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The Difference Between an Analytical Framework and a Theoretical Claim: A Reply to Martin Carstensen

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Martin Carstensen's recent article is a novel attempt to contribute a theory of incremental ideational change to the relevant discourse and institutionalist literatures. Noticing a potentially problematic twin focus on stable ideas and punctuated equilibrium, Carstensen outlines an alternative framework capable of capturing the true dynamism of political ideas. However, his article and analysis are based on the problematic assumption that analytical frameworks, such as historical institutionalism, make theoretical claims about politics, when instead their purpose is to create an underpinning prism for the construction of explanations. By ignoring this important yet subtle distinction, I claim, Carstensen creates a set of criteria for adjudicating the value of analytical frameworks that is both unfair and potentially inappropriate.

Most [political scientists] employ approaches not because they seriously believe in them as the be-all and end-all keys to unlock the mysteries of politics, but because they see them as the best (and sometimes, I am afraid, the trendiest) tool to hand for the particular task (Bale 2006, p. 102).

Show me an explanation that is not reductionist. All explanation consists of sentences which reduce the complexity of the world to smaller components, in order that we may begin to make sense of it (Dowding 2001, p. 103).

Martin Carstensen's (2011) recent article in *Political Studies* was an intriguing and clearly argued attempt at articulating a 'theory of incremental ideational change'. Such an intervention, in identifying a problematic focus within (1) existing ideational literature on coherent and stable ideas and (2) existing institutional literature on moments of 'punctuated equilibrium', should be welcomed. Carstensen draws on post-structuralist and interpretive approaches to discourse analysis in an attempt to offer an alternative theory. This alternative moves beyond ideas as static entities and instead attempts to show how ideas are essentially 'relational' (600) and comprised of many elements (601-2), meaning that actors use them in a

number of different ways depending on their circumstances (602). Feeling unprepared to offer an empirical analysis of incremental ideational change (606), Carstensen draws on examples to ‘illustrate the mechanisms of change that are analysed theoretically in the article’ (606). Carstensen uses New Labour employment and welfare policies to highlight the relational element of ideas and how different components of an idea can incrementally change respectively. The resulting conceptualisation of ideas is, according to Carstensen, ‘more dynamic’ (603), more ‘diachronically sensitive’ (602), and, ultimately, ‘sensitises the analyst to how ideas are made from horizontal, vertical and diachronic relations between different elements and ideas’ (612). Whilst his analysis is logically coherent and the theoretical innovations are interesting, there is a serious issue with the article: Forwarding an alternative set of ontological assumptions, as Carstensen does, cannot be verified, as is their nature. As a result it is hard to see why the scholars whose work is critiqued here would listen.

Carstensen’s problems emanate in part from a problematic understanding of the role of theory in political science. In the abstract, Carstensen claims that ‘most *theories* about ideas in politics implicitly conceptualise ideas as relatively stable entities’ (596, emphasis added) – which then goes on to group this literature as a theory or set of theories four more additional times in the abstract alone. However, Carstensen’s targets – the ideas and institutions literature – are not aiming to explain or generalise about politics itself, they are instead aiming to offer an approach that political scientists can adopt in order to generate explanations about politics in answering specific research questions. Along with the many others in the discipline, Carstensen is keen to label historical or discursive institutionalism, or any analytical framework, as a theory. Unlike most of the discipline, he actually treats these frameworks as making theoretical claims, as opposed to assessing them on their ability to generate explanations. The distinction between what exactly constitutes the difference between a theory and an analytical framework is, at best, blurry. However, by taking advantage of this blurry distinction Carstensen makes a number of critiques that are not in the spirit of the original intentions of the targeted research.

This response attempts to highlight how this is so, and, more importantly, how and why such critiques should be avoided. As such, this article aims to highlight how the premise on which Carstensen’s analysis is based on is itself problematic. Carstensen’s piece is just one of many articles to have appeared in recent times that is based on the muddled assumption that approaches to the study of politics also claim to be ‘the be-all and end-all keys to unlock the mysteries of politics’ (Bale 2006, p. 102). Quite simply, they do not. When this assumption is problematized, part of the foundation on which work such as Carstensen’s is built upon becomes questionable. This article aims to expand upon and, ultimately, justify this claim.

