

**Ideas are not as stable
as political scientists want them to be**
- Using discourse theory in ideational research

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Abstract

Most theories about ideas in politics implicitly conceptualise ideas as relatively stable entities that are important in explaining change in times of crisis. In these theories political change is usually brought on by the full and sudden replacement of old ideas with new ones. The paper's main charge against this mainstream perspective on ideas is that it is based on a simplified conception of ideas which biases the theories to focus on the role of ideas in times of crisis, and, in effect, overlook incremental yet significant ideational change in times of stability. With inspiration from discourse analysis the paper develops a more dynamic understanding of ideas - namely as made up by several elements of meaning that typically does not reach a final stage of stability or equilibrium. Furthermore, it is argued that a more dynamic analytical perspective can account for both incremental and paradigmatic ideational change. Two types of incremental ideational change are discussed and exemplified with empirical examples: First, a change in the relation between the existing elements of an idea, and, second, a change of one or more (but not all) elements of an idea.

1. Introduction¹

Ideational research has in recent years gained prominence within political science, so much so that it has become common ground to argue that ‘ideas matter’. This assertion is so broadly accepted that Rueschemeyer (2006) in a review of why and how ideas matter starts out by stating:

"That ideas matter in politics is beyond question" (p. 227). One argument that seems particular strong is that ideas have great(est) influence during times of crisis. In periods of crisis, existing ways of thinking have a declining ability to predict the outcome of joint interactions (Culpepper, 2008), but the crisis is not ‘objective’ in the sense that the existing institutions no longer functionally solve political problems. Rather, actors *perceive* that current ideas and institutions no longer work (Hay, 2001). The upsetting of existing institutions leads to uncertainty about one’s interests and how to best satisfy them. In such times, ideas help actors to act in spite of uncertainty (Blyth, 2002). For all the success ideational theories have had arguing for the importance of ideas during crises, however, remarkably little has been done to show how ideas can lead to political change in times of stability. Ideational theories have tended to focus on the stabilizing role of ideas outside crisis situations, largely neglecting the task of studying how ideas can also develop in times of stability with significant political changes as a consequence.

This theoretical development is to a large degree analogous to recent debates within historical institutional theory. One of the most enduring arguments within historical institutionalist research is that political change is restrained by ‘path dependency’, the strength of the argument owing not least to the seminal work of Paul Pierson (1994, 2000, 2004). However, recent research results indicate that despite of path dependency, political institutions are indeed changing (e.g. Goul Andersen, 2001, 2007a, 2007b; Ebbinghaus, 2005; Hacker, 2004; Hinrichs, 2001; Hinrichs and Kangas, 2003; Jochem, 2007; van Kersbergen, 2000; Palier and Martin, 2007; Taylor-Gooby, 1999). A large part of the reason why researchers are experiencing difficulties determining whether we are witnessing stasis or change in contemporary welfare states (Clasen and Siegel, 2007), lies in the inability of current theoretical models to account for change within their own premises. Historical institutionalism functions well when it comes to explaining stability, but to explain change historical institutionalist theories have a tendency of invoking external shocks or functional adjustments as punctuations and critical junctures that determine a change of policy path (leading yet again to stability). This is not theoretically satisfying, because only stability – and not rupture or change – is explicable within the theories. Transformative changes are

¹ I would like to extend my gratitude to Jørgen Goul Andersen for commenting on the paper. A special thanks to Simon Bæk Carstensen who – employing his talent in computer science – spend a long afternoon trying to make my argument more coherent and logical. The extent to which he succeeded in this is obviously my responsibility.

not always abrupt and dramatic, and incremental changes are not always maintaining (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). In other words, both general institutionalist and ideational theories have focused most of their effort on the stabilising effect of institutions and ideas respectively, neglecting the task of developing theories to account for incremental yet transformative change.

This paper argues that an important part of the reason why ideational theories have predominantly been used to explain ideational stability and large paradigmatic changes is due to the conceptualisation of ideas within the tradition. In most theories ideas are implicitly conceived of as rather coherent entities that provide actors with a relatively stable world view of causality and normativity. However, if one examines the way ideas are conceptualised within other research traditions, most notably discourse theory and conceptual analysis, a different picture of ideas is identifiable. In such theories, ideas are thought of in an almost opposite way, namely as non-fixed and contested entities that develop dynamically over time without ever reaching a final stage of stability. These theories are also distinguished from their counterparts within public policy analysis by their complexity and focus on the dynamic nature of ideas. However, what the post-structuralist theories lack – especially with their adherence to context-focused analyses – is an ability to generate theories with general causality, an ambition that on the other hand is strongly present in ideational research within public policy. This implies that neither of the traditions can satisfactorily demonstrate nor explain incremental ideational change in policy, but also that there exists possibilities for theoretical cross-fertilisation between the traditions. It is thus the aim of this paper to use theories from both traditions to create an argument about how ideas change incrementally over time.

The argument is divided in three sections. The first section presents two connected reasons why ideational theories in policy analyses tend to focus on the stabilising role of ideas. First, ideas are typically conceptualised as coherent entities that encompass whole sets of meanings. This derives from the fact that the meaning of an idea is usually thought to originate from a core. This means that the micro-structure, the inner workings and complexity of ideas are typically not taken into consideration. Second, and following this, mainstream ideational theories focus on how change occurs through substitution of old ideas with new ones, leaving out the option that ideational change can also be incremental.

These weaknesses are the starting point for the second section which examines how discourse theory and conceptual analysis may contribute to developing a theory of incremental ideational change. On the basis of a post-structuralist understanding of ideas, the second section of the paper breaks with the dominant notion in ideational research that the meaning of an idea is constituted by a core. Instead, ideas are conceptualised as consisting of elements of meaning and relations between these elements that to a varying extent determines what the idea means at specific points of time. Subsequently,

this argument is coupled to a conception of actors as both constrained by ideas and able to reflect on their own position within an ideational system.

In the penultimate section, two typical processes of incremental ideational change are analysed. The first mechanism of change occurs when the relationship between the elements in an idea change, affecting the relative importance of the elements in the constitution of meaning. In the second mechanism of change, one or more (but not all) of the elements are substituted with new ones. Both mechanisms lead to incremental rather than paradigmatic change.

2. The role of ideas in mainstream ideational research

This section presses two claims about current ideational theories within public policy and comparative politics: First, ideational policy analyses have not yet developed theories that can account for how ideas develop incrementally, and this hampers progress in explaining ideational influences on politics. The existing literature has focused its effort on the question of under what conditions ideational change leads to change in political outcomes (e.g. Blyth, 2002), or, in a related focus, how certain constitutive idea sets stymie political change (e.g. Cox, 2004). Importantly, however, the variation on the ideational variable is usually *not* due to a development in the existing ideas, but instead due to the replacement of older ideas with new ideas. In other words, most theories tend to conceptualise ideational change as entirely new ideas replacing old ones. This is a relatively demanding criterion for ideational change, as it leaves out significant changes *within* ideas an explanatory factor.

Second, the paper argues that a majority of ideational theories within public policy and comparative politics conceptualise ideas as monolithic units that encompass whole sets of ideas. Often the analyses refer to ideas as paradigms, political culture or public sentiments (for a review and typology, see Campbell, 2004), and popular cases have been the introduction of Neoliberalism in Western polities (e.g. Hay, 2001; Kjær and Pedersen, 2001; Schmidt, 2002) or the challenge from monetarism to Keynesianism (Goul Andersen and Larsen, 2009; Hall, 1989, 1993; Blyth, 2002; Hay 2001). There are certainly instances of lower level conceptualisations of ideas, but these are by and large limited to the literature on ‘framing’ that mostly focuses on the rhetorical sides of politics (Béland, forthcoming, 2005), or ‘programmatic ideas’ (Weir, 1992).

Taken together, the insufficient focus on how ideas may develop incrementally over time, and the exaggerated focus on broad and coherent changes in paradigms and broader conceptions, implicitly bias ideational policy research towards a kind of “punctuated equilibrium model” – ideational stability except in situations of sudden and comprehensive change, typically in crisis situations. The reason is that relatively encompassing

developments in a set of ideas are necessary for the analyst to spot the ideational change taking place.

