Poststructuralist Discourse Theory as an independent paradigm for studying institutions

Towards a new definition of 'discursive construction' in institutional analysis

Abstract: Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (DT) is enjoying increasing recognition for its potential to contribute to the study of institutional change and continuity. Yet the most fruitful approach to realizing this potential has hitherto not been found. The main proposition so far has been to operationalize DT's insights and concepts by adopting them into the framework of Discursive Institutionalism (DI). However, an ongoing debate about the compatibility of the ontologies underlying DT and DI has cast doubts over whether such a combination is theoretically feasible. The critical literature review in the first part of this article indeed finds insurmountable ontological differences between the discourse-theoretical and the discursive-institutionalist traditions, as their clashing notions of what is understood as a 'discourse' result in diverging views on power, agency, and subjectivity. Instead of merging DT into DI, I suggest to empower the former as a self-sufficient paradigm for institutional analysis. To achieve this, the second part of this article re-articulates the 'logics framework' proposed by Glynos an Howarth (2007) into a middle-range theory for the study of institutionalization and politicization in a discourse-theoretical fashion. The purpose of this re-

poststructuralist

approach to institutions.

Author: Thomas Jacobs, Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University, t.jacobs@ugent.be

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Over recent years, a consensus has grown around the proposition that institutional analysis can benefit significantly from the input of poststructuralist Discourse Theory. Its conceptualization of power, subjectivity, and ideas, as well as its critical perspective, hold great promise for the study of institutions (Carstensen, 2011; Moon, 2013; Panizza and Miorelli, 2013; Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014; Schmidt, 2014a; 2014b; 2017; Larsson, 2015; Hay, 2017). But substantial debate still rages over how institutional research can capitalize on this potential. The most resonant suggestion thus far, is to combine Discourse Theory with Discursive Institutionalism (Moon, 2013; Panizza and Miorelli, 2013; Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014; Larsson, 2015). The goal of such a merger operation would be to adopt some of the promising concepts and analytical practices developed by the former theory into the more conventional framework offered by the latter. Valuable discourse-theoretical ideas, such as the decentring of the subject and the theorization of an ever-present possibility for change, could then be operationalized in institutional analysis without the need to legitimate the allegedly off-putting poststructuralist framework in which they were incubated (Schmidt, 2017, p. 15). However, while such an expedient union could mainstream underexploited poststructuralist insights, the last word has not been said on whether blending Discourse Theory (DT) and Discursive Institutionalism (DI) is actually feasible on a theoretical level. Are the ontological assumptions underlying both approaches compatible? And if not, then how can the study of institutions capitalize on DT's analytical resources?

These two research questions structure this article into two large parts. Whether DT can be combined with DI without creating an incoherent framework, is the issue animating the first one. A critical assessment of the recent interventions in this controversy will allow me to revisit the various

arguments in favour and against such a merger. Based on this review, I will argue in the first subsection that the irreconcilable manner in which DI and DT conceive of 'discourse' and 'the discursive' ultimately makes the case against compatibility the more convincing one from a discourse-theoretical vantage point. Divergences in how DI and DT view power, identity and agency, and subjectivity, are noted as products of this fundamental ontological discrepancy in the second and third subsections.

However, this intermediary conclusion leaves us in an ambiguous position. The literature review and the preceding introduction reveal an emerging consensus on DT's value for a discursive account of institutional change and continuity. But unfortunately, they also find sensible ontological objections preventing DT from consolidating its insights, concepts, and practices into DI, which is the established analytical framework for such accounts. Hence, if institutional analysis wants to seize on DT's potential, the most straightforward way to do so would be by developing an autonomous discourse-theoretical approach to the study of institutions. But puzzlingly, this move has not yet been explicitly advocated in the literature. Larsson (2014, p. 176), for instance, claims that 'bringing post-structuralism into institutional analysis may allow the development of new theoretical frameworks', but he makes no suggestions as to what such a framework could concretely look like.

To fill this gap, I will propose such a framework in the second part of this article. At the core of this second section stand the concerns of scholars like Larsson, who plea that DI and DT are incompatible, but who simultaneously maintain that the study of institutions could benefit from the latter's involvement. One would logically expect them to propose substituting DI's definition of discourse with DT's. Instead, however, they all raise diverse implicit and explicit arguments against such a swap, including the contentions that DT underappreciates reflexivity; that it fails to grasp subjectivity; and, most importantly, that on its own, it cannot support a view of something akin to institutions altogether. I will dispute these objections, maintaining that none of them ultimately prevent DT from providing a successful stand-alone perspective for institutional analysis.

Throughout this second part, as I dispel the unresolved gripes with a discourse-theoretical conception of institutions, I will engage in a re-articulation of the interpretation of DT advanced by Glynos and Howarth (2007). The goal of this re-articulation is to develop their 'logics of critical explanation' into a middle-range theory which allows to study of institutional change and continuity in a discourse-theoretical fashion. It is in reworking Glynos and Howarth's 'logics' in such a way that they facilitate a discourse-theoretical approach to institutional analysis, that this article makes its original contribution to the literature. Put differently, I suggest that the 'political' and 'social logics' of Glynos and Howarth have the potential to inform one of Larsson's 'new theoretical frameworks' for 'bringing post-structuralism into institutional analysis'.

Introducing Discursive Institutionalism, Discourse Theory, and their imminent merger

Before turning to these two substantial issues, however, I will first briefly introduce both DI and DT in the ensuing section, with particular attention to their respective ontological assumptions and to the benefits which DT promises to institutional analysis.

Discursive Institutionalism

Discursive Institutionalism is inseparably intertwined with the work of Vivien Schmidt. Though Schmidt herself occasionally uses the term to refer to a larger, paradigmatic unit which encompasses basically all institutional analysis which talks of discourses and ideas (Schmidt, 2014a, p. 190; 2016, p. 246; 2017), 'Discursive Institutionalism' usually points to the specific ontological and epistemological infrastructure she has put forward in her work. Scholars claiming to use a discursive-institutionalist approach normally draw on her clear and well-delineated theoretical programme about how ideas and discourse are relevant to institutional analysis (e.g. Schmidt, 2008; 2010; 2011; Carta and Morin, 2013). In this guise, DI is itself the dominant perspective for institutional research concerned with ideas and discourse, rather than the banner under which various discursive approaches to institutions gather.

