Why and How Ideas Matter

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That ideas matter in politics is beyond question. Knowledge, ignorance, and uncertainty frequently make the difference between success and failure of policies. And in a broader sense ideas can advance social change, as the Enlightenment played a role in the run-up to the French Revolution, or help maintain the status quo, as the doctrine of the divine right of kings to rule did in post-medieval Europe. Yet the importance of ideas compared to other factors shaping social processes has been a matter of debate throughout the history of social thought. Global answers to this question may be inherently elusive; but more detailed questions – perhaps confining themselves to specific developments and circumstances – can elucidate the ways in which ideas make a difference, the conditions that make them more or less effective, and their interactions with other factors that account for social change as well as stability.

It makes sense to delimit this vast subject matter. This chapter focuses on single ideas and idea complexes rather than on the ensemble of ideas commonly understood as symbolic culture. It concentrates on ideas about social and political life and thus largely excludes from consideration the immense bodies of scientific and technical ideas that have transformed economy and society since the industrial revolution and given rise to what is frequently discussed as the information or knowledge society. Furthermore, we are primarily concerned with explicit ideas – with theories of how the economy works for instance, with the proclamation of political ideals, or with considered assessments of threats to valued interests. We will not focus on the taken for granted premises of common attitudes and the implicit notions embedded in language and proverbs. At the same time, these more diffuse kinds of ideas may become relevant if this is where the inquiry about how ideas do and do not matter leads us. Ideas about social class, for instance, may be very limited in their impact if they are at odds with understandings of social reality that play down social inequality and that are built into the very language of common discourse (as more generally, one of the conditions shaping the efficacy of ideas is almost certainly how new ideas articulate with various bodies of prevailing ideas). In turn, new ideas may exert very forceful influence if they succeed in shaping these taken for granted understandings.

These delimitations do not yet yield a clear definition of the subject of our analysis. However, as this is not a treatise in the philosophy of the mind, I will go only a few steps further toward such a clarification of what is understood here as ideas. We will

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1 I wish to thank Zeev Rosenhek and the editors of this volume for their comments on an earlier draft.
1 Implicit beliefs and value orientations and their relation to established practices have been discussed under the heading of “mentality” or of “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977). Foucault’s (1972, 1979) notions of power diffused in the sediments of history and of discourse grounded in social practices make hidden and implicit ideas central to his views. And the “involvement of beliefs in ‘lived experience’” play a critical role in Anthony Giddens’ “structuration” approach to social theory, which seeks to reconcile agency and structure (Giddens 1979, 183; 1984).
not equate ideas with all forms of human consciousness. By focusing on explicit ideas about the social world we limit ourselves not only to expressions of consciousness but also to reflected expressions in contrast to inchoate emotive reactions to reality. However, while expressions of emotion are not the central subject, we must realize that emotions accompany all forms of perception and reflection, strengthening or softening ideas, sharpening or blurring them, and linking valuation and analysis.

Ideas may be primarily cognitive in character – descriptions of what is the case and tools for understanding how things work. Equally important, ideas can be above all of a normative nature; ideals, values, and norms define what is good and bad. A third category of ideas that commonly distinguished defines tastes and desires, shaping – together with cognitive and normative ideas – people’s preferences. It is important o distinguish these different kinds of ideas, but they are distinct from each other only in an analytical sense. They not only interact with each other but often form stable amalgams. For instance, some theorists of ideology have defined that concept not so much as a distortion of reality (Mannheim 1936) but as a fusion of important cognitive and normative ideas (Parsons 1951 and 1959, Geertz 1964). We will be concerned with all three categories, though we will focus especially on cognitive and normative ideas.

Last among these preliminaries, there is the deceptively simple question of who holds a given set of ideas. Can collectivities such as social classes or occupational status groups be carriers of ideas? While methodological individualism rather than an a-priori ontological collectivism seems the position of prudent choice, it is quite possible to arrive at a reasoned attribution of ideas to a social movement, the dominant part of a class, or a defined segment of the political spectrum. This requires collecting – on occasion even just reasonably guessing about – individual expressions, which are then interpreted in the light of the individuals’ position in communication networks, the relations of influence and authority, and the antagonisms and solidarities created by interests. In many instances, the participants themselves may well perceive such opinions and views as collective phenomena, as the faits sociaux so central to Emile Durkheim’s social theory. The attribution of ideas to collectivities is, then, a pragmatic decision contingent on evidence.

I ideas Do Matter: Some Examples

That ideas matter in social and political life is most obvious when it comes to knowledge, false beliefs, and ignorance. An example of considerable consequence comes from macroeconomic policy. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, the pre-Nazi government of Germany worsened the economic slump and increased unemployment when it cut government expenditures in response to declining revenues rather than, faced with unemployment and underused productive capacity, adopting the opposite policy of stimulating demand through budget deficits. The deepening severity of the Depression in Germany is commonly considered a decisive factor in the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the installment of the Nazi regime. That “countercyclical demand management” – increasing demand for goods and services through budget deficits in recessions, while returning to surpluses in boom periods – can optimize the joint goals of
employment, growth, and price stability came to be identified with Keynes’ (1936) reformulation of macroeconomic theory. That theory was and remains controversial. Yet pragmatically, a policy of countercyclical demand management was successfully adopted during the Depression by several governments, including that of Nazi Germany. It became standard practice after the Second World War, and it continues to be so in spite of the difficult experience with stagnation and inflation in the 1970s and the declining appeal of Keynesianism as a broader policy conception. While we will have to return to the role of other factors shaping macroeconomic policy, it is clear that here is a historical instance where knowledge and cognitive beliefs made a significant difference.2

Another example also involves cognitive ideas. The views of dominant groups on economic, social, and political conditions and their anticipations about future developments have a decisive effect on constitutional change according to a recent comparative historical study of democratic consolidation. Gerard Alexander (2002) created an ingenious set of hypotheses about when democratic rule becomes consolidated and tested it in the historical trajectories of Spain, France, Britain, Germany and Italy from before the First World War until after the Second. He postulates – and then shows – that the right’s perceptions of political risks to its safety and well being under democratic or authoritarian rule determine its regime preferences. Because the right had privileged access to the means of coercion, it could decisively block democratic outcomes or support a return to authoritarian government after a period of democratic rule. Consolidation of democracy will come about only if the dominant groups see their interests protected in the future as well as at present. The right hedges on the democratic option if current conditions under democracy are favorable, but the future is uncertain. The right turns away from democracy if it sees its interests better protected under authoritarian rule. And the right gives up authoritarian options and commits to democracy if its assessment of future as well as present risks favors democracy. The perceptions and interpretations of the right, then, have extremely far-reaching effects. This claim stands even if one considers Alexander’s model as too stylized and if some of his particular historical assessments were to be successfully contested.