This choice of analytical perspective is all the more puzzling taking into consideration that the proponents of the ideational perspective argue that ideas can explain the change other perspectives too focused on stability are unable to account for (especially historical and rational institutionalism). Often ideational explanations are believed to endogenise change to the theoretical model avoiding the *deus ex machina* of critical junctures and punctuated equilibriums (Schmidt, 2008a/b; Blyth, 1997), but this theoretical ambition is obscured by its conceptualisation of ideas as stable, coherent entities that in the end come to function as exactly the *deus ex machina* that ideational research renounces.

In short, this section will seek to illustrate how existing ideational theories within public policy and comparative politics do not sufficiently deal with how ideas transform over time, in turn leading to too strong a focus on ideational and political stability between crises. The aim of this section is to review current theories within ideational research to support this claim.

2.1 Explaining change in ideational analyses

Ideational theories have been deployed not least to endogenise explanations of change that much institutionalist theory explains with exogenous shocks. But how do ideational theories explain change? In this section some ideational studies are briefly reviewed in order to justify the argument that ideational change is too often seen simply as sudden substitution of old ideas with new ones, rather than as (incremental) discursive development of ideas.

A case in point is the famous theoretical framework offered by Peter Hall (1993). According to Hall, ideas are important because they structure not only political solutions, but also how problems are conceived of in the first place. This is determined by an ideational framework, or what Hall (1993) calls a policy ‘paradigm’. What role do ideas or paradigms play in policy change? Hall divides policy change into first, second and third order change. First and second order change can be seen as ‘normal policymaking’ (i.e. change in policy instruments and their settings) whereas changes of the third order are associated with a ‘paradigm shift’, that is, a shift in the entire understanding of policy, involving both instruments and the hierarchy of goals (Hall, 1993: 279). Third order change is the instance where ideas come to impact on policy making. Following Kuhn’s analysis of scientific revolutions, Hall suggests that paradigm shift is partly attributable to an accumulation of anomalies that the paradigm is not able to account for: “Ad hoc attempts are generally made to stretch the terms of the paradigm to cover them, but this gradually undermines the intellectual coherence and precision of the original paradigm” (Hall, 1993: 280). In other words, change happens when the old paradigm fails, that is, in times of crisis. Ideas are, however, not assigned significant explanatory power in times of ‘normal

policymaking'. And it is not the development of ideas, but the replacement of old ideas with new ones that sets the stage for change. A similar position is found in Mark Blyth's *Great Transformations* (2002), where it is explicitly argued that ideas matter most during times of crisis. In the five step model of institutional change (Blyth, 2002: 34-44), the replacement of old ideas with new ones is assigned the crucial role. In the first step, a period of (economic) crisis starts, and ideas reduce uncertainty by acting as interpretive frameworks that describe the workings of the economy. In the second step, ideas serve to catalyze coalition-building by helping to redefine the agents' understanding of the current crisis. Third, ideas are used to delegitimize existing institutions. Fourth, ideas work as blueprints to build new institutions. And, fifth, when these new institutions are set up, ideas promote stability over time by generating conventions that make the institutional coordination of agents' expectations possible. This short review serves to highlight once again how it is the replacement of old ideas with new ideas that explains change. Outside such crisis situations, ideas serve to stabilise rather than transform existing institutions. This means that we are left with a model of critical junctures where the crisis serves as a trigger of change – no option is left for transformative, incremental change during stability. And once again, the sources of change are exogenous to the theoretical model.

The focus on the power of institutionalised ideas is also an important part of Parsons' (2003) study of how the European Union became a community-oriented rather than just an intergovernmental project. Parsons' argument is that community-oriented ideas were institutionalised over time, blocking other ideas from organising the political project of the European Union. In Parsons' (2003) model, ideas come to constrain more than enable political change. In other words, we are not provided with any answer as to how ideas may evolve over time. The common denominator is that ideas mainly matter as constraining devices and during formative moments. In other words, we are left with a theoretical framework that only uses ideas as a significant explanatory variable in explaining change during times of crisis.

Vivien A. Smith, however, is one researcher who comes close to suggest a theory of how ideas develop in times of stability. In some of her most recent work, she points out new ideas are not normally put in play on a clean slate. Instead, new ideas are typically reinterpreted and layered on top of the old ones, creating association between old and new ideas (Schmidt, 2008b: 12). She also argues that the so-called discursive institutionalism considers change in a more evolutionary manner (Schmidt, 2008a: 316). But though she states the problem, it does not appear to be solved in her theoretical framework. The main reason is that she does not show us with which mechanisms the ideas develop, and how it relates to the nature of an idea.

2.2 The conceptualisation of ideas in ideational analyses

Part of the reason why ideational theories tend to over-emphasize stability between crises, stems from how ideas are typically conceptualised as relatively stable, homogenous and encompassing entities of meaning. Arguably, this conceptualisation does not correspond very well to how ideas manifest themselves in practice. Once again, some of the most cited studies within the ideational tradition will serve as illustrations.

In the already classic text about ideas in foreign policy, Goldstein and Keohane (1993) describe three ways that ideas have political impact: (1) As road maps in face of uncertainty that guide actors toward strategies for attaining their goals by providing causal beliefs; (2) as focal points that serve to define cooperative solutions to problems where there are no unique equilibrium solutions (p. 17); and (3) as ideas encased within institutions: “Once ideas have influenced organizational design, their influence will be reflected in the incentives of those in the organization and those whose interests are served by it“ (p. 20)². All the different types of ideas are described as stable, coherent and seemingly incapable of developing over time. The prime function of an idea becomes just this: to stand still and not change until a new (and better) idea comes around. In this way, a conceptualisation that depicts ideas as essentially frozen overemphasises the stabilising function of ideas at the expense of the transformative potential that ideas also contain.

From a historical institutionalist perspective, Hall (1993) provides an equally static conceptualisation of ideas as that exhibited in Goldstein and Keohane (1993). In Hall’s theory political actors’ use of ideas lead to change when the ideas are institutionalised as a paradigm. What make ideas powerful are their stability and their ability to order action in patterned ways leading to the elimination of other political solutions, which in large part stems from the support of centrally placed political actors. In this conceptualisation, ideas are only contradictory, ambiguous, open for contestation – in other words: dynamic – when they are about to be replaced with new ideas. Muddling up of meaning indicates that ideas are in crisis and are losing hegemonic power. The crisis will only end “when the supporters of a new paradigm secure positions of authority over policymaking and are able to rearrange the organization and standard operation procedures of the policy process so as to institutionalize the new paradigm” (Hall, 1993: 281).

A similar conceptualisation is found in other theories of institutionalisation of ideas. When Parsons (2003) talks of ideas he is referring to certain models: the ‘community model’ and the ‘confederal model’, and how one model “ruled out others as active options, making their victory permanent“. Arguing for a ‘permanent victory’ of an idea certainly lends support to the belief that Parsons (2003) is operating with an understanding of stable ideas functioning – indeed, exerting their power – through coherence and order.

² There are a number of reasons for being sceptical about Goldstein and Keohane’s (1993) theory of ideas, for an elaborate critique, see Gofas and Hay (2009).

The situation is much the same in Blyth's (2002) conceptualisation of ideas reviewed above. In the five step model of the institutionalisation of ideas, ideas are conceptualised as stable entities that can be used in a number of situations to fill out a range of functions: reducing uncertainty; functioning as weapons to delegitimise existing institutions; aligning actors' interests; etc. It is not indicated at any point that ideas may develop over time in such a way that it leads to significant political changes, e.g. by almost unnoticeably changing actors' conception of their own interests.

More recent analyses, however, have done more to include the inconsistencies, fuzziness and lack of conceptual stringency in their conceptualisation of ideas. For example, Jabko (2006) argues that an important part of what makes ideas strong does not stem from "their conceptual coherence but from their relative malleability" (p. 36). This prompts us to focus on tensions and inconsistencies of ideas and institutions as a source of change. In his study of the path dependency of the ideas behind the Scandinavian welfare states, Cox (2004) points to how the lack of ideational clarity within the paradigm enables the model to cover a lot of inconsistency and contradiction and thus in practice function as a viable frame of reference for political actors trying to set a common tone in reform processes. From a more general perspective, Lieberman (2002) argues that many analyses within institutional analysis have a tendency of emphasising ordered patterns and regularities. This focus on order blocks our view of more incremental yet transformative change within existing institutions. Ideas can clash with each other as well as existing institutions, a friction that may lead to significant political change. However, though Jabko (2006), Cox (2004), Lieberman (2002) and Schmidt (2008b) bring us some way in pinpointing the problematic lack of dynamism in existing ideational theory, this is not followed up by a general theory of how political ideas develop incrementally over time.

