

Framing the Ownership Society: Ideas, Institutions, and Neo-Liberal Social Policy

Paper Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Research Committee 19 (Poverty, Social Welfare and Social Policy) of the International Sociological Association [Chicago, September 2005]

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Abstract

This paper provides a comparative and long-term historical analysis of the relationship between the idea of personal ownership and social policy reform in the United Kingdom and the United States. The paper has two main parts. The first part discusses recent theories of institutional change prior to formulating a theoretical framework that stresses the impact of ideas and frames on policymaking. Such framework is compatible with the basic assumptions of historical institutionalism, an approach that has done much to shed light on institutional development. The second part reconstructs the old liberal idea of personal ownership before exploring the current debates over ownership and social policy in 1980s UK and 2000s US societies. Focusing on the relationship between ideas and institutional legacies, this part analyzes the privatization of public housing and the development of private savings accounts within and outside existing public pension systems. This analysis underlines the striking similarities between Thatcher's and Bush's neo-liberal discourse regarding personal ownership and social policy reform.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Fred Block and Jill Quadagno for their insightful comments.

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“We Conservatives want power more widely diffused through private ownership, so that you never get more power in the hands of the Government than you get in the hands of the people. Ownership that you and I have must always be greater than the ownership of the Government for that is the only check we have on Government activity.” (Margaret Roberts [Thatcher], *Speech to Orpington Young Conservatives*, August 27, 1949)

“(…) if you own something, you have a vital stake in the future of our country. The more ownership there is in America, the more vitality there is in America, and the more people have a vital stake in the future of this country.” (President George W. Bush, *Speech to National Federation of Independent Businesses*, June 17, 2004)

Since the 1970s, neo-liberalism has become the dominant economic paradigm in advanced industrial countries,¹ and much has been published about its impact on social policy. This is especially true in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, where Reaganism and Thatcherism emerged as explicit neo-liberal crusades against the modern welfare state. Yet, in the scholarly literature, there is a consensus that Reaganism proved far less successful than Thatcherism in reshaping existing social policy legacies (e.g. Pierson, 1994). For that reason, since the 1990s, US conservatives have launched an explicit campaign to complete Reagan’s unfinished neo-liberal restructuring (Quadagno, 1999).

A striking example of that neo-liberal crusade against the welfare state is George W. Bush’s discourse about the so-called “ownership society.” Increasingly salient since the fall of 2003, it promotes the development of personal ownership through new tax incentives and social policy privatizations. The centerpiece of the “ownership society” platform is the plan to let workers opt out of the federal old age insurance program, better known as Social Security (Béland, 2005). Strikingly similar to Thatcher’s call for “popular capitalism” and possessive

¹ On neo-liberalism see Campbell and Pedersen, 2001.

individualism, Bush's "ownership society" is a coherent ideological project that scholars should take seriously.

The present contribution has three main objectives: 1) underlining the central role of personal ownership in neo-liberalism and, more importantly, in the current politics of social policy reform; 2) comparing the frames on personal ownership and social policy in the United Kingdom and the United States in order to show the striking similarities between Thatcherism and president Bush's "ownership society;" and, 3) supplementing the historical institutionalist approach with an ideational framework that underlines the role of ideas and frames in policy-making. Compatible with the basic theoretical assumptions of historical institutionalism, this framework stresses the political relationship between ideational forces and institutional legacies. Following John Campbell's lead (2004), such framework bridges the political science literature on ideas and the sociological literature on social movements and framing processes.

This paper has two main parts. The first part discusses recent theories of institutional change prior to formulating a comprehensive theoretical framework that stresses the impact of ideas and frames on policymaking. Such framework is compatible with the basic assumptions of historical institutionalism. The second part reconstructs the old liberal idea of personal ownership before exploring the current debates over ownership and social policy in 1980s UK and 2000s US societies. Focusing on the relationship between ideas and institutional legacies, this part analyzes the privatization of public housing and the development of private savings accounts within and outside existing public pension systems. This analysis underlines the striking similarities between Thatcher's discourse and president Bush's "ownership society." Because their message is largely diffused through the mass media, the analysis will focus on the discourse and framing strategies of these two key elected officials. As suggested below, their framing strategies reflect broad historical, social, and political forces that participate in the construction of reform imperatives in the field of social policy. Regarding the role of ideas and frames, the argument here is not that ideational analysis necessarily provides a strict causal model to explain policy reforms. More modestly, the paper suggests that the analysis of ideational and framing processes aid in understanding the content, the meaning, and the rationale for reform. Throughout this article, ideational analysis mainly *supplements* historical institutionalism's study of the interplay between institutional legacies and vested interests. Although there is evidence that ideas and framing processes can become the primary locus of