DI departs from the claim that the three schools dominating modern institutionalism overemphasize continuity because they neglect the ideational and communicative components of institutions (Schmidt, 2008, p. 304; 2010, pp. 1-2). What Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI), Historical Institutionalism (HI) and Sociological Institutionalism (SI) share, according to DI, is a focus on how institutions are stabilized (Schmidt, 2010, p. 2; 2011, p. 47). DI, in contrast, wants to explain how actors change and transform institutions. It does this by defining institutions not as incentive structures (RCI), historico-normative structures (HI), or culturo-normative structures (SI), but as 'internal ideational constructs' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 12). Such ideational structures obviously constrain actors, by supplying them with common-sense ideas, 'unproblematic background information', and a stable conception of the material reality around them (Schmidt, 2012, pp. 86-87). But the meaning contexts which they provide are also enabling. Actors can step out of them, and communicate critically about these meaning contexts, thus reshaping them through discursive intervention (Schmidt, 2010, p. 4). Accordingly, DI's institutions are the product of a communicative logic. Active mediation by sentient agents plays as big a role in their construction as unconscious reproduction (Schmidt, 2008, p. 314; 2011, p. 48; 2012, p. 91).

'Discourse' and 'ideas', the two key concepts of DI, are defined in a reciprocal manner: '[d]iscourse serves not just to represent ideas but also to exchange them through interactive processes […]' (Schmidt, 2008, pp. 321-322). An alternative, but substantively similar definition is contained in the claim that DI covers analyses that 'take account of the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed and exchanged through discourse' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 3). In the simplest of manners, one could say that DI sees ideas as the content of a discourse, as the beliefs and perceptions of interlocutors, whereas discourse is the overarching concept, describing how actors communicate and develop their ideas (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004, p. 184).

However, the notion that discourse and ideas can inform institutional analysis is not without its critics. Concerns exist that focusing on them too strongly might lead us to lose track of constraint and

continuity altogether. Bell (2011, p. 891) for example, asserts that 'discursive institutionalists place almost all explanatory weight on agency and lose sight of institutions', while Larsson (2015, p. 194) fears that the 'ideational turn' might 'dissolve institutions into the conscious ideas of individuals'. Anxiety over such 'voluntarist idealism' has undoubtedly been the major argument against DI (Hay, 2002, pp. 52-53, 208).

Poststructuralist Discourse Theory

On the other side of the potential merger stands poststructuralist Discourse Theory, the brainchild of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985/2001). Their point of departure is the classic poststructuralist idea that meaning is the incomplete product of a relational system of difference. DT abandons the view that there is anything imperative or indispensable in how we understand the world. Instead, we render our environment meaningful by differentiating it into 'elements', which we articulate together. These elements are not the natural building blocks of all discourses, nor do they carry any innate signification. They only become meaningful when are articulated as 'moments' in a specific discourse (Laclau, 1999, pp. 109-111; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, pp. 125-127).

The crucial part of this line of reasoning, is that there is nothing essential or necessary about such articulations. The absence of extra-discursive laws that discourses have to abide to, implies that all discursive structuration is contingent and that there is no deeper basis shaping or grounding the discursive. All social structure around us is therefore arbitrary. Hence, restructuration always remains possible, as no discourse can ever definitely and exhaustively capture its object or be founded in an underlying reality. This inescapable openness to restructuration and contestation is referred to as the 'dislocated' nature of any discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, pp. 39-41).

The outcome of this argumentation is the claim that 'every object is constituted as an object of discourse', implying that something is meaningful only because it is articulated in a contingent relation to other meaningful objects (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2001, p. 107). Obviously, if every object is an

object of discourse, so are institutions, as Laclau and Mouffe (*idem*, p. 103) explicitly underline. It is here that the preliminary possibility of combining DT and DI originates: just like DI, DT sees institutions as a discursively constituted meaning context. The similar manner in which they conceive of institutions, is what hypothetically could allow researchers to employ discourse-theoretical ideas in a discursive-institutionalist analysis.

Discourse Theory's (potential) contributions to the study of institutions

Yet why has the perceived opportunity to combine DI and DT attracted such interest? The main reason discursive-institutionalists offer for their curiosity about poststructuralist (discourse) theory, is that it contains several insights and propositions which they think could augment institutional analyses sensitive to ideas and discourse. These propositions include DT's notion of power (Moon, 2013; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007, p. 40; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016, p. 320; Schmidt, 2017); its decentring of the subject and of intentional, deliberate, wilful action (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007, p. 39; Larsson, 2014); its conceptual toolkit (Moon, 2013); its relational conception of meaning (Moon, 2013; Carstensen, 2015); the avenues for critique and political thought it opens up (Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014); and its move beyond interests and intentions (Schmidt, 2014a, p. 194).

Given DT's superficial similarity to DI, the most straightforward way to seize on DT's potential for institutional analysis would be to integrate it into DI. If both theories are indeed compatible, then merging DT into DI would make the entire discourse-theoretical acumen available for use in institutionalist analysis, where it 'could deepen present discursive-constructivist analysis via the analytical tools it provides' (Moon, 2013, p. 113). This prospect has encouraged flirtations between both theories so overt that even Schmidt abandoned her initial reluctance and opened up to the possibility of adopting poststructuralist ideas into DI (compare Schmidt, 2014a; 2014b, p. 246; 2017 with Schmidt, 2008, pp. 304-305).