Torfinn (2004) shares with this paper an ambition to incorporate discourse theory into policy analysis. He also works with a conceptualisation of ideas (or, in his terminology, discourse) as ambiguous, contested and dynamic. With his perspective he demonstrates how ideas can develop over time and in important ways create the possibilities and limits for political actors. In other words, Torfinn (2004) comes a long way in developing a theory that incorporates the dynamic elements in the inner workings of ideas. However, despite his dynamic perspective, Torfinn (2004) also focuses on the 'big bangs' of politics, when ideas and interests are recast within new discourses and institutions. In his perspective – which in certain respects resembles Hall's (1993) – change happens when an existing discourse can no longer give answers or solutions to the perceived political problems. As he puts it: "It is not until the existing policy-paths are problematised and all together or partly breaks down that there is created room for political struggles over the creation of a new policy-path" (Torfinn, 2004: 54, author's translation). There is continuity in the creation of a new policy-path (due to ideational path-dependence), but Torfinn (2004) still focuses on rather large ideational ruptures. Unfortunately his theoretical framework

does little to show how ideas can develop incrementally. Moreover, with his strong adherence to post-structuralist discourse theory, actors are granted a low degree of rationality, which is not part of the theoretical argument that is sought developed here (cf. below). Thus another framework with other theoretical tools and ontological assumptions is necessary to develop a theory of incremental ideational change.

2.3 Concluding remarks

The theoretical consequences of conceptualising ideas as 1) stable entities 2) that only bring about change when they replace existing ones are twofold: They bias attention towards crisis situations, and they bias us toward emphasising the stabilising effect of ideas. Even though it is plausible that ideas matter mostly in times of crisis, we should not neglect the possibility of incremental yet transformative changes during times of stability. This point has recently gained prominence in historical institutionalist theory (especially Streeck and Thelen, 2005) and has also been voiced within the ideational research tradition (Gofas and Hay, 2009; Seabrooke, 2009). Though ideational theories, as mentioned above, seem open to the notion of incrementally developing ideas, a majority of the work within ideational research has explicitly or implicitly used punctuations and critical junctures to explain change, leaving the question of how ideas change incrementally almost untouched.

A general theoretical framework that rejects the notion of ideas as stable and coherent is currently missing in policy-oriented ideational research. This is in fact a bit of a paradox as discourse theory tends to take the very opposite point of departure. The fact that inspiration from discourse theory is surprisingly limited in ideationally oriented policy research may stem from uneasiness with post-structuralist theories or from a wish for more parsimonious analyses. However, it is possible to incorporate elements from discourse theory without ‘buying the whole package’ of post-structuralist epistemology and ontology. In the following section I will try to demonstrate how discourse analysis and conceptual analysis can be used to create more realistic and viable theories of how ideas develop over time.

3. The nature of an idea and the role of actors

As mentioned, what is typically missing from ideational analyses is a more adequate conceptualisation of ideas that allows for contradictions and ambiguities, and a greater attention to how ideas develop over time. The diachronic perspective on ideas has typically been applied in analyses of how ideas are institutionalised (e.g. Cox, 2004; Parsons, 2003; Béland, 2007), but these analyses (almost by definition) lack a theory of how the meaning of ideas may change over time. In this section, we try to provide a more adequate concep-

tualisation of the nature of ideas and the role of actors; in the subsequent section we outline an argument about incremental ideational change.

A theory about the nature of an idea should obviously take as its starting point a definition of what an idea is. The concept of an idea is heavily burdened by its long history in Western philosophical thought, making it impossible to create a definition that can apply satisfactorily to all studies of ideas. Thus, the best solution seems to be to formulate a definition that delivers answers to the theoretical and empirical questions posed within distinct research areas. In this case what is necessary is a definition that can function as a basis for studying ideas within comparative politics and public policy.

3.1 Discourse theory and the nature of an idea

As a basis for the following discussion, an idea can be defined as a *network of elements of meaning*. The definition takes as its starting point the argument that actors live in uncertainty and complexity. Individuals need socially constructed heuristics that can reduce societal complexity to a level that enable them to act. These cognitive short cuts are what the definition refers to as ‘elements of meaning’. Meaning is created intersubjectively through the use of language. This is a discourse theoretical and post-structuralist point: the meaning of social, economic and political phenomena is generated with linguistic means. Thus, the basic substance of social reality is subjects that continually interpret and reinterpret the different components of their shared horizon of meaning. Meaning is created from a collective’s attempt at making sense of the subjective and intersubjective social reality.

Though ideational theories rarely explicate this argument, it is implicit to many theories in the field. What is also common to most theories is – as mentioned above – a conceptualisation of ideas as ordered, stable and coherent entities. Sceptical of this understanding of ideas, Hudson and Martin (2009) prompt us to “be less concerned with the overall structure – as it appears *in toto* – than with individual elements, the props” (p. 25). This is a contention worth developing on, because choosing between a focus on micro- or macro-ideas is an analytical choice with significant analytical consequences: Focusing on macro-ideas leads the analyst to look for core ideas, whereas using micro-ideas as explanatory variables sensitises the analyst to focus on how ideas are made up of several elements of meaning, not a core idea. Thus, the first important element in our discussion of the definition of an idea is to reject conceptualising ideas as containing a core that determines its meaning. Beyond this rejection, however, we need a theoretical framework to formulate a theory about the nature of an idea that takes the micro-structure of ideas seriously. In this respect, post-structuralist theory and conceptual analysis is helpful to our purpose.

The argument that the meaning of an idea does not derive from a core sentiment is not new. This understanding has a long history in linguistic theory. One of the main proponents of the argument about relational meaning was the linguist Ferdinand de