The first section begins by outlining the aims and purposes of analytical frameworks in political science. In particular, it hones in on the role that ontological assumptions play in underpinning and ‘making possible’ explanations, in contrast to what can principally be termed as making ‘theoretical claims’. The second section builds on this stylistic distinction to argue that by unfairly treating the ontological assumptions inherent in analytical frameworks as making theoretical claims – as Carstensen does – a number of critiques become possible. Instead of judging ontological assumptions on their ‘closeness’ to the world (the classic yardstick of verifiability in science), they should be judged on their ability to generate convincing explanations about politics itself. The third section attempts highlight how this understanding of meta-theory can avoid accusations of relativism by demonstrating some of the ways in which ontological assumptions can still be critiqued. The article concludes by recapping the argument and examining some of the factors that lead to the meta-theoretical confusions reviewed here.

Theory and frameworks in political science

This first section aims to outline the basic principled distinction between the ontological assumptions inherent in an analytical framework and what can be termed as ‘theoretical claims’. In the strictest sense of the term, historical institutionalism and the ideas literature do not represent theories. An analytical framework doesn’t *aim* to reflect political reality, and should not be assessed on its ability to do so. Instead they should be assessed on their ability to *generate* or *construct* explanations or theories. They do of course contain implicit ‘theories’ of the social and political world, i.e. ontological assumptions. However the purpose of ontological assumptions in political science is not to best represent the political world, but help categorise and reduce its inherent complexity. In contrast, the purpose of ‘theory’, in the classical scientific sense, is to best reflect reality. Ontological assumptions should not be judged by their ability to best reflect the world, but in how convincing the explanations they generate are. There is no explicit disciplinary agreement to how realistic ontological assumptions should be. However, analytical frameworks, by definition, should be applicable to a variety of contexts and research problems. Ontological assumptions underpinning these frameworks must be, to some degree, simplifying in order to achieve this applicability (see Dowding 2001, p. 103). If increasing the complexity of ontological assumptions seriously compromises the applicability of a framework then it should not be considered advantageous. When Carstensen refers to ‘theories’ he is essentially referring to their ontological assumptions, i.e. how they conceptualise what an ‘idea’ is (in this case, as essentially static).

This is the appropriate place to offer an important caveat: this article is not particularly interested in semantic nit-picking. Researchers can call their work theories if they want. Labels are sticky. I’m not proposing an official ceremony to rename rational choice theory

‘rational-choice approaches’. What this article is trying to say is that, as a discipline, there needs to be an understanding that in calling something ‘theory’ it does not necessarily take on the criteria to which scientific theories are held (e.g. George and Bennett 2004, pp. 115-7). In principle, the aim of an analytical framework is to generate explanations about politics with an epistemological licence to make simplifying assumptions (see Bale 2006), whilst the aim of the theory is to totally explain and (possibly) predict the (political) world. We can call analytical frameworks ‘theories’ if we want to, but we must not then analyse the ontological assumptions within these frameworks as making ‘theoretical claims’. Doing so means many unfair criticisms can be levied at approaches that do an otherwise very good job at constructing explanations. As Keith Dowding says, ‘a true theory must be generalizable to all objects to which it is supposed to be applicable ... It should be able to explain variance between those objects as well as explaining similarities’ (Dowding 1995, p. 140). Dowding’s definition may well be too restrictive, and historical institutionalism and the ideas literature may well be labelled as theories, but in principle their aims are very different from making ‘theoretical claims’.

Although Dowding is analysing what comprises a ‘model’, his remarks are equally apt here: ontological assumptions in analytical frameworks, as opposed to theoretical claims, ‘are not usually thought of as being ‘true’ or ‘false’ but rather less or more useful in helping us understand the world’ (2001, p. 91). Historical institutionalism is a very popular analytical approach in political science. Yet Carstensen repeatedly treats it as making theoretical claims, which is far more systematically problematic. He refers to ‘recent debates within historical institutional *theory*’, he discusses when ‘when historical institutionalist *theories* try to explain change’, and he explores how ‘historical institutionalist ... *theories* focus most of their effort on the stabilising effect of institutions’ (all 596, emphasis added). This potentially harmless misunderstanding has repercussions for the criteria in which he assesses and evaluates historical institutionalism. He presents historical institutionalism as a systematic attempt to *theorise* change in politics. For instance, one critique claims that historical institutionalist scholars ‘seem unable – within their own premises – to account for the changes that modern states are indeed going through’ (596). Historical institutionalism does not claim, nor does it need to claim, to be able to explain all change that modern states are going through. Historical institutionalism is set up as an approach to help us understand specific research problems – such as ‘how institutions emerge from and are embedded in concrete temporal processes’ (Thelen 1999, p. 371). If there is a different research problem that is not compatible with historical institutionalism then a different analytical framework needs to be selected. Historical institutionalism, in short, is not strictly speaking a theory: it is an analytical framework that is composed of pre-packaged ontological assumptions and methodological strategies that *allow* researchers to construct explanations or theories of

political phenomenon. It should be evaluated as such, for its ability to generate explanations; on its outcomes.

