

Transnational Actors and Public Policy

Abstract

In contradiction to a number of scholars who have focused mainly on the role of financial loans and material interests to explain policy diffusion and transnational influence, this article argues that ideational processes constitute a key aspect of the impact of transnational actors on country-level policy development. In most cases, transnational policy actors exert policy influence at least in part by taking on the roles of global think tanks and policy entrepreneurs. Recognizing that this ideational influence interacts with other potential causal factors, the article first turns to the literature on ideational processes and public policy before showing how transnational actors play a central role in both the diffusion and the country-level implementation of policy ideas.

Introduction

Standard public policy models have tended to privilege the role of domestic actors in policy choice; however, a growing

number of scholars have begun to study the influence of transnational actors on country-level policy development (e.g. Ağartan, 2007; Bøås and McNeil, 2004; Deacon, 2007; Jacoby, 2008; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Kelley, 2004; Mahon, 2006; Merrien, 2001; Orenstein and Schmitz, 2006; Stone, 2004; Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Vachudova, 2005; Weyland, 2005). From the World Bank to the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the European Union (EU), from the Soros Foundation to Greenpeace and the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), international financial institutions, non-profit organizations, and other transnational actors advise governments and provide technical and financial support to most countries around the world. Within the political science literature, a central debate concerns the methods and mechanisms of transnational actor influence.

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financial loans, membership conditionalities, and material interests to explain policy diffusion and transnational influence (Brooks, 2005; Kelley, 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Vachudova, 2005), this article argues that ideational processes constitute an important aspect of the impact of transnational actors on country-level policy development. In most cases, transnational actors lack formal or informal veto power over domestic policy sometimes imposed through hard conditionalities.¹ Instead, they must work through persuasion, convincing key domestic veto players to adopt new policy preferences. Activities geared towards persuasion are frequently supplemented or reinforced by whatever material resources transnational actors have at their disposal, making attention to resources necessary to the study of transnational actor influence. Yet only in exceptional circumstances do transnational actors have such a high level of resources that they can effectively dictate domestic policy. These exceptional circumstances, however, have often been the focus of scholarly research: for instance, IMF crisis programs (Stone 2002; Pop-Eleches 2009) or EU membership negotiations (Vachudova 2005; Kelley 2004). These types of events are rare, and they constitute the exception rather than the rule. There are good reasons for this focus on the hard conditionalities; they can have a major impact on country policy. However, this emphasis on hard

conditionalities has tended to overshadow the more day-to-day and pervasive reach of transnational actors as agenda-setters, global think tanks, and policy entrepreneurs in domestic politics. As argued here, under most circumstances, this ideational role of transnational actors holds greater importance than financial coercion, which is precisely why such a role needs to be better integrated into standard models of domestic public policy. This article specifies the conditions under which hard conditionality and ideational influence work. It thus develops a new perspective on the long-standing debate on the weight of material and ideational factors in how transnational actors impact country-level policy change.

Explanatory Models

Over the last decade, the social science debate regarding the nature and the causes of policy change in contemporary societies has intensified (e.g., Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Capano and Howlett, 2009; Clemens and Cook, 1999; Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008; Weyland 2008).² An interest-

ing way to map the different possible theories of policy change is to draw on the recent work of Craig Parsons (2007), who distinguishes between four major types of explanation in political analysis (i.e., material, institutional, ideational, and psychological explanations). On one hand, material and institutional explanations feature a logic-of-position according to which structural or human-made constraints and opportunities impact the behavior of actors (Parsons, 2007: 13) On the other hand, ideational and psychological explanations are characterized by a logic-of-interpretation, which is about showing how the way actors perceive their environment impacts human behavior (Parsons, 2007: 13) Concerning transnational actors and their potential impact on policy change, the contrast between material and ideational explanations is especially crucial. This is true partly because materialist explanations focusing on financial loans and economic factors tend to reduce policy choices to objective constraints, and to reject the claim that ideas can have an independent impact on policy development.

