

## 8. Constructivism and agenda setting

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Agenda setting and constructivism have established a very close relationship since the first publications on the transformation of an issue into a problem at the beginning of the 20th century. Why a problem becomes a problem, or in other words “the conversion of difficulties into problems” (Stone, 1989), is a complex process in which ideas and cognitive frames play a crucial role. Early studies on agenda setting have insisted on this central place of ideas in transforming difficulties into problems that are put on the agenda. Empirical examples abound in this aspect: why do tobacco or alcohol consumptions become a problem at one point in time, although alcohol and tobacco consumption is a centuries-old practice? Other problems such as food safety, the fight against cancer, housing policies, or the fight against terrorism are regularly put on the agenda. Some of these issues are linked to immediate events, such as terrorist attacks; others, however, are constantly part of the social and political system in which we live. Why then do they become a problem that political actors perceive to be necessary to address? In order to explain this process, it is possible to concentrate on the characteristics of actors participating in the agenda setting process – public or private – or the nature of the difficulties themselves – whether they are serious or mild, new or recurring, short-term or long-term (Stone, 1989). Constructivist approaches, however, argue that it is only when we concentrate on the framing of the deliberate use of language and thus the framing of information available as a way of getting an issue on the political agenda – or, on the contrary, keeping it off – that we best understand why some issues make it on the agenda while others don’t.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, the chapter aims to analyse the intimate, but very often implicit, relationship between constructivism and agenda setting by presenting the major claims and developments of constructivism with regard to the agenda setting process in policy studies. The subsequent section will outline the main controversies and show how constructivism has tried to answer the limitations of other approaches in the analysis of the agenda setting process. The final section will develop a series of issues that might be addressed in possible research agendas anticipating future developments.

## CONSTRUCTIVISM AND AGENDA SETTING: AN IMPLICIT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

Constructivist approaches in the field of public policy focus on the social construction of policy problems – in other words, the construction of frames of reference on which policymaking is based. The main question is how ideational factors (worldviews, ideas, collective understandings, norms, values, cognitive schemes, and so on),<sup>1</sup> or ideas understood as “claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationship, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions” (Parsons, 2002, p.48), dominate political action (Checkel, 1993; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Hall, 1993; McNamara, 1998; Berman, 1998; Wendt, 1999; Cox, 2001; Blyth, 2002; Fischer, 2003; Parsons, 2003, 2010; Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004; Culpepper, 2008; Genyies and Smyrl, 2008; Gofas and Hay, 2010; Abdelal et al., 2010; Béland, 2015). That means that interests and derived policies are shaped within a particular framework of meaning and are not exogenously given.

On the most general level, constructivism refers to the assumption that social norms and frameworks on which reality is based are constructed and redefined through permanent interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Actors’ interests cannot be understood as deduced from a solely material structure, as rational choice approaches would argue (Elster, 1989; Mueller, 2003). Rational choice derives preferences exogenously by specifying properties (position, resources, and so on) across actors and how different values of properties imply different preferences. On the contrary, constructivists assume that social, political, and economic contexts structure these interests, thus actors and structures are co-constituted – one of the most central terms in constructivist research. In other words, the way we think about the world makes the world as we perceive it. Thus, constructivists have a very different understanding of how interests change. For materialists, actors’ interests evolve as changes in their environment alter their situation, whereas constructivists or idealists, on the contrary, assume that interests change as agents alter their understanding of their changing world and recalculate their priorities (Béland and Cox, 2010).

The importance of this co-constitution of agents and structures is reflected by the opposition of two logics: a logic of appropriateness and a logic of consequentialism (see, in particular, March and Olsen, 1998; for a less constructivist and more sociological perspective, see March and Olsen, 1984, 1989). Whereas the logic of consequentialism treats agents and structures as two distinct features that explain political processes (the goal of action is to maximize one’s own interests and preferences), the logic

of appropriateness allows for the conceptualizing of this co-constitution of actors and structures. The logic of appropriateness:

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

Thus, acting according to a logic of appropriateness is more a question of behaving correctly in policymaking processes, in line with criteria established by a society or a group, than maximizing one's preferences (Ostrom, 1999).

