Book Review

Varieties on Discursive Governance
Umut Korkut, Kesi Mahendran, Gregg Bucken-Knapp, and Robert Henry Cox (eds) (2015): Discursive Governance in Politics, Policy and the Public Sphere. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

The view that ideas play an important role in the policy process can be labelled as commonplace today. More than two decades ago, Peter Hall argued (Hall 1993) that beyond expertise and technical knowledge, we also have to consider policy paradigms to understand public policy-making. His article has 'provide[d] a foothold for a new wave of ideational scholarship in policy science' (Béland – Cox 2013, 195). However, recent pieces of that ideational scholarship seem to problematize the structuralism of the Hallian approach, and lay a greater emphasis on agency (see e.g. Bevir – Rhodes 2006; Béland – Cox 2011; Hay 2011). This focus on agency is often coupled by a focus on the broader categories of discourse and ideas (see e.g. Schmidt 2002; 2010; 2014). These factors enable ideational approaches to acknowledge the normative role of intersubjective ideas in regulating political conduct, and at the same time pay attention to the active role of political agency in shaping those ideas.

The volume edited by Umut Korkut, Kesi Mahendran, Gregg Buckan-Knapp, and Robert Henry Cox fits into this research tradition. Cox, a prominent figure in today's ideational scholarship, highlights in his Preface that '[t]he main intellectual message in this volume is that most of the social world is socially constructed' (xiii.). The meaning of 'discursive governance' is to be understood in the light of that social constructivist assumption. As the editors in the Introduction put it: 'discursive governance refers to implicit mechanisms of governance resting on narratives, leitmotifs, and strategic metaphors in political language, and the subsequent framing of policies using such language to interpose ideas in order to affect political and social representations within the public sphere in accordance with the wishes of political authorities.' (p. 2) In this volume, as in several constructivist/ideational works, discourse is seen as strategic (in the sense of being a tool of legitimizing policy measures or achieving political goals), as well as constitutive (in the sense of shaping the perceptions of those who participate in the discourse).

The editors argue that identities, communities, as well as institutions are shaped by our ideas that we communicate through discourse. To use Schmidt's distinction (Schmidt 2002), the discourse has both an ideational and an interactive dimension. The editors see the most important contribution of the volume in reconstructing the latter, interactive dimension, or, as they put it in 'tracing the discursive relationship among actors, namely governments and political parties, policy participants and societal actors, and the public' (p. 2).

Each chapter of the volume analyses an empirical case (or compares more cases), and tries to draw some theoretical conclusions, ask potentially important questions for further research. Although the cases show a great variety, there are some

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topics on which several chapters touch, such as European integration, migration, or gender equality. The methods used by the authors are also manifold, ranging from qualitative content analysis through critical discourse and critical frame analysis to quota-sampled interviews. In the following, I will try to touch briefly upon the main findings of every article, while dwelling longer on some of them to illustrate a couple of the main problems addressed by the volume.

The volume is organized into three parts. As the variety of topics and methods suggest, chapters are often connected rather loosely. In the first part, the focus is mainly on political parties, more precisely on how they use and generate discourses. In the second, other political and social actors come to the fore; and the third is mainly about the role of the public sphere in discursive governance. The first and second parts contain four chapters each, while the third consists of three.

In the opening chapter, Lena Karamanidou uses a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to identify and analyse different frames and narratives that Greek government parties used about violence against migrants. The frame of illegalization denied migrants their true asylum-seekers status by emphasizing the illegality of the way they entered the country; while the frame of securitization identified migration as a threat to employment, national and cultural identity and to public order. The narratives construing anti-migrant violence as isolated events (in an expressive metaphor of a government spokesperson: '[i]n every basket of apples there is a rotten one that needs to be removed' – p. 23) and recurrently emphasizing a lack of evidence served similar goals. In Karamanidou's view, these goals were, on the one hand, to cover certain institutional (structural) shortcomings of the Greek polity (the unaccountability of security agencies, and connected to it the flawed nature of investigations about cases of violence committed by them). On the other hand, they helped the state to maintain one of its highly symbolic functions (the exercise of sovereignty understood as protecting citizens), and at the same time to cover the failure of the Greek state to exercise this function within the normative requirements of liberal democracy. The paradox of the case lies in the fact that while the government condemned violence against migrants as a violation of democratic norms, the discursive practices mentioned above contributed to the legitimization of that violence.

