for understanding the policy process. Instead of concentrating on actors’ material interests as key variables of policymaking, constructivists analyse the influence of cognitive frames and ideas on actors’ behaviour. In doing so, they aim to analyse factors that influence the ‘career of a public policy’: the *embeddedness* of actors, their *socialisation* and finally the *framing* of a problem.

### The Embeddedness of Actors

The ‘career of a public policy’, its origin but also its change, generally starts with the identification of a problem. Identifying a problem in order to make it fit to be put on the

agenda requires that a social fact is perceived as a problem. Hence, a problem does not make it onto the agenda on its own, by its simple existence. Someone must identify it as such and put it on the agenda (Gusfield 1981). The analysis of how and why specific actors try to transform issues into a problem is a specific feature of the policymaking process where constructivist approaches are useful. Constructivist public policy approaches argue that the embeddedness of actors and of their interests in specific cognitive frames makes it possible, for some issues, to be transformed into a problem (Blyth 2002; Parsons 2007; Marsh 2009; Hay 2011, 2015).

The question of actors' cognitive embeddedness in the social system is a cornerstone of sociological institutionalism. Institutional approaches understand institutions as rules, norms and strategies (Ostrom 1999, p.37). Sociological institutionalism is not a constructivist perspective as such but it has conceptual linkages to constructivism (see above; see also Knill and Tosun 2012; Hay 2015). It contains elements that constructivists have used extensively when analysing how and why a problem is identified as such. More specifically, sociological institutionalism derives from different conceptualisations of organisational sociology, putting particular emphasis on the cognitive dimensions of institutional actions. At the heart of sociological institutionalism is a very broad understanding of institutions, incorporating symbols, cognitive frames or moral templates that provide meaning to action. It stresses the way in which institutions influence behaviour by providing the cognitive concepts and models that are indispensable for action.

Contrary to the understanding that a problem would be put on the agenda based on a combination of a rational cost–benefit analysis and the most powerful actors, as the rational-choice inspired logic of consequentialism would have it, the logic of appropriateness argues that issues are transformed into problems because of a widespread conception of what should be (Kingdon 1984). In other words, individuals' actions are determined by their sense of obligation as structured by the appropriate rules and routines rather than by self-interest. In this sense, institutions are not only enabling and constraining actors' preferences, but also influence the way actors conceive their preferences in the first place.

A central element of sociological institutionalism helping to understand why specific problems are put on the agenda refers to isomorphism, which results from social processes of emulation and diffusion. Sociological institutionalism argues that in policymaking processes, actors replicate organisational models collectively sanctioned as appropriate and legitimate (March and Olsen 1984, 1989; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). In their study on the establishment of the European Parliament as defender of democracy, Rittberger (2005) as well as Goetze and Rittberger (2010) show that the concept of problem or issue legitimacy that allows the problem to be put on the agenda must be understood as an inter-subjective property that 'operates through individuals via cognitive scripts' (*ibid.*, p. 37). It thus helps to understand that the legitimacy of an issue is not an unchangeable fact but a shared cognitive framework that structures agents' attitudes in policymaking processes. Controversies amongst actors or groups in arguing why an issue should or should not become a problem on the agenda have been explained in European studies through the establishment of divergent collective values or cognitive frames which make the defence of specific positions possible (Richardson 1996; Cini 1996; Fouilleux 2004; Christiansen and Tonra 2004).

The embeddedness of actors in specific cognitive frames has also been used in compliance studies to explain why certain countries implement European policies, although

the countries' public opinion and major interest groups might oppose those policies. Contrary to power-centred (realist) or capacity-centred (management) approaches in compliance studies, which argue that the higher the bargaining power of member states and/or their administrative capacities, the higher the degree of member state compliance with international norms (Tallberg 2002; Börzel et al. 2010), constructivist public policy approaches argue that the pro-European attitudes of member state elites and population and their belief in the rule of law increase compliance (see Panke 2007).