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

A caveat is in order, however. The widespread use of the terms “constructivist turn” or “ideational turn” in public policy gives the impression there is a coherent conceptual framework. This is not the case (Saurugger, 2013). Constructivist accounts have taken various forms and can be understood from different vantage points ranging from post-positivist constructivists who explore actors' discursive practices, denying that discourses have a reality behind them, to “conventional” constructivists whose aim is to analyse how socially constructed facts do indeed influence politics (Diez, 1999; Checkel, 2006; Genyies and Smyrl, 2008; Landman, 2008; Gofas and Hay, 2010; Béland and Cox, 2010).

This chapter argues that the interest of “conventional” constructivists in the *measurable* influence of ideational aspects on the policy process makes it particularly useful for explaining agenda setting. Early studies of the agenda setting process – such as Dewey (1927), Edelman (1971, 1988), Cobb and Elder (1972), Gusfield (1963, 1981), and Kingdon (1989) – have shown that actors often do not have a clear and well-articulated set of preferences or, better, have contradictory preferences which are embedded in specific values and worldviews (Zahariadis, 1999, 2003). It is the influence of these worldviews on agenda setting processes that constructivist public policy perspectives help to understand.

However, while most of the constructivist approaches explicitly or

implicitly insist on the clear difference between rationalist and constructivist thinking, the constructivism we find in agenda setting approaches is less clear cut between these two epistemological views. This is particularly well reflected in Stone's (1989, p. 282) basic assumption, drawn from Gusfield:

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

Hence, ideational factors frame the understanding of material factors (for an in-depth debate of this “intellectual topography of ideational explanations”, see Gofas and Hay, 2010, p. 3). These ideational factors shed light on the influence of “worldviews”, mechanisms of identity formation, and principles of action in public policy analysis (Hall, 1993; McNamara, 1998; Surel, 2000; Blyth, 2002; Parsons, 2003; Jabko, 2006).

Indeed, the idea of the strategic behaviour of actors has found its way back into constructivist approaches centred on public policy. The aim of this “actor-centred” constructivism is to understand how worldviews, which provide the cognitive background in which actors evolve, are at the same time used by actors to strategically achieve their goals. In this perspective, ideas and norms do not solely constitute the environment in which actors are embedded (constitutive logic) but are also tools consciously used by these same actors to attain their goals (causal logic). This allows us not to obscure the fact that power is unequally distributed amongst actors, as social interactions mobilize rules for agenda setting that privilege specific agents. Hence the agents' actual power in bargaining is fostered by a governance system's specific cognitive structure. At the same time, this branch of constructivism is no longer exclusively centred on cognitive factors as opposed to materialistic factors: both must be taken into account (Gofas and Hay, 2010). My argument here is consistent with this idea: only approaches that succeed in combining both a constitutive logic and a causal logic provide the necessary tools to understand agenda setting processes.

#### POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES IN AGENDA SETTING PROCESSES

In order to systematically analyse the extent to which constructivism can help us to better disentangle the complexity of agenda setting, I suggest we distinguish between three different aspects of the process: identify-

ing, framing, and justifying the problem. These aspects do not represent sequences. On the contrary, they can (and often do) occur at the same time in order to explain how and why a policy controversy emerges, who the actors are that take part in the debate, how and why certain arguments become more important than others, and how to get rid of contradictory experts (see also Zittoun, 2014).

#### Identifying

Identifying a problem in order to make it fit to be put on the agenda requires that a social fact is perceived as a problem. Hence a problem does not make it onto the agenda on its own by virtue of simply existing; someone must identify it as such and put it on the agenda. The analysis of how and why specific actors try to transform an issue into a problem is a specific feature of the agenda setting process in which constructivist approaches are useful. The answer that this is “because they have an interest in putting the issue on the agenda” is certainly correct, but only partially so. The embeddedness of actors and of their interests in specific cognitive frames makes it possible for some issues to be transformed into problems. Constructivist approaches to identifying a problem particularly stress the constructed nature of interests (Blyth, 2002; Parsons, 2007; Marsh, 2009; Hay, 2011, 2015). It is extremely interesting to note that John W. Kingdon’s *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (1984) puts ideas at the centre of the agenda setting analysis (Béland, 2005, 2015). In answering the puzzle “what makes people in and around government attend, at any given time, to some subjects and not others?”, Kingdon’s framework allows us to combine structure (institutions), agency (the carriers of ideas), and timing through the concept of “windows of opportunity” that allow actors to carry their ideas during a short period of time. Contrary to the idea that there are “sound mechanisms for detecting problems and prioritizing them for action” (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015, p. 5), constructivists would argue that the logic of appropriateness is a better explanatory variable for explaining and understanding the emergence of a problem on the political agenda.

