# FLOOR

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, LAND POLICY, AND GLOBAL SOCIAL RIGHTS

Moritz von Gliszczynski

# Ideas and Discourse in Policy Research
## Applying a Constructivist Approach on the Global Level

Principal investigators:

Benjamin Davy (School of Spatial Planning, TU Dortmund University),
Ulrike Davy (Faculty of Law, University of Bielefeld), and
Lutz Leisering (Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld)

**www.floorgroup.de**

## Table of Contents

## Moritz von Gliszczynski

Research Assistant / Doctoral Candidate (FLOOR Project: Social Cash Transfers)
Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld
E-Mail: moritz.gliszczynski@uni-bielefeld.de

Moritz von Gliszczynski was born and grew up in Bonn (Germany). He graduated from Bielefeld University as *Diplomsoziologe* in 2010. During his studies he spent 3 months as an intern at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) in Brussels where he worked on social innovation and the after-effects of the global financial crisis. His research interests include global and national social policy, comparative welfare state research, social assistance, poverty and social inequality. Since September 2010, Moritz von Gliszczynski is research assistant in the FLOOR research project *Social Cash Transfers – The Global Construction and Diffusion of the Right to a Monetary Minimum* and member of the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology. The working title of his doctoral thesis is *Global Discourses on Social Cash Transfers* (supervisor: Professor Lutz Leisering).

# FLOOR
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, LAND POLICY, AND GLOBAL SOCIAL RIGHTS

# 1 Introduction

Scholars seeking an approach that emphasises the role of knowledge or ideas in political science are faced with a bewildering array of choices (Béland and Cox 2011:6–8). Various scholars claim to have developed a theory that gives ideas their proper place and meaning. Indeed, the role of ideas is an issue that has long been contested, following the supposed inability of objectivist approaches to adequately explain the process of political decision-making and policy change (see Yee 1996 for an early discussion). Currently the dispute seems to have moved from the question *if* ideas matter at all to *how* they matter in political processes (Mehta 2011). This, however, has led to little theoretical clarification in the field; many problems remain unresolved, e.g. how ideas should be conceptualized, how they exert causal influence on policy or how they relate to other causal factors. Nevertheless, there is evidently some common ground between the different approaches, which may serve as a bridge to other disciplines, such as sociology.

This, however, leads to two further problems: Virtually all eminent scholars limit their research to the national level, or, at most, the level of international comparison. In addition, research on the role of ideas in the specific field of global social policy is exceedingly rare. Thus, any researcher wanting to examine the role of knowledge or ideas in global social policy is at a loss. No body of work examines whether any existing "nationalist" approach can be applied to the global level. This is problematic, because it should not be assumed that ideas play the same role in a stable national state with a clear governmental centre of power as in the highly fragmented global political community, where many actors lack the ability to exercise "hard" power and focus on "soft" power instead, which entails a greater role for rhetoric and political discourse (Nye 2004). In fact, eminent scholars have already pointed out that the production and dissemination of knowledge can be an important aspect of political power on the global level (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1999). Consequently, it can be assumed that ideas have, at the very least, a greater role to play on the global level, if not a qualitatively different one.

For these reasons, this working paper offers a short overview of existing ideational approaches in political science. I begin by summarising eminent approaches from a sociological perspective, contrasting the term "idea" with a sociological concept of discourse. In the second section, I attempt to determine the common conceptual ground between the different ideational approaches. To conclude, I present a tentative attempt to apply these shared concepts on the global level, in combination with world society theory and sociological discourse analysis.

# 2 Ideational Approaches and discourse

As mentioned above, ideational approaches in general are portrayed as an attempt to balance out the shortcomings of objectivist approaches such as rational choice (Campbell 2002:21–22). The integration of "ideas" as a factor in explanatory models reintroduced constructivist thought without fully replacing the objectivist roots

of most approaches; in fact current scholars tend to criticise each other for not truly leaving "materialism" (i.e. objectivism) behind (e.g., Gofas and Hay 2010b) or are trying to establish a specific perspective as the defining constructivist approach (Hay 2011; Schmidt 2011). In spite of this, all approaches share some basal assumptions: The fact that ideas have some degree of independent causal influence is usually taken for granted. Furthermore, objectivist concepts such as interests and institutions are usually considered as stronger causal factors than ideas. From a perspective of modern sociology, this discipline-specific discussion seems confusing. Current sociological thought is characterised by a basal constructivism and there is not much conflict about the degree of objectivism in different approaches (Compare Nassehi 2008, esp. p. 25). In the following, I will review the defining features of three eminent ideational approaches – namely *discursive institutionalism* and two variants of *historical institutionalism* – in order to find out which of their concepts may be useful for a sociological analysis of policy. Institutionalist scholars dominate in the field of ideational approaches, and much of the confusing variety in concepts, causal models, research strategies etc. can be traced back to their contributions – indeed, Peters identifies no less than seven variants of institutionalism (Peters 2005). However, the most characteristic approaches are either ideational reformulations of *historical institutionalism* (predominantly Béland 2009), or are trying to integrate elements of *rational choice* and *historical institutionalism* into a new approach (e.g. Blyth 2002). Schmidt's *discursive institutionalism* stands apart in so far as it is the only approach in this tradition which explicitly focuses on a concept of "discourse" (Schmidt 2011).