The distinction painted between frameworks and theories thus far is, of course, an oversimplification. Often in the muddy world of political science methodology it is far from this clear. For instance, securitisation, a popular part of the burgeoning critical security studies literature, is and can be presented legitimately as both an analytical framework and as a theory. On the one hand, it is considered an analytical approach to help understand the process in which ‘security’ is not a given, but something that is constructed via speech-acts often to legitimise political intervention (e.g. Buzan et al. 1998). In this sense, it is a pre-packaged set of assumptions and strategies to assist scholars whose research questions or normative agenda naturally lead to such an approach. On the other hand, it is considered as a theory of security *per se* that makes claims about the (necessarily) contingent nature of security issues (e.g. Balzacq 2005).

This blurring is also compounded since ontology also means different things to different researchers. For some, it means ‘what exists, out there in (political) reality’ (e.g. Marsh and Furlong 2002, p. 18). In this understanding one of the primary aims of research is to ensure that the ontological assumptions underpinning explanations best reflect the ‘reality’ of social and political existence. Yet for others, ontological assumptions play a far more secondary role in the research process. In this understanding, ontologically representing ‘what exists’ is regarded at best secondary to the alternative goal of gaining certain standards of knowledge and verifiable claims regardless of whether this results in a simplistic conceptualisation of structure-agency. In other words, ontological assumptions are considered the means to an (epistemological) end (e.g. Friedman 1966, p. 14). The problem for Carstensen is that he accepts the first conception of ontology uncritically, without considering that the approaches he is critiquing may have been formulated with principles closer to the second conception in mind. The result is a potential for ‘more heat than light’, as scholars with different conceptions of ontology (see Stanley 2012) argue past each other and consequently fail to properly engage with the substantive issues.

Moving the goalposts

While the preceding section outlined a brief overview of a particular understanding of theory and meta-theory in political science, this section more explicitly reviews the potential dangers of adjudicating ontological assumptions on the basis of making theoretical claims. By judging an analytical framework as making theoretical claims it allows authors to make a series of critiques that are not necessarily valid or fair. Simply put, it moves the goalposts. Ideational ‘theory’ is an analytical framework. It is not trying to explain a general trend in politics, but instead attempting to create a framework of ontological assumptions and methodological

strategies that can be relatively easily applied to a series of relevant research questions. Ideational approaches thus contain ontological assumptions (which could, problematically, be interpreted as ‘theory’), but do not aim to explain a general trend.

Ideational approaches could be rearticulated as a theory by perhaps claiming that in the last two decades, for instance, competing ideas about globalisation have become increasingly important in explaining the trajectory of state governance (e.g. Antoniadis 2010). Yet note how this potential theory is not really making claims about ideas but instead claiming something ‘real’ is happening in politics – that is the transformation of the nation-state. In order to make this explanation it necessary to assume, on a *meta*-theoretical level, that ideas can have causal impact, and that this causal impact can be, in some way or another, be observed (for want of a better phrase). But this is not the theory – this is the underpinning set of ontological assumptions that make the theory possible. This set of ontological assumptions makes no claims about trends in politics because they are meta-theoretical. Yet Carstensen treats such assumptions as theoretical claims, thus making a series of critiques that are not necessarily applicable when his targets are treated as analytical frameworks. It is much easier to critique an analytical framework if you (unfairly) expect it to explain most facets of political life. Not only does this make critiques easier to come by, but it also renders many of them potentially irrelevant – as critiques resulting from the moving the goalposts often do.