The question of actors’ cognitive embeddedness in the social system is a cornerstone of two institutionalist frameworks: sociological and discursive institutionalist approaches. Institutional approaches understand institutions as rules, norms, and strategies (Ostrom, 1999, p. 37). Sociological institutionalism is not a constructivist perspective as such but can be, and increasingly is, perceived as such (see Knill and Tosun, 2012; Hay, 2015). It contains elements constructivists have used extensively when analysing how and why a problem is identified as such. More specifically, sociological

institutionalism derives from different conceptualizations of organizational sociology, putting particular emphasis on the cognitive dimensions of institutional actions. At the heart of sociological institutionalism is a very broad understanding of institutions, incorporating symbols, cognitive frames or moral templates that provide meaning to action. It stresses the way in which institutions influence behaviour by providing the cognitive concepts and models that are indispensable for action. These cognitive dimensions can be understood through four attitudes in particular: logic of appropriateness, logic of consequentialism, isomorphism, and mimesis (Peters, 2005). The first two logics have strongly influenced the debate agenda setting, and more precisely the question of why one specific problem triumphs over another in the sense that it is put on the agenda.

Contrary to the understanding that a problem would be put on the agenda based on a combination of a rational cost–benefit analysis and the most powerful actors, as the rational choice-inspired logic of consequentialism would have it, the logic of appropriateness argues that issues are transformed into problems because of a widespread conception of what should be (Kingdon, 1984). In other words, individuals’ actions are determined by their sense of obligation as structured by the appropriate rules and routines rather than by self-interest. In this sense, institutions are not only enabling and constraining actors’ preferences but also influencing the way actors conceive their preferences in the first place. Linking this approach to the agenda setting literature in policy studies, Béland (2015, p. 5) insists on Kingdon’s understanding of the role of ideas in the construction and the classification of policy problems. Indeed, Béland insists, for Kingdon policy ideas have a strong ideational component because they only become apparent as a consequence of “the mismatch between the observed condition and one’s conception of the ideal state of affairs” (ibid). Hence the answer to the question of how an actor becomes the carrier of an idea is linked to the cognitive frame in which she evolves.

The third element of sociological institutionalism helping to understand why specific problems are put on the agenda refers to isomorphism: results from social processes of emulation and diffusion. Sociological institutionalism argues that in policymaking processes, actors replicate organizational models collectively sanctioned as appropriate and legitimate (March and Olsen, 1984, 1989; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Three mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change can be identified: coercion, mimesis, and normative pressures. Coercive isomorphism refers to pressure from other organizations, mostly the government, via public subsidies upon which institutions are dependent. Coercive isomorphism can also be exercised by cultural expectations stemming from society as institutions conforming to expectations from the outside. Hence what becomes

a problem can also be imposed from the outside. According to research based on sociological institutionalist perspectives, the concept of problem or issue legitimacy that allows it to be put on the agenda must be understood as an intersubjective property that “operates through individuals via cognitive scripts” (Goetze and Rittberger, 2010, p. 37). It thus helps to understand that the legitimacy of an issue is not an unchangeable fact but rather a shared cognitive framework that structures agents’ attitudes in policymaking processes. Controversies among actors or groups in arguing why an issue should or should not become a problem on the agenda have been explained through the establishment of divergent collective values or cognitive frames, which make the defence of specific positions possible (Fouilleux, 2004).

Finally, mimesis, a variant of isomorphism, is thought to occur mostly through the migration of professionals from one organization to another. Here, however, it is less the problem that is constructed first, but rather a solution to which a problem is then attached (Zahariadis, 2013).