One aspect of DT's importance to institutional analysis which I believe has underestimated hitherto, is its conception of 'hegemony'. The idea of hegemony as theorized in DT harbours a vast innovative potential for discursive approaches to institutions. It could uproot long-held views on change and continuity within these approaches in a way that simultaneously makes them more resistant to the voluntarism they are frequently associated with (Hay, 2002; Bell, 2011; 2012), and more open to fundamental change of both a revolutionary (Laclau, 1990; Sim, 2013) and an incremental nature (Carstensen, 2011, Devenney *et al.*, 2016).

DT's view of hegemony effectively moves us beyond the idea that 'discourse, just as any other factor, sometimes matters, sometimes does not in the explanation of policy change' (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004, p. 184). Instead, it recasts all forms of societal structure as historico-discursive, without recourse to extra-discursive realities or transcendental principles (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 114). DT's 'discursive materialism' (*idem*, pp. 108-109) discourages using ideas as occasional variables and caveating analyses with qualifiers about other factors that limit the shapes or effects of discourses. Instead, it spurs us to think all social structure as unabridgedly discursive, and hence dislocated, contingent, and open to change (*idem*, pp. 136-137, 140, 143).

Yet while it recasts social structure as always contingent and contestable, the idea of 'hegemony' equally implies that social structuration is radically necessary. Society has no essential, deeper, natural form to fall back on once the contingent infrastructures of which it consists, fail. Social structuration is thus unavoidable, only the shape it takes is contingent. This explains why social institutions are so firmly entrenched, despite their fragility – there is nothing beyond them. Institutions form hegemonic historic blocs, that mask their dislocation and resists any transformation, because if they did not, there would be no society altogether (Laclau, Butler and Žižek, 2000, pp. 50-59; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, pp. 88-89, 98-99, 112-114). Considering the 'impossibility of society' in these terms thus reversely alerts us to the phenomenal and unyielding power that the most sedimented and embedded discourses exert. It is in this way that DT is adept at explaining institutional continuity and stickiness.

DT's conception of hegemony thus deepens how discursive analyses can consider institutional change, while simultaneously equipping them to withstand the critique of voluntarism. Both these arguments will return throughout this article. The nuanced manner in which a discourse-theoretical approach considers change will for instance be readily apparent in how the logics framework recasts institutions as discourses oscillating on a gradient, subject to institutionalization and deinstitutionalization; while the discussion of the 'decentred subject' will illustrate how DT resists overestimating the prospect of institutional change.

Tangible discourse-theoretical contributions to the study of institutions are evidently still scarce, considering the novelty of its involvement in institutionalism (but see Moon, 2013). Yet one concrete area where DT has built up considerable expertise which it could definitely bring to bear on institutional analysis, is without a doubt populism. DT has shown itself proficient at explaining why political action mostly takes places within an institutional context, but occasionally turns itself against existing institutions (e.g. Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005; Devenney *et al.,* 2016, pp. 307-311).

The prospect of combining Discourse Theory and Discursive Institutionalism

Having established that DT holds major potential for the discursive-ideational analysis of institutions, and considering that this field is traditionally dominated by DI, it is safe to say that the proposition to combine DT and DI at least warrants consideration. However, much paradigm-shaping work in DI (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2011) and more recent analyses from a poststructuralist point of view (Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014; Larsson, 2015) suggest serious contradictions between their respective ontologies. If such contradictions indeed exist, they would put any analytical combination of DI and DT at serious risk of incoherence (on the importance of internal coherence for constructivist research, see Marttila, 2015, pp. 97-116). As such, while DI may stand to

gain from grappling with DT, the question is whether the end product of this engagement still forms a consistent whole.

In this puzzle, their respective definitions of institutions, discourses, and ideas become crucial, because it is with regards to these concepts that an ontological quarrel between both traditions possibly exists. This section therefore examines from a discourse-theoretical perspective to what extent DI's and DT's interpretations of these notions align. A critical evaluation of the literature that discusses blending DI and DT will reveal that their conceptual views indeed diverge significantly. I will argue that these exegetic differences can be traced back to a discordant conception of what 'discourse' is, and that from a discourse-theoretical standpoint, this schism is ultimately too fundamental to overcome.

Note that the point of this ontological comparison is not to adjudicate between the assumptions underlying DI and DT. Evaluating ontologies in a vacuum is a futile exercise (Stanley, 2012). Neither am I concerned with comparing DI and DT as analytical approaches. References to their respective modi operandi in the following section merely serve to illustrate the type of research their respective ontologies generate. My sole objective here is to discuss the compatibility of their ontological premises, in order to gauge the internal consistency of an approach combining both.

Diverging views on discourse

One of the first to suggest a link between DT and constructivist approaches to institutions, was Moon (2013), who in turn drew on the pioneering work of Sørensen and Torfing (2007). Moon takes as his starting point the well-established discursive-institutionalist view of institutions discussed in the introduction, with the addition of 'the poststructuralist assertion that all such institutions exist only as discursive entities' (Moon, 2013, p. 114). Ensuingly, he collapses the formal (rules, functions) and non-formal aspects (conventions, norms) of institutions into one ontological category, as DT's stipulation that institutions are wholly discursive in nature requires.

Yet his follow-up argument that inquiry should then mostly focus on the non-formal aspects of institutions and that the formal aspects of institutions can be treated 'as-if-real' seems to reintroduce some intransitive nature for institutions which would set them apart from other discourses (Hay, 2005 cited in Moon, 2013, p. 114). If we treat the formal aspects of institutions as if they were real and objective, what is the weight of positing that institutions are discursive constructs? If executed as he proposes, Moon's argument does not really lead to the introduction of any poststructuralist insights, or at least none with any practical analytical significance (compare Moon, 2013, pp. 114-116 to Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 108).