The effective advancement of women’s interests during the wave of the women’s movement, which started in most rich democracies during the 1960s, relied heavily on ideas and arguments, as did the earlier push for women’s voting rights. These are primarily examples of the impact of normative ideas rather than of perceptions and cognitive interpretations of social reality. The normative arguments relied on older ideas of human equality; but they took on a new urgency. This again suggests that other causal factors played a role as well; but the arguments played a significant role in transforming the views of policy makers and large parts of the populations.

2 An instance concerning economic knowledge of special contemporary relevance is found in the important discussion of Bockman and Eyal (2002) of the genealogy of neoliberalism’s influence in postcommunist Europe. They show that it arose out of a prolonged East-West dialogue that began in the 1920s. It was grounded in transnational networks of economists who analyzed the experience of central command economies. Bockman and Eyal plausibly contrast this account with the prevailing stereotypes that the influence of neoliberal ideas was either the result of an obvious failure of Keynesianism or constituted simply an imposition of western interests.
Other examples of normative ideas exerting a strong influence on social change and stability easily come to mind. Consider for instance nationalist ideas developing and buttressing individual obligations to serve and sacrifice in causes defined by nation states or the pronouncements of religious doctrine that shape practices of devotion and authority relations within religious communities.

Can we point to similar examples of ideas that are primarily appreciative in nature, shaping preferences and motivation? Appreciative ideas seem to be most effective in shaping desires through the offer of new experiences and products. Innovation and importation play a major role in the proliferation of consumer desires, but equally or perhaps more important are technical innovations and normative changes that make the satisfaction of existing needs and wants more effective and/or more legitimate. Other causal factors, especially status relations, are of great importance for the spread and proliferation of changes in wants and preferences. Appreciative ideas and the dynamics of changing preferences will be treated in this chapter with – a perhaps not too benign – neglect. This in spite of the very considerable importance of the unending increase in desires even and perhaps especially among the most well off, even and perhaps especially in the richest countries.

**Ideas Do Matter: An Argument from Elementary Social Theory**

That ideas matter in social and political life is equally obvious if we consider elementary social theory. A theoretical analysis of action and elementary interaction constitutes the starting point of the two of most influential theoretical approaches in the social sciences of the past fifty years – the theory of action and social systems of Talcott Parsons, who built his arguments on an interpretation of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and the economists Vilfredo Pareto and Alfred Marshall, and rational choice theory, which used elementary economic theory for the analysis of social and political life.

Both theoretical approaches begin with the model of a goal-oriented actor who finds her/himself in a physical and social environment relevant for the attainment of goals. Parsons (1937) insisted that human action cannot be understood without reference to an “internal dimension” of action. This dimension includes the perception and interpretation of the actor’s environment, normative orientations, and the development of tastes and preferences. The open space created by the relative indeterminacy of human action in terms of environment and inborn behavior tendencies is “filled” by norms and values, by varying levels of information, interpretation, and analysis, by particular preference structures, as well as by codes of communication. All of these are shaped by collective human creations, though they build on innate foundations. Individuals are not able to produce such orientations successfully by themselves, though they do add to their change and maintenance. In fact, no single generation is able to create a comprehensive

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3 In this conception Parsons followed Weber’s claim that “meaningful action” – distinguished from sheer behavior conceived as devoid of subjective meaning – must be the elementary building block of social and political analysis.— I will neglect here that some social theorists, very prominently for instance Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), find fault with the centrality of goal orientation in Parsons’ theory of action as well as in rational choice theory.
set of such standards, codes, and meanings from scratch, as is obvious when we think of language.

Parsons’ conception differs from the strongest (as well as the most simple) version of rational choice theory. This version does acknowledge the importance of the subjective dimension of action by focusing on the rational means-end calculus of actors; but it does so only to immediately close that open space again, attending solely to the rational pursuit of given goals in a well understood environment; behavior is then shaped by rational and therefore predictable responses to a given environment. Yet while this radically simplified model may have considerable heuristic value in well understood situations, a more comprehensive approach suitable to a broader variety of situations needs to answer – or make reasonable assumptions about – the same basic questions that led Parsons to speak about an internal dimension of action: How are goals chosen? How are means evaluated? Which understandings of the situation inform the choices? How do norms and values influence the adoption of goals and means? And how do normative orientations themselves come about and change? A comprehensive rational choice theory, then, must surround its core of a rational calculus model with a belt of subsidiary theories. These theories have to deal with needs and wants, cognitive understandings, and normative orientations, inquiring about their causal determinants, the dynamics of their change, and their impact on action. Such theories remain at present incomplete and fragmentary, but they inevitably involve ideas as causally relevant phenomena.4

Guidance from the History of Social Thought?

The role of ideas has preoccupied thinking about society and history for ages, generating again and again passionate disputes. Can we benefit from this history? The struggle over the role of ideas reached a highpoint with Marx’s attack on Hegel’s philosophy of history. This has defined the discussion for more than a century. When Hegel opened his teaching at the University of Berlin in 1818, he exhorted his students: “Faith in the power of the mind is the first condition of philosophical studies.” And: human beings “cannot think high enough of the greatness and power of the mind.” The young Marx turned to Hegel’s philosophy in order to get a comprehensive perspective on past history and the future of society. But he soon rejected Hegel’s claim that the dialectic of ideas was the key to understanding historical change. He replaced this “idealist” vision with a “materialist” one:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life

4 A glance at historical materialism is instructive here, as it resembles rational choice theory in many ways. Marxist thought always had elements of such subsidiary theories. For instance, it sees needs and wants shaped by people’s position in a system of production. Recent developments in marxist theories of class formation and class action explicitly focus on cultural causal conditions and the role of ideas (E.P.Thompson 1963, Antonio Gramsci 1975/1928-37). I return to Marx’s views in the next section.
process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (Marx 1978/1859, 4)

This formulation – and its key concepts of substructure, superstructure, and the dependence of consciousness on the relations of production – has become the centerpiece of the Marxist catechism. Yet it deals primarily with the very long run of history. And it is a formulation that dramatizes the contrast to Hegel’s ideas. When more specific questions are asked, more complex mechanisms come into view.