By their own account, these scholars introduce ideas into their explanatory frameworks to deal with institutional or political change as well as with the origin and content of political decisions (Blyth 2002:8; Schmidt 2008:304; Béland 2005b:29). Nevertheless they still retain the causal factors of material interests and institutional structure, which are the defining features of the older institutionalist approaches; thus, an universally shared point of inquiry is how an interaction between the three factors of ideas, institutions and interests influences the political process and which relative weight each factor should be given (Béland 2005b:35; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004:184; Blyth 2002:44). However, it quickly becomes evident that ideational scholars do not conceptualize this interaction as a balanced concurrence of the factors. Even though ideas are generally attributed with potential causal influence, the other factors are often thought to prevail, except under very specific circumstances.

Blyth gives a particularly characteristic example of this perspective with his conception of "uncertainty" (Blyth 2001:3, Blyth 2002:8–11), which is also echoed by Béland (Béland 2009:704–705). The gist of his position is that ideas will actually mirror existing social structures as long as institutional stability is maintained. In such a situation the institutional order and the interests actors derive out of it are implied to determine policy choices, while ideas do not play a role. However, as soon as a crisis destabilises the given institutional order, actors become "uncertain" of their own interests, and employ ideas to interpret their situation, delegitimise the old order and construct a new set of stable institutions (Blyth

2002:37–41). In short, ideas only have an independent causal effect in a phase of confusion, i.e. "uncertainty" in between two stable institutional equilibria. This is by no means implausible, Blyth actually gives more space to ideas in other aspects: Both crises and interests are conceptualized as the product of ideas, or, in other words, as social constructions.

Nevertheless, Blyth's approach to ideas still appears unsatisfactory from a sociological perspective. On the one hand ideas are incorporated into strict causal models, while much of modern sociology prefers an interpretative or "constitutive" logic of explanation (compare Gofas and Hay 2010a:15–16). On the other hand, Blyth's treatment of ideas seems inconsistent. While he explicitly criticises the strict "materialism" of his predecessors and recasts both crises and "material" interests themselves as social constructions, ideas in general are only meant to matter to policy in extraordinary, irregular and ultimately bounded spans of time. In general, it seems puzzling that Blyth defines all three of his causal factors as social constructions but partially removes one, i.e. ideas, from his causal model. He neither elaborates upon his assertion that crises, the precondition for ideational influence, are also social constructions, nor reflects that "uncertainty" may also be constructed. I would argue that Blyth is lacking a concept that describes the wider orders of knowledge into which different types of social constructions are embedded. This would enable him to clarify the interrelations between interests, institutions and ideas and thus potential differences in their effects upon policy. "Discourse" is a potential candidate for such an overarching concept, as the term circumscribes dynamic orders of knowledge in their reproduction and transformation over time.

While there are modern approaches to discourse analysis in sociology, Schmidt productively employs the term in political science. She employs a concept of "discourse" that signifies "both a set of policy ideas and values and an interactive process of policy construction and communication." (Schmidt 2002:210). In Schmidt's own words: "The difference between scholars who use the term discourse and those who limit themselves to ideas is primarily one of emphasis." (Schmidt 2008:306). In fact, this concept of discourse as "a set of ideas" allows her to examine the relations between different ideas, including possible internal contradictions of a discourse (Schmidt 2002:227–230) or its embedding into a wider context of social knowledge (id., 215).

However, Schmidt's concept of discourse still contains many of the fundamental assumptions of ideational approaches in political science, and therefore does not fully exploit the potential of the term. First and foremost, discourse, in spite of being more complex a concept than ideas, is still thought to be only one possible *causal factor* besides interests and institutions (Schmidt 2002:212; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004:184; Schmidt 2011:62). Secondly, discourse is only thought to have an independent causal effect on policy under specific conditions, otherwise just reflecting institutional structures, the self-interest of powerful actors or fixed cultural norms. Schmidt joins Blyth in diagnosing external crises as the events which open up the opportunity for discursive influence (Schmidt 2002:225, 251). Admittedly her conception is somewhat more complex: An external crisis leads to a crisis

in the policy discourse, which is then changed, resulting in new policy – as long as the new discourse is actually able to overcome the mentioned structural factors. Ultimately, however, a condition of uncertainty is necessary to make discourse significant (ibid.). Again, there is no systematic explanation of when and how uncertainty appears; puzzlingly enough, Schmidt does not reflect upon Blyth's assertion that a crisis in itself is a social construction, even though she is evidently aware of his work (see, for instance the references in Schmidt 2008). What is more, interests are also seen as being objectively determined, in clear contrast to Blyth (Schmidt 2002:252).

One further point concerning discourse should be clarified: The term "discourse" is understood very differently in the strand of political science discussed above and the post-modern research tradition of discourse analysis originated by Foucault. This difference hinges on the interest in wider, more abstract orders of knowledge. Schmidt's definition of discourse, for instance, essentially means a string of interconnected political arguments that can actually be "owned" and strategically applied by a single person, which comes close to the colloquial usage of the term (compare Schmidt 2002:215). Therefore, the arguments or ideas themselves are taken as given – the scope of research does not encompass the wider universe of knowledge from which they result.

Sociological discourse analysis – especially Keller's sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) – in contrast, specifies that "discourse" is an abstract, overarching structure of ideas, which embodies and produces certain interpretations of the world (Keller 2008:205, 235-236). Such typical ideas are held by actors who reproduce them in single discursive statements (e.g. newspaper articles, political speeches, scientific texts); however, no single discourse is fully contained in any single statement. Any given text is likely to contain a combination of different parts from various discourses, integrated to produce a certain meaning. The scope of research is generally the in-depth, holistic interpretation of one single discourse as the background for certain superficially identifiable ideas (even though SKAD emphasises the interaction between different discourses in a given social or political field, see Keller 2008:239).