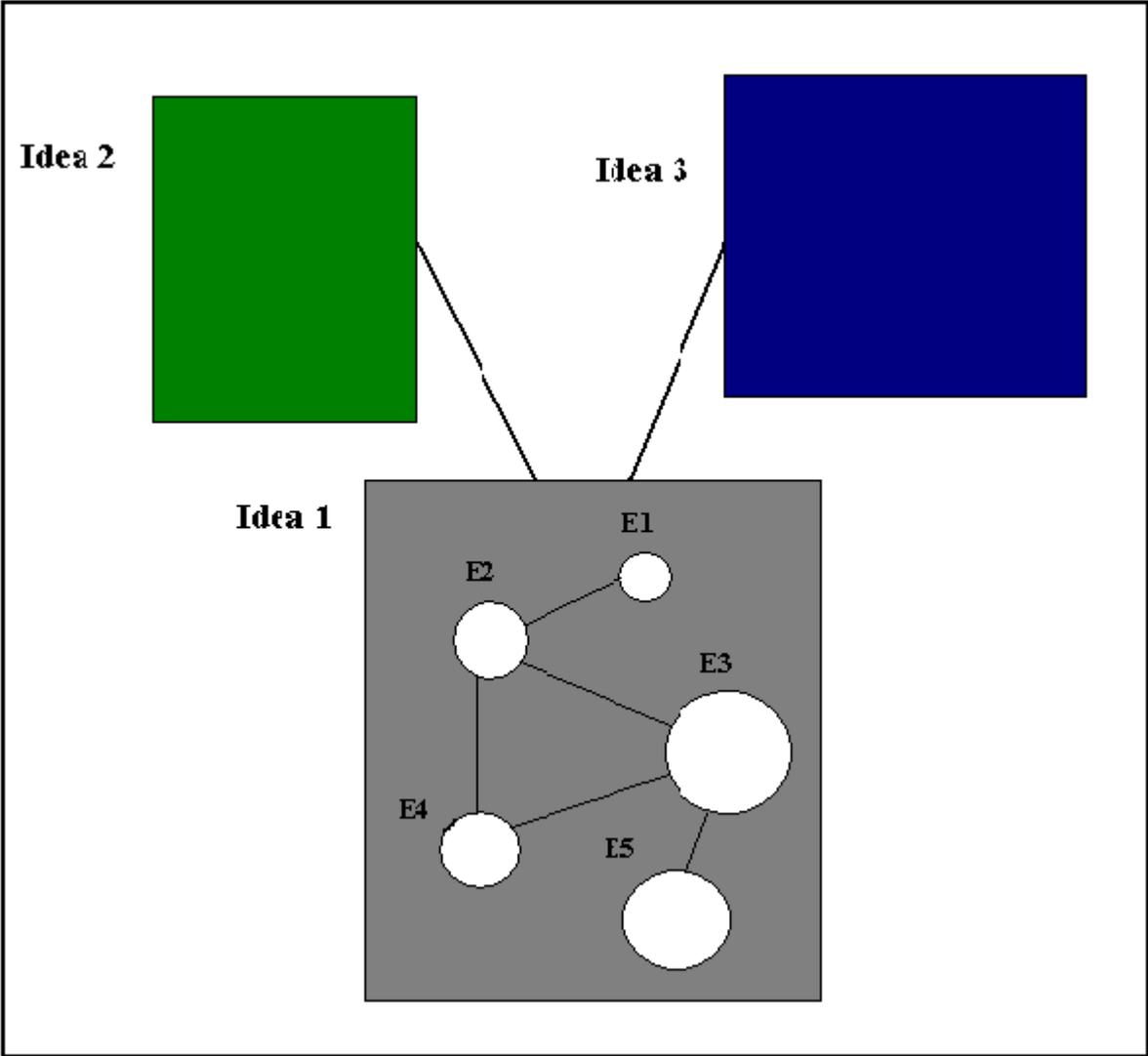
Saussure. In his *Cours de linguistique générale* (Course in General Linguistics), Saussure (1974) outlined his famous argument about the arbitrariness of the sign. According to Saussure there exists no natural relation between the acoustic image (the signifier) and a concept (the signified). For example, there is no reason that the sign *cat* must necessarily be connected to the concept ‘cat’ – this relationship is instead a linguistic convention within certain language systems. The convention is based upon the relation to other words. For example, the meaning of the word ‘mother’ does not derive from its relation to a certain object, but instead from its relation to other words like “father”, “grandmother” and “daughter”. In essence, Saussure presents a relational understanding of language as opposed to an essentialist conception (Howarth, 2005). It has the theoretical consequence “that language constitutes a *system* in which no element can be defined independently of the others (...) each element of the system is exclusively defined by the rules of its combination and substitutions with the other elements” (Laclau, 1993, italics in original). In the context of analysing the nature of an idea, we may thus think of the idea as the system and the elements of meaning as words within the system. In this way we can speak of an idea as constituted by a *network of related elements of meaning*.

Saussure’s ideas have had to be developed further in discourse theory and conceptual analysis to be useful in social scientific analysis. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) follow Saussure’s argument about the arbitrariness of the sign, when they argue that a discursive formation – which resembles our understanding of an idea – is not unified³. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985) discourses are constituted by regularity of dispersion rather than an underlying principle external to the discourse. The different parts of the discourse depend closely on each other: “The point is that all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference (...) Necessity derives, therefore, not from an underlying intelligible principle but from the regularity of a system of structural positions” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 106).

We can speak of the relations between elements of meaning within an idea as the *internal* determinant of ideational meaning. There exists, however, also what could be called an *external* determinant of meaning, namely the ideational environment that the idea is part of. Originating in a different theoretical tradition than the post-structuralist, but still with a reference to Saussure, the conceptual analyst, Michael Freeden (1996), argues that the meaning of an idea – or what he calls a ‘concept’ – is acquired through its particular location within a constellation of other ideas. Or to put it differently: “political concepts

³ There is an abundance of discourse theories, but this paper mainly endorses the post-structuralist perspective of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) for two reasons: First, with their inspiration from Saussure, they work with a dynamic conception of ideas and discourse as based on relations and not principles internal to the discourse (cf. below). Thus, in their discourse theory they focus on the non-fixity of ideas, which is helpful in developing a theory of ideational incrementalism. Second, Laclau and Mouffe focus strongly on power, not least how actors use discourses to gain power, and this makes their theory fit well with the political scientific perspective that is sought developed in this paper.

will gather meaning from their empirically ascertainable ideational context, from the idea-environment in which they are located” (Freeden, 1996: 73). Thus, the theory spans at least two levels (with the theoretical possibility of moving to a third, the macro-level of a paradigm), namely, first, the network of elements of meaning within the idea, and, at a ‘higher’ level, the relation between different ideas. This perspective has the strength, then, that multiple levels of an idea and the relation between them, can be studied within the same analysis. The model is illustrated below in model 1, where *E* signifies an element of meaning, and the lines signify relations between the different units of the model:



Model 1: A model of political ideas and their internal elements

The model encompasses three levels: First the elements of meaning and the relation between them; second the relation between (in this case three) ideas; and third the paradigm that is constituted by the three ideas (illustrated with the square that encapsulates the three ideas).

Focusing on the first level, it is worth noting that the different elements of an idea do not inhabit equally important positions in constituting the meaning of the idea. In this way, it is possible to talk of a kind of ‘hierarchy’ between the elements of the idea. According to Freeden (1996) ideologies contain both ineliminable elements that cannot be dispensed with without losing crucial meaning (for example non-constraint in liberalism), and more marginal elements⁴. These latter marginal elements, however, “add vital gloss to its [the ideology’s] core concepts” (p. 78) and an ideology – as well as an idea – need these marginal elements to gain the amount of complexity necessary to create meaning for individuals and support their actions. Moreover, elements inhabiting a peripheral position in the idea may over time gravitate from a more central to a marginal position, or vice versa (cf. section three). Freeden (1996) provides the example of natural rights that gravitated from a core to a marginal position in liberalism, and violence that gravitated from a marginal to a core position in the development of fascism (p. 78). An important part of ideological development is thus the potential changes in relative importance between the elements making up the idea, a central feature in the theory of change, which we will return to in the next section.

It is important to note how the relations of meaning that constitute an idea are never shielded from exterior challenges. This is so because it is not logical necessity that creates the relations, but rather social practices that are never fully determined by an overarching structure. In this sense, ideas are not closed systems of fixed meaning. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out: “neither absolute fixity nor absolute non-fixity is possible” (p. 111). The partial fixation is constructed through nodal points that function as attempts to structure the discourse:

“The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points, which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of very discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 113).

In other words, because discourse is never hermetically sealed from other discourses – its identity is based on relations to other discourses – there always exists a possibility of exchange and communication between them (Howarth, 2005: 165, cf. Laclau, 1993). This also means that discourse and the meaning of an idea can change when its components – or its relation to other ideas – change: “Ideologies constitute semantic fields in that each com-

⁴ The ineliminable elements are not cores, though. They are not intrinsic or logically necessary to the meaning of the idea. The features are ineliminable “in the sense that all known usages of the concept employ it, so that its absence would deprive the concept of intelligibility and communicability” (p. 62) and “to eliminate it means to fly against all known usages of the concept (though it does not rule out its removal in the future)” (Freeden, 1996: 63).

ponent interacts with all the others and is changed when any one of the other components alters” (Freedon, 1996: 67). The important point here is that the assertion that ideas are not fixed, opens up for a dynamic and diachronically sensitive analysis of the development of ideas, and one which does not treat ideas as coherent and stable entities.

3.2 Constructing the actor

Ideational theory needs more room for political actors than discourse theory in most cases offers. This should not be taken to imply that discourse theory is not sensitive to the role of actors. Quite to the contrary, discourse theory builds on the notion that actors are not structurally determined, thus making it an important purpose of analysis to determine how actors actively construct their identity and acts in accordance with it (Howarth, 2005; Thomsen, 1997). However, discourse theory is less helpful in explaining action within the political system, not least because of its rejection of more traditional forms of intentional causality (Thomsen, 1997: 88). To put it pragmatically: A discourse theoretical perspective presents the most coherent and advanced theoretical framework for understanding the nature of ideas, but ideational research is better at explaining political action, that is, how political actors use ideas in political struggles. Furthermore, existing ideational theories of actors are easier to operationalise for empirical purposes. Thus, the theoretical challenge is to combine the insights from discourse theory presented above, with existing ideational theories of how actors use ideas, as they have been developed within public policy. To understand how actors use ideas in political struggles, a conceptualisation of actors as intentional and bounded rational is necessary, which will be elaborated further below.