#### Framing

From the earliest agenda setting studies onwards, framing of policy issues and their transformation into legitimate problems was a central feature. Cobb and Elder (1972) focused on the conditions, that obstruct propagation as well as those that enable the resolution of a problem. The authors attached particular importance to the language used, to the mobilization of symbols and to the generalization of rhetoric. Associating a problem to a long tradition of conflicts, for instance, constitutes one of the strategies that individuals develop to expand conflict. Therefore, the process by which actors develop and manage to impose a definition of a problem perceived as legitimate, or in other words, “frame” an issue is a key factor to analyse in policy studies. Hence the central question of policymaking for constructivists is not “who gets what, when and how?” but how one frames one’s needs. Starting with Goffman’s (1974) understanding of framing in social interactions, the puzzle of framing has attracted a broad variety of studies in social sciences. Framing is generally considered as either *frames in thought* consisting of the mental representations, interpretations, and simplifications of reality, or *frames in communication* consisting of the communication of frames between different actors. Three aspects are crucial to understand framing processes in policy research on agenda setting: the construction of legitimate tools that justify how an issue becomes a problem, discourses through which framing and justification takes place, and the process of socialization that permits establishing a more automatic framing process.

#### Constructing legitimate tools for policy change

Policies are not always prone to rapid change. Conceptual frameworks such as three orders of change (Hall, 1993), path dependency (Pierson, 2000) or punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015), which have in common an insistence on the incremental (and thus slow and complex) nature of the vast majority of policy change, illustrate this phenomenon. Hence over long periods of time, the dominant actors of a public policy sector ensure a balanced and stable situation by monopolizing upstream problem definition processes (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015). The stable rules of the game ensure the stability of configurations. All new actions entail frictions and are costly to implement. Due to the fact that individuals have cognitive limits and therefore prefer stable ideas to new ideas, they reinforce the equilibrium status of public policy. Hence, in order to put a problem on the agenda and thus to disturb this equilibrium, the existence of a problem must be justified. Justifying policy problems must be understood as giving reasons why an issue must be put on the agenda as a problem. The justification stage has become increasingly important in contemporary policymaking, in which expert justifications are needed in order to act. Even if old and new media can use public emotion to create pressure for transforming an issue into a problem, this problem will only be put on the public agenda if it can be justified through science.

Constructivist public policy approaches are useful to explain these legitimation strategies that actors pursue in policymaking processes. This is important because constructivists argue that the main logic of actions that guide organizational behaviour is more than the search for functional efficiency; it is to increase the legitimacy of the organizational environment. The influence of ideas, of “worldviews”, of “ways of seeing things”, of frames, or more generally of representations is at the centre of these approaches. In this sense, public policy is understood as the result of the interaction between individuals whose interests are not only based on a rational cost-benefit calculation but also must be understood as something that is embedded in specific social representations, values, and norms in which the actor evolves. General constructivist approaches of public policy aim to help us to understand why some proposals have more legitimacy in a debate than others at a given time:

Politicians, officials, the spokesmen for societal interests, and policy experts all operate within the terms of political discourse that are current in the nation at a given time, and the terms of political discourse generally have a specific configuration that lends representative legitimacy to some social interests more than others, delineates the accepted boundaries of state action, associates contemporary political developments with particular interpretations of national

history, and defines the context in which many issues will be understood. (Hall, 1993, p. 289; see also Surel, 2000).

Studying the justification process used to transform an issue into a problem is a central issue in constructivist public policy approaches. According to this understanding, the justification process is influenced through cognitive and normative frames available to policy actors: "actors always perceive the world through a lens consisting of their pre-existing beliefs" (Sabatier, 1998, p. 109). These pre-existing beliefs, as Sabatier calls them, are not homogenous, however. When conflict occurs among actors within these frames, as well as among actors who have adopted different frames in negotiations leading to public policies, the debate about which issue to put on the agenda starts. Hence, conflicts allow us to explain why policies change. While normative frames in which actors are embedded continuously exist, this embeddedness does not lead to a situation in which policies do not change. Even incremental change is based on conflict between different cognitive frames, which justifies the importance of a specific issue to be put onto the agenda.

This understanding of ideas and cognitive frames allows the legitimization of public policies to be conceptualized differently to rational choice approaches. The legitimacy of a policy problem thus is no longer an absolute value but must be understood in the light of a permanent framing process in which different ideas about legitimacy confront each other: the legitimacy of public policies is in reality a process of legitimization of public policies (Muller and Jobert, 1987). This research field has gained in importance since the beginning of the 1990s, when the debate on citizens' disenchantment with politics became increasingly salient (see also Druckman, 2001). However, cognitive frames are not only out there; they must also be used as strategic tools in order to have an impact on the agenda setting process. Blyth (2002) and Jabko (2006), for example, have convincingly shown how social democratic and liberal parties defend their hierarchy of problems in framing these hierarchies based on a series of data.