policy change (e.g. Cox, 2001; Schmidt, 2002a), the present article argues that, even when no strict causal arguments about the impact of ideational processes are made, the study of such processes can shed a needed light on political and symbolic struggles surrounding policy reform.

Ideas and Institutional Change

Recent Theories of Institutional Change

Historical institutionalism is grounded in the assumption that a historically constructed set of institutional constraints and opportunities affect the behavior of political actors and interest groups involved in the policymaking process. According to Theda Skocpol, “This approach views the polity as the primary locus for action, yet understands political activities, whether carried by politicians or by social groups, as conditioned by institutional configurations of governments and political party systems.” (Skocpol, 1992: 41) Such a *structural* approach of politics recognizes the autonomy of political actors while directly taking into account the impact of previously enacted measures on policy-making (Immergut, 1998; Orloff, 1993; Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth, 1992; Weaver and Rockman, 1992). In contrast with sociological and rational choice institutionalisms, historical institutionalism focuses on asymmetrical power relations as well as the impact of long-term institutional legacies on policymaking (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Yet historical institutionalist scholars like Paul Pierson have engaged in a dialogue with the two other institutionalisms to improve our understanding of institutional development (Pierson, 2004).²

In recent years, institutionalist scholars have begun to offer comprehensive theoretical accounts on how institutions change over time (e.g. Clemens and Cook, 1999; Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 2004; Hacker, 2004). In *How Institutions Evolve*, for example, Kathleen Thelen sketches a comprehensive theory of institutional change. One of the most powerful aspects of that book is a critique of the “punctuated equilibrium model” of institutional change based on the assumption that long episodes of institutional inertia follow rare “critical junctures” during which exogenous shocks provoke massive, path departing institutional change. Although she does not reject the concepts of “critical junctures” and “path dependence,” Thelen convincingly argues that most forms of institutional change occur outside such episodes. Thelen identifies two main mechanisms that may explain institutional change: layering and conversion. On the one hand,

² A dialogue between neo-Marxism and historical institutionalism has also begun around the concept of “business power.” (Hacker and Pierson, 2002)

layering involves “the grafting of new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework. Such amendments (...) can alter the overall trajectory of an institution’s development.” (Thelen, 2004: 35) On the other hand, conversion is about adopting new goals or bringing in new actors that end up altering the function or the role an institution performs in society.

Borrowing from Thelen’s work, Jacob Hacker argues that a series of low-profile processes have slowly transformed the nature of the US welfare regime (Hacker, 2005). This argument contradicts the common wisdom that enduring policy legacies have favored strong institutional inertia in spite of frontal neo-liberal attacks against the welfare state (e.g. Pierson, 1994). For Hacker, new economic and social trends can make existing institutions become less and less adequate in the absence of significant reforms designed to adapt them to changing circumstances. He labels this process policy drift. In the field of social policy, the current multiplication of personal savings accounts and the decline of defined benefit pensions in the private sector illustrate how the interaction between changing circumstances and low profile legislative decisions—or even political inaction—may gradually transform the institutional arrangements that impact the life of workers and their families. Yet, the central role of policy drift in the US does not mean that revision, the explicit, legislative reshaping of social programs, has become irrelevant. The 1996 welfare reform provides ground to this claim (e.g. Somers and Block, 2005; Weaver, 2000).

Hacker’s work sheds an interesting light on the current transformation of US social policy and, more generally, on the conditions of institutional change. Yet, his account leaves several questions unanswered. First, how can scholars understand the content of specific reforms, or the path that policy drift takes? Or, regarding the current US situation, what is the overall vision that guides political actors involved in the incremental reconstruction of social policy? Second, how do actors legitimize their decision to add a new layer to existing institutions, to explicitly revise them, or to let them drift without direct legislative action? These unanswered questions point to the role of ideas and frames in policy-making and institutional development. Compatible with the basic assumptions of historical institutionalism regarding the impact of institutional legacies on policy-making, the ideational approach sketched below is not an alternative to historical institutionalism but an attempt to fill some of its analytical gaps (e.g. Béland and Hacker, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Lieberman, 2002).