Four Types of Political Explanations

| | <i>General</i> | <i>Particular</i> |
|--------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Logic of Position</i> | 1. Material | 2. Institutional |
| <i>Logic of Interpretation</i> | 3. Psychological | 4. Ideational |

Source: adapted from Parsons, 2007

For Parsons (2007), the four types of explanations can all leave room for agency; yet they each point to a distinct set of factors that may impact actors' decisions and strategies. More important, combining different types of explanation is potentially fruitful, as long as scholars clearly identify the nature of the causal factors to which they refer (Parsons, 2007).³

Until recently in political science, material and institutional arguments tended to dominate. However, since the 1990s, psychological and ideational approaches have been growing in importance, as in economics with the rise of behavioral (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) and identity (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010) approaches. The work of scholars like Kahneman and Tversky (1981), Cohen, March and Olsen (1972), and Simon (1955) in sociology and in psychology convincingly have shown that rational actor assumptions about human behavior had serious limitations. The literature on transnational actors follows similar lines. Traditional approaches to transnational actors tend to downplay their role, focusing on the rare instances in which transnational actors, through hard conditionalities, have exercised something of a veto power on national policy making. At the same time, a growing chorus of scholars have begun to explore psychological and ideational influences on different fields of public policy (e.g. Abdelal, 2007; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Béland

and Cox, forthcoming; Berman, 1998; Bleich, 2002; Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Chwieroth, 2007; Cox, 2001; Epstein 2008; Finnemore, 1993; Genieys and Smyrl, 2008; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Hall, 2008; Hansen and King 2001; Jacoby, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Kelley, 2004; Lieberman, 2002; Mintrom 1997; Mehta, forthcoming; Moreno and Palier, 2005; Orenstein, 2008; Orloff and Palier, 2009; Parsons, 2002; Pop-Eleches 2009; Risse-Kappen, 1994; Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004; Somers and Block, 2005; Stone, 2002; Stone, 1997; Surel, 2000; Slaughter 2004; Tarrow, 2005; True and Mintrom 2001; Vachudova, 2005; Walsh, 2000; Weir, 1992; Wendt, 1999; Weyland 2005; Woods, 2006; Yee, 1996).

While few scholars in the ideational tradition dismiss the fact that material factors have something to do with policy, they tend to be concerned with growing evidence that ideational factors also play a leading role under many circumstances. For example, a number of scholars have demonstrated that ideational processes participate in the construction of the economic, environmental, and security problems most public

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policies are designed to address (e.g. Kingdon, 1995; Mehta, forthcoming; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994; Stone, 1997). Ideas may also help actors make sense of their interests, which are defined not only by material conditions and the logic of position, but through interpretations of these conditions (Blyth, 2002; Hay, 2006; Jenson, 1989; King, 1973; Parsons, 2007; Steensland, 2006; Schön and Rein, 1994; Stone, 1997; Weir, 1992). Still, much of the debate between material and ideational explanations has taken the form of a competition between explanatory processes, with some arguing for the supremacy of ideational versus material explanations and vice versa. Kelley (2004), for instance, put the two forms of explanation to a test and concluded that, in the area of minority rights policy adoption in EU new member states, that while both sets of factors played a role,

hard conditionalities were more effective in gaining compliance.

Taking a new perspective on this debate, we find that adherents of material and ideational approaches disagree in part because they focus on disparate types of transnational actors mobilizing under different circumstances. Adherents of the material approach tend to study episodes far at one end of the spectrum of transnational actor influence — episodes in which transnational actors have extraordinarily high levels of power and resources due to some extraordinary circumstances, like the collapse of communism or a major economic crisis. Students of ideational approaches tend to study more “normal” forms of transnational actor behavior. Both have something important to contribute. Transnational actors can be far more influential in times of crisis or during an extraordinary “window of opportunity” and the use of coercion afforded by hard conditionality can facilitate major changes in national policy. Scholars in the material and institutional traditions are correct to point out that coercive resources can be more powerful. However, these episodes of hard conditionality are, by their nature, relatively infrequent. Most of the time, the vast majority of transnational actors do not have sufficient resources to force conditions upon countries. At these times, transnational actors fall back on the most common arrow in their quiver: ideational influence.