A fitting starting point for the construction of the actors within a theory of how ideas develop over time is to reject the rational understanding of an actor as a utility maximiser with clear goals for his actions. Actors act within systems of great complexity and a rather large degree of uncertainty (Blyth, 2002, 2009; cf. Simon, 1985; Lindblom, 1959; March and Olsen, 1989), which makes it necessary to use ideas as heuristics for action. As Jabko (2006) puts it, actors:

“constantly have to make choices in the present while knowing that these choices will have unpredictable and contentious consequences beyond the short term. Actors formulate and pursue broad visions of what they want to achieve. These visions provide them with a sense of direction, but they rarely spell out rigid ideological or material goals. By necessity, actors often have to embark on a course of action without being sure where it will lead them” (p. 26).

But actors are not institutional and ideational ‘dopes’ unable to reflectively use the resources at hand to try to gain political power and influence. Instead, actors are, at least to some degree, able to reflectively and critically evaluate the system they are part of and the role they play within it (Schmidt, 2008a).

We are, in other words, witnessing a tightrope walk between accepting that actors on the one side act with intentionality and on the other side are dependent on existing ideas to act purposefully. A theoretical construct of the actor that comes in handy at this point in the argument, is the ‘bricoleur’. One of the first scholars to use the analytical heuristic of the ‘bricoleur’ was the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1996 [1962]). According to Levi-Strauss the ‘bricoleur’ is “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman” (p. 16-17). When the ‘bricoleur’ tries to solve a problem, the tools and materials he uses are not defined by the problem at hand, but instead picked from the existing repertoire of instruments and recombined. These combinations “are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre” (Levi-Strauss, 1996 [1962]: 19). Emerging from this discussion is thus an actor which is to some degree reflective about his own position in the (political) system, while at the same time limited by the boundaries for meaningful action that the system poses.

3.3 Actors and ideational change

The last part of the theoretical argument of this chapter deals with the question of what role actors play in ideational change. It is important to acknowledge that ideas do not change by themselves. Actors need to use and activate ideas if they are to have a political impact (Béland, 2005; Berman, 1998, 2006; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). At the same time, however, actors cannot use ideas as they see fit and without regard for the nature of ideas. To analyse how ideas develop over time, it is thus necessary to clarify the relationship between ideas and actors, which is the chief aim of this section. The argument that is defended is that ideas are never stable, but rather open for contestation by political actors. Actors can use ideas to try to impose their vision of the world on other actors, but ideas are never fully controllable, thus making it important to study how ideas change meaning and develop over time.

Ideas function as both a constraint and a resource for actor: actors need ideas to handle uncertainty and systemic complexity, and at the same time ideas can be used by actors to affect other actors’ conception of the world and in this way become a powerful political tool. According to Laclau (1993) it is indeed the aim of all politics to partially fix the relation between signifier and signified and in this way dominate and structure the identity of actors (cf. Howarth, 2005: 149), or, in the words of Laclau and Mouffe (1985),

try to create 'hegemony'. According to Freeden (1996) it is exactly hegemony (or as he calls it, 'decontestation') that ideologies strive to create:

"They [ideologies, A.N.] aim at cementing the word-concept relationship. By determining the meaning of a concept they can then attach a single meaning to a political term. Ultimately, ideologies are configurations of *decontested* meanings of political concepts" (p. 76, italics in original).

It is a central point for both Freeden (1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) that this closure of ideas is never fully possible, but it is exactly what actors try to accomplish, when they struggle to establish the dominant vision of the world.

How is the relationship between actors and ideas dynamic? One way of answering the question, is to analyse a struggle between two sets of actors: The original creator of an idea and his rivals trying to challenge its meaning⁵. The position of the original creator is characterised by a mix of constraints and possibilities in creating new meaning. On the one side, the actor is privileged by the possibility of presenting a new idea and in this process to choose what network of ideas he wants to place his idea in. In this way the original creator has a first-mover advantage in framing the idea and can thus affect the range of other ideas it can combine with in the future. An important part of decontesting the meaning of an idea is to try to fix its relation to other ideas, and an essential part of this process consists in choosing what network of already existing ideas the new idea will be part of. The original creator naturally holds a privileged position in this regard.

On the other side, when a policy idea is first created, it must be joined with other already existing ideas in order to obtain meaning and public resonance. As argued above, actors as 'bricoleurs' recombine elements from the existing repertoire of ideas to create new meaning.

This has the obvious consequence of creating ideational path dependence (Campbell, 2004), and thus restrains the forms of meaning actors in practice can create. Actors can place an idea in a network of other ideas, but the range of different possible networks is structured by the existing ideational tradition of a policy area. The ideational environment of a new idea is thus determined in two steps: First by the tradition of the policy field it is introduced within as well as the more general category of 'national political culture'. And second by the original creator of the idea, who additionally limits the range of trajectories that the idea can develop in.

⁵ This is of course a simplification. Ideas are never simply created anew by actors. Instead ideas are layered on top of and related to previous ideas (Schmidt, 2008b). Thus, the idea that one actor develops is always part of a larger complex of ideas created by other actors through time. On the other hand, ideas do not pop out the blue, they need actors to present and defend them. This makes the following argument reasonable as an analytical simplification.

The position of the rival actor, who has an interest in changing the meaning of the new idea to correspond to his own vision of the world, is obviously different. He has no immediate influence over what network of ideas the idea is placed in, and thus his influence is based on his ability to change the network of ideas. One way of doing this, is to contest the interpretation of the relations between the ideas in the network, possibly trying to move certain ideas that are at the centre of the constellation to a more peripheral position. Another way is to change the composition of the network of ideas that the idea is part of, e.g. by trying to inject a new idea into the network. As argued above, this would change the overall structure of meaning in the network.

3.4 Concluding remarks

This description of an exchange between an original creator and his rival serves to illustrate the dynamic and incremental nature of ideas, and thus also how the prevalent conceptualisation of ideas as coherent entities within ideational research is inaccurate. This section has sought to bring home this point with two connected arguments. First, discourse analysis tells us that ideas are never fixed, because this demands that they are structured by an underlying principle, which would leave them closed off from the surrounding social world. Indeed, politics is all about trying to decontest meaning, to create ideational totality, but it is a task that is never successfully carried out. The political struggle consists in binding ideas together to create meaning for other actors, both on an elite and mass level. Second, and following this, actors can use ideas, but they are constrained by both the existing ideational terrain and other actors. Thus, actors can use ideas, but the ideas are never controllable. The understanding of ideas that follows from this is radically different from the conceptualisations in mainstream ideational research. The perspective is helpful as a basis for showing how ideas change incrementally over time, and, not least, how this leads to political change in a broader sense, which is the subject of the next section.