Finally, one of the most prominent conceptual frameworks concentrating on the embeddedness of actors in policymaking concentrates on forms of and reasons for policy change. What Hall's three orders of change (Hall 1993) or Pierson's path dependency (Pierson 1993) have in common is their insistence on the incremental, thus slow and complex nature of the vast majority of policy change. These approaches have been widely used in EU studies literature to explain the policy change in areas such as social or employment policy (Leibfried and Bonoli 2001).

Although generally not considered to be constructivists, Baumgartner and Jones (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner et al. 2014), when explaining policy stability (as opposed to instability), also use the constructivist device of actor embeddedness to explain policy continuity. They argue, for instance, that over long periods of time, the dominant actors of a public policy sector ensure a balanced and stable situation by monopolising upstream problem definition processes. The stable rules of the game ensure the stability of configurations. All new actions entail frictions and are costly to implement. Due to the fact that individuals have cognitive limits and therefore prefer stable ideas to new ideas, they reinforce the equilibrium status of public policy. Hence, in order to put a problem on the agenda, to thus disturb this equilibrium, the existence of a problem must be justified. Justifying policy problems, therefore, must be understood as giving reason as to why an issue must be put on the agenda as a problem. Expertise or scientific reason as such is not sufficient to put a problem on the agenda. Actors need to actively frame and interpret expertise and scientific knowledge to justify a specific solution of a problem. In other words, expertise is never neutral; its meaning must be constructed.

## **Socialisation**

While constructivists use the initial embeddedness of actors to explain policy actors' positions and preference formation, one of the core concepts of constructivism, 'socialisation', helps us to understand how and why actors' positions and policy preferences may change over time. Socialisation occurs when norms, world views, collective understandings are internalised, and subsequently codified by a group of actors (Risse 2004). Similar professional backgrounds and the role of professional organisations in spreading mutual understanding of policy problems and solutions are important in this context (Knill and Balint 2008).

Based on this assumption, constructivists argue that constitutive dynamics of social learning, socialisation, routinisation and normative diffusion, all of which address fundamental issues of agent identity and preferences, are not adequately captured by strategic exchange or other models adhering to strict forms of methodological individualism (Checkel 1999, 2005). For instance, in order to understand why a majority of decisions in the European Union, both in the European Council and Council of Ministers, but also

in the European Parliament is taken by consensus or based on a large majority, research must concentrate on the influence that the collective acceptance of certain standards of behaviour exerts on the policymaking processes (Checkel 2001; Tallberg 2002; Wincott 2004; Hooghe 2005; Beyers 2005; Lewis 2005, 2008; Zeitlin 2016). Another example refers to the alleged democratic deficit at the EU level, which became a problem once the professionals of representation, that is, EU member state representatives and members of the European Parliament, framed the dissatisfaction of citizens as a legitimacy problem (see Saurugger 2010). Through continuous interaction, actors within groups of actors share a number of common values, which, in turn, influence their positions in decision-making processes.

Socialisation approaches are also used to explain why the judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) have encountered so relatively little resistance at the domestic level (see also Saurugger and Terpan 2017). The high degree of compliance with CJEU judgments is surprising, given that the EU, contrary to the US Supreme Court, cannot send federal marshals to go face to face with state officials who refuse to comply with the law. The CJEU's judicial mechanisms, although deeply integrated, remain partially inspired by international law, and hence the acceptance of its jurisprudence is dependent on national courts. A constructivist legal approach to socialisation posits that the degree to which national courts accept CJEU rulings depends on their perception of it as a court. Such an understanding depends largely on what the national courts consider to be the constraints of judicial legitimacy. As such, the legal training specific to lawyers in each member state, as well as the specific historic role of the court within a particular society, affect how the judges react to EU law (Bobek 2008).