These two research strategies, while certainly both legitimate, will evidently produce widely different results. While Schmidt's approach will result in a dense description of the strategic interaction between political actors (via ideas), discourse analysis rather focuses on understanding the ideational background of such processes. I assert that a "middle road" between these two strategies is most useful if the main research interest is clarifying the cognitive and cultural background of global policies: As mentioned above, the global political process is mostly limited to rhetoric and the exchange of ideas. As long as research strictly focuses on the global level of actors, it will not include the implementation of these ideas, i.e. the confrontation of rhetoric talk with political action. Simply describing the development of different strands of argumentation, i.e. discourses in Schmidt's definition, does not seem wholly satisfying, as this would just result in a re-narration of the globally constructed policies – whose substantial political consequences are not always clear (see the remarks on "hard" and "soft" power above).

It seems more interesting to examine how certain political ideas are actually produced and relate to each other in the wider universe of knowledge. The main goal of such a global political analysis would be to examine how various policies are produced from a background of world cultural discourses, and what consequences this may have for their structure. How actors deliberately utilise or even attempt to modify parts of that background to advance their political ideas would be of particular interest. Such a "background centred analysis" would profit from the "deep" approach to discourse offered by discourse analysis. At the same time, it is important to keep the analysis closer to the actual policies than the classical Foucauldian approach, which tends to under-emphasise agency in favour of broad trends in shared knowledge (compare Foucault 1974). Keller's SKAD offers a way out of this dilemma, as his approach ties an analysis of discourse to a sociological concept of actorhood and the strategic usage of discourse to advance certain interpretations of the world, or "knowledge politics" (Keller 2008:186, 193). Discursive institutionalism, in turn, points out that such processes are shaped by their (institutional) context, which determines the access to legitimate speaking positions and other important resources as well as the form which discursive statements must have to be successfully heard (Schmidt 2008:312–313; see above for the requirements of cognitive and normative legitimacy).

Therefore, I contend that the difference between the concepts of "discourse" and "idea" is more than "one of emphasis", at least from the perspective of sociology. Firstly, discourse is not thought to be a causal factor among others as is common with ideas. Instead, discourses are defined as social structures which "constitute social realities of phenomena" (Keller 2005:7–8). There is no precondition for this ultimately constant process of constitution. As mentioned above, this precludes a causal logic of explanation in favour of an interpretative logic that traces the processes of constitution.

Secondly, Interests, institutions, crises and (policy) ideas can all be counted among the social phenomena constituted by discourses. As Schmidt says discourses are "sets of ideas" or social constructions; since "social construction" is a very open concept, the differentiation between different factors that is common in ideational scholarship is not necessary. While it may still be productive to discern different types of construction, their interaction is seen as more balanced, and there is no preconceived notion that one type is less important.

Thirdly, a concept of discourse as a set of social construction emphasises both the connections between different constructions ideas and the interactive process of their construction. These two aspects – interrelations and modes of construction – constitute discourses as structures in their own right, which are more than the sum of the ideas they contain (Keller 2008:235–236). These issues seem to be under-emphasised in research on ideas, which are rather seen as isolated factors whose genesis is not analysed closely.

In sum, I suggest that there is a qualitative difference between ideational research and sociological discourse analysis: Both the associated mode of explanation and the theoretical background of the concepts are much different. Schmidt's approach represents a compromise between the two strands of research. On the

one hand, it includes a concept of discourse that is not far removed from sociological discourse analysis, in so far as it revolves around interrelated ideas and communication. On the other hand, a causal logic of explanation is preferred and not all involved factors are seen as social constructions. To conclude, *discursive institutionalism* (Schmidt 2008) implies that the ideational strand of research is compatible with discourse analysis, at least to a certain extent. It remains to be seen which concepts from political science can be productively incorporated into a sociological analysis on the global level – see section 3 for my attempt at such a combination.

Before reviewing useful concepts from ideational research, I would like to briefly discuss Béland's ideational extension of *historical institutionalism*, as he is the only ideational scholar who focuses on social policy (Béland 2005a). Much like his peers, he sees ideas as a causal factor besides interest and institutions and specifies "uncertainty" as a precondition for their influence (Béland 2009:702, 707). However, he points out one particular point of interest: Since most modern social programmes are connected to significant vested interests, the introduction of new political ideas should be particularly dependent upon "framing", i.e. the presentation of such ideas to the public (Béland 2005a:13). Whether this insight is applicable to the level of global social policy is doubtful, since no global actor is directly responsible for any kind of welfare system or directly dependent upon a democratic constituency (compare Deacon 2009).

# 3 Types and functions of ideas

In my opinion, two major field of discussion from the literature on ideas have further potential. On the one hand, most scholars in the field employ a typology of different ideas. On the other hand, these ideas are attributed with different functions (see Campbell 1998, Campbell 2002 for a review of the literature).

The first strand of discussion can be traced back to Halls classic treatment of policy paradigms, which includes a differentiation between policy change on three different levels of abstraction: the parameters of policy instruments, the instruments themselves, and the overarching political goals and worldviews (Hall 1993). In general these levels of abstraction are present in most typologies of ideas, and there is some agreement on their specific qualities and impact on policy, even though the actual terms used may differ.