The chapter written by Umut Korkut and Aron Buzogány problematizes the interaction between institutional (structural) and ideational factors. They compare the health care policy reforms in Slovakia and Hungary. What makes this comparison particularly interesting is that despite the similarity of certain conditions and of the ideational background of the reforms (neo-liberal economic ideas) one of the attempts ended with success, the other with complete failure. They argue that the different outcomes were due to the different relationship between institutional and discursive factors. In Slovakia, the institutional arrangements (the position of reform teams within government; the role of prime minister Dzurinda as a publicly acknowledged, authentic leader, head of a Europeanizing right-wing elite and as middleman in the coalition; the opportunity of coalition partners to carry out their own portfolio) played a vital role in the success by boosting ideational factors. By contrast, in Hungary the synergy between ideational and institutional factors was missing. Coalition tensions

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between the liberals and the socialists, the weakening authority of Hungarian PM Ferenc Gyurcsány after his leaked Őszöd-speech (in which he admitted lying to the voters before the elections), and the dissipation of the government's reform capacity with the dismissal of the liberal minister for healthcare Lajos Molnár led to the failure of the reform plans. Besides these factors, the successful negative framing of the planned reform by then-opposition party Fidesz also contributed to the failure. According to the authors, 'the Hungarian case illustrates [that] discursive factors cannot bring forward policy reforms unless they enjoy institutional factors that enforce their resonance in the public sphere and impact of policy making' (p. 59). The conclusion of the chapter in fact seems to point toward the limits of discursive governance: ideational factors and discourse on their own are not enough for a successful reform.

The remaining two chapters of this part show how parties use certain ideas strategically. In the article of Mikael Nygård et al., the idea of social investment, human capital and equality of opportunity (concepts usually having a positive connotation) are used to legitimate policy shifts undertaken by parties. Mari K. Niemi shows how the selection of women as party leaders serves strategic purposes, although in different ways. In the Swedish case, through the selection of Mona Sahlin, her party tried to appeal to the Swedish public that is very sensitive about equality issues; while in the Finnish case the cause of selecting Jutta Urpilainen was rather her immaculate image. This difference draws our attention to the importance of the public/discursive context: as Niemi emphasizes, contrary to the common sense notion, the several kinds of Nordic public are not homogeneous when it comes to progressiveness.

While parties are the primary initiators of policy discourses, other agents can play active roles as well. The rest of the book is about such actors – the second part about societal actors and policy participants, the third about the role of the public.

The chapter by Marcin Dąbrowski illustrates how a new public policy instrument (the Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas – JESSICA) 'can result in the discursive frames becoming reality through incentives to change behavior and the perceived interest of the actors' (p. 93). The new frame mentioned is the 'results-oriented' recalibration of the EU cohesion policy by the European Commission, following the economic crises and the emergence of the idea of austerity.

A common point between the chapter by Dąbrowski and that by Alexandra Bousiou and Antonios Kontis is the importance of how policy actors interpret certain discursive packages presented to them. While in the former case, the new Commission Discourse and the policy instrument fostered new (although not at all unproblematic) cooperation and synergies between policy actors, in the latter case a narrative competition has begun. That competition takes place between the asylum policy of the EU and the bilateral agreements of southern member states with the countries of North-Africa concerning migration control. While the measures of the EU asylum policy are both control- and prevention oriented (both short- and long-term), the inability of this union-level policy to handle cases of emergency led southern member states to focus only on the short-term, control-oriented measures. This resulted in disregarding the long-term dimension and several normative aspects

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of the EU-level policy (e.g. that of refugee protection, and democratic reforms in North-African countries). Therefore, while the presence of a potentially transformative policy-instrument (that of JESSICA) can help in turning discursive commitments into reality, the lack of such instruments (in the case of EU asylum-policy) can lead to rivalling interpretations and narrative competition.

The other two chapters in this part show the potential power of discourse and the role of other, non-party actors in the discursive process. In the chapter written by Angela O'Hagan, these actors are femocrats and policy entrepreneurs who are able to present a particular policy goal (the introduction of gender budgeting) as essential to achieving the policy priorities of governments. Gregg Bucken-Knapp et al. emphasized the role of the media in framing labour migration in Sweden.