Bringing Ideas and Frames In

Exploring the role of ideas and frames in policy-making requires serious analytical work as too many studies dealing with ideational processes lack precise conceptual definitions, which may lead the reader to assume that policy ideas have no concrete meaning and, for that reason, no empirical significance. Yet, a growing number of theoretically informed case studies have underlined the central role of ideas and frames in political and policy processes (e.g. Berman, 1998; Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 1998; Cox, 2001; Dobbin, 1994; Dobbin, 2004; Edelman, 1971; Hall, 1993; Hansen and King, 2001; Lakoff, 2002; Lieberman, 2002; Marx Ferree, 2003; Schmidt, 2002a; Schmidt, 2002b; Somers and Block, 2005; Weir, 1992). An appropriate way to structure ideational analysis is to distinguish between the manners in which ideas can shed light on policy-making and institutional development—without always becoming the main causal factor at stake. The presentation will start with a discussion centered on the political science literature about ideas before drawing extensively on the rich sociological scholarship on framing processes.

According to Mark Blyth (2001; 2002), ideas impact political decisions in three main ways. First, ideas serve as institutional blueprints that reduce uncertainty and provide political actors with a model for reform. Offering a basic understanding of actor's interests, institutional opportunities, and the economic pressures at stake, this model helps actors to coordinate their efforts and build coalitions around common economic, social, and political objectives. The example of economic ideas illustrates this logic: "By defining what the economy is, how it operates, and the place of the individual or the collectivity within the economy, economic ideas both reduce uncertainty by defining a given moment of crisis and project the institutional forms that arguably would resolve it." (Blyth, 2001: 4). Yet, following Thelen and Hacker, one can argue that, because institutional change often takes place outside "critical junctures," ideas as blueprints can prove influential beyond the episodes of crisis to which Blyth refers. To a certain extent, the example of George W. Bush's "ownership society" illustrates that claim. Second, ideas can serve as "cognitive locks" that help reproduce existing institutions and policies over time. This role of ideas corresponds to Peter Hall's widely cited work of policy paradigms and degrees of institutional change. For Hall, a policy paradigm is "a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing." (Hall,

1993: 279) Both technical and ideological in content, paradigms constitute the pragmatic “world view” of bureaucrats, policy experts, and elected politicians who interact within existing institutional structures. A dominant, shared paradigm enhances institutional stability by providing actors with a common set of “causal beliefs” (i.e. ideas about what is likely to work and what is likely to fail). The emergence of new social and economic trends that challenge such dominant assumptions can erode support for existing institutional arrangements and the paradigm they are rooted in. “Like a scientific paradigm, a policy paradigm can be threatened by the appearance of anomalies, namely by developments that are not fully comprehensible, even as puzzles, within the terms of the paradigm.” (*ibid.*) This type of analogy between scientific and policy paradigms is problematic at best because *political* conflicts may shape the learning process leading to the demise of a paradigm (King & Hansen, 1999). Third, following that logic, ideas constitute powerful ideological weapons that “allow agents to challenge existing institutional arrangements and the patterns of distribution that they enshrine.” (Blyth, 2001: 4) These ideas constitute a *public* frames that, through framing processes, seeks to convince decision-makers, interest groups, and the population at large that change is necessary.³ This is what Robert Cox labels “the social construction of the need to reform.” “In a political environment the advocates of reform need to employ strategies to overcome the skepticism of others and persuade them of the importance of reform. In other words, they must create a frame that changes the collective understanding of the welfare state, because doing so ‘shapes the path’ necessary to enact reform.” (Cox, 2001: 475) When supporting institutional layering, conversion or revision, experts and political actors have to justify the need to reform through strategic, cultural, and ideological frames drawing on a society’s ideological and cultural repertoire. The concept of repertoire refers to a relatively coherent set of cultural symbols and political representations mobilized during social and political debates to frame the issues and shape public opinion (Marx Ferree, 2003). Because policy-makers must justify their political and technical choices, there is a need for “symbols and concepts with which to frame solutions to policy problems in normatively acceptable terms through transposition and bricolage.” (Campbell, 1998: 394) From this perspective, the construction of the need to reform must take the form of a strategic framing attempt that appeals to shared cultural and ideological understandings. And,