That ideas are shaped by the lived experience of groups and classes in distinct social locations remains a central idea. Marx then borrows from the interest psychology and the theory of ideas of eighteenth France (e.g., Helvetius) and claims that dominant classes adopt ideas that can serve as a means of domination and as instruments of legitimation, while emergent revolutionary classes seek to define what’s necessary to advance their position. This clearly has implications for the efficacy of ideas in class divided societies: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” (Marx and Engels 1978/1945-6, 172)

That this intellectual dominance and thus the ideas it promulgates have significant consequences in history is implied even in the formula of substructure and superstructure. The legal and political superstructure and the attendant forms of consciousness maintain the status quo in the face of slow changes in the mode and the relations of production – until fairly sudden developments realign substructure and superstructure. Marx’s view of history as shaped by class struggle would lose its dialectic character and the discontinuity of revolutionary turns without that assumption. His insistence that “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process” takes aim at the validity and the legitimacy of the “intellectual life process” and at the view that ideas develop autonomously and are the ultimate determinants of the course of history. It is far from denying that ideas have significant consequences, even in the long run.

In the twentieth century, Marxian conflict theory built on these and other complexities in Marx’s historical analyses. It emphasized cultural elements in class formation and class action (Thompson 1963) and developed the ideas of cultural hegemony and counterhegemony (Gramsci 1975/1928-37). It also gave political processes a greater degree of autonomy, opening links to the institutionalist realism of Weber’s political analysis.

The counterposition was represented in the twentieth century by different versions of Parsonian functionalism and the integration theory of social systems. Beginning with his *Structure of Social Action* (1937), Talcott Parsons made value orientations the strategic entry point for social analysis. This remained so in *The Social System* (1951). Values and norms were emphasized as a key to understanding social life in a
methodological sense, not necessarily because they were the causal forces of primary importance. But in his later formulation of “cybernetic hierarchies” governing all systems of action, Parsons (1961) turned from arguments about the strategy of analysis to substantive causal claims. To make this clear requires a brief sketch of this later model.

Parsons distinguished four functional subsystems of social action and societies that deal with (1) adaptation and the generation of resources, (2) goal formation and attainment, (3) integration, and (4) largely latent ultimate orientations required for the maintenance of basic system patterns. In societies, these functional areas correspond to the economy, the polity, the societal community, and the pattern maintenance system linked to culture. These four parts of the model, Parsons claimed, stand in definite relations to each other, relations that can be understood in analogy to cybernetic control mechanisms. Parsons elaborates here a metaphor of Max Weber, who called religious ideas about salvation “switchmen of history” as they direct similar concerns and energies in different directions much as railroad switches send engines and trains to their various destinations (Weber 1958/1915, 280). In Parsons’ model, cultural orientations inform and shape the system of social integration; in the same way, the societal community shapes and controls the polity, and the polity the economy. This “hierarchy of cybernetic control” has an inverted counterpart in a “hierarchy of energy and necessary conditions.”

As the furnace generates and uses more energy than the thermostat, so the subsystems lower in the hierarchy of control generate and use more resources than those higher in that hierarchy. These formal analogies lead Parsons, at the end of an examination of simple and more complex societies, to a summary statement about the relative importance of ideas and normative orientation:

In the sense, and only in that sense, of emphasizing the importance of the cybernetically highest elements in patterning action systems, I am a cultural determinist, rather than a social determinist. Similarly, I believe that, within the social system, the normative elements are more important for social change than the “material interests” of constitutive units. The longer the time perspective, and the broader the system involved, the greater the relative importance of higher, rather than lower, factors in the control hierarchy, regardless of whether it is pattern maintenance or pattern change that requires explanation. (Parsons 1966, 113)

This strong statement, which has a counterpart in claims about the relative stability and autonomy of cultural patterns, has found a broad and diffuse following among many defenders of functionalist theory; but it encountered incisive criticism from many theorists who seek to develop Parsons’ ideas further. The formal model leads to this conclusion only if one treats the cybernetic metaphor as a valid causal proposition of how social action and the change and maintenance of social systems are determined. Empirically, the claim about the relative importance of normative orders and material interests hardly followed from the preceding evolutionary and comparative sketches.5

5 That the same empirical evidence is open to quite varied interpretations is indicated by Weber’s very wording of the “switchmen of history” metaphor, which is part of the same famous essay on world religions that was so important to Parsons’ thinking about the role of ideas from the beginning (see already Parsons 1937 and 1938, but also 1966): “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern men’s
One of the most influential overall assessments of Parsons’ theory – that of one of his last students, Jeffrey Alexander (1980-83) – insists that Parsons’ theoretical work is, despite of its intermittent leanings toward idealist positions, fundamentally multidimensional in character. In his own program, Alexander seeks to strengthen this multidimensionality by integrating Marxian ideas into the overall framework. One of the leading German followers of Parsons’ theory, Richard Münch, similarly rejects a causal primacy of culture and the system maintenance component of the social system (Münch 1987).