But even ignoring for a moment Moon's problematic recommendation that the formal aspects of an institution should be treated as-if-real, another, a more fundamental complication lingers. For at face value, his 'poststructuralist assertion' that institutions only exist as discursive constructs in fact does not add anything new to DI, since DI already views institutions as 'discursive'. When DI draws on Habermas (1987; 1996; 2000) in explaining the nature of institutions, it does so to claim that institutions are created by agents through rational-critical deliberation, individual intervention, and collective agreement, as well as through unwitting reproduction. Indeed, Schmidt (2012, pp. 91-94; 2017) posits that we can both unconsciously reproduce institutions through the 'background ideational abilities' with which we experience them, and critically reflect and communicate about institutions in order to try to change them by using their 'foreground discursive abilities'. In this view, institutions constrain us, but when we actively try, we can alter or escape them, because we always retain the capacity to think outside the structures they impose on us. DI's understanding of institutional change as the result of active personal intervention follows from this assumption, and is thus explicitly indebted to Habermas' (1995, p. 127; 1996, pp. 169-170) theory of communicative action. Hence, if we define discourse in a Habermasian way, it is fair to say that DI already considers institutions as discursively constructed, making Moon's assertion redundant.

Yet if Moon's 'poststructuralist assertion' is alternatively taken to imply that a discourse-theoretical interpretation should be given to the idea that institutions are 'discursively constructed', logical contradictions arise. The discursive-institutionalist view of 'discursive construction' I just outlined is at odds with how 'discursive construction' is understood in DT. DT does not see discourses as the carriers of self-sufficient ideas, but reversely sees 'the discursive' as fully constitutive of 'the ideational' and of any and all forms of meaning expressed in ideas (Lievens, 2012, p. 383). Discourses are not just a tool through which actors coordinate their actions and share or agree on ideas, they are ontologically primordial. When institutions are discursively constructed in the discourse-theoretical sense, they are independent frameworks of meaning which transcend the individual subject, who draws on these frameworks to construct his identity.

Thus, contrary to the Habermasian interpretation of discourse, when thinking from a discourse-theoretical perspective an actor cannot just step outside of a discursive structure, since his entire worldview depends on his (necessarily incomplete and flawed) integration into such structures. Actors 'are not an entity separate from the structure, but constituted in relation to it' (Laclau, 1990, p. 30), and any self-determination which the subject has is not an expression of his personal identity, but rather a failure of structural determination (*idem*, p. 44). DT simply does not contain a dualist subject who exists separately from structure and who can serve as a privileged vessel in which to preserve ideas isolated from discourse (Laclau and Bhaskar, 1998, p. 9; Hansen, 2008a).

It follows from this that ideas only exist when discursively articulated in DT, whereas for DI, it is possible for ideas to endure outside of discourses, in the mind of the individual. The ideational, which DI associates with internal mental states and personal beliefs, is social and intersubjective to DT (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 98-99). Mixing a discourse-theoretical notion of discursive construction with DI's existing view of discursive construction thus creates incoherence.

The ontological underpinnings of this discrepancy run back to the critique of transcendental objectivity which Habermas and the poststructuralists share. Both reject the Hegelian idea that rationality stems from an overarching truth which subjects can access. However, unlike the poststructuralists, Habermas wants to retain a ground for objective rationality. Hence, he switches ratio to the other side of the divide: rationality is no longer the product of subjective self-consciousness, but of intersubjective communication. This means, however, that Habermas (1979, pp. 65-68; 1987, pp. 294-326) needs to maintain the Hegelian division between subjectivity and intersubjectivity and between communication-qua-discourse and meaning-qua-ideas.

Thus, according to Habermas, ideas and discourses belong to two different ontological spheres. Building on this distinction, DI sees institutions as belonging to the discursive and intersubjective sphere, where individuals debate about their personal and subjective ideas. In other words, ideas are by nature individual and thus extra-discursive, but they can become shared through discursive communication, as is the case for institutions. DT, on the other hand, knows only one ontological sphere, as it collapses the distinction between ideas and discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, pp. 108-109). All meaning is discursive to DT. Ideas are therefore by nature shared and structural, because they only exist as discourses in DT's ontology. As such, DT sees institutions as belonging to the ideational sphere as well as to the discursive sphere (which are one and the same since the former is completely subsumed by the latter), whereas DI, following Habermas, sees them as belonging to the latter only.

To counter this reasoning, it could perhaps be indicated that DI's antecedents extend beyond Habermas' theory of communicative action (Schmidt, 2017, p. 4). But my argument that DI's ontology rests upon an ontological dichotomy between discourse and ideas equally applies to other sources of inspiration referenced by Schmidt (2014a, p. 198). The same dualism marks Searle's Speech Act Theory and Giddens' (1979, pp. 5-6) view of 'knowledge as belief-claims constituted in the discourse of social actors', for instance. In fact, the moment when the disjunction between DI's ontological

dualism and DT's ontological monism becomes clearest, is when Schmidt cites Cognitive Psychology as an inspiration to DI (Schmidt, 2008, p. 315), for DT is actually relatively closely related to Discursive Psychology, one of the main challengers to cognitive psychology (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, pp. 98-99).

In conclusion, even though DI and DT both conceive of institutions as discursive constructs, their respective views on institutions are nevertheless incompatible due to diverging definitions of what a discourse is, and of how discursive construction works. The gap separating these definitions cannot be overcome by downplaying it (Schmidt, 2017, pp. 2, 6), the gulf between Habermas' and Laclau's thought is too fundamental for that. Their respective theories give rise to very different conceptions of the public sphere and the democratic debate, for instance (Mouffe, 2005). Given this fundamental ontological discrepancy, Moon's mixture of DI and DT is thus not at all an unproblematic operation, and his merger procedure betrays this (notably the reintroduction of DI's ontological dualism by ascribing to institutions an 'as-if-real' character). I will argue in rest of this section that other differences between DI and DT that have been noted in the literature are a product of their incompatible definitions of discourse.