The lowest level, which Hall identifies with the operational parameters of established policy instruments, however, is rarely examined. In contrast, the middle level of abstraction is most often the focus of interest, and a variety of terms is used to describe it. Ideas on this level are often thought to be "blueprints" (Blyth 2001:3), "programmatic ideas" (Campbell 1998:386) or "policy solutions" (Mehta 2011:28), which contain specific programmes of action to solve a political problem. On this level, research focuses on the question why a particular solution came to be implemented instead of rival ideas (id., 28-34). At that highest level, scholars usually talk about a set of general ideas, assumptions and norms such as a "dis-

course" (Schmidt 2002:210), a "zeitgeist" (Mehta 2011:40–42), or a "paradigm" (Hall 1993:279), that contain the very goals of policy and constitute the basic worldview of political actors – including basic causal relationships and problem definitions. Ideational approaches have, in addition, pointed out that the political/ social problems which motivate solutions are not to be taken as given, but are themselves a matter of social construction; thus "problem definitions" have become a further field of study (see e.g. Blyth 2002:37–38; Béland 2009:701–702; Mehta 2011:32). While these definitions are clearly more abstract than programmatic ideas and the like, and determine which solutions are at all seen as acceptable (Mehta 2011:32–40), I find it difficult to place them on the highest level of abstraction, since they do not constitute fundamental worldviews. Therefore I posit that it makes sense to see "problem definitions" as a bridging concepts between the high and middle level of abstraction, which serve to clarify worldviews on tangible examples so that they can inspire actual political programmes.

Aside from the levels of abstraction derived from Hall the basic distinction between "cognitive" and "normative" ideas is often employed (Campbell 1998:384; Schmidt 2008:306–307). Cognitive ideas are thought to specify cause-and-effect relationship in the world, while normative ideas are variously defined as values, attitudes or assumptions. The sets of ideas at the highest level of abstraction are often meant to contain both types, but some authors like Campbell do differentiate between paradigms as cognitive worldviews and (e.g.) "public sentiments" as sets of overarching norms (Campbell 1998:389–394). Ideas on the level of "programmatic ideas" and the like, however, are evidently thought to be purely cognitive. The main difference between these two types is their respective function for policy: While cognitive ideas legitimize policies by showing that they are politically rational, i.e. will effectively produce certain effects, normative ideas show that they are appropriate, i.e. that their effects are at all desirable.

This points out that the first strand of discussion is often conflated with the second one, which deals with the functions of ideas in the political process. Indeed, there is some confusing overlap, as problem definition, for instance, is sometimes a type of idea (see above) and sometimes a function that ideas fulfil (e.g. Béland 2007:125). Nonetheless, three major – and distinct – functions can be identified: First the shaping of actors perceptions by social constructions which determine the range of viable ideas, second the enabling of political action by social constructions which act as focal points for political organization, and third the (de)legitimization of policy solutions by publicly relating them to other important social constructions.

Regarding the first function, terms such as "cognitive locking" (Blyth 2001:4–5) or "cognitive filters" (Hay 2011:69) are used. The exact mechanisms remain unclear, but the main point is that the ideas which actors hold lead them to interpret their environment in a specific way. Comparing the two terms, Blyth's concept of "cognitive locking", seems relatively deterministic, as it mostly serves to shift the explanation of path dependency from institutional regimes to sets of ideas. "Cognitive filtering", in contrast, inherently implies a greater degree of flexibility than "locking"; in fact, Hay is specifically interested in the way "cognitive filters" may

change and be contested by agents, while Blyth wants to show how ideas reproduce the existing institutional order. Problem definitions are closely associated with this function, since they constrain the range of policy solutions considered viable (Mehta 2011, see above).

The second function is usually rather implied in terms such as "blueprint" than named specifically. As mentioned before, ideas at the middle level of abstraction are often thought to contain political plans of action. Institutionalist authors such as Blyth and Béland make it clear that such plans not only provide political goals but function as rallying points for actors to organize themselves and take action towards those goals (Blyth 2001:3; Béland 2007:125).

The third function is described in various ways. Firstly the legitimization of policy is seen as a basic function (Schmidt 2002:210); secondly processes of "framing" are widely discussed (Campbell 2002:26–28; Béland 2005a:12); thirdly ideas are thought to function as "ideological weapons" (Blyth 2001:4; Béland 2009:704–705). I have already pointed out how legitimization is generally supposed to function in the distinction between cognitive and normative ideas above. Processes of framing are generally used to describe how specific policy ideas are presented to the public to legitimize their implementation. To this end, political actors creatively and strategically put them in to "frames" of socially accepted ideas and thus attempt to create support (Béland 2005a:10–11; Campbell 1998:394). How the repertoires of ideas which frame policy proposal are composed is somewhat contested: While the term "framing" originally rather referred to processes of normative legitimization (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:897; Campbell 1998:394), Campbell writes that "frames" consist of both cognitive and normative ideas (Campbell 2002:26). I suggest that this is more feasible, as there seems to be no discernible reason to believe that a political actor would portray an idea as rationally viable but not as normatively appropriate (or vice versa).