What can we conclude from this brief excursion in the history of social thought? Contrary to Parsons’ early programmatic call to transform disputes about the role of ideas in general by asking more specific questions, thus moving the discussion away from philosophical problems and into the forum of practical observations and theoretical analysis on the empirical level” (Parsons 1938, 652), the debate is still suffused with ideological inclinations toward broad answers. The left tends to be skeptical about the role of ideas. It sees the autonomous causal power of ideas and ideals contradicted by elementary social and political experience. In this view, the fundamental structures of power and economic advantage stand in the way of realizing ideals no matter how convincing. Maintaining that ideas and ideals are a major force shaping social life then comes to be seen as legitimating an unjust world. Ironically, such a skepticism about idealism actually springs itself from an insistence on values and ideals, albeit values and ideals that remain unrealized. Many on the right offer a mirror image of this. Though there is also a materialism of the right, many conservatives are inclined to stress the causal importance of culture. They consider the left’s insistence on the realization of ideas as naive idealism. The real world, profoundly shaped by values and realistic cognitive ideas, seems to them thoroughly unjust only if judged by unrealistic yardsticks.

Yet side by side with this continuing ideological discourse we can observe a certain convergence among theorists towards a “multidimensional” perspective, which seeks to move away from one-sided emphases and avoid ideological entanglements. In his valiant attempt to spell out “what sociological theory claims to know in the late twentieth century – 100 years into the development of the discipline,” Randall Collins presents a “multidimensional conflict theory” as a – perhaps more developed – complement to Alexander’s program. (Collins 1987, 1, 74, chs. 4 and 5). Differences among these analysts are in many ways not as radical as conventional views suggest. At the same time, this convergence remains largely at the metatheoretical program level. There is more agreement on problem formulations than on answers. Yet the limited programmatic convergence can be seen as the result of mutual correction of the two dominant traditions. Corresponding in important ways to the arguments from elementary social theory outlined earlier, that convergence offers a broad framework for future investigation.

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conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the track along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.” (Weber 1958/1915, 280) – Wenzel (1990, 453-455) points out that the cybernetic model reintroduces a dualism of “ideal” and “real” factors that cannot be sustained and that had been overcome in Parsons’ earlier insights about the symbolic mediation of all human action. For an ultimately dualist conception of Ideal- and Realfaktoren in which the content of the “ideal” factors is in the end immune to change, see Scheler 1980/1926).
What Kinds of Answers Can We Expect?

The controversies generated by the confrontation of idealism and materialism turned on the largest questions: Which factors – ideas or variously defined “material” factors – are more important overall and in the long run? Which general modes describe their interaction? Answers to these broad questions seem beyond reach. What Parsons urged in 1938 still seems a promising way to proceed: the task is to explore more specific, but nevertheless extremely complex questions and to do so by way “of factual observations and theoretical analysis on the empirical level.” However, given the limited success of moving in this direction during the last half century, we may well ask what kinds of results we can reasonably expect.

The answers that seem possible are more modest than Parsons appears to have anticipated in 1938. Establishing theoretical generalizations that are plausibly valid across time and space has proved extremely difficult. It is not an accident that Parsons focused on one of the dramatic exceptions – Weber’s theoretical sketch of how similar interests in salvation interact with the non-empirical ideas held by the major world religions to engender goals and values of a dramatically different character; this introduced and was supported by his vast, if essayistic comparative analysis of the major world religions.

More likely are partial insights, limited to questions about special kinds of ideas and distinctive social processes, and often also valid only in particular historical domains. Even if sharply focused on the explanation of specific developments, our questions will only rarely find answers that meet textbook specifications of theoretical propositions. Social science does not often produce such hypotheses that have survived repeated empirical tests and that are sufficiently specified to allow predictions. Even the theories of the middle range Robert Merton advocated two generations ago as a way forward as well as the recently much discussed “mechanism” hypotheses rarely meet the textbook requirements for theoretical propositions capable of explanation and prediction, however wide the margins we allow for variation in the outcomes. Reference group theory for instance says something worthwhile about people referring to other social categories and groups when they make cognitive or normative judgments but it does not tell us which references are taken under which circumstances. Many mechanism hypotheses are similarly underspecified, a fact that earned them the ironic label of “bits of sometimes true theory”.

True, there are theoretical insights, which may come from relatively simple empirical findings or even common sense observations that are sufficient to put unqualified claims into doubt. A (not so simple) example is E. P. Thompson’s (1963) study of the constitution of the English working class that denied claims that the

6 For the recent revival of interest in mechanisms see Hedström and Swedberg (1998) and earlier Stinchcombe (1991). For the cuttingly funny formulation see Stinchcombe (1998, p. 267) and Coleman (1964, pp. 516-9). On reference group theory see Merton (1968/1949). Ironically, Merton had, in the opening chapters of the same seminal volume, distinguished between “theoretical orientations” of a meta-theoretical character and theoretical propositions in the narrower sense. I suggest that the theories of the middle range are actually instances of the former rather than the latter.
conditions of class formation can be read off from objective conditions of material interest and conflict, independent of cultural antecedents. But the research results that we can more commonly expect derive from reasoned causal explanations of the impact of ideas in one or a few complex cases and are valid only in limited domains, often of unknown extension.

This is true for many areas of research, but it applies with special force to studies that centrally concern ideas. Determining the meaning of ideas inevitably involves interpretation. Such hermeneutic problems are formidable when we deal with explicit and detailed formulations, they become even greater when much less information is available. These problems frequently make a standardization of inquiry impossible, a fact that often renders survey data of dubious value. Historical studies have to make do, in the absence of such oral information, with even more indirect indications of subjective meanings. Small wonder that many traditional works of this kind simply confine themselves to the study of a few thinkers, either foregoing assertions about wider circles or just claiming representativeness, however great the odds against that.\textsuperscript{7}

Studies dealing with the role of ideas will therefore typically involve complex hypotheses about the incidence and the meaning as well as the consequences of ideas, hypotheses that are tested in multiple, non-standardized ways as the investigation proceeds. Many of these hypotheses will not be “portable” beyond the particular context, though some may well meet that standard. However, the complex dialogue between empirical evidence and theoretical surmise that characterizes such studies is often guided by \textit{theoretical frames}. These are not theories in the strict sense. They do not consist of an integrated series of tested theoretical propositions. Rather they set out an approach to the issues in question.