4. Mechanisms of ideational change

Based on the theoretical discussion presented above, this section outlines two general mechanisms of incremental, ideational change: First, a change in the *relation* between the existing elements of an idea, which means that the elements of the idea remain constant, but the hierarchy of the elements (periphery/centre) changes, thus changing the relative weight and importance of the elements. And, second, a change in the *composition* of the elements of an idea, where the introduction of a new element of meaning into the idea significantly changes the meaning of the idea. Of course, this is in no way an exhaustive list

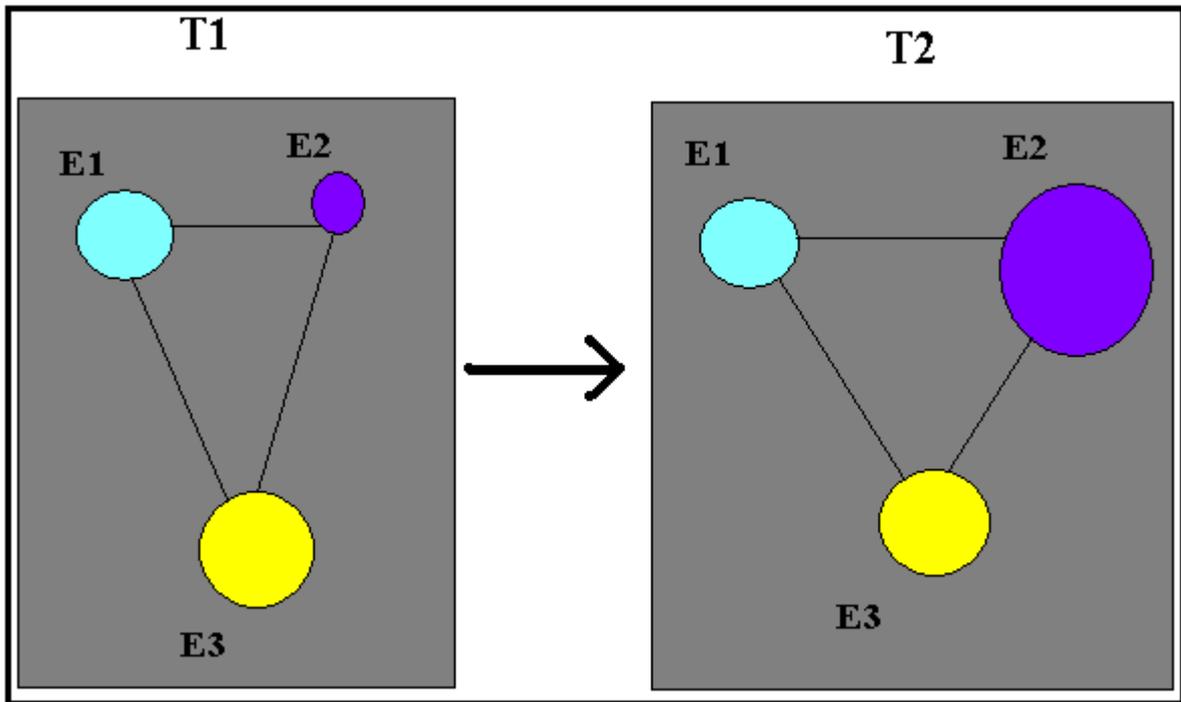
over mechanisms for ideational change⁶. One could imagine other mechanisms, and this serves simply as an illustration of how ideas can change incrementally.

Following this, a note of caution is necessary at this point: The examples in the two following sections should *not* be read as an attempt to present an empirical analysis of how ideas change incrementally. Instead, the examples are used to illustrate the mechanisms of change that are analysed theoretically in this chapter. A proper empirical analysis would necessitate the collection of data and selection of cases sensitised to capture the nature of ideas, which is not the case in the studies reviewed below. Moreover, it is beyond the scope of this paper to present such evidence. Thus the following examples merely serves to show how ideas in real life have changed incrementally, and to some extent render probably that these ideational changes have led to significant political change.

4.1 Change in the relation between existing elements in an idea

As mentioned in the last chapter, the elements of an idea do not inhabit equally important positions. All the elements affect the meaning of the idea, but some are more strongly articulated and fill out a greater 'space' in the network of elements. The relative importance of the elements may, however, change over time. This means that an idea may for example develop from being less consequential for the meaning of the idea to become organising for the other elements. That all the elements still exist within the network means that the change in relative importance does not lead to a paradigmatic change. Instead, to analysts the change might rather look like, and possibly turn out to be, a consolidation of the elements of the idea. None the less, the meaning of the idea has changed and may thus have significant political consequences. The development is illustrated in model 2 below:

⁶ E.g. the layering or embedding of new ideas into older ones, thereby changing both old and new ideas. Or that the 'ownership' of an idea changes over time, analogous to Streeck and Thelen's (2005) idea of 'conversion'.



Model 2: Change in the relation between existing elements of an idea

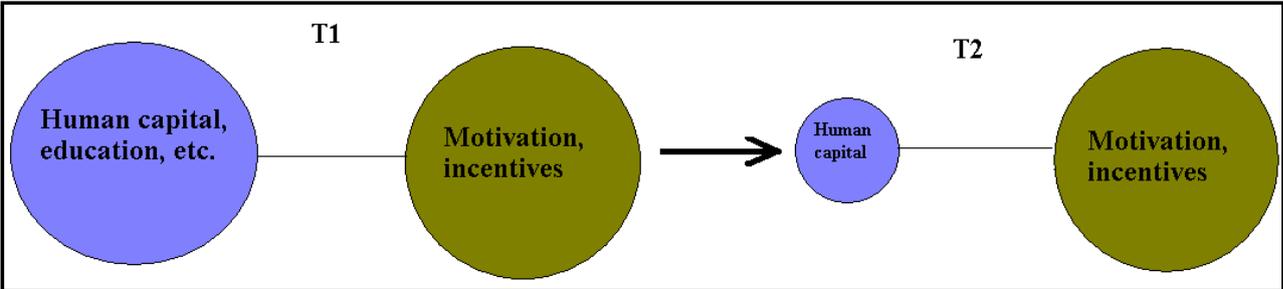
In the process of moving from the first cluster of elements (T1) to the second (T2), the elements E1 and E3 retain the same space in the network of the idea, but element E2 changes size to inhabit a larger part of the idea, and thus plays a greater role in defining the meaning of the idea.

This mechanism can be illustrated empirically with the incremental development in the meaning of the idea ‘Individualisation’ in Danish employment policy with a focus on how the Danish government party, Venstre, changed its understanding of the idea during the end of the 1990’s. The idea of individualisation is part of a turn from explaining unemployment as a result of too low productivity and thus demand for labour, to focus on the supply-side of unemployment, that is, the abilities and incentives of the individual. This idea increasingly gained ground in Denmark and other OECD countries from the end of the 1980’s (Torfing, 2004; Damgaard, 2003; Goul Andersen and Larsen, 2004). The idea is based on the belief that all unemployed people hold certain resources that need to be activated for the unemployed to get a job. In other words, the reasons for unemployment must be found in the individual’s lack of motivation or abilities (the current abilities of the client do not match the demand of the employer). Thus, the idea consists of two main elements of meaning, namely, first, that to obtain employment the client needs motivation and (economic) incentives, and, second, that the unemployed need the skills necessary to match the demand of employers. The two goals are reached through tighter eligibility criteria and different education-related measures respectively.

The two elements of individualisation have held different positions of relative weight through the years of Danish employment policy. The Social Democrats were the first to make individualisation an organising idea of their employment policy. Through the 1990s the relative weight of the two elements of the idea developed from focusing most strongly on human capital and education to assign equal weight to the two elements. During the years in opposition (1992-2001), Venstre's emphasis on the two elements developed in the opposite direction: From focusing almost exclusively on (economic) incentives and motivation to accepting a greater room for the human capital-approach. On the face of it the change of government in 2001 had no impact on individualisation in Danish employment policy, because individualisation still played a central role. In an important labour market reform, the recent Danish jobcentre reform (see below section 4.3.1), the idea of individualisation was strongly represented in the set of ideas that were used to construct the reform. It is evident from the following quote that the Liberal-Conservative government believed that the needs of the individual are central for reintegration.

“The reintegration efforts should be determined by the needs of the unemployed, rather than whether the unemployed is insured or not. The system must be adjusted to the individual, not the other way around” (Government, 2002: 1; author’s translation).