While not as powerful as the blunt force of coercion, ideational influence can and does have a major influence on country policy across a wide range of areas. Harder to study and typically less obvious in nature, it has tended to be downplayed as a factor in public policy analysis. This article shows why ideational influence must be integrated into standard models of policy analysis and transnational mobilization, and not just for analyzing times of perceived crisis.

Transnational Actors

Transnational policy actors are defined broadly here as actors that seek to influence policy in multiple countries through the advocacy of specific, well-elaborated policy proposals. They may include international organizations (Woods, 2006), transnational activist networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998), epistemic communities (Haas 1992), and individual policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom, 1997). Although their development has accelerated in recent decades in a context of growing economic interdependence and changing communication and transportation technologies, such transnational policy actors have long existed, which is why scholars have explored their history (Kott, 2008; Rodgers, 1998).

Transnational policy actors have many tools for influencing government policy globally or across a defined set of countries. However, their

behavior is in large part defined by the institutional tool that they do not have: formal veto power over government policy. In fact, transnational actors are often left out of public policy models because of this lack of formal veto power over policy. For instance, George Tsebelis’ (2002) famous institutionalist approach to the study of public policy places a key emphasis on veto players: those actors who have a formal veto over policy through either constitutional means or by virtue of being part of a coalition government whose votes are necessary to achieve a majority. While this type of institutional approach helps to put the spotlight on those moments when a small number of transnational actors exercise a quasi-veto on policy by virtue of power asymmetries, it leaves little room for the role that transnational actors typically play in policy processes worldwide.⁴

When transnational actors are depicted as important causal forces, it is frequently because of unique or exceptional circumstances that give a single transnational actor a quasi-veto power over country policy. For instance, the EU gained an effective veto over country policy in a wide range of areas in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after the collapse of communism. Since the CEE countries wanted to get into the EU far more than the existing member states wanted to let them in, they were forced to adopt a wide

range of legislation without debate and, in most areas, were unable to negotiate exceptions or special conditions. This has led many scholars of EU accession to the conclusion that membership conditionality was by far the strongest policy tool of the EU, which is undoubtedly the case (Grabbe 1999; Jacoby 2008, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, Vachudova 2005). Similarly, studies of IMF crisis programs (Stone 2002, Pop-Eleches 2009) have emphasized the material factors that enable the IMF to impose policy conditions on countries in crisis. It is obviously true from these studies that material factors that generate quasi-veto powers for a single transnational actor are the most powerful mechanisms for transnational actor influence. Yet at the same time, these instances are obviously exceptional. EU membership negotiations generally happen once in a country's history, while IMF programs occur infrequently. In any case, most transnational actors are not inter-governmental organizations with billions of dollars or euros of resources to leverage compliance. Under most conditions, transnational actors lack the effective veto generated by hard conditionality.

So how do transnational actors affect policy under normal conditions? Close analysis of the behavior of transnational actors shows that they develop a wide range of activities that are intended to overcome this lack of formal veto power. Many of

these activities are ideational in character.

In particular, transnational actors commonly play the role of “proposal actors” in national policy debates. Rather than exercising a veto, they attempt to influence the ideas and strategies of national actors in multiple countries. By educating, socializing, or otherwise influencing the ideas and preferences of key veto players as well as state bureaucrats and civil society actors interacting with them, they affect public policy worldwide. This can be done in a multiple number of ways. Jeff Checkel (2005) has emphasized the manner in which international organizations “socialize” national policy leaders into transnational norms. Juliet Johnson (2008) has shown that central bankers in Central and Eastern Europe are frequently socialized into the norms of international institutions such as the Bank for International Settlements, and that this affects their behavior in national policy debates. Wade Jacoby (2008) emphasizes the ways that transnational actors become involved in domestic policy debates by forming coalitions with minority actors, providing them with resources and strategies to win battles they had previously lost. In none of these circumstances have transnational actors been veto players. Indeed, the wide variety of transnational actor strategies arises from their lack of an effective veto on national policy. Transnational proposal actors typically