The function of ideas as "weapons" is close to such framing processes, but describes how they can serve to *de*legitimize existing institutional arrangements or policy (Blyth 2001:4; Béland 2005a:12). In general, this should be connected to framing processes, since striving for the implementation of a policy may very well include both its positive framing and the demonstration that rivaling or established ideas are neither viable nor appropriate, i.e. a negative framing. The use of ideas as weapons is not described in great detail, but I suggest that it may be similar to framing in so far as it also involves putting established policies into the context of socially accepted ideas, with the important difference that it is demonstrated how they *clash* with that frame, not how they *harmonize* with it. Overall, the functions of positive or negative framing are not assigned to any specific type of idea: All levels of abstraction from paradigms and discourse to problem definitions and blueprints can have use in framing a specific policy idea.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the literature on ideas and policy shares some useful conceptual tools, in spite of the mentioned fragmentation. These concepts promise to be useful for a sociological approach, but two problems remains: None of the discussed scholars has worked on the global level of society, and only Béland has offered sparing insight on the field of social policy.

# 4 What About the Global Level?

As I have stated above, ideational approaches in political science have not been applied to the global level. Schmidt's work on processes of Europeanization aside, scholars usually examine processes of change inside a single national polity (Schmidt 2002). This is not to say that knowledge, ideas or discourse do not play a role in research on global (social) policy. However, these various strands of research stem from traditions that rather emphasise the transmission of specific policies across national states or international organizations, and thus neglect the construction and content of ideas, as well as their embedding into wider contexts of knowledge. The two most widely used perspectives focus on "policy diffusion" (see Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett 2007 for an overview) or on the role of "epistemic communities" (Haas 1992; for empirical examples see e.g. Ervik 2009, Hulme 2006). I assert that these approaches, while highly important, only partially highlight the role knowledge plays in global political processes. As demonstrated, a comprehensive theory of ideas in global social policy can neither fully present in the "nationalist" literature reviewed here, even though various useful concepts and assumptions are available.

Meyers neo-institutionalist theory of world society (Meyer et al. 1997) may provide a starting point, as it posits the existence of a world culture, consisting of rationalized global models which shape global actors. These models could easily be understood as socially shared cognitive constructs or, in other words, ideas. World society theory, however has been criticised for not paying enough attention to the actual processes in which these models are constructed (Heintz and Greve 2005). Therefore, further theoretical input seems necessary to fully grasp the role of ideas in global policy. I here suggest that a sociological approach to discourse analysis serves best in tying together an overarching theory of world society and the discussed literature on ideas and policy. Sociological discourse analysis specifically examines how actors strategically produce, share and institutionalise knowledge. As explained above "discourse" can be seen as a structure that contains a set of qualitatively different ideas, such as those specified by ideational scholars. Since world society theory focuses on shared ideas there is evident potential for combination. In the following pages, I will attempt to sketch the theoretical basis for such a comprehensive approach, paying special attention to its application on global policy. The result is a framework that integrates the concepts of world culture, discourse, policy paradigms and policy ideas.

As I implied above, the global level of policy and political discussion has several specific qualities which pose a unique challenge to research: There is no truly unified strong centre of power and actors present on the global level are mostly limited to the exercise of soft power. For the most part policy is still implemented by national states, and even though some international organizations (IOs) such as the World Bank have a reputation for coercing states into the adoption of specific policies through financial means (see Peet 2003 for a typical example), most global actors rely on persuasion or soft pressure via the dissemination of information (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1999).

In short, the global level of policy is mostly shaped by rhetoric, discourse and the exchange of ideas. This is not to say that there are no institutions; as Meyer states world culture does indeed provide an institutional basis that moulds social processes. The most illustrative example may be human rights, which are increasingly employed as a yardstick for policies around the globe (see Risse 2008). Regarding the specific field of social policy, *social* human rights have been codified in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), whose member states regularly have to report on its implementation. This reporting mechanism, while formalised, does not include any hard sanctions; it does, however, task countries with portraying how their policies have worked towards the realization of the covenant. This illustrates the specific role of institutions on the global level: They are to be understood less as fixed "rules of the game", which actors need to know in order to exercise power (e.g. Béland 2009:703), but more as a cognitive and normative background which policies have to be made to fit to be recognized as legitimate (Meyer et al. 1997:145). Therefore, it makes sense to see institutions as *internalized* social constructions which shape global actors as well as their perceptions and actions.

In sum, the specific importance of ideas and institutions in global (social) policy can be theorised up to a point. Interests, however, present a more difficult problem: Most, if not all, global IOs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) present themselves as altruistic entities who selflessly serve the interests of others or act in the name of the public good. Paradoxically, this projected (self?)image may in itself be in an actors interest – as Meyer states altruism and a dedication to social progress are principles of world culture, and an open dedication to them produces necessary political legitimacy (see Meyer et al. 1997:165 for the concept of "disinterested others"). Conversely, large IOs such as the World Bank have often been criticised for serving the narrow material interests of specific nation states or business (Peet 2003). In any case, the question what a political actors "true" interest may be would firstly be hard to answer without bordering on a conspiracy theory, and would secondly risk repeating the materialist fallacy that actors interests are in some way determined by their structural position. Keeping in mind Blyth's assertion that interests are themselves social constructions, it seems feasible to treat interest the same as any other type of idea. That is, how any given actors defines his interest and how they interact with other ideas should remain an open empirical question (compare Keller 2008:254).