According to a constructivist understanding, the Court has managed to become an influential actor participating in the government of the European Union not because it is legally authorised to interpret law, but through the strong interpersonal relations between national and European judges as well as their participation in the same professional associations (Alter 2009; Vauchez 2014). For this reason, constructivists argue, it is impossible to study European law separately from the study of the lawyers who produce this law. Rational choice approaches are thus considered to be insufficient for understanding the influence of law and CJEU judgments on the domestic level: the social and national background of lawyers and their legal training must be analysed in order to explain the symbolic power of the European legal system and thus the European judicial system as such.

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

The second advantage is the ability to integrate one of the major challenges of research concentrating on contemporary governance systems, that is, thinking about the multitude of levels where reality is constructed – by the individual, the group to which it belongs, the media or, more generally, the messages that are transmitted on several levels: locally, regionally, nationally, or more internationally.

However, one question that remains unanswered is why, if the socialisation process leads to a common understanding of an issue, do a large number of bargaining processes still seem not to be based on a shared understanding of the problem, although actors cooperate over long periods of time? Is the explanation linked to the level of analysis? In other words, why is it that we can observe socialisation processes in the European Union, in which common world views are constructed in only small and very technical groups, whereas intergovernmental bargaining remains focused on national collective understandings?

If the socialisation of actors adds a dynamic aspect to the study of policymaking as it explains the transformation of policy preferences and positions through interaction, the question of how a policy problem makes it on the agenda and how it is transformed into a public policy is addressed by the mechanism of framing.

### **Framing**

From the earliest constructivist studies on public policy onwards, *framing* of policy issues and their transformation into legitimate problems was a central feature. Cobb and Elder (1971) focused on the conditions, which obstruct propagation as well as those that enable the resolution of a problem. The authors attached particular importance to the language used, to the mobilisation of symbols and to the generalisation of rhetoric. Associating a problem to a long tradition of conflicts, for instance, constitutes one of the strategies that individuals develop to expand conflict. Therefore, the process by which actors develop and manage to impose a definition of a problem perceived as legitimate, or in other words, 'frame' an issue, is a key factor to analyse in policy studies. Hence the central question of policymaking for constructivists is not 'Who gets what, when and how?' but how one frames one's needs. Starting with Goffman's understanding of framing in social interactions (Goffman 1974), the puzzle of framing has attracted a broad variety of studies in social sciences (see Daviter, Chapter 5, this volume). Framing is generally considered as, either, *frames in thought*, consisting of the mental representations, interpretations, and simplifications of reality, or *frames in communication*, consisting of the communication of frames between different actors (Jobert 1998). Framing, however, can be also seen as a strategic undertaking. Framing an issue in such a way that it speaks to the largest possible number of actors and constructing a compromise around it, is considered by Nicolas Jabko (2006) as the most convincing explanation of the construction of the single market. This aspect of constructivist policy analysis leads us to an actor-centred approach, which the chapter addresses below.

The concept of framing is also crucial for helping us to understand the legitimisation strategies actors pursue in policymaking processes. This is important, as constructivists argue that more than the search for functional efficiency, the main logic of action guiding organisational behaviour is to increase the legitimacy of the organisational environment. The influence of ideas, of 'world views', of 'ways of seeing things', of frames, or more generally, of representations, are at the centre of these approaches. In this sense, public policy is understood as the result of the interaction between individuals whose interests are not only based on a rational cost-benefit calculation, but must be understood as something that is embedded in specific social representations, values and norms in which the actor evolves. General constructivist approaches of public policy aim at helping us to

understand why some proposals have more legitimacy in a debate than others at certain moments:

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

Studying the justification process used to transform an issue into a problem is a central issue in constructivist public policy approaches. According to this understanding, the justification process is influenced through the cognitive and normative frames available to policy actors. 'Actors always perceive the world through a lens consisting of their pre-existing beliefs (Sabatier 1998, p. 109). While the question whether or not Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) entirely falls under the constructivist heading remains controversial,<sup>1</sup> the use of actors' beliefs in his framework is helpful to explain the importance of the embeddedness of actors' preferences. Pre-existing beliefs, as Sabatier calls them, are not homogeneous, however. When conflict occurs amongst actors within these frames, as well as amongst actors who have adopted different frames in negotiations leading to public policies, the debate about which issue to put on the agenda commences. Hence, conflicts allow us to explain why policies change. While normative frames in which actors are embedded continuously exist, this embeddedness does not lead to a situation in which policies do not change. Even incremental change is based on conflict between different cognitive frames, which justify the importance of a specific issue being put onto the agenda.