Diverging views on power, identity and agency

Panizza and Miorelli (2013, p. 307) assert that 'Schmidt's narrow concept of discourse limits her analysis of the relations between discourse, power and institutions'. They contend that DT is better suited to trace power relations and identification in an institutional setting, and suggest that DI should borrow from DT to improve in these areas (*idem*, pp. 301-307). Translating this claim into the context of the ontological argument I just developed, it can be said that in DI's Habermasian ontology, power and identity belong to the ideational sphere. As discourse only communicates ideas without constituting them, there is a separation between discourse as a communicative vessel on one side and power and identity as stemming from ideas on the other side of the idea-discourse divide.

This separation is the underlying reason for Panizza and Miorelli's claim that a discursive-institutionalist concern with discourse cannot account sufficiently for power and identity. Only a discourse-theoretical analysis can do so, because it collapses the idea-discourse divide and thus allows for the investigation of power relations in discourse. To a certain extent, Schmidt (2017, pp. 10-14; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016) agrees with the characterization of power as a bone of contention between DI and DT, though she argues that DI emphasizes different forms of power, rather than overlooking it altogether.

Bacchi and Rönnblom (2014, p. 178) additionally point out that by limiting discourse to a communicative function, DI effectively turns ideas and institutions into 'givens' by 'removing from consideration the politics involved in their formation'. Drawing on Foucault, they argue that poststructuralist theory better recognizes the power-dependent nature of social practices. Situating this line of reasoning within my ontological argument, it can be said that ideas remain inaccessible for analysis in DI, since ontologically separating them from discourse turns ideas into 'discrete entities', 'empirical subjects to be studied in their own right' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 14 quoted in Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014, p. 176). There is no way to crack open ideas and investigate them, due to the lack of a theorization of how they are composed in DI.

A discourse-theoretical ontology does facilitate this line of inquiry, as Carstensen (2011) shows us. I argue this is the case because by collapsing the divide between ideas and discourse, ideas come to be seen as constructed in discursive structures in DT. Conceiving of ideas and meaning as constituted through discursive articulations by actors, allows actors to actually affect the processes and the elements through which ideas and meanings are constructed (Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014, pp. 175, 179). Hence, DT does have a theory of how ideas are composed and configured, and thus it can open them up for analysis. This way, studying ideas in a discourse-theoretical fashion implies investigating how they are constituted through articulatory practices. This approach is unavailable to DI, which keeps ideas as black boxes.

Diverging views on subjectivity

Just as Bacchi and Rönnblom, Larsson (2015) is sceptic about the prospect of integrating poststructuralist insights into DI, but for different reasons. Whereas for Bacchi and Rönnblom the core problem was that in DI ideas are black boxes which cannot be opened; for Larsson (2015, pp. 187-191), it is the purely subjective and individualized nature of discursive-institutionalist ideas. His complaint is that DI sees ideas exclusively as personal beliefs and perceptions, which actors converse over.

I once again think this disparity is grounded in DI's and DT's respective definitions of discourse. As discussed, DI and Habermas understand discourse as communication between individuals, with ideas being the content of this communication. Ideas are thus represented in discourses, but exist independently of them (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309, cited in Larsson, 2015, pp. 189-191). Hence, ideas precede interaction, and subjects are already pre-constituted when they engage in the articulation of a discourse; they hold beliefs, interests and ideas before they enter in debate and interaction. Reversely, discourse depends on ideas to give it content.

DT, on the other hand, sees discourse as constitutive of meaning, and as this eliminates the ontological difference between ideas and discourse, it is impossible for ideas to be prior to discourse. Since meaning is discursive, it is social, constituted through interaction. Ideas are thus shared in nature in a discourse-theoretical ontology, whereas in DI ideas reside with the individual and can only become shared through communication.

This entails that ideas and meaning are ontologically speaking of a subjective nature in DI and of an intersubjective nature in DT.[i] From an agency perspective, this means a subject holds ideas in DI, whereas ideas are the structural positions subjects can occupy in DT. Larsson (2015, p. 194) contends that the former perspective leads DI to 'dissolve institutions into the conscious ideas of individuals'. By allowing ideas to exist only in the mind of individuals, which then have to find agreement on what they consider institutions, DI gives these individuals too much scope for autonomous choice and action.

Larsson's criticism intersects with Bell's (2011; 2012) aforementioned charge that DI overestimates an actor's capacity for intervention and leaves too much leeway for institutional change.

A poststructuralist turn in DI should transfer ideas and meaning partially to the intersubjective level, Larsson thinks (2015, p. 194), in order to reduce the individual's choice and his capacity to enact change. Indeed, DT's actors are more strongly constrained by discursive structures, for their status as subjects is dependent on these structures. Actors become 'subjectified' through inscription in the subject position provided by discursive structures, and hence, are more strongly bound by structural pressures.

Larsson's proposition to partially transfer ideas to the intersubjective level is rather close to the notion of intrasubjectivity Hay (2017, pp. 241-243) advances. Yet in Hay's proposition (2017, pp. 239-240), only the social facticity of ideas is ontologically intersubjective, with ideas themselves retaining their subjective nature. Schmidt (2017, pp. 4-7) similarly defends herself from Larsson's charge of subjectivism by pointing to the intersubjective elements of her theory. However, she too maintains the Habermasian distinction between discourse and ideas as communication and its content. As such, though their arguments may weaken Larsson's contention that DI is voluntarist, they do not resolve the ontological disparity between DI and DT.

This review of the *status quaestionis* unavoidably leads to the conclusion that DI and DT are fundamentally incompatible on an ontological level. The leitmotif of this incompatibility is a conflicting definition of what discourse is. While both theories see institutions as discursive constructs, their respective interpretations of what 'discursive' means, do not match. Habermas' understanding of discourse-as-communication and of ideas-as-personal contradicts Laclau's understanding of discourse-as-meaning and of ideas-as-structural in this regard. Diverging views on power, agency, identity, and subjectivity, which were previously underlined in the literature, are all expressions of this underlying ontological mismatch.