need to be present throughout a wide range of policy stages, connecting in a variety of ways with veto players. This makes conceptualization of their role harder, but also justifies the need for a coherent and multifaceted ideational perspective on transnational influence. Moreover, as suggested above, beyond their interactions with formal veto players, transnational actors forge alliances with state bureaucrats as well as civil society organizations like business associations, labor unions, and social movements. On one hand, state bureaucrats can help transnational actors facilitate the development and the implementation of the policy ideas they put forward. On the other hand, civil society actors may help transnational actors pressure formal veto players to act, reshape a country's policy agenda, or translate global ideas into local cultural and political language (Campbell, 2004).

Ideational Influence and Global Think Tanks

In many ways, then, the influence of transnational actors is akin to that of domestic think tanks, organizations with significant resources that, however, exercise influence largely through ideational means. In a number of countries, think tanks play a central role in the development and diffusion of policy ideas, notably through their media outreach, publications, regular contact with policymakers, and organization of semi-

nars and conferences (e.g., McGann and Weaver, 2000; Rich, 2004; Stone, 2007; Stone and Denham, 2004). Although these organizations are research institutes, their role is distinct from research centers located on university campuses, for example.⁵ More importantly for the present article, think tanks do not act as veto players in national political systems, and their main source of influence is ideational. Just like think tanks, transnational actors' activities cover a wide range of areas, including norms creation, norms diffusion, development of policy paradigms, specific policy advice, and policy campaigns. In nearly every policy sphere in this partially globalized world (Rosenau, 1992), a field of transnational actors cooperates and competes to set and diffuse policy. For instance, in the global health field, there is the World Health Organization, the Gates Foundation, Médecins sans Frontières, and the like. In pensions, there is the World Bank, OECD, and the ILO. In human rights, there is Amnesty International, the UN agencies, and Human Rights Watch. In today's field of global governance, almost no policy area remains outside the remit of some group of transnational policy actors.

Transnational actors typically rely on several sources of legitimacy to pursue their ideational agendas (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Sometimes transnational actors adopt ideational strategies because of their charter or mandate. States may delegate transnational actors to create and disseminate

ideas and norms in particular areas of policy. For instance, the World Health Organization is tasked with developing public health norms worldwide and has a generally high degree of trust among governments worldwide.⁶ This power or legitimacy is often greater than that of a typical think tank. In other cases, however, transnational actors take these roles upon themselves – for instance, in an NGO campaign against landmines or for preservation of animal habitats. Just like national think tanks, such international organizations gain legitimacy as policy actors by gathering extraordinary expertise in particular areas of policy. They can also pursue policy goals that are seen as legitimate, but are not served or underserved by other organizations. By virtue of their official roles, expertise, or self-defined missions, transnational actors explicitly seek to promote public welfare in certain areas of policy.

Ideational influence can be exercised by transnational actors in a wide variety of ways. One of the most fundamental is norms creation: activities that are undertaken with the purpose of creating policy ideas, templates, or justifications for a set of policy changes. These ideas are frequently located within broader policy paradigms for maximum impact. Large international conferences such as the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro are opportunities for creating norms which governments are advised to follow. Major publications often have the same purpose of formulating a policy response. One

common aspect of norms creation is the use of analytic resources to identify problems that demand a policy response. From this perspective, norms creation is about the construction and diffusion of policy solutions. Only a small proportion of transnational actors have sufficient idea-generating and research capacities to set agendas for governments worldwide. Yet those that do play a very important role in policy development, though the role of transnational proposal, actors in developing policy ideas can be hard to capture in either quantitative or qualitative analysis. If a policy idea were not invented in the first place, it could not be implemented anywhere. However, it is habitually difficult to disprove the counter-factual; that if the idea had not been invented in one place and time, it would have been invented at another in order to facilitate a structural need. Still, the norms creation that takes place in universities or think tanks can have a fundamental influence on government policy worldwide.