Theoretical frames consist of a number of concepts that clearly define what is to be explained and identify a set of factors relevant for the explanation; they offer justifications for the particular conceptualizations they propose as well as arguments supporting their choice of relevant causal factors; they may explicate certain logical interrelations that are not obvious at first sight; and they may contain also an occasional admixture of specific testable and tested hypotheses. The value of such theoretical frames lies in their usefulness for empirical investigation. While they cannot be judged as true or false in a more immediate sense, their quality nevertheless depends on their adequacy to the realities studied. I submit that much of what we can count as advances in social and political analysis consists of more appropriate theoretical frames for specific problem areas.

In a very broad sense, one could consider the limited convergence on a multidimensional orientation of social and political theory noted above a theoretical frame, but more specific constructions are of greater interest for the questions discussed here. The example of one such focused theoretical frame will make this clear.

\textsuperscript{7} Issues of interpretation and hermeneutics lead quickly into philosophical questions and arguments (see, e.g., Apel 1984). I am here just pointing to pragmatic methodological difficulties. For some ingenious attempts to deal with these see Mohr (1998).
Robert Wuthnow opened his powerful study of three of the greatest ideational challenges in the development of western modernity – the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European socialism – by a detailed theoretical frame or, in his more literary choice of words, a “theoretical scaffolding” (1989, 3-15). It begins with the problem of articulation: “Great works of art and literature, philosophy and social criticism, like great sermons, always relate in an enigmatic fashion to their social environment. They draw resources, insights, and inspiration from that environment: they reflect it, speak to it, and make themselves relevant to it. And yet they also remain autonomous enough from their social environment to acquire a broader, even universal and timeless appeal.” (3) Next he distinguishes the social and cultural environment, the institutional context, and action sequences within those contexts as components of the conditions of intellectual action. The analysis then focuses on the production of ideas in a community of discourse, on their selection in the wider society, and on the process of their institutionalization that makes resources and channels of communication routinely available and that turns these ideas into a stable feature of a historical period. Finally, for the analysis of the ideas themselves, he distinguishes how the social and cultural environment is perceived and analyzed (“social horizon”), how the new ideas are crystallized and opposed to singled out features of the status quo (“discursive field”), and how the problems can be resolved by prototypical ideas and actions (“figural action”). Needless to say, this schematic listing can only give a first impression of the theoretical frame that informs this massive study and that is reviewed in its conclusion.

Other examples of theoretical frames that have proved useful in arriving at persuasive explanations of developments or constellations of great interest are not hard to find. Joseph Ben-David, for instance, used a consistent set of analytic ideas in his too little appreciated sketch explaining long periods of stagnation as well as phases of rapid growth in the development of modern science and its applications (Ben-David 1971).

The recourse to theoretical frames may seem open to abuse. The choice of categories and variables could be willful, informed by idiosyncrasy and ideological inclination. And working within the frame could insulate the investigation from contrary ideas. After all, the problems of ideas and their role have, as we have seen, long been the subject of intense ideological disputes. Thus, one might imagine, the discourse could degenerate into a relativism analogous to conflict avoidance in child play: “I’ll play in my sandbox, you in yours.” But that outcome is hardly necessary. After each explanatory use of a theoretical framework, the results should be – and often are – scanned for anomalies and open questions suggesting revisions of the analytic frame. Equally or perhaps more important, other researchers will insist on such shortcomings, and they are likely to prevail if they do not confine themselves to global claims – that the frame privileges one broad set of factors or another – but demonstrate their point by showing that hypotheses guided by a different theoretical frame can offer better and more comprehensive explanations.

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8 See also Wuthnow (1987) for an overview and evaluation of different theoretical approaches to the study of meaning and culture.
Successful studies aided by such theoretical frames advance our understanding in two ways. First, they give credence to a particular frame, aid in its revision, and lend support to others following a similar theoretical strategy. Second, they themselves offer a reasoned explanatory account of complex historical developments. Once similar developments are explored in other cases, the result could be a more definitive theoretical account of certain kinds of developments. A more modest and perhaps preliminary expectation would be that a number of such historical explanations yield a repertory of possible and likely causal patterns that may be encountered again.

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a few ideas that could be building blocks for theoretical frames focused on specific problems in the wider field of the role of ideas – on questions about the conditions of impact of ideas, the magnitude of impact and non-impact as well as to the modes and mechanisms through which ideas make a difference. Some of what follows will take up elements of the earlier grand traditions. Aside from the overall controversies, these contained after all theoretical constructs of great persuasiveness. I think for instance of Parsons’ ideas about institutionalization as a mediation between normative as well as cognitive ideas and social processes, or of the role the “division of material from mental labor” played in Marx and Engels’ conception of the fundamentals of historical change.

How Ideas Matter: Interaction with Other Factors

That the impact of ideas must always be seen in the context of other factors shaping the outcome as well is strongly suggested by the programmatic multidimensional consensus noted above. This virtually obvious maxim may gain a little in complexity if we return to our first example of the role of cognitive ideas, the failure of the last Pre-Nazi German governments of the Weimar period to engage in countercyclical demand management.

This was not a case of overlooking or neglecting a well-established policy idea. Many German economists saw themselves as largely removed from policy concerns, but a majority adhered to the view that a market economy tends toward optimal equilibria rather than getting stuck in a stable underuse of human and material resources. They therefore were hostile to suggestions that the Great Depression could be ameliorated by the government generating demand. Civil servants in government were skeptical of deficit financing for similar reasons; in addition, they had to deal with constraints in Germany’s international financial situation and feared that “printing money” could make for financial panics in an already panic-prone situation. The most important factor shaping the policy, however, was political. This was driven by the fear of returning to the rampant inflation that had characterized the first years after the First World War. Following the collapse of Imperial Germany, a coalition of labor, business and government responded to the threat of chaos and political instability with inflationary

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9 This anticipation differs from the problematic empiricist hope that theoretical conclusions will emerge simply from an accumulation of empirical findings. The difference lies precisely in the guidance of empirical research by successively revised theoretical frames. If a label were desired for this strategy, a slightly changed version of the old formula of “analytic induction” could serve.

10 See Marx and Engels (1978/1945-6). For some interpretive comments that elaborate the remarks above see Rueschemeyer (1986, 105-6).
policies that eventually resulted in the “hyperinflation” of 1922/23. It was this negative policy legacy that was the strongest factor leading to the deflationary policy adopted in 1930-32 (see James 1989).