Towards a discourse-theoretical approach for institutional analysis

As we must reject the proposition of merging DI and DT, we have to find alternative routes if we want to exploit DT's resources for the study of institutions. Since we cannot adopt its acumen into DI, it appears worthwhile to explore whether DT can function as an autonomous, self-sufficient paradigm for analysing institutions. However, despite the considerable enthusiasm in the literature for using discourse-theoretical ideas to study institutions, remarkably little consideration has been given to this option. In the following section, I will argue in its favour, maintaining that none of the implicit and explicit objections against such a move constitute an unconquerable obstacle.

Throughout my rebuttal of some of these objections, I will advance a re-articulation of the 'logics framework', which has become one of the most popular middle-range theories for operationalizing DT (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The concepts of 'social' and 'political logics' on which this framework is based, provide us with powerful tools to study institutional change in a discourse-theoretical manner, I argue. The end-result is an autonomous discourse-theoretical approach to institutional analysis which can stand side-by-side with a DI, similarly drawing attention to the importance of ideas and discourse in institutions, yet studying them differently.

A lack of institutions in DT?

Panizzi and Miorelli (2013, p. 302) are reluctant to abandon Discursive Institutionalism because it is DI that actually brings in the institutional perspective, they claim. According to them, DT has 'failed fully to take on board the institutional dimension of politics'. Hence, they refrain from using DT as a framework simply because they believe it would result in a view of politics that is largely devoid of institutions. This objection echoes with how Marxists like Mouzelis and Geras criticized early renditions of DT (Sim, 2013). Hansen (2008a) has dubbed this allegation DT's 'problem of institutions'. Yet he and Larsson (2015) dispute that social stability is indeed an incomprehensible phenomenon for DT, and

maintain that there is an internal solution to this putative problem. Larsson (*idem*, pp. 188-189) in particular contends that DT is in fact far less volatile and thus more 'institutional' than DI.

First of all, Laclau's concept of 'objectivity' can definitely be used to introduce at least a rudimentary form of institutions into DT: despite the fact that all discursive construct are ultimately contingent in nature, this contingency can disappear out of sight, rendering the construct seemingly objective – and transforming it into what we understand to be an institution (Laclau, 1990, pp. 34-39; Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000, pp. 82-84; Jorgensen and Philips, 2002, pp. 32-40;). This idea draws on the Husserlian notion of 'sedimentation' (Marchart, 2014, p. 272).

The sedimentation of discursive constructs as objective social facts is never final though, as expressed by the idea of 'dislocation', which is understood as the impossibility to completely close a discursive structure, and the unavoidable persistence of flaws and inconsistencies that can lead to its re-articulation (Marttila, 2015, pp. 63-65). Since all discourses are dislocated, a sedimented, objectified discourse can always be re-activated and modified, hence the idea of 'relative discursive fixation' (Laclau, 1990, pp. 41-42, 60-61; Laclau, 1995, p. 117; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, pp. xiv, 106, 111-113; Zienkowski, 2016, p. 47).

If we see institutions as objectified discourses, this means that they are by definition contestable and transformable, since they too are dislocated. Such institutions are ontologically no different from any other type of practice, they are merely a particular type of practices. Because their fundamentally contingent nature has become obscured, they come to be seen as 'normal' and taken for granted, but that does not change their inherently political character. As Howarth (2000, p. 120) puts it, 'there are no qualitative distinctions between discourses, only differences in their degree of stability'.

From this angle it is clear that even in its original shape, DT can capture 'institutions' and 'institutional change' in an embryonic form. As discussed in the introduction, the absence of deeper, underlying forms of societal structure explains the iron grip of the hegemony of sedimented social forms: to

relinquish them is not to abandon a particular view of society, it is to abandon society itself. Hegemony, and the sedimentation it entails, are inescapable.

Furthermore, the work of several scholars who have built on Laclau and Mouffe can be used to fine-tune their basic understanding of objectification. I regard particularly the concepts of 'social' and 'political logics' introduced by Glynos and Howarth (2007) as highly promising for the elaboration of a more complex notion of institutions within Discourse Theory. Panizza and Miorelli (2013, p. 308) doubt the relevance of this line of thinking, dismissing it by claiming that 'the notion that institutions are not different from other discourses but just more sedimented ones is true at a high level of abstraction but does not advance its understanding too much'. Yet there is a large body of empirical work drawing on the logics framework that demonstrates its empirical relevance and its practical repercussions for the study of policy and politics (see Marttila, 2015 for an overview).

Sedimented and objectified discourses in the Laclauian sense are governed by a 'social logic' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 137-140). Social logics cast such discourses as natural rules, as a grammar of social sphere, thereby normalizing these discourses. This way, social logics allow us to recognize certain discourses as integral patterns of social life, as constitutive of the world we live in. When a person portrays a particular practice as normal, as the way things are, the discourse he articulates can be characterized with a social logic, regardless of whether he approves of this normal situation or not.

Such (dis)approval, is captured by political logics. These concern the formation of the social rules captured by social logics. Whereas social logics govern what we consider conventional and normal, political logics govern how we try to contest what is normal and how we try to instate new or defend old conventions and 'normals' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 105-106, 139-145; Zienkowski, 2016, pp. 51-52). The claim that 'growing international commerce promotes the competitiveness of domestic industries' for instance involves a social logic, while voicing support or opposition to this development involves a political logic. Political logics thus make the transformation of social patterns possible by

revealing the arbitrary nature of the discursive structure in which they are embedded (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 141-145; Zienkowski, 2016, p. 51).

Evidently, an institution can be understood as a set of discourses governed principally by social logics. However, due to the dislocated nature of all discourses, there is always some residual degree of political logic left (Marchart, 2014). Discourses can never completely and fully capture the world around us, and thus always remain open to contestation. DT therefore lets our characterization of discourses oscillate between the 'political' and the 'social', with the achievement of a either a purely 'social' or a purely 'political' status being impossible (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 112). There is thus no such thing as a fully institutional practice or a practice free of all institutional constraint, practices are always incomplete repetitions and reproductions.