Constructivism has developed tools to understand how justification occurs through the study of the social construction of expertise: indicators, statistics, peer review schemes, or benchmarking. This allows us to distinguish how actors justify which problems should be addressed and which shouldn't. Kingdon (1984), in his book on agendas and agenda setting, draws our attention to the construction of statistical indicators and their influence on the construction of policy problems. The importance of statistical indicators, one of the major tools in justifying why an issue should become a problem, is related to the fact that "the countable problem sometimes acquires a power of its own that is unmatched

by problems that are less countable" (ibid, p.93). Statistical indicators are thus a powerful aspect of problem definition. Understanding their construction and their interpretation is crucial to assess their impact on problem construction in all policy areas (Stone, 1997). Numbers thus become powerful symbols that tell stories that researchers must pay attention to (Schneider and Ingram, 1993; Dobbin, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Simmons et al., 2007; Koppl, 2010; Béland and Cox, 2010). These focusing events "have an ideational component, as they can become powerful political symbols embedded in 'causal stories' (Stone, 1997) that may push policy actors to address certain problems associated with such events" (Béland, 2015, p. 6).

#### **Discourse and fora**

The conceptualization of discourses in different fora is linked to a relatively new form of constructivist institutionalism applied to public policy studies, which was developed at the end of the 1990s. It is summarized by Vivien Schmidt (2008) under the label of discursive institutionalism (for first conceptualizations see Fairclough, 1992; Hay, 2001; Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Peters, 2005). Discursive institutionalism investigates how changes of paradigm and reference sets of public policies lead to the justification of new problems to be put onto the agenda.

While in the constructivist public policy approaches presented earlier, ideas are identified as mechanisms of political change, discursive institutionalism attempts to solve the causality question: precisely how do ideas and cognitive frames influence public policies? The answer of discursive institutionalist approaches to this question is straightforward: ideas require the existence of a vehicle or a carrier in order to become a problem. Discourse is identified as the main instrument of change. In this logic, it is important to focus on the content of ideas and the interactive process which brings them onto the agenda and which communicates them to the public. Thus, discursive institutionalism traces the process from the emergence of ideas, through their dissemination and finally their legitimization (Wincott, 2004). While ideas as a factor of change emerged at the beginning of the 1990s in the international relations literature (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993), they are differentiated by discursive institutionalists on at least three levels (Schmidt, 2008). The first level refers to ideas in specific public policies and, more particularly, solutions to problems raised by political and administrative decision-makers. Here, the use of ideas is rather micro-sociological and concerns specific issues.

The second level concerns ideas upon which general political programmes are based. In this context, ideas can be seen as paradigms reflecting the organizational principles that guide policy. The literature refers to

these ideas via the notion of *référentiel* (Muller and Jobert, 1987) or the notion of programmatic beliefs (Berman, 1998).

The third and last level concerns common ideologies, or indeed, the deep core (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and reflects a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) shared by a particular set of actors. Each of the three levels contains two types of ideas: *cognitive* and *normative*. While cognitive ideas explain the beliefs on which public policies are based, emphasizing the interest of agents and the need for action, normative ideas are the mechanisms that justify policies; they attach values to political action. However, even those ideas so clearly identified as mechanisms of political change require the existence of a vehicle that can be observed. It is here that discursive institutionalists refer to discourse as an instrument of change. In this logic, it is important to focus on the content of ideas and the interactive process which brings them to a head: from the emergence of ideas, through their dissemination and finally to their legitimization.

Discourses are "carriers of ideas". They can be divided into two types: *coordinative* and *communicative*. Coordinative discourse takes place between a set of actors such as epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, or even mediators. This type of discourse can be found in the context of bargaining and negotiation processes. Communicative discourse, on the other hand, is delivered to the public through communicative action. According to this approach, institutions are themselves tantamount to discourses; these discourses carry ideas. Discourses are not merely boxes in which ideas and interests of actors are embedded without being transformed, as argued by sociological institutionalists. At the European Union (EU) level, for instance, the European Commission has attempted increasingly to build communicative discourses in its coordinative discourses as a way of legitimizing its policies and reforms ever since claims of a "democratic deficit" in the EU began to emerge in the beginning of the 1990s (Fouilleux, 2004). For example, while the German and French capacity to reform their telecommunications policy was enforced by discourses that directly referred to EU institutional requirements, the reform of French immigration policy did not refer to European pressures but was very much based on French internal political debates (Thatcher, 2004; Geddes and Guiraudon, 2004).