A key question of any discursive theory is how we look upon the 'recipients' of the discourse, that is, upon the wider public. The third part of the volume tries to cope with this problem. The last chapter written by Hande Eslen-Ziya et al. is about the potential tension between constitutional norms and public attitudes. The case that it analyses is the paradox of the South African equality legislation: while equality as a norm resonates with the views of South-African society, LGBTI rights form an exception. This fact renders the constitutional protection of these rights ineffective. In this case, ideas challenge formal institutions – more precisely: the 'conservative' ideas of the public are at odds with the 'progressive' ideas institutionalized in the constitution. Ideas in this case are understood as 'beliefs held by people in general' (p. 179). It is remarkable that the authors of the chapter seem to attribute a rather passive role of the citizenry, relying on former researches that conclude that 'citizens lack factual information on political matters [and] [s]uch deficiency in political knowledge [...] affects their political behavior' (p. 186). This view leads them to emphasize the role of the political and social elite (state representatives, churches, media) in forming public beliefs.

Contrary to the analysis of Eslen-Ziya et al., the chapter by Kesi Mahendran et al. offers a micro-level perspective and attributes a more active role to citizens in the discursive processes. Relying on quota-sampled interviews of non-migrants, intra-European migrants and non-European migrants, they investigate citizens' ideas about European citizenship. They draw on Bakhtin's concept of 'authoring', a process where people create a dialogical self, bringing in the voices of others when speaking about a topic – in this case, about their relationship to European citizenship. This points towards an understanding of social representations as dynamically created during interactions, and 'exist[ing] between people, rather than in the heads of people' (p. 148); and towards the European public sphere understood as 'a relational site [...] a more symbolic space, where stories circulate and shared stories create borders' (pp. 153–154). These theoretical considerations lead them to introduce the concept of the 'dialogical citizen', that 'enables a public citizen to emerge engaged with stories, metaphors and narrative ideas as a way of both enacting and making sense of Europe' (p. 152), thereby actively engaging with 'social knowledge circulating in a globalized and relational public space' (p. 161). The image of the 'dialogical citizen' is founded on the interviews conducted by the authors. They identify various identification and disidentification patterns among the interviewed. The results lead to a conclusion

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contrary to Raymond Aron's statement that '[t]he European idea is empty', and to the claim that 'it seems to have gained some narrative plausibility [because] ordinary people are able to project their ideals into the European project' (p. 161). More concretely, they identify the 'freedom through mobility' narrative as a potential basis of identification with the EU-project.

The last chapter of the volume by Arno van der Zwet tries to reconstruct the dynamics of how party discourses resonate with the public; it focuses on the parties' innovative use of a certain idea. The problem he analyses is how endorsing the idea of European integration can contribute to the mainstreaming of stateless nationalist and regionalist parties. He identifies three main areas: legitimizing core goals, moderating core message, and offering a platform for learning (through participating in the European Free Alliance). The main finding is that the protean nature of the European integration narrative and the malleability of the European idea is a crucial factor that enables these parties to frame it to their strategic goals – showing it as either a process towards post-sovereignty (as in the case of the Flemish FNP), or as an intergovernmental cooperation of sovereign nation-states (as in the case of the Scottish SNP).

In summary, the volume offers a wide range of contributions to several highly actual problems (such as the migration problem or the future perspectives of the welfare state), and sophisticated analyses about their impacts on concrete policy fields. Researchers interested in the topics of European integration or gender equality, and in critical or feminist perspectives could also read it with interest. The structure of the volume is mainly logical – a considerable merit at this thematic and methodological variety – although one might have questions at some points (for example it seems to me that the chapter by van der Zwet might fit better into the first part than the one by Korkut and Buzogány).

Finally, a short remark about the notion of 'discursive governance'. Discursive approaches often face the fact that there is substantial distance between their theoretical background and their empirical analyses. The reader might feel something similar in the case of this volume, too. While the theoretical parts (the Preface and the Introduction) articulate a clear-cut social constructivist view, some chapters deal with problems that would not necessarily (or only partly) need this theoretical background to be addressed (e.g. the 'classical' institutional problems in the case of Korkut and Buzogány; an EU-level policy failure and national responses to it in the case of Bousiou and Kontis; or the impacts and shortcomings of a new policy instrument in Dąbrowski's chapter). At the same time, some chapters (most notably that by Mahendran et al.) build on social constructivist views more substantively. So, if I had to name the lowest common denominator of all chapters, it would be – to borrow a phrase from Thomas A. Schwandt – some kind of 'garden-variety constructivism' (Schwandt 2010, 46.), meaning here that all authors attribute some importance to discursive factors, although in some cases this role is rather supplementary, in others more substantial. However, this is certainly not a grave problem, and it is perhaps even unavoidable in the case of a volume that tries to connect many authors with different topics and approaches.

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