Even cognitive ideas of considerable potential utility, then, have to meet with complex favorable conditions before they are accepted and used. This is especially true of social and economic ideas, because they typically have normative implications and affect vested interests. They thus are prone to provoke ideological contestation. Hall concludes a comparative analysis of Keynesianism in advanced capitalist countries with a chapter on “The Politics of Keynesian Ideas” (1989: 361-91), in which he offers a theoretical frame identifying three clusters of factors that mediate between a new economic theory and its adoption as a guide to policy: The “economic viability” of economic policy ideas depends on their relation to existing economic theories, the nature of the national economy, and international economic constraints. Their “political viability” is determined by the goals of ruling political parties, the interests of potential coalition partners, and the collective associations with policy legacies. And the “administrative viability” depends on policy inclinations in the relevant agencies and their relative power as well as on their capacities for implementation.

The dynamics of the influence of economic ideas represent of course only a small segment of the very large area of questions concerning the role of different factors shaping the influence of ideas. New normative ideas – values, ideals, and innovations in the normative regulation of life – do not face an altogether different situation in their struggle for acceptance, since it is the rare cognitive assertion about social, economic, and political matters that does not have any implications for the constellation of vested interests and the established moral order. But new normative ideas cannot rely on the appeal of empirical reality claims.

If for no other reason than the vast variety of ways in which new ideas – both cognitive and normative – can relate to established ideas, vested interests, and their bases in the institutional order, the interaction of ideas with other factors shaping their impact is a huge field of inquiry, virtually coextensive with the analysis of social change. At the extremes, it is easy to think of situations that illustrate a near-complete impotence of ideas, even if they strike observers in a different situation as persuasive and powerful, while in other constellations ideas prevail that later witnesses may well find ill-founded and/or morally objectionable. In the following, only a few peculiar issues in the interaction of ideas and other factors will occupy us further.

**How Ideas Matter: The Sequencing of Different Factors**

Common sense explanations often speak of successful intellectual innovations as “ideas whose time has come.” Ideas then matter because powerful supportive factors have already emerged that strongly advance or even guarantee their success. In fact, the ideas themselves may have been shaped by such other factors, as explored in the sociology of knowledge. The role of the ideas themselves may in this case vary between that of a nearly negligible contribution and a causal factor that substantially advances a change which otherwise might remain incomplete or come about only much more slowly.
Women’s struggles for equality during the last century and a half provide an example. The idea of a fundamental equality of men and women is of course much older, built in many ways into the universal human condition. Its implications for equal political, civil, and socioeconomic rights, however, had little chance of realization in large-scale agrarian societies. Equal gender rights came onto the agenda of modern societies only when profound changes in the structures of family life, in fertility and mortality, in the relations between work and family, and in the physical requirements of work and warfare removed major obstacles to a vast extension of gender equality. Does this mean that the ideas and the struggles of the women’s movements of the late nineteenth century and the last half of the twentieth merely rubberstamped developments that were proceeding anyway? By no means. These ideas involved struggle because gender roles – grounded deeply in the norms of everyday life and in values that have strong popular as well as institutional support – have an amazing staying power even when their macro-structural underpinnings have given way. The ideas of gender equality played an important role in the slow dismantling of male privileges both at the level of the mores governing day-to-day life in diverse subcultures and at the level of politics, legislation, and adjudication. This struggle is not over because of the continuing strength of inherited gender roles; but it is advancing its cause – an impressive demonstration of the relevance of ideas. This is an interesting causal pattern because egalitarian ideas, previously perhaps acknowledged in principle but devoid of a multitude of rights implications that are now sought, are opposed primarily by the staying power of normative ideas about gender, while the macro-structural underpinnings of these gender relations are gone.11

Another instructive instance in which the sequencing of interacting factors shaped the role of ideas concerns cognitive innovation – the transformation of social science in the context of new social problems generated by capitalist development. In can be argued that one major factor instigating the rapid development of empirical social research in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century were social problems that could not be sufficiently understood with the cognitive tools available. “The modern social sciences took shape in close interaction with early attempts to deal with the social consequences of capitalist industrialization.” (Skocpol and Rueschemeyer 1996, 3) Once they developed, the new investigations gained influence because of the urgent needs for social diagnosis to which they responded.

One must not, however, think of this too simply as a closed loop between demand for knowledge, its supply, and its subsequent impact. The definition of urgent needs for new insight cannot be taken for granted; it was generated in part by the new social investigations. The supply of the needed information and analysis does not follow automatically from the definition of problems nor can it be simply understood as a response to well defined questions. And the influence of the knowledge generated does

11 The ways in which the social structure of agrarian societies blocks gender equality is well established in comparative anthropological studies. For one quantitative cross-societal analysis that also points to war, migration, and the long-term effects of religious myths see Sanday (1981). – Rueschemeyer and Rueschemeyer (1990) offer a more extended version of the argument just outlined.
not follow unequivocally from the identification of the need. Rather, all three phases – demand, supply, and influence – involve complex processes that are shaped by institutional structures, by the location and power of the different interests at stake, and by the knowledge bearing groups as well as the substance of the knowledge they offered. The project just referred to resulted in a theoretical frame whose outlines can here only be hinted at by pointing to the major actors – state elites in competing nation states that were faced with increasingly divisive class differences and democratizing pressures, the organizational leadership of the major social classes, parties and status groups that occupied a “third position” between capital and labor, and a variety of knowledge generating and knowledge bearing groups and institutions.

How Ideas Matter: The Social Construction of Collective Interests

A similar constellation of factors is found in successful political and social movements. These are rarely if ever instigated primarily by a set of ideas. Rather a complex set of felt problems and emerging openings for change constitute the major conditions for mobilization. Within this context ideas play a critical role offering diagnosis and promising solutions. This seems to apply to working class movements, women’s movements, the environmental movement as well as the great variety of ethnic and national movements. Social and political movements are therefore an eminently promising research site for studying the role of ideas. Here we will focus only on one specific aspect of their role, the social construction of collective interests that are eventually pursued in the movements.