One example is the development of free market economic policies at the University of Chicago in the latter half of the twentieth century. Though economists like Milton Friedman spent most of their time working on economic theory and training students, their ideas had a major impact across a wide variety of policy areas, in the United States and elsewhere around the world (e.g., Valdes, 1995).

Ideational or norms diffusion is a fur-

ther step in the process of ideational influence. The process of diffusing policy ideas is quite distinct from framing a meaningful reform agenda. Whereas only a few transnational actors have the capacity to develop new policy ideas, most transnational actors are involved in selling policy ideas to governments and like-minded groups and individuals worldwide. Ideational diffusion has many different facets and techniques, which have been described and reviewed by scholars like Martha Finnemore (1993) and Jeffrey Checkel (2005). While there are many possible typologies, we propose that norms diffusion can take place through three sorts of methods: 1) passive; 2) ideational; and, 3) coercive.

Passive leverage. Passive leverage refers to the influence exerted on other parties by simply observing the existence of a policy change in a neighboring, peer, or model country. Neighboring or peer countries may be influenced by observing the perceived results of a policy change without further direct action by a transnational actor. Passive leverage has been employed extensively by the European Union, where it has been shown to exert considerable influence on aspirant members that mimic European Union policies in different areas, hoping thereby to be considered for membership (Vachudova, 2004).⁷

Ideational Diffusion. Ideational methods of norms diffusion work

mainly by persuading people to support a policy innovation by providing them with information that may cause them to change their views. Conferences, seminars, and events can provide an opportunity to draw new people into a discussion and publicize specific policy ideas. Media outreach and advertising provide other opportunities, such as the Red Campaign aimed at fighting AIDS in Africa. Long-term socialization of government officials through meetings, memberships, and communities of knowledge can also provide a means of spreading policy ideas and norms across national boundaries. But this spreading of norms is not necessarily about pure imitation, in the sense that country-level actors can take an active part in adapting such ideas and norms to their national context. For instance, as John Campbell (2004) argues, the transnational diffusion of norms may involve translation processes, which refers to the adaptation of widely diffused ideas such as the neoliberal belief of the virtues of market (de-)regulation to concrete national institutions and symbolic repertoires. In other words, transnational ideational diffusion can be about the active participation of national actors not only as veto players but as translators of broadly diffused norms and ideas. This domestic context is not only political and institutional but cultural and ideological, as national cultures are likely to impact popular perceptions of transnational ideas in particular countries. From this angle,

translation is not only a political and institutional endeavor but an ideational process that may involve the mobilization of powerful “cultural categories” (Steensland, 2006) by both national and transnational actors.

Coercion, Resource Leverage and Persuasion. The use of resource leveraging by transnational actors to induce change has been a controversial topic in political economy. Some have argued that transnational actors exercise a near-veto power by virtue of membership or financial conditionalities. For instance, the European Union requires new member states to adhere to certain norms and because of power asymmetries, these requirements take on the character of an effective veto. Vachudova (2004) calls this “active” leverage. This appears to be true in certain circumstances. However, others have argued that financial conditionalities are rarely successfully applied (Woods 2006). Governments tend to comply with conditionalities when they want to and ignore them when they do not. While resource leveraging is no doubt an important tool for some transnational policy actors, it cannot be effectively used except in combination with persuasive methods. This means convincing veto players and other national actors that it is right or in their interest to implement the policy ideas advocated by transnational actors.