However, the weight of the two elements changed from the Social Democratic to the Bourgeois government (led by Venstre). Focusing on getting people in work as soon as possible, ‘The shortest road to employment’ has become a mantra for the government. The employment policy still leaves room for individual courses of activation, but at the same time the budgets for further training and education have been cut (Jørgensen, 2008). The ideational development from the Social Democratic government at the end of the 1990s to the Bourgeois government of 2001 can be depicted as in model 3:

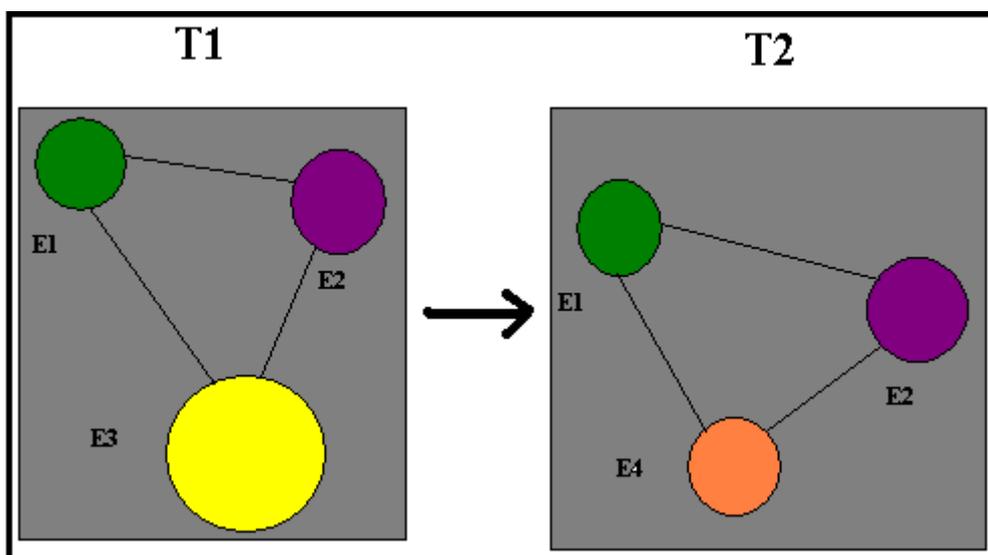


Model 3: The change in Venstre’s notion of individualisation in employment policy

The model shows how the idea of individualisation contains the same overall elements of meaning in both periods. This would support the argument that there has been no paradigmatic change, but it does not support an argument that the idea of individualisation has not changed between the two governments. Rather the element of ‘Human capital’-individualisation has lost ground to individualisation with a focus on motivation and incentives, thus changing the relative weight of the two elements. In sum, the ideational change has been incremental with the significant political consequence that a leading government party’s conception of individualisation changed meaning around the time it took office and reformed important parts of Danish labour market policy.

4.2 Change in the composition of elements in an idea

Another way ideas develop incrementally is through a change in the composition of the network of elements that constitute an idea. If we imagine an idea made up by the relation between three ideas, this kind of development occurs when one or two of these elements are substituted with a new element. As argued above, the meaning of an idea derives from the relation between the elements. Thus, a substitution of one of the elements with a new element leads to a change in the meaning of the idea. The change is incremental, because though the idea changes meaning, the meaning still in large part hinges on the ideas that were part of the original network. This form of incremental change is illustrated in model 4 below:



Model 4: Change in the composition of the network of elements

Before the change, in time 1 (T1), the meaning of the idea derives from the elements E1, E2 and E3. With the change in the composition of elements in the idea, E3 is substituted with a new element, E4, while the elements E1 and E2 remain in the network. This necessarily leads to a change in the meaning of the idea, but the change is not large enough to talk of a new idea or a paradigmatic change. The change in the composition of elements may also lead to a change in the relative weight of the elements. This is also illustrated in model 3, where E1 and E2 have the same size in T1 and T2, but their relative weight in relation to the third element changes from T1 to T2 because E4 is larger than E3.

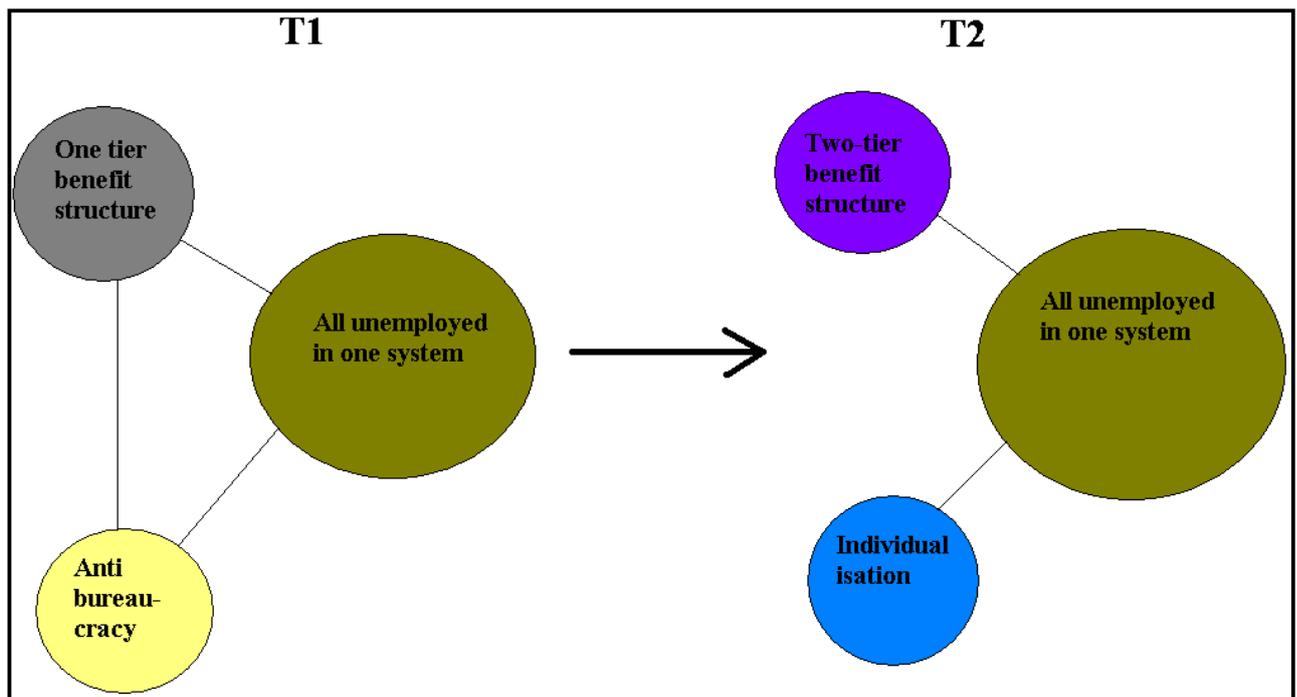
Once again the mechanism of incremental ideational change can be illustrated by recent developments in Danish employment policy. In this example the development in the Danish bourgeois party Venstre's idea of how the administration of employment-related measures and benefits should be organised is analysed. Before the jobcentre reform of 2007, which was decided in an agreement between the bourgeois government (Venstre and the Conservatives) and the Danish People's Party, the administration of activation and benefits was divided between the state and the municipalities in a two-tier structure. The state was responsible for the clients with unemployment insurance, whereas the municipalities were responsible for clients without unemployment insurance. With the reform a one-tier structure was implemented, which placed all clients within the responsibility of jobcentres, jointly run by municipal- and state-employed caseworkers. The benefit structure, however, did not change: Benefits were still determined on the grounds of insurance-status, thus a two-tier benefit structure remained. There are many interesting aspects of the reform (some of which are dealt with in Carstensen and Pedersen, 2009), but here focus is on the development of Venstre's idea of how the administrative structure of employment policy should be organised.

Venstre has for a long time argued for a one tier labour market structure, not only regarding employment service, but also a one-tier benefit structure. There are many examples of this support. In 1995, MP for Venstre, Lars Løkke Rasmussen⁷, expressed his frustration with the existing two-tier system, where, according too Rasmussen, the municipalities spend more time trying to avoid paying social benefits than getting people to work, and claims that often it is accidental who are insured and who are not (Rasmussen, 1995). In other words, in Venstre the idea that the two-tier structure should be collapsed into one has been around for a long time, at least dating back to 1995, and probably even longer than that. Another example can be found in 1996, when senior members of Venstre – notably Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who would in 2001 become Prime Mister – produced a policy paper suggesting a reform of the benefit structure (Venstre, 1996). The policy paper argues that all unemployed should be covered by the same rules, and that a one collective

⁷ Lars Løkke Rasmussen would in 2001 become Minister of the Interior in the Liberal-Conservative government, and he is considered the main architect behind the Structural Reform that the jobcentre-reform was part of.

benefit (resembling the British Jobseeker's Allowance) should replace existing benefits and social assistance. The argument for a one-tier structure was based on the notion that the existing two-tier system was unnecessarily rigid and bureaucratic. Venstre's position on a unified administrative structure was kept intact when the party formed government with the Conservative People's Party in 2001, save for one important difference: Venstre no longer argued for a unified benefit structure.