All things considered, "ideas", institutions and interest can all be defined as specific variations of social constructions in world society. I conceptualize institutions as a stable cultural background in Meyers sense, meaning that they are taken as given by world society and thus constitute its roots – in short, social constructions that have solidified (up to a point; see below) and are now reproduced. Definitions of interest that have stabilised may well fall within this category: If world culture shapes actors it should also define which actions benefit them most. I assert that discourses are the structures within a wider universe of knowledge (i.e. world culture) which reproduce institutions but also allow actors to generate new ideas or transform established ones. In so far, new ideas can also represent the

creative aspect of social construction, e.g. when a discourse is employed to produce and legitimise a new policy idea which changes an established institution.

This opens up the important question how discourses and actors relate to each other: If discourse, on the one hand, reproduces institutions that shape actors and their perceptions, how can it, on the other hand, be also used by actors to generate new knowledge that may transform these institutions? Schmidt's discursive institutionalism and Keller's SKAD provide an answer (Keller 2008:204; Schmidt 2008:315–316). Both conceptualize the relationship between discourse and actor as a dialectic interaction. Naturally, discourses and the institutions they produce provide actors with a repertoire of ideas that construct and explain the world around them. But actors still have to actively employ these ideas, either in communication or for some other purpose, such as the implementation of a policy. This necessitates a situational interpretation of such ideas, which opens up a space for deliberation – if a previously held idea does not help in solving the problem at hand, actors may critically distance themselves and communicate about such misgivings. This may lead to a modification or even a complete rejection of such ideas and new processes of social construction may begin.

Conversely, an easy and successful application of an internalized idea would serve to reproduce it, as no irritation occurs. I assume that empirical processes generally fall between these two extremes. Thus, internalized ideas and institutions would appear much less static than some structuralist theories claim: In fact, I posit that it illustrates the constant state of gradual flux and renegotiation which characterizes socially shared knowledge and global institutions. Much like Hall's "paradigm shift", a sudden and/ or complete overhaul of such institutions should be a rare and qualitatively unique occurrence (Hall 1993:279). Nevertheless, shared knowledge in society is always contested, and various actors try to advance their interpretation of the world at the expense of others (see Schwab-Trapp 2006).

I would like to conclude this paper by sketching a theoretical framework for a "background centred" analysis of global policy, as explained in section 1. The framework is meant to emphasise how the common background of world culture is utilised to produce and legitimise single policy ideas. The chart on the following page illustrates my basic assumptions: I posit that discourses are the most abstract and fundamental structures in the wide universe of knowledge that constitutes world culture (the following theory draws heavily on classical sociology of knowledge; see Berger and Luckmann 1997). Parts of such discourses are integrated into political paradigms, which produce policy ideas via problem definitions. A short description of each concept and the relations between them follows.

Firstly, discourse: To reiterate, I define discourses as basic structures of interrelated social constructions, or "ideas" in the language of political science, in a wide universe of knowledge. They provide social actors with fundamental schemes of interpretation that construct a certain part of their environment as a social reality.

More specifically discourses will revolve around broad themes such as "poverty", "development" or "welfare" , important normative concepts such as "equality", "solidarity" or "freedom", and finally more tangible political issues such as

the concept of "basic income". In such discourses a variety of cognitive and normative ideas are constructed and connected; such ideas may, for instance, include very basic definitions ("What is poverty?"), the construction of identities and actors ("the poor"), problem definitions and goals ("Poverty is morally undesirable and should be fought."), the norms and values connected with them ("Social solidarity means that the rich should share with the poor.") as well as possible solutions for such problems ("The state should redistribute wealth in society.").

I assert that various contradictory ideas regarding an issue can exist within any single discourse, including the construction of cause-and-effect relationships between concepts or the like that would be mutually exclusive from a purely logical standpoint. Such sets of conflicting ideas and interrelations make up different positions in the discourse that may be advanced by specific actors as a sub-discourse. Actors use these ideas to make sense of the world and any problems that appear to them, which leads them to design certain courses of action.
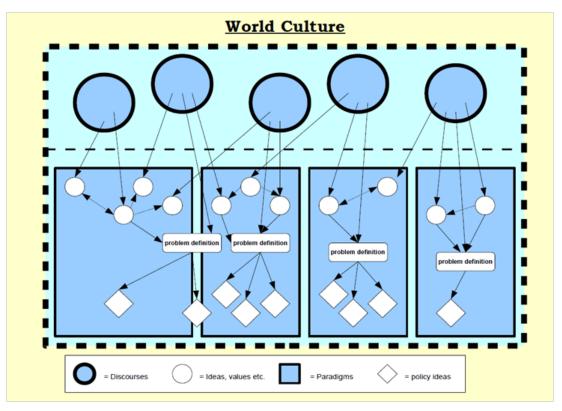


**Figure 1: A background centered framework of global policy analysis**

Secondly, I assume that, in the sphere of politics, social actors combine ideas from various discourses into a specific policy paradigm as suggested by Hall (Hall 1993:279), i.e. an "interpretative framework" that defines the problems policy should address, the goals it should follow and the instruments it should employ. Such an encompassing worldview integrates ideas from discourses on various themes into a coherent whole by combining specific sub-discourses, i.e. drawing only on chosen parts of different discourses that can be made to fit together. Again, I assume that this includes a variety of cognitive and normative ideas from

basic definitions and norms to actual political programmes, which form into an overarching, idealised political project. Policy goals, programmatic ideas and problem definitions should be of particular significance, because paradigms are closer to political action than abstract discourse. Since the basic discourses in world society tend to be vague and include many different ideas, parts of any single discourse can be included in multiple paradigms, although it seems unlikely that any single paradigm will include the confusing and contradictory entirety of a discourse.