The persuasiveness of adopting an approach to political science, in principle, emanates from a balance of the complexity or parsimony of the explanations it generates (Hay 2002, pp. 29-37). Carstensen’s targets don’t gain their strength from perfectly representing the world of politics, but by offering easily implementable methodological strategies that result in parsimonious explanations. There’s a good reason for unrealistic assumptions: they need to be operationalisable. Carstensen makes little effort to explain why his vision of incremental ideational change is any more ‘persuasive’ than alternative approaches in terms of the complexity-parsimony trade-off. By critiquing the ontological assumptions as being *unrealistic*, his only option is to offer a more ‘*accurate*’, or complex, set of ontological assumptions. Offering a set of complex ontological assumptions whilst irredeemably reducing the parsimony of an approach is unlikely to be considered by many in the discipline as a quality development. The key requirement for any relevant ontological intervention is that it improves the existing approaches – and this means the new ontological assumptions must be easy to decipher and easily applicable to a series of research problems whilst offering something no other approach offers. I would contend that Carstensen fails to do this. This is perhaps evident in Carstensen’s reluctance, or inability, to empirically apply the ideational ‘theory’ his paper is dedicated to (see 606).

Coming up with increasingly complex sets of ontological assumptions in the name of theory detracts from the aim of analytical frameworks: to offer apparatus for explaining politics. There is a very good reason why ideas are assumed to be stable that Carstensen does not even consider. Borrowing some positivistic rhetoric for a sentence, if a researcher is to explain why a certain policy outcome occurred through ideational causes then it is necessary to make the simplistic (ontological) assumption that ideas are stable in order to operationalize them as a variable. In other words, if you assume that actors draw on an idea in navigating the policy-making process, then it makes sense to assume ('unrealistically') that ideas are stable. To assume anything more complicated will compromise the parsimony of the explanation. However Carstensen does not really offer a convincing reason for going beyond these assumptions other than they do not reflect what he, in his opinion, considers to be reality. No approach can account, nor claim, for everything in politics. Putting forward a set of ontological assumptions will always tend to be futile because ontology can neither be proven nor rejected (Hay 2006). As has been shown, ontological assumptions rarely emerge from purposeful or conscious deliberation with philosophical dualisms, but instead often emerge from a series of epistemological and normative concerns (e.g. Bryman 2007; Donovan 2005). Carstensen seems to misunderstand this point, much to the detriment of the value of his contribution to the literature. If he were to reorientate his analysis to take this into consideration, it could be far more convincing.

How can we still critique the ontological assumptions that underpin analytical frameworks?

Unfortunately, one cannot legitimately reject ontological assumptions because other ontological assumptions are preferred. As the literature on ontological consistently reminds us, ontological assumptions can never be 'proven' or 'disproven' because they are just that: assumptions (Hay 2006). Claiming that one set of ontological assumptions are better than another, on the basis of and in the context of political science analytical frameworks, is ultimately futile as there is little way of adjudicating which claims are better. This is highlighted through a brief review of a debate between Colin Hay and Stuart McAnulla. McAnulla (2005) critiques Hay's work for not containing a 'sufficient concept of structure', and goes on to highlight the ways in which this can be improved. Of course, Hay (2005) had a ready-made riposte: that ontological assumptions cannot be proven or falsified, making it difficult to convincingly justify why someone should replace one set of assumptions with an alternative version. Hay concludes by, rightly, warning of the dangers of 'ontological proselytising', which is unlikely to result in any conclusive answers. As this shows, debating ontological assumptions can quickly descend into a case of one researcher's word against another. Arguably, the argument forwarded in Carstensen's article is likely to be adjudicated along such lines, highlighting the problematic foundation on which his critique is based. Yet having got to this point, one may conclude that an implication of the argument presented here

is that ontological assumptions are essentially relative since a researcher can assume the world to be whatever it is in the name of parsimonious knowledge, in true Milton Friedman (1966) style. There are methods of critiquing ontological assumptions without resorting to a trip down the 'unrealistic' cul-de-sac and the proposal of an alternative ontology. Three possible strategies are outlined here.