The problem the approach faces is twofold: to determine whether discourse really can be the independent variable and to distinguish between ideas and strategies. Establishing causal links between the different phenomena is extremely difficult. The solution offered by discursive institutionalism is thus to concentrate on correlations between variables instead of insisting on causality (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004).

The second difficulty – differentiating between ideas and strategies in

discourse – has been tackled head-on by actor-centred constructivists, who do not distinguish between ideas and strategies but argue that ideas, as well as any other argument, can be used strategically in order to put an issue onto the agenda, and hence transform it into a problem.

#### **Framing through socialization**

Similar to the hypotheses developed by the mimesis aspect of sociological institutionalism, but without the identification of a clear role model as offered by sociological institutionalist perspectives, socialization approaches in public policy help us to understand how and why certain issues are framed as problems. Socialization occurs when norms, worldviews, and collective understandings are internalized and subsequently codified by a group of actors (Schimmelfennig, 2000; Risse, 2004). Similar professional backgrounds and the role of professional organizations in spreading mutual understanding of policy problems and solutions are important in this context (Knill and Balint, 2008). Higher education policies are one example: studies have shown the extent to which institutional isomorphism and framing through socialization can be seen as main mechanisms that lead to a common understanding of a problem. This process makes it easier for a group to carry an issue together and put it onto the agenda. In the last decade, many countries started to change their higher education policies and the organizational structures of their universities and colleges in order to pattern them after the US or UK model, based on the idea that competition amongst higher education institutions will lead to better training and research (Dobbins and Knill, 2009; Dobbins, 2011).

Based on this assumption, constructivists argue that constitutive dynamics of social learning, socialization, routinization, and normative diffusion – all of which address fundamental issues of agent identity and interests – are not adequately captured by strategic exchange or other models adhering to strict forms of methodological individualism (Checkel, 1999, 2005). On the contrary, in order to understand how an issue is transformed into a problem and put onto the agenda, research must concentrate on the influence the collective acceptance of certain standards of behaviour exerts on the policymaking processes (Checkel, 2001; Tallberg, 2002; Beyers, 2005).

Sympathetic critiques of this research insist on the fact that socialization processes are phenomena which must be rigorously studied in order to understand the moment at which an issue becomes a legitimate problem and is not just an idea or ideological position of one single individual. Hence, the alleged democratic deficit at the EU level became a problem once the professionals of representation – that is, EU member state representatives and members of the European Parliament – framed the dissatisfaction of citizens as legitimacy problem (see also Saurugger,

2010). Through continuous interaction, actors in groups of actors share a number of common values, which in turn influence their positions in decision-making processes.

This understanding of the influence of socialization on problem construction has two advantages. First of all, it shows that certain actors do not only succeed in imposing their interpretation of social phenomena or their norms as hegemonies because they have the necessary authority or because a window of opportunity opens up. Rather, their arguments are persuasive because they have managed to create a common understanding of a problem and thus hold a legitimate position through the broader social context in which they are embedded (Jobert and Muller, 1987; Dimitrova and Rhinard, 2005). Second, this understanding bestows the advantage of integrating one of the major challenges of research concentrating on contemporary governance systems; that is, thinking about the multitude of levels at which reality is constructed. Reality is constructed by the individual, the group to which it belongs, the media, or (more generally) the messages that are transmitted on several levels: locally, regionally, nationally, or more internationally.

However, one remaining question is why, if socialization processes lead to a common understanding of an issue, many bargaining processes still do not seem to be based on a shared understanding of the problem (although actors cooperate over long periods of time). Is the explanation linked to the level of analysis? In other words, can we observe socialization processes in which common worldviews are constructed only in small and very technical groups, whereas intergovernmental bargaining remains focused on national collective understandings?

Hence the problem with regard to all three of these puzzles – identifying, framing, and justifying – in constructivist approaches is that the question of unequal power structures among actors is not always part of the constructivist framework. Why do certain actors have more success than others in transforming issues into problems and putting them on the agenda? Why do some ideas have more influence than others? These questions are addressed by actor-centred approaches in constructivist studies.