This understanding of ideas and cognitive frames allows the legitimation of public policies to be conceptualised differently from rational choice approaches. The legitimacy of a policy problem thus is no longer an absolute value but must be understood in light of a permanent framing process in which different ideas about legitimacy confront each other: the legitimacy of public policies is, in reality, a process of legitimation of public policies (Jobert and Muller 1987). This research field has gained in importance since the beginning of the 1990s, when the debate on citizens' disenchantment with politics became increasingly salient. However, cognitive frames are not only out there – they must be used as strategic tools in order to have an impact on the agenda-setting process. Blyth (2002) and Jabko (2006), for example, have convincingly shown how European social democratic and liberal parties as well as EU elites defend their hierarchy of problems in framing these hierarchies, based on a series of data. Constructivism has developed tools to understand how justification occurs through the study of the social construction of expertise: indicators, statistics, peer review schemes or benchmarking. This allows us to distinguish how actors justify which problems should be addressed, and which should not.

## OVERCOMING LIMITS BY COMBINING CONSTRUCTIVISM AND STRATEGIC THINKING

Constructivist approaches have shed new light onto policymaking in the EU in insisting on the embeddedness of actors in the construction of problems and solutions, socialisation of agents through interaction and the influence of specific cognitive frames of actors in policymaking processes more generally. Policy actors are constantly embedded in cognitive frames, which guide their actions and define their preferences. Ideational factors frame the understanding of material factors (for an in-depth debate of this ‘intellectual topography of ideational explanations’, see Gofas and Hay 2010, p. 3). These ideational factors shed light on the influence of ‘world views’, mechanisms of identity formation, and principles of action in public policy analysis (Hall 1993; McNamara 1998; Surel 2000; Blyth 2002; Parsons 2003; Jabko 2006).

Concentrating on embeddedness, socialisation and cognitive frames, however, leads to a situation where actors are implicitly perceived as passive individuals. Deborah Stone’s understanding of cognitive frames sheds light on how well constructivist public policy approaches could deal with the strategic use of these frames and ideas:

I believe our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas; those ideas in turn are created, changed and fought over in politics. I will show that political actors use narrative story lines and symbolic devices to manipulate so-called issue characteristics, all the while making it seem as though they are simply describing facts. (Stone 1989, p. 282)

Since the end of the 1990s, a group of scholars has attempted to address this implicit blind spot. The term *implicit* refers to the fact that most of the approaches discussed above include actors’ usages of ideas, but give the impression that most of the time actors are thinking and acting only along previously created cognitive frames. Whilst these researchers agree with the general constructivist assumption on the fact that the individual ideas and beliefs of an actor are constructed, they emphasise the importance of taking into account *how specific actors use these ideas* (see Saurugger 2013). The central question to which the so-called actor-centred constructivism seeks to find an answer is to understand how precisely ideas and cognitive frames count in policy outcomes. Mark Blyth argues in this respect that constructivist perspectives have for too long opposed interests, preferences and ideas and considered them to be radically different and unrelated concepts (Blyth 2002; see also McNamara 2006).

How do ideas frame preferences, then, and how can one understand the practices of actors and more generally the policymaking process as a whole? When and why for example, do European public officials evoke the neoliberal paradigm in their messages and when and why does this idea not find its way into official documents and discourse? These questions lead to identifying the agents who pay attention to certain ideas and not to others, as well as the reasons why certain decisions are made at a specific period and not at another (Zahariadis 2008). In other words:

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

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

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

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

However, the difficulty of showing the empirical influence of ideas remains. One of the problems is to be found in the dichotomic (Janus-faced) nature of ideas (Parsons 2002). Sometimes, the beliefs of actors guide their actions and sometimes perceived beliefs only rationalise strategies that can be chosen for other reasons. Empirically distinguishing between the two situations remains difficult.