I assert that the relationships between different paradigms is complex: As Hall states, different paradigms are "by definition never fully commensurable in scientific or technical terms" (Hall 1993:280). However, as long as two paradigms draw upon the same sub-discourse, there may be overlap and potential communication between them; conversely, paradigms that draw upon conflicting sub-discourses are more likely to be fully incommensurable, and the actors that hold them may easily be involved in struggle to delegitimise each others interpretations (see ideas as "weapons" above).

Thirdly, I assume that problem definitions are specifically significant in their own right – even though they are part of policy paradigms – as they provide the focus for political action and define the range of programmatic ideas deemed viable. Such definitions translate a political paradigm into actual political programmes or "policy ideas" by demonstrating how norms and/ or goals constructed by the paradigm are not met and suggesting what should be done to resolve the situation, thus enabling political actors to organize themselves (see above). In short, problem definitions focus the interpretative framework on a specific issue and make it actionable. I suggest that policy paradigms which are in some way commensurable may share problem definitions, leading to identical or at least comparable policy ideas. However, just like paradigms, problem definitions may also be contradictory, which would lead actors in a given political field to struggle for the dominance of their chosen definition. Finally, I assume that each problem definition suggests a certain range of specific policy ideas that derive from the paradigm which it embodies (see Mheta above). A paradigm, as an encompassing perspective on the world, specifies important causal factors, the relationships between them, and desired political results – when a certain issue is constructed as a problem, actors can therefore easily formulate a plan of action and specific ways to implement it. In general, all types of ideas/ social constructions included to here should be able to fulfil the three functions defined above; whether any type is particularly important for cognitive filtering, organisation or framing on the global level is an open empirical question.

Analytically, the framework presented here suggests the following research strategy: Using document analysis, expert interviews, or comparable methods, specific policy ideas in a given political field should first be identified. Analysis of such policy ideas should clarify which problems actors construct to argue for their implementation. A closer look at the identified problem definitions should reveal what underlying assumptions actors employ to construct an issue in that particular way, i.e. definitions of basic concepts and basic causal relationships. It should

then be possible to infer the basic policy paradigm from these underlying assumptions.

Once a paradigm has been identified, analysis can proceed by checking to which other concepts its ideas are connected in a wider context of world culture. This should result in the identification of more abstract structures of knowledge that are part of underlying discourses – at this point comparison with other policy paradigms and generally shared knowledge becomes important, as it is unlikely that any single discourse can be examined by looking at a single political process, or even a single political field. The end result of analysis should be a dense explanation how political actors were able to construct and legitimize specific policy ideas from the universal order of knowledge that is world culture. In specific empirical cases this may lead to the discovery of processes of institutionalization, that have turned ideas into global models in Meyer's definition. Generally, analysis should focus on the conflictual nature of the political process: Since the knowledge produced by political actors will have substantial consequences via the legitimization of political action, it is always contested (Schwab-Trapp 2006:265) – finding acceptance for a specific policy idea and its argumentative background should generally require attacks on competing ideas and their background knowledge.

# 5 Conclusion

The purpose of this working paper was a review of current literature on ideas and policy in political science and potential applications of that literature to the global level. Despite some shortcomings (from the perspective of sociology), these approaches have done useful conceptual work, particularly on the various types and functions of ideas.

The embedding of ideas into a wider context of shared knowledge, however, remains under-emphasised, even though Schmidt's discursive institutionalism shows theorisation into this direction. I have argued that an analysis of global policy requires a concept of such wider orders of knowledge; because global actors usually do not implement policy themselves, the global policy process consists of a struggle to publicise and legitimize competing policy ideas. Simply analysing who exchanges which political arguments would result in scientific re-narration of the global policies. While this is legitimate, and should remain part of a global policy analysis, I have attempted to show that it is feasible and productive to go one step further with an analysis of the context in which policy ideas are grounded.

As suggested above, Meyers world culture, defined as an ensemble of global models and the discourses that produce them, could be the appropriate concept. Analysis can then proceed by examining how actors utilize widely shared knowledge to advance their political projects – particularly focusing on attempts to modify that context or strengthen specific interpretations, i.e. "knowledge" or "discourse politics" and thus on the changes that discourses experience over time (Keller 2008:193). I have sketched a conceptual framework that illustrates how policy ideas are produced from fundamental world cultural discourses via political

paradigms and problem definitions. This is not to say that there is a deterministic relationship between discourse and actors: As mentioned above, I assume a dialectic relation between the order of socially shared knowledge and actors, who are thus always able to exert a measure of agency – in fact, global institutions are not unchangeable monoliths but rather in a constant state of contestation and gradual flux. In general, the proposed framework seeks a compromise between "deep" approaches to discourse from the post-modern tradition and the more pragmatic variants in political science. Both Keller's SKAD and Schmidt's discursive institutionalism provide starting points for such a compromise, and have inspired the framework: While policy ideas and the actors that advance them still form the focus of analysis their embedding into an order of social knowledge is emphasised.

# 6 References

Béland, Daniel. 2005a. "Ideas and Social Policy: An Institutionalist Perspective" *Social Policy & Administration*. 39:1–18.

------. 2005b. "Ideas, Interests, and Institutions: Historical Institutionalism Revisited" Pp. 29–51, in *New institutionalism. Theory and analysis,* edited by A. Lecours. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.