#### Actor-Centred Constructivism

Since the end of the 1990s, a group of scholars has attempted to accommodate the limits of previous constructivist conceptualizations of public policies, referring to the fact that the strategic considerations of the actors involved in agenda setting processes were largely ignored in constructivist approaches. While these researchers agree with the general constructivist assumption that the individual ideas and beliefs of an actor are

constructed, they emphasize the importance of taking into account how specific actors use these ideas. The central question that actor-centred constructivism seeks to answer is precisely how ideas count in policy outcomes, including the problem construction and agenda setting processes. It should be emphasized here that actor-centred constructivists rather consistently use the term “ideas” throughout their research. Ideas are considered to be explanatory factors in their own right. But as Mark Blyth notes, constructivist perspectives have for too long opposed interests and ideas and considered them to be radically different and unrelated concepts (Blyth, 2002; see also McNamara, 2006).

How do ideas frame interests, then? When and why, for example, do public officials evoke a specific paradigm in their messages – be it neoliberal or securitarian or protectionist – and when and why do these ideas not find their way into official documents and discourse? These questions lead to identifying the agents who pay attention to certain ideas and not to others, as well as the reasons why certain decisions are made at a specific period and not at another (Zahariadis, 2008). Blyth formulates this question particularly well in the context of his research on economic ideas:

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

Ideas are considered to be malleable objects: they can be used for strategic purposes. The purely rhetorical use of these notions underestimates the forms of mobilization and instrumentalization to which these frames have been subject (Surel, 2000). In a certain sense it is rather trivial to say that these strategies are socially constructed. However, in saying this it is important to understand that actors must create broad coalitions around common strategies in order to be able to put a specific issue on the agenda.

Research based on this perspective is particularly important in the field of the European political economy. The main question here is why and how a convergence of beliefs around economic and political solutions to specific European welfare state problems has emerged (Hall, 1993; Berman, 1998; Blyth, 2002; Abdelal et al., 2010; McNamara, 1998, 2006; Parsons, 2002; Jabko, 2006, 2010; Woll, 2008; Meyer and Strickman, 2011; Clift and Woll, 2012). While scholars working on this perspective have developed different hypotheses and might not be comfortable with being called “actor-centred constructivists”, they agree on the basic assumption that when the international environment confronts political leaders with a set of challenges, it does not automatically follow that the “correct” or

“best” answer will be forthcoming. However, where these authors differ is in their views on the degree of independence that the carriers of ideas have. For one group of scholars, the understanding, interpretation, and analysis of economic, political, and social challenges is filtered by the cultural and ideal structures in which political actors operate. In order to be visible, ideas must serve the interest of the dominant actors by strengthening their position in the game (Hall, 1993; McNamara, 1998; Parsons, 2002; Béland, 2009). Another group considers ideas as weapons that can be used quite independently from the position of the actor itself (Blyth, 1997, 2002; Jabko, 2006; see also Saurugger, 2013).

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

The analysis of the intensified European economic regional integration process starting in the 1980s uses a similar research design (Jabko, 2006). Here, European integration is studied from the angle of economic governance. The observation is based on the dual economic and political changes in Europe and on the definition of a political strategy of “market gain” developed by European actors and (in particular) the European Commission. This strategy is based on the idea of a common market, a concept that brings together all of the European actors’ ideologies around a single project: the construction of the single market and the Economic and Monetary Union, which is the driving force behind the European Commission’s political strategy. This “silent revolution” agenda in Europe over time brought together a broad coalition of European actors. Through the use of what he calls “strategic constructivism”, Jabko (2006) emphasizes two paradoxical aspects of the European Union: the parallel emergence of intergovernmental economic governance, and the strengthening of the powers of supranational actors such as the European Commission at the European level. According to Jabko, the European Union is not just a marketing tool serving neoliberal ideologies; the European Commission is an active agent in developing a specific understanding of neoliberalism as not a homogenous paradigm but rather a discursive notion allowing for different interpretations and strategies to guide economic policies.

Actor-centred constructivism attempts to tackle critiques expressed

by opponents of constructivist approaches, focusing on the one hand on who the carriers of ideas and norms are and on the other on how their power relations shape the policy outcomes under scrutiny. Economically rationalist thinking is brought back into the analysis and linked to the use that actors make of these ideas. Agents are purposeful actors embedded in ideational structures, which they use according to their interests. Higher institutional complexity gives rise to potential conflict. A large number of actors with overlapping and often conflicting competencies increases the possibility of power struggles for control of agendas and resources. Blyth (2002) shows that ideas play a more powerful role in shaping the perceived interests of policymakers in periods of acute collective uncertainty, such as during economic crises. Outside of these periods actors tend to take their interests for granted. When analysing the ideas and behaviours of policy actors, constructivists reconstruct their interests by looking at how their economic and institutional position in society might shape their perceptions of self-interest and how, in turn, these perceptions affect the way in which they understand their concrete position within the policy system (Béland, 2010, 2015).