Actor-centred constructivism introduces sociological methods, concentrating on the study of individual actors or groups of actors, which are aimed to help in the understanding of the power games that take place between actors in public policy. Craig Parsons (2003), in particular, argues that, in order to observe the influence of ideas, it is crucial to consider the agenda-setting power of the actor in question. In his analysis of the success of integration ideology in relation to the confederal or intergovernmental model developed by the ‘founding fathers’ of European integration, Parsons offers a micro-sociological study of French debates on this issue as well as of the interactions between European partners in the 1950s.

The analysis of the intensified European economic regional integration process, starting from the 1980s, uses a similar research design (Jabko 2006). Here European integration is studied from the angle of economic governance. The observation is based on the dual economic and political change in Europe and on the definition of a political strategy of ‘market gain’ developed by European actors and, in particular, the European Commission. This strategy is based on the idea of a common market, a concept which is sufficiently multi-tasking to bring together all the European actors’ ideologies around a single project: the construction of the single market and the

Economic and Monetary Union, the driving force behind the European Commission's political strategy. This 'silent revolution' in Europe over time brought together a broad coalition of European actors. Through the use of, what he calls 'strategic constructivism', Jabko (2006) emphasises two paradoxical aspects of the European Union: the parallel emergence of intergovernmental economic governance, and the strengthening of powers at the European level. According to Jabko, the European Union is not just a marketing tool serving neoliberal ideologies. The European Commission is an active agent developing a specific understanding of neoliberalism, not as a homogeneous paradigm but a discursive notion allowing for different interpretations and strategies guiding economic policies.

Actor-centred constructivism, and more precisely 'strategic constructivism', attempts to tackle critiques expressed by opponents of constructivist approaches focusing, on the one hand, on who the carriers of ideas and norms are, and on the other, how their power relations shape the policy outcomes under scrutiny. Economically rationalist thinking is brought back into the analysis and linked to the use actors make of these ideas. Agents are purposeful actors, embedded in ideational structures, which they use according to their interests. Hence policies are not simply a translation of beliefs or cognitive frames. The translation requires the exercise of power, and we therefore need to understand how power is distributed amongst policy actors.

As I have argued elsewhere (Saurugger 2013), actor-centred constructivism allows us to deal particularly well with two issues which arise from this understanding and that we can find in EU policymaking in particular: on the one hand, the complexity of policymaking processes and, on the other, legitimation issues.

The combination of a constructivist and rationalist research design makes actor-centred or 'strategic' constructivist perspectives particularly interesting in public policy studies aimed at explaining a multi-level system such as the EU. As in public policy generally, actors often lack a clear and well-articulated set of preferences in policy processes, and have contradictory preferences, which are embedded in specific values and world views.

While these characteristics are central elements in the analysis of the *complexity* of contemporary societies in general, the notion of complexity seen by actor-centred constructivists goes beyond the difference in positions or interests. While these differences undoubtedly exist, these scholars question the origin of these differences and find them in different world views of social groups. Contemporary social systems, which are both agents of social change through public policies and addressees of these changes, are characterised through functional differentiation. Agents evolve in different subsystems at the same time and their interests are therefore influenced by a multitude of values and ideas. All constructivist perspectives seem, at first sight, particularly apt to address the problems of issue complexity that arise in contemporary systems of governance, and more particularly in the EU, because they aim at uncovering rather than to assume material rationality of policy agents in their research. Actor-centred constructivism, however, has allowed for reintroducing tools that address the question why, under certain circumstances, some policy solutions win, whereas others lose. They argue that higher institutional complexity gives rise to potential conflict, in which a high number of actors with overlapping and often conflicting competencies increase the possibility of power struggles for the control of agendas and resources. Actor-centred constructivists insist on the fact that ideas, world

views or norms do not exist independently of the users of these ideas and the institutional conditions in which they are embedded. Thus world views, norms or ideas, 'do not float freely' as Thomas Risse-Kappen (1994) has so pertinently observed.