------. 2007. "The social exclusion discourse: ideas and policy change" *Policy & Politics*. 35:123–139.

------. 2009. "Ideas, institutions, and policy change" *Journal of European Public Policy*. 16:701–718.

Béland, Daniel and Robert H. Cox. 2011. "Introduction: Ideas and Politics" Pp. 3–22, in *Ideas and politics in social science research,* edited by D. Béland and R. H. Cox. Oxford ;, New York: Oxford University Press.

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1997. *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie,* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Blyth, Mark. 2001. "The Transformation of the Swedish Model: Economic Ideas, Distributional Conflict, and Institutional Change" *World Politics*. 54:1–26.

------. 2002. *Great transformations. Economic ideas and institutional change in he twentieth century,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Campbell, John L. 1998. "Institutional analysis and the role of ideas in political economy" *Theory and Society*. 27:377–409.

------. 2002. "Ideas, Politics, and Public Policy" *Annual Review of Sociology*. 28:21–38.

Deacon, Bob. 2009. *Global social policy & governance,* Los Angeles, Calif.: SAGE.

Dobbin, Frank, Beth A. Simmons, and Geoffrey Garrett. 2007. "The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition, or Learning?" *Annual Review of Sociology*. 33:449–472.

Ervik, Rune. 2009. "Policy actors, ideas and power: EU and OECD pension policy recommendations and national policies in Norway and the UK" Pp. 138–164, in *The role of international organizations in social policy. Ideas, actors and impact,* edited by R. Ervik. Cheltenham: Elgar.

Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change" *International Organization*. 52:887–917.

Foucault, Michel. 1974. *Die Ordnung des Diskurses (L'ordre du discours, dt.). Inauguralvorlesung am Collège de France- 2. Dezember 1970,* München: Hanser.

Gofas, Andreas and Colin Hay. 2010a. "Varieties of ideational explanation" Pp. 13–55, in *The role of ideas in political analysis,* edited by A. Gofas and C. Hay. London ; New York: Routledge.

------. 2010b. "The ideational turn and the persistence of perennial dualisms" Pp. 3–10 in *The role of ideas in political analysis,* edited by A. Gofas and C. Hay. London ; New York: Routledge.

Haas, Peter M. 1992. "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination" *International Organization*. 46:1–35.

Hall, Peter A. 1993. "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain" *Comparative Politics*. 25:275–296.

Hay, Colin. 2011. "Ideas and the Construction of Interests" Pp. 65–82, in *Ideas and politics in social science research,* edited by D. Béland and R. H. Cox. Oxford ;, New York: Oxford University Press.

Heintz, Bettina and Jens Greve. 2005. "Die 'Entdeckung' der Weltgesellschaft. Entstehung und Grenzen der Weltgesellschaftstheorie" Pp. 89–119 in *Zeitschrift für Soziologie,* 34.2005, Sonderheft, *Weltgesellschaft. Theoretische Zugänge und empirische Problemlagen,* edited by B. Heintz. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

Hulme, Rob. 2006. "The Role of Policy Transfer in Assessing the Impact of American Ideas on British Social Policy" *Global Social Policy*. 6:173–195.

Keck, Margaret E. and Kathryn Sikkink. 1999. "Transnational advocacy networks in international and regional politics" *International Social Science Journal*. 51:89–101.

Keller, Reiner. 2005. "Analysing Discourse. An Approach From the Sociology of Knowledge" *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 6.

------. 2008. *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse. Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogramms,* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften | GWV Fachverlage GmbH Wiesbaden.

Mehta, Jal. 2011. "The Varied Roles of Ideas in Politics: From 'Wether' to 'How' " Pp. 23–46, in *Ideas and politics in social science research,* edited by D. Béland and R. H. Cox. Oxford ;, New York: Oxford University Press.

Meyer, John W., John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez. 1997. "World Society and the Nation-State" *The American Journal of Sociology*. 106:144–181.

Nassehi, Armin. 2008. *Soziologie. Zehn einführende Vorlesungen,* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften / GWV Fachverlage GmbH, Wiesbaden.

Nye, Joseph S. 2004. *Soft power. The means to success in world politics,* New York: PublicAffairs.

Peet, Richard. 2003. *Unholy trinity. The IMF, World Bank and WTO,* London: Zed Books.

Peters, Brainard G. 2005. *Institutional theory in political science. The 'new institutionalism',* London [u.a.]: Continuum.

Risse, Thomas. 2008. *The power of human rights. International norms and domestic change*. Vol. 66, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Schmidt, Vivien A. 2002. *The futures of European capitalism,* Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

------. 2008. "Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse" *Annual Review of Political Science*. 11:303–326.

------. 2011. "Reconciling Ideas and Institutions through Discursive Institutionalism" Pp. 47–64 in *Ideas and politics in social science research,* edited by D. Béland and R. H. Cox. Oxford ;, New York: Oxford University Press.

Schmidt, Vivien A. and Claudio M. Radaelli. 2004. "Policy Change and Discourse in Europe: Conceptual and Methodological Issues" *West European Politics*. 27:183–210.

Schwab-Trapp, Michael. 2006. "Diskurs als soziologisches Konzept. Bausteine für eine soziologisch orientierte Diskursanalyse" Pp. 261–285, in *Handbuch sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse,* edited by R. Keller. Wiesbaden: VS Verl. für Sozialwiss.

Yee, Albert S. 1996. "The causal effects of ideas on policies" *International Organization*. 50:69–108.