We argue that to the extent that transnational actors have resources at their

disposal, they will use them to “leverage” or “coerce” compliance. While many studies have focused on the relatively unusual instances of strong coercion, we claim that most of the time transnational actors do not command sufficient resources to simply impose their will upon national actors. Except for instances like EU accession, when transnational actors command some resource that is so desirable that countries will do a lot to get it, in most cases, the resources leveraged are much more modest—for instance conference attendance, a favorable press release, or a budding alliance. In most cases, such modest resources are used in tandem with ideational influence. Overall, transnational actors use coercion when available but, because their capacity to impose their will upon national actors is generally limited, persuasion – or, at least, a combination of resource leverage and persuasion – is the most prevalent form of transnational policy influence.

The suggestion that resource leverage and ideational persuasion can reinforce one another is especially important to understand the role of transnational policy actors as global think tanks. For instance, as the literature on think tanks suggests (Rich, 2004), exercising ideational influence requires resources. All organizational activities cost time and money. Creating a publication series, disseminating reports, organizing conferences, media campaigns, and the like all require

considerable resources, particularly when the organizational ambition is to exercise influence on policy change in multiple countries. Resources enable ideas-creation, ideas-dissemination, and resource leveraging activities; and, often, these tools cannot be easily disentangled. For instance, the organization of a prestigious conference to disseminate specific policy ideas may also play a role in providing incentives to individual policymakers to adopt or speak favorably about a particular reform.

Wade Jacoby (2008) develops a useful typology of transnational actor mechanisms of influence that combines ideas and norms teaching and resource leveraging perspectives, focusing on four modes of external influence (see also Tarrow, 2005).

This typology does not intend to decide the rather fruitless discussion in the ideas literature of whether ideas or resources are more important for influencing policy, but rather explores different ways that both ideas and resources may be combined by transnational actors in the pursuit of policy influence. The first mode of transnational actor influence is “inspiration,” whereby external actors influence state bodies largely through the development and promotion of ideas. The second mode is “subsidy,” whereby external actors offer support conditional to the enactment of reform. The third mode is “partnership,” whereby external ac-

tors support the political fortunes of domestic allies. The fourth mode is “substitution,” whereby external actors seek to enforce their preferred solution without cooperation from domestic actors. Jacoby’s (2008) typology analytically distinguishes between norms teaching and resource leveraging roles but also acknowledges that the two functions are frequently combined in practice. This does not mean that ideas are a simple superstructure for the material power of transnational actors but that having money and other resources can help such actors diffuse their ideas more effectively. To return to Craig Parsons’ (2007) model, material and ideational factors can combine to shape the behavior of national actors and help produce policy change. From this perspective, resource leverage and ideational persuasion are two closely related factors, and scholars need to explore their interaction systematically.

Cooperation, Competition, and Ideational Influence. Another feature of transnational actor behavior that has been overlooked by studies of hard conditionality is the way that transnational actors compete and/or collaborate with one another for ideational influence. Competition between organizations is ever-present and within any policy sphere, national actors can find a wide array of policy advice from different perspectives, often representing fundamentally different frames or models. For

example, left-leaning and neoliberal transnational actors may clash at both the ideological and the organizational levels, as they may compete for attention and influence in the same countries and regions of the world. Frequently, opposing networks compete for influence in a given policy sphere.

This discussion points to another similarity between think tanks and transnational actors: competition for ideational influence (Rich, 2004). In diffusing their ideas and pursuing policy change in different states and regions of the world, transnational actors can also cooperate with one another in transnational policy campaigns (Tarrow, 2005).

These campaigns are meant to define policy problems and influence policy development in multiple states. Campaign coalitions can magnify the influence of transnational actors by creating a division of labor and bringing a wider variety of competencies, networks, and sources of legitimacy to bear on a problem. For instance, one part of a transnational network may focus on policy research and development, while another specializes in policy implementation. One organization may have a special ability or mandate to work with government officials, while another conducts public relations campaigns featuring extensive framing activities. As far as the role of ideas is concerned and even beyond, it is important to analyze both the cooperation and

competition of transnational actors within a sphere of governance.