Venstre's policy on a one-tier benefit structure in the mid 1990s resembled the British Jobseekers Allowance, both with its aim to trim down bureaucracy and simplifying the administrative structure and in its insistence on a one-tier benefit system. However, the party changed their approach significantly in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. As Venstre presented the important policy paper *More People Working* (2002) – which was to lay the ground for the future jobcentre reform – the party still advocated a one-tier employment service, but now gave up their wishes for a one tier benefit structure á la Jobseeker's Allowance. This shift can be explained by the fact that the Liberal-Conservative government wanted a large majority to pass the reform, and the support of the social partners (Goul Andersen and Albrekt Larsen, 2004). What changed in the position of Venstre regarding a one-tier structure was that they ended up accepting that the benefit structure remained organised in two tiers. Furthermore, the idea of a one-tier administrative structure was no longer tied to the notion of anti-bureaucracy, but instead to the argument that the activation measures could better be individualised and personalised in a one-tier structure. In the new system the measures to help the unemployed back in work could be attuned to the individual's need rather than being determined on the basis of which system the client was placed in. The development in Venstre's idea of an administrative structure for the implementation of unemployment policy can be illustrated as in model 4:



Model 5: The incremental change in Venstre's idea of an administrative structure in Danish employment policy

The model illustrates the dynamics in the development in Venstre's idea about an administrative structure for Danish employment policy. First, in the first cluster of elements (T1), the element 'All unemployed in one system' is depicted as larger than the other elements, making it constitutive of the idea's meaning. This does not change in the new cluster of elements (T2), where the notion that clients should be helped within the same system is still the leading element of meaning. Second, two of the three elements in the first cluster are substituted with two new elements in the second cluster. This changes the meaning of the cluster to only support a one-tier administration of measures such as activation and control and not a one-tier administration of benefits. Consequentially, the idea changes meaning without eliminating the overall structure of the idea, which centres on placing all unemployed in the same system. Thus, the change is significant but not paradigmatic. Third, in the first cluster all the elements are connected in the sense that the notion of 'Anti-bureaucracy' supports both of the other elements. This changes in the second cluster, where the notion of 'Individualisation' is not connected directly to the element 'Two-tier benefit structure', placing the latter element less centrally in the overall argument.

Overall the development in Venstre's idea does not lead to paradigmatic change, because the leading element remains in the cluster and keeps its organising role in the cluster. However, the change is still significant, because the development removes a significant part of Venstre's policy in the 1990s, namely the long held conviction that to remove unnecessary bureaucracy the two-tier benefit system should be reformed into a

one-tier system. The new constitution of the idea still supports a one-tier administrative system for handling clients, but builds this argument on an idea of individualisation which was originally developed by previous Social Democratic governments. In other words, the analysis shows, first, that the meaning of an idea can change over time without a paradigmatic break with the original idea, and, second, that this change can significantly affect an idea and lead to the exclusion of previously important elements of an idea.

4.3 Concluding remarks

The examples above serve to make two theoretical and analytical points. First, the analyses revealed how ideas can change incrementally with significant political consequences. Often ideas change meaning in small steps, seemingly without a change in the overall structure. If we want to understand how and why political ideas change, it is necessary to analyse the incremental developments – the small steps – that possibly leads to greater dislocations of meaning.

Second, the examples sought to render probable that a theoretical framework that includes parts of discourse theory sensitises the analysis to the dynamic nature of ideas – both from a diachronic and synchronic perspective. The strength of the approach also lies in its ability to move between different levels of an idea within the same analysis. This was demonstrated with the example of the idea of ‘Individualisation’ in Venstre’s employment policy. Individualisation was analysed both as an element in an idea and as an idea in its own right. An approach that incorporates the focus on relations between elements of meaning, as opposed to look for an ideational core, thus demands of the analyst to look for the multiple levels of meaning that all ideas are part of.

Moreover, though the approach focuses on ideas as discourses, this does not block out a focus on the role of actors. In the examples of ideational change the actors played a key role in the development of an idea, presenting, appropriating and developing them. This should not be taken to imply that actors can use ideas as they see fit, because new ideas must be connected to older ideas. At the same time, however, the actors are not helplessly left to accept the existing ideational structure. When we acknowledge that ideas are dynamic and not closed entities – that they are made as they are used – it is possible to appreciate how ideas are neither controllable nor uncontrollable. Instead their meaning and influence is determined by an interrelationship between how different agents use them and the historical background of the ideas.

5. Conclusion

Historical institutional and ideational research are two traditions that share a number of similarities and are in many ways complimentary (Béland, 2005). An unfortunate affinity between the two sets of theories, however, is their tendency of focusing on stability. At a first glance, ideational research seems able to explain the change that historical institutionalism has difficulties accounting for within its theoretical premises (Schmidt, 2008a and b), but as argued above, ideational theories are also focused on stability stemming from the common conceptualisation of ideas as relatively coherent and stable outside periods of crisis. This is analogous to the conceptualisation of institutions as inherently stable and coherent (Lieberman, 2002; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). The aim of this paper has been to show how much can be won by employing parts of a post-structuralist perspective on discourse without accepting its questionable and analytically problematic epistemological and ontological assumptions.

There are a number of reasons why discourse theory can add to the understanding of how ideas matter. First, with the incorporation of a focus on the discursively founded micro-structure of ideas, the analytical framework can capture change on both lower and higher levels of an idea. Through a rejection of the notion that ideas have a core from which it derives its meaning, the ideas are broken down into smaller pieces that in different ways are related. Thus this perspective sensitises the analyst to how ideas are made from horizontal, vertical and diachronic relations between different elements and ideas.

Second, developing a theory that focuses on the dynamic nature of ideas poses in no way a rejection of the importance of actors in ideational processes. To the contrary, as shown above, there exists no theoretical contradiction in arguing that ideas are defined by their relation to other ideas, and assigning an important role to actors. Instead of taking sides in a meaningless discussion of whether ideas control actors or actors control ideas, the theory argues that actors and ideas are interrelated. Thus actors can use ideas, but due to the contested nature of ideas, actors are not able to control the meaning of an idea.

Third, and following this, the approach is open towards multiple methodological approaches. The incremental development of ideas can be analysed mainly from a discourse-oriented perspective with an emphasis on how different ideas are expressed over shorter or longer spans of time. It is also possible to focus more on how different actors try to influence discourses within certain institutional settings. However – and this is the most important methodological point – analyses gain most from *combining* discourse analysis and actor-centred explanations. Such an approach strengthens the possibility of claiming some form of general causality while paying due attention to the micro- and macro-foundations of ideas.

Fourth, a theory of incremental ideational change strengthens the most important argument in ideational research, namely that ‘ideas matter’. The analysis has sought to demonstrate from a theoretical perspective, how ideas not only matter in times of crisis, but also develop and have political effects in times of relative stability. Obviously we are still in dire need of empirical analyses of exactly how ideas change incrementally, and not least how this leads to significant political changes.

The argument that ideational research has much to gain from developing ideational theories with a micro-foundation that incorporates certain theories from post-structuralist discourse theory, should not be taken to imply that I believe the approach can answer all questions pertaining to ideational developments. In some, possible in many, cases the strong focus on the internal workings of ideas needs to be supplemented with other types of theories that to a greater extent incorporate structural and ‘material’ factors, for example how the political system is structured, the political power that actors (e.g. interest groups, international organisations) get from different institutional positions, the effect of existing political institutions more generally, the political opportunity-structure, elections, the workings of the media system, etc. However, it is the argument of this paper, that analysts miss out on an important determinant of change if they ignore how ideas develop incrementally over time, and focus all energy on how ideas perform their stabilising functions between crises.

In the effort to open up both historical institutionalism and ideational research for incremental transformative change, it is increasingly becoming apparent that we need to look inside the black box of the two central variables, ideas and institutions – both during formative moments and critical junctures as well as in times of relative stability. And, most importantly, to develop theories that analyse the close relation between the ‘big bangs’ and everyday ‘muddling through’ of politics.

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