Even if the chances of movements rest on the existence of fairly intense and widespread concerns, the goals actually pursued by the emerging movement do not follow from these concerns. To give just one example, “Communist, social democratic, liberal, Catholic, and even outright conservative organizations have competed with each other for the allegiance of the working class, and all have claimed to represent the best interests of labor.” (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992, 54) Ideas clearly play a significant role in choosing from the variety of possible trajectories to which an incipient movement may be open. They can have lasting consequences for divided or unified responses to the same broad set of problems, and they decide in large part whether only some issues are addressed while the concerns of parts of the larger potential constituency are neglected.

The way specific ideas gain this influence can be specified further. The exigencies of overcoming the difficulties of moving from widely shared concerns and interests to effective collective action put a premium on small groups of activists and, eventually, on formal organization. This gives disproportionate influence to the organizational leadership, and that “oligarchic” influence does not only constitute a problem for intrainMovement democracy (which is the way it has found the greatest attention in political sociology); it also shapes the goals actually pursued by the organization and its followers. On the one hand, organization is critical for giving substance and power to an incipient

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12 Recent years have seen great advances in this field. On the role of cognitive frames see Snow et al. (1986) and Eyerman and Jamison (1991). More generally, I content myself with two bare references: McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996), and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001).
movement; on the other, the same process of organization shapes the specific goals and their justification, their relation to other, broader visions of history and the future, and the choice of means. This is not to deny that the ideas thus generated have to find resonance among the potential constituencies of the movement; but if they do appeal to the implicit ideas represented in these diverse groupings, they do have a chance to spread them along the paths of organizational networks and to transform existing patterns of “consciousness”, potentially creating new collective identities.

The simplified model sketched gives some indications of where to locate the generation and promulgation of ideas that play a role in the structuring of social movements. Yet more than location is at stake. Through their relations of power and influence the organizations and institutions involved constitute springboards for influential ideas.

This points to broader implications. If we look back at the Hall’s theoretical frame for the politics of Keynesian ideas or at the role of the emerging modern social sciences in interaction with policies addressing social problems by capitalist development, we see in these instances as well how the location in institutions and groups – in government agencies, professional communities, universities, parties, and unions – played a critical role for the efficacy ideas in shaping important outcomes.

How Ideas Matter: Structural Protection and the Autonomy of Ideas

Organizational and institutional structures not only nurture ideas and secure their propagation. They also protect and conserve them. This covers a wide range of institutional forms, from small provisions such as the creation and maintenance of libraries to the complex structures involved in the institutionalization of academic inquiry. Such arrangements may protect ideas against simple obliteration; they may keep new ideas from being “nipped in the bud” by the force of tradition and restrain vested interests so as to create an opening for change; and they may shelter innovative ideas against a backlash their impact may have instigated in the wider society, be it for moral or material reasons.

Organizational and institutional structures protect ideas by offering them a separate space from other concerns that are often more pressing and frequently claim higher standing on moral, religious or simply traditional grounds. This structural differentiation, to use the technical language of structural functionalism in which this idea gained prominence, involves normative regulation of the differentiated space itself, giving it a place in the wider social order, and securing this place through influence that elevates its standing, through legal (and ultimately coercive) guarantees, through the provision of material resources, and through a privileged position in grid of communication.

13 For a more extended discussion of these issues see Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992, 53-57). Our argument joined modifications of Olson’s (1965) theory of collective action and of Michels’ (1949/1908) theory of oligarchy with considerations of how movements are embedded in the power structure of society to arrive at a more complex view of the construction of class interests and also of more problematic aspects of collective action. Regarding the latter, we claimed that “from a grass roots point of view, it seems reasonable to speak of an inherent ambiguity of collective action.” (55)
The institutionalization of science – or, more broadly, of academic investigation – in modern societies is a prime example of this structural protection of ideas. This idea entered the mainstream of social theory with the brilliant chapter on “Belief Systems and the Social System: The Problem of the ‘Role of Ideas’” in Parsons’ *Social System*. The starting point is a fundamental duality in the role of ideas. Their adequacy to reality stands in tension with their impact on social integration and collective identity. At the most elementary level of interaction, “if ego and alter share a distorted belief – about the physical environment or about third parties, if ego corrects his belief to bring it closer to reality while alter does not this introduces a strain into the relations of ego and alter.” (Parsons 1951, 328) Parsons’ important sketches of the institutionalization of scientific investigation and in particular also of applied science (1951, 335-348,491-2, 494-5, 505-20) found a counterpart in the historically fleshed out treatment of Ben-David (1971) who sought to explain the rise of modern science in Europe after long periods of stagnation in the development of scientific knowledge. He shows how the full institutionalization of scientific investigation was preceded by charismatic movements advocating a new status for science but also how substantial institutional support could develop later in enclaves within more backward societies, relying more on the sponsorship of ruling elites.

Normative and ideological ideas may be similarly shielded from the impact of interests and concerns in society, though this protection is not likely to be as strong and impermeable as the protection of science. We encountered the elements of such protection when we considered the construction of collective interests. Such a stabilization of ideas through organizational and institutional arrangements is the main reason why ideological ideas often have a considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the interests and concerns of their audiences. The several components of the amalgam that is represented by current American conservatism – protection of the material interests of the rich, self-reliant individualism, and a high valuation of market exchange as well as of family and community values, religiosity, and traditional morality – are often explained by long-established popular value traditions. Following the leads of this analysis, however, one should expect that this syndrome of ideas has its grounding at least as much in specific organizations and institutions – in religious seminaries, networks of ministers, repeated political mobilization, secular think tanks, and the associated patterns of elite and mass communication – as in diffuse popular attitudes whose elective affinity defies reasoned expectations of which values are compatible with which others.

Within the spaces of a fairly comprehensive institutional protection, ideas come easily to be seen as more autonomous from other social forces than they are in a broader perspective. In such an arena ideas undergo internal developments undisturbed by extraneous influences and blockages and shaped by their own premises, by logic, and by pertinent insights and findings. If the conditions of this state of affairs are not fully recognized, this can easily become a source of idealistic misunderstandings about the transcendence of ideas and their autonomous efficacy.