The preponderance of social logics, where a narrow distribution of subject positions leads to the necessary reproduction of these positions, repetitive practices, and sedimentation, entails a high degree of institutionalization. A low degree of institutionalization, conversely, amounts to the dominance of political logics where a broader range of available subjects positions provokes more awareness of contingency and thus the availability of a larger variety of socially acceptable identities for the subject. Since the distribution of subject positions and the degree of institutionalization are directly related, the dichotomy between structure and agency is de facto collapsed into a monist system of logics from which both structure and agency arise (Hansen, 2008a, pp. 5-6; Howarth, 2010, p. 314). Through this 'decentring of the subject', DT furnishes an ideational approach free of the voluntarism or intentionalism often associated with this tradition.

A discourse-theoretical approach to institutional analysis thus effectively replaces 'institutions' with 'institutionalization', a gradient on which discourses can be seen as more or less sedimented. Discourses closer to the 'institutional' pole of the gradient are governed principally by social logics,

discourses closer to the 'political' pole are governed principally by political logics. Since there is always some degree of political logic left, discourses can never become truly objective rules of social life.

Replacing institutions with degrees of institutionalization enables DT to move beyond the study of rare moments of total institutional breakdown, on which it is concentrated according to Panizzi and Miorelli (2013, p. 308), towards a more nuanced and detailed understanding of incremental change, without ascribing any unique ontological status to institutions. The transformation of some social logics into political logics entails a politicization, making more far-reaching institutional transformations possible and institutional changes more likely to occur. Reversely, the transformation of political logics into social logics implies depoliticization, reducing both the scope for and the likelihood of change. For example, a protest movement articulating political logics into a field previously hegemonized by strong social logics, creates new subject positions in that field, which make new political outcomes outside the existing institutional constraints possible. But if this protest movement subsides again without having transformed the patterns engrained in the extant social logics, the depoliticization entailed by this development forecloses these new possibilities again.

This analytical concern resonates with Laclau's move away from the singular idea of one revolutionary moment, towards a politics of possibility and options (Devenney *et al.*, 2016, pp. 304-305, 321). The resultant picture is one in which change, whether abrupt or incremental, radical or minor, is an everlasting possibility, but in which stability is nevertheless understandable to the point where it may even appear inevitable. As such, while the ascendancy of a political logic makes a diversification of practices possible, the practices for which it makes room need not necessarily be more attentionate to this newly acquired space for pluralism. A logic establishes 'functional relationships between subject positions, statements, practices, topics and other discursive elements' (Zienkowski, 2016, p. 67), and politicization implies that new discursive elements can enter this relationship, but it says nothing about what these elements are. The discourses born from a moment of politicization can very much aim at re-concealing the open nature of the field in which they operate, and can try to re-institute a particular

(or even the original) social logic (Howarth, 2010, p. 322). Consequentially, while political logics make institutional change possible, the prevalence of a political logic does not mean structural change will ensue. All it does is provide space for a hegemonic struggle between various competing articulations to materialize.

A lack of reflexivity in DT?

The reinterpretation of the logics framework I just articulated shows that DT can support analyses preoccupied with the institutional. But even when accepting that a 'poststructuralist institutionalism' is possible (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007), there remain arguments against using DT as a foundation for it. Bacchi and Rönnblom (2014 pp. 171, 178-179) for instance, attach great importance to the political consequences of the analyst's choices, as they want to study the origins and the role of power in the production of knowledge, in order to affect these analytical processes and advance a feminist cause in academia. They argue that the philosophy of Foucault is the most promising foundation for this enterprise, especially when compared to Laclau (1990, pp. 90-92), whose 'decentred subject' is trapped within a number of discourses that together constitute his identity. This severely limits the individual's 'room for manoeuvre', something which Bacchi and Rönnblom (2014, p. 175) value highly.

DT is indeed not very interested in the question of how individuals can intervene politically: 'it's not a question of 'someone' or 'something' producing an effect of transformation […]. Rather, the production of the effect is part of the construction of the identity of the agent producing it', Laclau argues (1990, p. 210). DT's highly structural vision of political change which leaves little space for the individual to affect discursive processes indeed does not sit well with a vision of scholarship that entails individual political activism.

Additionally, Laclau and Mouffe lack the self-reflexive component which Foucault offers, their 'theory and analysis being presented as if they were objective descriptions of the world and its mechanisms' (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 22). Nor do later developments in the discourse-theoretical tradition

offer a position from which reflection on one's own analytical practices is possible (Marttila, 2015). Yet the logics framework at least facilitates a distinction between discourses qua *in situ* interpretations articulated by interlocutors in concrete situations, and logics qua second-order characterizations of the patterns and resemblances these interpretations take on articulated by the analyst (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 134-137). While this may still not facilitate the needs of the activist scholarship pursued by Bacchi and Rönnblom, it is a step in the direction of what Marttila (2015, pp. 13, 106-114) calls a 'holistic', 'reflexive' and 'scrutinizable' use of theoretical models.

Crucially though, the lack of a self-reflexive account of research as a practice in its own right does not prevent DT from being a basis for institutional analysis, it is merely a potential motivation to prefer an alternative basis.

A lack of subjects in DT?

A last hesitation over the use of DT as foundation for institutional analysis, is formulated by Larsson (2015). Despite being more sympathetic to the view of meaning as intersubjective, he maintains DI as a point of reference because he believes discourses should be conceptualized as both subjective and intersubjective, and deems DI necessary to deliver the subjective dimension of discourse (*idem*, pp. 179-184). Larsson retains the individualistic component which DI guarantees, because he wants his agents to be able to 'critically reflect upon institutions, […] not completely free to forge their own ideas and perceptions, but [to do so] in relation to wider ideational structures' (*idem*, p. 189).

Given that 'poststructuralist institutionalism claims that political strategies […] cannot be seen as the result of the choice, decision or strategic manipulation of an individual subject or collective agency' (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007, p. 39), DT is indeed less than ideally positioned to account for the role of personal intentions in institutional change. It is difficult to combine an insistence on individual agency with the 'production of the subject on the basis of the chain of its discourse' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 88).