Actor-centred constructivism thus allows us to deal with two central issues found in contemporary governance systems: the complexity of policymaking processes and legitimacy issues.

## CONCLUSION: FUTURE AGENDAS

We have seen that constructivist approaches are largely used in studies on agenda setting. However, the specific conceptualization of constructivist approaches in agenda setting studies is more often than not implicit, as if the social construction of a problem through the interaction of a large variety of actors is evident in all types of agenda setting studies.

The assumption that cognitive frames can be on the one hand constructed, and on the other used strategically by agents to set the agenda, constitutes a useful instrument by which to overcome the artificial dichotomy between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequentialism. This becomes particularly clear when we think, for instance, about the German and French governments’ attempts to establish an economic government in the European Union as an answer to economic and financial crises since 2009. Their positions are both embedded in their national history – the German *ordo-liberalism* and the French statist tradition – and influenced by their economic preferences in a globalized market.

In general, however, constructivist accounts help us to better understand policy processes by virtue of insisting on the multiplicity of actors’



positions framed by their institutional, cognitive, or cultural embeddedness, on the fact that policy outcomes are not based exclusively on economic rational calculations, and on the significant role played by the socialization processes of actors and its effect on policy outcomes. The crucial role played by the contextualization of processes – that is, the fact that actors are embedded in a certain social, political, or economic context based on an important number of variables that cannot be reduced to a simple linearity between interests and outcomes – that constructivist approaches advocate leads to detailed research protocols and precise statements on policy processes. Three major questions remain, however.

First, while constructivist approaches are particularly good at explaining how specific cognitive frames permit the emergence of policy problems, more explanation is needed to understand how constructivist approaches explain the agenda setting process better than other approaches. Cohen et al.'s (1972) "garbage can" model, for instance, explains that an organization "is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work". Problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities flow in and out of a garbage can, and which problems get attached to solutions is largely due to chance. Leaders or policy entrepreneurs can make a difference in the garbage by carefully timing issue creation; being sensitive to shifting interests and involvement of participants; recognizing the status and power implications of choice situations; abandoning initiatives that get hopelessly entangled with others; and realizing that the planning is largely symbolic and an excuse for interaction. Indeed, while cognitive frames are not explicitly included as independent variables influencing the definition of an issue as a problem in this model, actors play with different symbols and ideas to influence agenda setting.

A second area in which constructivist approaches might need deepening is the question of the influence the public mood has on agenda setting of public policy issues. Political sociology approaches (see Wlezién and Soroka, 2012) have shown the interrelatedness between public opinion preference and budget choices. Studies on cognitive frames or justification procedures of agenda setting processes mostly concentrate on elite policymakers rather than the broader public (or sections thereof). Studies on how the public mood frames the cognitive space of policymakers' options beyond economic policy ideas would allow for a broader additional research agenda for constructivism in public policy (see Blyth, 2002).

Finally (and relatedly), the question of precisely how policy actors' cognitive frames shape the agenda setting process would equally gain from more precise research designs. Process tracing and discourse analysis have

addressed this question in single case studies, but broader research results would be most welcome. Here, however, we encounter the ontological problem of constructivist approaches concentrating on a small number of case studies. The central criticism that ideas constantly float around (albeit not freely) in political as well as policy processes – and that trying to understand these often contradictory variables, which do not significantly influence policy outcomes, is therefore in vain – remains an echo in constructivist research. While strategic constructivists attempt to introduce economically rational elements in their embeddedness research, other constructivist approaches insist on the long-term and learning factors in order to explain policy outcomes. However, norms, ideas, informal institutions, belief systems, or worldviews are extremely difficult to define and thus to operationalize in order to understand their influence in the policy process. All of this indicates that more exciting work awaits constructivist approaches on agenda setting, cognitive frames, and the public mood.

## NOTE

1. While all these terms have very specific definitions, the majority of constructivist approaches dealt with in this chapter uses them synonymously.

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