Firstly, ontological assumptions may create common-sense prisms in which the predestined direction of research obscures a number of important or interesting questions that can only be answered by rejecting some ontological assumptions. For instance, many constructivist analyses of the global financial crisis are based in terms of 'order' or 'disorder' (Amin and Palan 2001, p. 567) within the pre-crisis policy paradigm of 'neo-liberalism' (Konings 2009; Thompson 2011). This leads to an implicit assumption that in order to characterise the crisis as a genuine disjuncture in the development of the international economy an alternative to neo-liberalism must both be articulated and become dominant. Therefore, some political variations, such as the impending austerity measures, are uncritically considered as 'continuity', masking questions of, for instance, how such developments received legitimacy. Secondly, ontological assumptions can be critiqued for imposing objectionable characteristics upon actors that could potentially lead to undesirable self-fulfilling prophecies. For instance, some of the most convincing critiques of rational-choice ontological assumptions have been in the way in which they can lead actors to realign their own behaviour within the predictions of utility-maximising assumptions (Hay 2004). Thirdly, the parsimony of a set of ontological assumptions may be deemed too simplistic in light of wider developments of the discipline that allow more complex ontological assumptions within a simple and operationalization framework. For instance, Alexander Wendt's critique of mainstream international relations theory was not based on the problem of unrealistic assumptions about structure and agency, but instead focussed on how such assumptions lead to 'an inability to explain the properties and causal powers of their primary units of analysis, a weakness which seriously undermines their potential explanations of state action' (Wendt 1987, p. 337). What these critiques have in common is that they address problems that arise in the *application* or *outcome* of ontological assumptions, as opposed to critiquing such assumptions in a face-value abstract manner. Carstensen's critique and alternative framework was based on this latter endeavour.

Conclusions

Martin Carstensen's attempt to outline a theory of incremental ideational change is potentially of importance to the both the ideas and institutionalist literature. However, this article has argued the potential value of this contribution would be better realised if Carstensen did not treat the ontological assumptions inherent in approaches, such as historical institutionalism, as making theoretical claims. By treating ontological assumptions as theoretical claims far more critiques can be levelled as the criteria for validity is far more

strenuous. As this response has tried to stress, the most productive method of critiquing ontological assumptions is not by creating ever more sophisticated frameworks in the hope of best reflecting reality, but to show how the explanations that result from such phenomenon can be improved. In this respect, and in line with his stated aims, Carstensen may have engaged with his target audience better by looking at recent International Political Economy literature for inspiration.

For instance, Jacqueline Best (2005) highlights how, contra mainstream rationalist and constructivist approaches, 'economic ideas set frameworks' (Seabrooke 2007, p. 378) in relation to the unavoidable 'ambiguity' of international finance. The dominant reading of Best's novel work is to reflect on the history of Bretton Woods and beyond, but an alternative reading may be the ultimately flexible way in which ideas interact with ambiguity – thus showing ideas are not always as 'stable as political scientists want them to be'. Yet, crucially, this conclusion *emerges* from engagement with existing political science explanations and is thus already applicable by definition. The alternative, to identify an ontological gap and fill it with a complex substitute, as Carstensen does, may not be pointless but is less likely to fully convince many that it is superior. Carstensen is not the only political scientist to unfairly adjudicate the ontological assumptions in analytical frameworks as theoretical claims. Arguably, this blurring is systematic in political science as a discipline. The article will conclude by outlining some tentative reasons for why this may be.

As already mentioned, the distinction is not as clear-cut as this article makes it. For instance, Marxism could be considered a theory (of political-economic development) or an approach (that may prioritise class as a causal mechanism). Furthermore, ontological assumptions are sometimes referred to 'social theories' (e.g. Blaikie 2007) which while strictly correct is also confusing given other usages of the concept of theory in political science (e.g. the idea of 'theory-building' common in American political science). From a pedagogical perspective, it has been noted that the relevant textbooks are vague and sometimes confused over the use and purpose of meta-theory in the discipline (Bates and Jenkins 2007). Such textbooks also tend to jump straight into describing and analysing approaches or methodologies without defining or placing these concepts within the wider discipline as a whole. Furthermore, treating analytical frameworks as theories of politics makes teaching easier. Speaking from experience as both contemporary seminar tutor and recent student, it is much easier (and more fun) to engage students through asking 'are people really utility-maximisers' compared to 'is it a reasonable methodological strategy to assume that actors aim to maximise their interests when we create parsimonious explanations?'. This arguably creates a 'path dependency' of systematic misunderstanding (Bates and Jenkins 2007, p. 61). By getting political scientists to sing from similar (meta-theoretical) hymn sheets, the relevance of research and publications on ontology can be potentially increased. One way this can be done is through starting to explicitly note the important but subtle differences between

theoretical claims and ontological assumptions, and the implications this distinction has on what a legitimate critique can be.

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