³ The literature on social movements has made a crucial contribution to the sociological analysis of frames and repertoires (Benford and Snow 2000; see also Schneider, 1997).

when political actors do not take any action, they also have to frame the issues to justify their behavior, which—in the long run—could favor policy drift. To distinguish it from the more “technical ideas” embedded in policy paradigms, it is better to refer to this third type of ideas as *frames*.

Sociological Frame Analysis: From Social Movements to Policy-Making

The most comprehensive attempt to understand framing processes comes from the sociological literature on social movements. Drawing in part on the seminal work of Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), sociologists working on social movements have studied framing processes in a systematic way in order to understand better the social and political construction of reality surrounding social mobilization. From this perspective, “movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers.” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613). Several arguments present in this sociological literature can contribute to our understanding of framing processes related to policy-making and social policy reform. Instead of offering a comprehensive review of the ever-expanding literature on social movements and framing processes, the following paragraphs focus on these arguments and, more specifically, on the work of David Benford, Robert Snow, and their collaborators.

Students of social movements stress the strategic nature of framing processes according to which movements actors pursue specific political and organizational goals. In a seminal article, Snow and Benford identify the three “core framing tasks” of social movements: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing. Diagnostic framing is about the “identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality.” (Snow and Benford, 1988: 200) As the label implies, prognostic framing involves both the construction of a possible solution to the problem on which the movement focuses and the identification of relevant strategies and targets for action. Finally, motivational framing concerns the formulation of a “vocabulary of motives” that could stimulate mobilization and help social movements reach their goals. In order to suggest that these framing tasks are present in broad policy-making processes, one can turn to John Kingdon’s agenda-setting typology (Kingdon, 1995). According to this scholar, policy agendas and alternatives are the product of the interaction between three autonomous streams through which social and political actors mobilize in order to promote specific issues or policy

options: the problem, the policy, and the political streams. One can argue that each stream corresponds to one of the framing tasks that Snow and Benford have identified in the field of social mobilization: the problem stream corresponds to diagnostic framing, prognostic framing to the problem stream and, to a lesser extent, motivational framing to the political framing. This suggests that the sociological literature on social movements share some similarities with the one on public policy. The empirical study below will emphasize diagnostic and motivational framing, as the push for “popular capitalism” and the “ownership society” is about framing specific policy alternatives (prognostic framing) and increasing popular support for the neo-liberal crusade (motivational framing). The boundary between prognostic and motivational framing is sometimes hard to identify, and the empirical analysis below will not feature this distinction. What is essential here is to understand that framing processes feature closely related diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements that participate in the *strategic* construction of reality surrounding policy-making.⁴

For the analysis of the politics of ownership, perhaps more relevant is the work on frame resonance and, more specifically, the “infrastructural constraints of belief systems.” For Snow and Benford, cultural factors impact the appeal and mobilizing potency of framing processes. For example, “if the values or beliefs the movement seeks to promote or defend are of low hierarchical salience within the larger belief system, the mobilizing potential is weakened considerably and the task of political education of consciousness raising becomes more central but difficult.” (Snow and Benford, 1988: 205) Inversely, references to a value or belief central to a society’s cultural repertoire increase the potential effectiveness of framing processes. Although this is not the only determinant of frame resonance, the relationship between these processes and value salience is crucial. Yet, as suggested by Snow et al. (1986), actors involved in framing processes can do more than just refer to a value or a belief central to a society’s cultural repertoire. Through the value amplification logic, framers can actively promote and embellish a specific value in order to justify the actions proposed in its name. “Value amplification refers to the identification, idealization, and elevation of one or more values presumed basic to prospective constituents but which have not inspired collective action for any number of reasons.” (Snow et al., 1986: 469) For example, a value taken for granted or clichéd can be

⁴ This strategic process is related to the fact that cultural resources form a “tool kit” that social actors, including framers, can mobilize to elaborate their strategies (Swidler, 1986). Yet, as opposed to what Ann Swidler argue, it would be problematic at best to exclude “values” from culture.

revivified through intense framing efforts depicting this value as crucial and timeless. Regarding the current study, this suggests that elevating and idealizing an old liberal value like personal ownership is a potentially powerful framing strategy than can effectively construct the need to reform and legitimize specific neo-liberal policy alternatives.