The question remains though, what analytical advantages the retention of a leftover modicum of subjectivity offers when adopting an intersubjective framework. Its direct function seems to be to theorize the possibility of free choice. But on an analytical level, choices need to be explained. Individual dispositions cannot function as a point of departure to do so, as such a solution would be self-referential (individual choices would be both the primary empirical manifestation and the main explanation of institutional change). Even for actions going against pre-existing constraints, there must be some explanation transcending the agent, because if the agent can just choose to ignore these constraints, he was not constrained in the first place.

Any explanation that wants to emphasize intersubjectivity thus has to depart from contextual factors. Assuming that these contextual factors are sufficient to offer a convincing interpretation of the phenomenon in question, it is unclear what the added analytical value is of insisting that there is also an intentional, personal dimension to it. As Carstensen and Stanley agree in their heated debate on Carstensen's critique of DI and HI, '[i]nstead of judging ontological assumptions on their 'closeness' to the world [...] they should be judged on their ability to construct convincing explanations about politics itself' (Stanley, 2012, p. 475 cited in Carstensen, 2012, p. 720). Since in an intersubjective framework individual discretion does not 'contribute to the construction of convincing explanations', ontological assumptions about them are redundant.

DT instead offers a contextualized and situated account of agency through the previously mentioned notion of the 'decentred subject'. A decentred subject is a subject whose identity is constituted himself through inscription in pre-existing subject positions qua discourses (Laclau, 1990, pp. 21-24; Norris, 2006, p. 115). Such an inscription is fundamentally ungrounded, there is no deeper, underlying reason for choosing any position (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 128-129). This idea is inherent to dislocation: if all structure is contingent and ungrounded, this equally goes for a subject's identity. Thus, without context, any decision is thus completely arbitrary. The subject can then be understood, according to

Laclau (1990, p. 31), as the gap between this 'undecidability' and the absolute necessity of taking a decision to establish an identity (Norris, 2006, pp. 122-124; Hansen, 2008a, pp. 4-6).

Of course, this theoretical scenario never actually occurs: a subject is never a perfectly blank slate having to take an impossible, fully arbitrary decision just in order to establish an identity for himself. He is always already pre-constituted by the positions he has previously occupied and by the situation in which he finds himself; he is 'thrown' into the world (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 79, 129), always surrounded by 'the ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society' (Laclau, Butler and Žižek, 2000, p. 82). This is the 'subject as structure', the subject in a particular temporal and spatial context (Laclau, Butler and Žižek, 2000, pp. 80-82; Norris, 2006, pp. 122-124). Hansen (2008b, p. 2) calls this the 'radically historical' dimension of Discourse Theory.

Still, no identity established through interaction with a historical and cultural surrounding can ever be complete, since there are no objective grounds to base it on. Dislocation and the impossibility of ultimate closure make the constant reaffirmation of one's identity through continuous re-inscription in the original subject position necessary (Laclau, Butler and Žižek, 2000, pp. 77-78). Through this process, the agent establishes an identity for himself, while the original subject position is reproduced. More simply put, individuals do not have a pre-existing identity, but affirm one by continuously engaging in articulatory practices. This process transforms the individual into an acting subject, and over time, potentially, the practice in question into an institution, if it becomes sedimented as a 'normal' part of life described by a social logic. This mutually constitutive dialectic does not require individual voluntarism based on subjective, individual ideas to arrive at convincing explanations.

Conclusion

The double verdict at the end of this article is that ontologically, there is no fit between DI and DT, but that DT holds unfulfilled promise to serve as an independent perspective for institutional analysis. As such, if DT's conceptual toolkit and its insights regarding hegemony and social structure are to be

capitalized on in the study of institutions, an autonomous discourse-theoretical approach is the way to go.

I first touched on how DI and DT uphold different conceptions of power, agency and subjectivity. These differences were all found to be rooted in a fundamentally different understanding of what 'discourse' is. DI draws on Habermas to support its notion of 'the discursive' as the realm of communication. The ontological bifurcation this creates between the idea communicated in a discourse and the discourse itself, does not fit with DT's ontological monism, in which the ideational and the discursive coincide.

Given its problematic fit with DI, I proceeded by exploring whether there is a possibility for DT to form an independent perspective for institutional analysis. This possibility was affirmed by dispelling various arguments against this course of action. Through a re-articulation of Glynos and Howarth's (2007) logics framework, I elaborated a discourse-theoretical view of institutions, based on the notions of objectivity, sedimentation, dislocation, and social and political logics. The goal of this re-articulation was to highlight the possibility of using DT as a self-sufficient paradigm for studying institutions (or rather institutionalization and de-institutionalization), and to stress its potential for understanding not just change, possibility, and contingency, but also stability and fixation.

Of course, DT is not the sole or privileged avenue for 'bringing post-structuralism into institutional analysis' (Larsson, 2014, p. 176). Carol Bacchi has for instance been exploring what such a framework could look like if it was rooted in a Foucauldian paradigm. Yet as established in the introduction, and as corroborated in the literature, DT does hold great promise in this regard, and I found no reason to assume its ontology is unfit or insufficient for this task.

About the author

Thomas Jacobs is currently writing a doctoral dissertation at the Centre for EU Studies of Ghent University about the discourse of trade policy debates in the European Parliament. His main research interests include international political economy and political communication. Most of his work focuses on meaning-making, signification, and strategy in political praxis, departing from a discourse-theoretical perspective.

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[i] The term 'intersubjectivity' is frequently associated with Habermas, but his understanding of the term differs substantially from Larsson's (2015) and mine. Habermas (2000, p. 355) sees intersubjectivity as a subject's capacity for rational communication with others, and underscores that it 'no longer refers to the result of an observed convergence of thoughts or representations of various persons'. The understanding of intersubjectivity deployed here is in fact closer to the interpretation Habermas rejects, than to the one he adopts.