Analytical Challenges

As stated above, transnational actors are mostly limited by their inability to veto policy decisions at the national level. Formal decision powers in nearly every country rest with domestic veto players.⁸ Transnational actors exert influence, but often through more subtle ideational channels. Rarely are they able to directly draft legislation or pass it without amendment (though it is not uncommon for transnational actors to propose domestic legislation). For this reason, and because of the resultant path dependencies in policy choice (Pierson 2000), transnational influence is seldom uniform between countries. Countries may simultaneously adopt generally similar reforms, as in the case of Keynesian economic policies (Hall, 1993), neoliberal economic policies (Campbell and Pedersen, 2001), pension reform (Orenstein, 2008), or other areas. However, these reforms can vary greatly from one country to another. For some scholars, this variation suggests that the influence of transnational actors is minimal. A reform advocated by transnational actors becomes “interpreted” or “translated” (Campbell, 2004) into a domestic context and its features end up being more domestic than transnational. For other scholars, the implementation of similar reforms in many places at around the same time provides evidence of

the influence of transnational actors (Strang and Meyer 1993; Meyer et al. 1997).

Yet it is increasingly hard to argue that the ideational influence of transnational actors does not matter on a day-to-day basis for country policy. Transnational actors have been involved in the spread of neoliberal economic policies worldwide since the 1980s (Rodrik 2007; Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008; Woods 2006). Networks of economists were crucial in spreading policies of privatization in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s (Kogut and Macpherson 2008). More than thirty countries worldwide have privatized their pension systems with assistance from a consortium of transnational actors by the World Bank since 1994 (Orenstein 2008). The Bank for International Settlements trained central bankers throughout Central and Eastern Europe in norms of monetary policy (Johnson 2008). Transnational actors facilitated the reduction of capital controls worldwide (Abdelal 2007). They have placed additional major issues on the international policy agenda such as global warming, clearance of land mines, and human rights. In nearly any area of policy, transnational actors play a significant role in setting or shaping national policy agendas.

Political analysis needs to concern itself with creating models of the political process that include both trans-

national and domestic variables as part of the picture of policy choice. Political science has plenty of tools for understanding why transnational actors may have difficulty influencing a domestic policy process. Institutionalist scholars have analyzed the ways that domestic political institutions and interest groups interact to perpetuate existing policies (Pierson, 2000) and maintain distinctive national “varieties of capitalism” (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Most state-centered theoretical policy models do not take into account external actors. Many, like the veto players model (Tsebelis, 2002), exclude consideration of any actors without a formal veto power over policy. Therefore, we know a lot about why countries adopt policies that do not conform to transnational actor norms and ideas.

We need to know more about how and under what conditions transnational and domestic actors in fact coordinate and coalesce to affect domestic policy. One promising avenue of analysis is in current work on decision-making heuristics. Borrowing extensively from cognitive psychology, this perspective explicitly brings in the psychological type of explanation discussed above (Parsons, 2007). Kurt Weyland (2005), for example, argues that policy-makers rarely use rational search procedures when considering what policy to adopt. Instead, they are strongly affected by available ideas in a given policy domain and by the psychological “anchoring” of

their perceptions in the observation of practices in neighboring countries. Transnational actors may be involved in developing policy ideas in order to provide conceptual “anchors” to policy makers when they face a crisis and need some new ideas. Weyland (2005) demonstrates how this sort of domestic/transnational policy process plays out in several policy areas in Latin America.

While scholars have begun to develop models of the policy process that transcend the domestic/international boundary, important challenges remain. For instance, it can be difficult to code certain policy actors as “transnational” or “domestic.” Some studies that have found a low influence for transnational actors have simply coded them as local, when they may be more appropriately seen as transnational. For instance, in Weyland’s (2005) study of pension reform, he regards Chilean policy advisers who worked elsewhere in Latin America as not part of an international financial institution, and therefore local rather than transnational. However, these same individuals may also be regarded as transnational policy entrepreneurs, linked into a loose coalition or network with transnational actors that frequently sponsor their activities.