Beyond the treatment of the complexity of social systems, actor-centred constructivist approaches are equally useful to explain *legitimation* strategies actors pursue in policy-making processes, as they put power struggles amongst actors up front in their analysis (Blyth 1997). Constructivist public policy approaches have addressed this issue, as we have seen above, but they have often done so implicitly. This is important for public policy studies in the EU, as in both political and academic debates the question of legitimate and accountable governance in the European Union becomes an ever more crucial issue. While debates on legitimate policy choices were confined to an elite circle before the mid-1990s, and, since the 1950s, occupied particularly federalist institutional thinking (Burgess 2000; Nicolaidis and Howse 2001), legitimising policy choices became an increasingly salient issue after the Maastricht Treaty.

This conceptualisation does not exclude behaviour based on cost and benefit analysis. However, this attitude only occurs when actors have chosen the instruments available to them in order to pursue a specific objective. Again, and this seems somewhat circular, these objectives, however, are influenced through cognitive and normative frames available to them. These norms or cognitive frames are not homogeneous. Conflict amongst actors within these frames constantly occurs, as well as amongst actors who have adopted different frames in negotiations leading to public policies. These conflicts thus allow us to explain why policies change, instead of insisting on their normative embeddedness and their ensuing static character.

Seen under this light, legitimacy thus is no longer an absolute value but must be understood in light of a permanent framing process in which different ideas about legitimacy confront each other, as this chapter has pointed out earlier.

## CONCLUSION

Constructivist approaches in public policy have allowed looking into a number of blind spots in European policy studies, such as the question of how to explain policy change when power relations between member states have not changed. How is the resilience of the liberal paradigm in economic policy decisions at the European level explained? To what extent does the socialisation of member state representatives, Commission civil servants or European judges influence policy outcomes? Why do certain policy solutions win over others, or how are policy problems constructed?

This chapter has shown which theoretical mechanisms were used by constructivist scholars to answer these questions convincingly. It has, however, also identified a series of limits linked to the fact that the concentration on the sociological and cognitive embeddedness of actors sometimes leads constructivists to ignore the underlying and often decisive power struggles between actors and their continued capacity to use ideas strategically. In the last section, this chapter discussed to what extent actor-centred constructivist approaches manage to overcome these limits.

At the moment of publication of this volume, there is a widely shared understanding that the European Union experiences a series of important crises: the ongoing economic and

financial crisis, a refugee crisis and the *Brexit* vote of British citizens. Constructivist public policy approaches have a particular capacity to explain how these crises have been framed, perceived and used by policy actors. For instance constructing the refugee crisis as a crisis of the EU's external border has very different implications (like fighting illegal boat migration) compared to a discourse that stresses the moral and legal responsibility of the EU to protect refugees and to create safe channels for protection (cf. Münch, Chapter 17, this volume). While the explanatory power of constructivism to explain the influence of ideas and paradigms on the framing of policy solutions applied to the economic and financial crisis – those defended by supranational institutions, national governments and non-state actors more generally – is high, the reciprocal influence between domestic level politics and European level negotiations seems so far relatively uncharted territory for constructivist public policy approaches. More recent actor-centred constructivist frames aim however at addressing the multi-level complexity of EU policymaking in concentrating on elite policy actors. In a time where public opinions become increasingly influential in EU decision-making, however, they must yet develop tools to include these numerous public opinions to understand to what extent aggregate public moods at the domestic level influence the embeddedness of European policy actors and their capacity to use ideas strategically.

## NOTE

1. See for instance Frank Fischer (2003, p. 94) who understands the ACF as a 'rigorous call for the rejuvenation of the empiricist research agenda in policy studies'.

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