In fact, the insulation described may not only protect ideas but also limit their influence. Ideas set aside in such a way may be well preserved, but unless they gain at the
same time a certain authoritative standing in society and a privileged place in the lines of communication their broader influence may be miniscule. In the extreme, ideas may acquire an esoteric character that is cherished as such by its followers. Less extreme patterns seem quite common. In nineteenth century Europe, critical philology infused biblical studies in universities with a skepticism corrosive of traditional faith, while the ministers trained there were kept from letting this knowledge influence their ministry. More generally, the values held dear in religious doctrine are often formulated in a way that is sufficiently vague and general so as not to antagonize an audience committed to contrary daily routines. This “Sunday sermon” syndrome preserves the values, an effect that must not be underestimated; but as it does so, it fails to structure much of actual behavior.

**How Ideas Matter: Truth and Efficacy**

So far, we have not touched on the quality and characteristics of ideas except to distinguish between cognitive, normative, and appreciative ideas. Instead, we have focused on the connection of ideas to social structures and processes. Clearly, however, their qualities, in particular truth, distortion, and falsehood, make a difference.

Intuitively, cognitive ideas that are required for successful action are the most persuasive examples for the claim that ideas matter. Truth and efficacy, however, stand in a complicated relationship. It takes just a moment’s reflection that the importance of ignorance and misunderstandings is only the inverse of the role of empirically adequate ideas. For instance, neglecting the collective action problem and its ramifications is at the root of quite a few political misjudgments that block successful action.

That is not where the matter ends, however. Beyond knowledge and ignorance, a powerful role in politics is played by deception and – often willful – illusion. Yet “whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case.” (Arendt 1969, 5; 1968)

Wishful thinking is clearly a powerful mechanism producing illusion. In principle, this is at odds with the chances of successful action; but in many situations and for many people and groups successful problem solving is not the immediate issue. It is then that wishful thinking – motivated by parallel inclinations of many individuals or by mechanisms sustaining group identity and solidarity – comes to the fore. Upsetting troubles can then easily be seen as instigated by outsiders or as the work of the most plausible source of evil – of communist infiltration, the American Satan, the CIA, or the Israeli Mossad. That these examples are obvious and somewhat extreme, should not distract from the fact that the mechanism involved is quite common and can take much more nuanced forms. Such spontaneous and often massive tendencies can be exploited by elites who are bent on deception.

There is no question that intentional deception – outright lying as well as the intentional fostering of mistaken ideas – is endemic in politics. Even if lies that are
uncovered are detrimental to trust, the temptation to conceal inconvenient facts is very strong because this seems to maintain trust, morale, and legitimacy. And deception is often effective, especially when it articulates well with existing inclinations toward illusion.

The relations between the consequences of ideas and their cognitive adequacy are quite complex. Lying and delusions are not always disabling even in the long run (though what is disabling depends of course on whose interests are at stake). Witholding knowledge has been defended by the elitist partisans of esoteric knowledge because “a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing” in the minds of the masses. A certain veiling of reality – say about the extent and the dynamics of “deviant behavior” – may protect established norms and values, while realistic descriptions of reality may undermine them. The hope that public lies will always fail in the long run may itself be an idea that is valuable for the protection of civic virtue while its general validity is not unproblematic.

Can simplifications and the attendant distortions be enabling, while an emphasis on complicating inconvenient facts may curtail effective action, especially large scale collective action? Georges Sorel claimed that ideas, for instance the ideas of marxism, exerted their greatest social power not as realistic theories but as myths. Vilfredo Pareto, endorsing Sorel’s claim, relates this to more fundamental features of social action: “The fact that human behavior is strongly influenced by sentiments in the form of derivations which go beyond experience and reality, explains a phenomenon which has been well observed and elucidated by Georges Sorel, namely, that influential social doctrines (it would be more exact to say the sentiments manifested by social doctrines) take the form of myths.” (Pareto 1966/1916, 246)

**Conclusion: How Ideas Matter**

Quite clearly, ideas matter in society and history. The ultimate answer to why this is the case can be found in fundamental reflections on human social action. How ideas make a difference, however, is a problem that defies comprehensive answers. The reason is simple: Precisely because ideas have pervasive consequences but at the same time interact with other factors, to ask how ideas matter turns on closer inspection into as many problems as the question of how social change and social order come about. As we do not have a general theory of social change and order, specific enough to explain what we are interested in (not to mention prediction), we cannot expect a general theory detailing how ideas matter.

What we do have are a number of investigations of the role of ideas in more specific developments and circumstances. Associated with these studies are a number of focused theoretical frames that for the time being constitute the building blocks of advances in the study of the role of ideas.

The theoretical frames we have discussed seem to have an interesting common denominator. It is the way ideas are grounded in groups, organizations, and institutions and the attendant relations of communication and influence that is of decisive importance.
for their creation, their maintenance, and their impact in society. This focus on organizations and institutions happens to have a fortunate methodological implication: It eases at least to some extent the peculiar difficulties of ascertaining the incidence and meaning of ideas as it tells a little more precisely where to look and as the record of ideas is likely to be better preserved in the context of groups, organizations, and institutions. At several points we encountered the problem that the impact of ideas can only be fully understood if we also consider the ideas of broader audiences, which are likely to be of a more implicit character. However here, too, we may suspect that the strength of these ideas depends to a large extent on their grounding in groups and institutions as well as the codes of everyday life.

If we return from these specific theoretical ideas to the grand discussions of the past, we may conclude that the preceding considerations suggest a certain skepticism about claims for the role of ideas as such. It is not only that their effect seems mediated by the way they are embedded in organizations and institutions. This embedment serves also as selection mechanism, and the very content of ideas is partially shaped by these forms of social grounding and support. This skeptical comment, however, does not endorse the materialist side of the enduring controversy between idealist and materialist claims. Ideas enjoy varying degrees of autonomy in their development and their impact on social stability and change can be miniscule but also extremely powerful. We are only at the beginnings of a better understanding of the factors that account for the difference.

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