A second key problem in analyzing transnational influence is the difficulty in defining what transnational actors are trying to achieve. Studies of

the influence of transnational actors often begin from stylized assumptions about what transnational actors want. Such assumptions are usually made in the spirit of theoretical and empirical parsimony, but they are frequently inaccurate. Ascertaining the goals of transnational actors typically requires careful attention to the complex internal decision making of actors with diverse centers of power and multiple stakeholders. This remark is crucial, and it once again points to the fact that it is essential to pay close attention to the ideational dimension of transnational actors. In other words: instead of assuming that we know what the overall goals of particular transnational actors are, we must try to explore their concrete orientations and their internal ideological tensions, which are likely to exist within large international organizations like the World Bank. In order to understand transnational actor influence properly, it is important to accurately study the behavior and objectives of transnational actors, a challenging task given their global reach and distinctive organizational styles.

As comparative politics pays more attention to transnational influences on policy, the fields of comparative politics and international relations will be increasingly interwoven. The domain of domestic politics will become less and less a distinct field of study and there will be more demand for models of the policy process that do not

exclude “external” actors. Future theorists will work with more agreed-upon methods for defining, observing, and interpreting the roles of transnational actors. Arguing that transnational actors and the ideas they help diffuse matter does not mean downplaying domestic politics. It is not a zero-sum game. The issue is to develop models of policy analysis that include both sets of influences.

Conclusion

The starting point of this article is that, as far as country-level policy-making is concerned, the economic leverage of transnational organizations is not the primary source of policy influence for these actors. Suggesting that financial coercion is the exception rather than the rule in the world of transnational policy influence, the article has stressed the essential role of ideational processes for transnational actors. From this angle, transnational influence is in large part ideational in nature.

As argued, at the national level, transnational actors have much in common with think tanks, in the sense that they are not formal veto players in the political arena, and that they must persuade national actors to collaborate with them to implement the policy ideas they help diffuse. From this perspective, alongside ideas and material factors, national institutions are important because they impact the behavior and strategies of both

national and transnational actors. Finally, as the work of Weyland (2005) suggests, psychological factors can affect policy development and the transnational diffusion of policy ideas and proposals. These remarks point to the possible interaction between distinct types of causal factors (Parsons, 2007).

Taking this interaction seriously, this article has emphasized the ideational side of transnational policy influence in order to convince scholars that paying close attention to ideas is important when the time comes to assess the potential weight of specific types of causal factors. At a more general level, this article points to the need to explore the close relationship between transnational and national actors. Ideational processes are a major aspect of this relationship, which should remain at the center of the research agenda on policy development and transnational politics for the years and decades to come.

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ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this article, “hard conditionalities” simply refer to conditions a country must meet in order to receive money or other benefits from an international organization (e.g., Woods, 2006: 70).

2. Throughout this article, the concept of policy change refers to a major shift in existing policy goals and instruments. Although minor modifications to policy instrument settings like tax levels constitute a relevant form of policy change (Hall, 1993), it is not discussed in this article, which focuses on path-departing change involving a direct shift in policy goals and/or instruments.

3. For a discussion about the interaction between ideas and other causal factors see Béland, 2010; Campbell, 2004; Hansen and King, 2001; Padamsee, 2009; Schmidt, forthcoming; Walsh, 2000.

4. Another problem with this approach is that it can easily become overly deterministic and even mechanistic.

5. A country where think tanks have become particularly influential is the United States (Rich, 2004).

6. On the World Health Organization see Lee, 2009.

7. The nature of the European Union is much debated. While recognizing

that the organization may be portrayed as “inter-governmental” rather than “supranational,” we argue that institutions of the European Union, notably the ECJ and the Commission, act as transnational proposal actors. Additionally, for new member states of the European Union during the accession process, the organization has clearly been more “supranational,” as these states have had little control over its decisions.

8. There are countries that are largely governed by transnational actors as effective “mandates,” such as Bosnia or Kosovo. Transnational actors also govern certain policy areas within countries, such as humanitarian assistance in Darfur or agricultural policy in EU states.

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