Ideas, Historical Legacies, and Vested Interests

Ideational and framing processes, like institutional ones, are embedded in long-term historical realities (Somers and Block, 2005). The three types of ideas discussed above can have a long history, and tracing the development of such ideas may prove necessary to illuminate the role of ideas in institutional change. Take the issue of ideas as weapons, for example. As a strategic tool that actors mobilize to advance their current reform projects, frames rooted in a cultural repertoire that is the product of long-term, frequently slow-moving historical processes. Representations about gender roles, economic prosperity, and class status slowly change over time, and the repertoires to which they belong form relatively structured and stable orders that actors must draw upon to convince their fellow citizens, who have long assimilated such cultural representations (Béland, 2005). Ironically, short-term reform projects and campaigns may require the mobilization of traditional representations about social and economic order. From this perspective, the case for change is made in reference to decades or even centuries-old representations about social and economic order. The empirical analysis below provides ground to that claim as the promotion of possessive individualism and social policy privatization is rooted in liberal representations about possessive individualism and personal ownership that can be traced back to the 17th century.

Certainly, actors have some autonomy in the manner in which they rework these types of representations to frame their proposals, construct the need to reform or, in the case of policy drift, suggest that change is unnecessary, or even dangerous (e.g. Hirschman, 1991). Yet, ideational legacies are probably as resilient as institutional ones, and ideas as weapons can become “path dependent.” This means that, over a long period of time, actors must refer to a specific idea or value to legitimize institutional change. Although the concrete meaning of this idea may change over time (Cox, 2004), the existence of stable repertoires create constraints (and opportunities) as political actors must draw on a limited number of ideas and symbols to justify reform. Policy legacies may also create powerful ideational constraints (and opportunities) as

framers have little choice but to refer to the legal language embedded in existing social and economic legislations (Pedriana and Stryker, 1997).

Arguing that frames and paradigms matter is not to say that ideas always constitute the primary locus of institutional change. Ideas matter in part *because* they interact with powerful interests and institutional forces (Béland and Hacker, 2004). For that reason, the study of ideational forces must pay close attention to interests and institutions surrounding them. Moreover, one must recognize that, if institutions can affect the ideational construction of reality, ideas and frames are strategic realities closely linked to (although they cannot be reduced to) interests. First, as mentioned above, ideational processes help define what actors perceive as their “interest” in a specific historical and institutional context. Second, according to Hendrick Spruyt (1994), ideas cannot triumph or even gain a significant status in the public arena without gaining support from powerful interests. Influential, high profile actors such as elected officials, political parties or, in some contexts, social movements, are instrumental in the propagation of specific blueprints, paradigms and frames that, in turn, can serve some of their *perceived* strategic interests. Yet, ironically, because they shape the perception of such interests, ideas are not only mere instruments in the hands of powerful actors. Finally, ideas and frames can help politically weak actors defend themselves against more powerful ones, notably by seeking greater media and public support. This is what happened to the US welfare rights movement of the 1970s, which successfully framed itself as an anti-racist, pro-civil rights organization (Nadasen, 2005).

Although it will refer to blueprints and policy paradigms, the following analysis focuses on framing processes embedded in the liberal tradition and, with the case of the UK and the US, in a society’s cultural repertoire. A crucial aspect of this empirical study is to show that the analysis of ideas and framing processes can shed interesting light on the reform process even when it is clear that other factors (i.e. institutional legacies and vested interests) also play a major role in specific policy-making episodes. For that reason, the following analysis stresses the role of ideas and frames while acknowledging the causal weight of policy legacies and economic interests. Although it would be possible to isolate ideational processes from institutions and interests, as suggested above, there is evidence that ideas and frames matter alongside these two other levels of reality. For example, the sociological literature on social movements suggests that framing processes must be understood in a broad cultural and political context where other factors matter (e.g. Cress and Snow, 2000; McCammon et. al.: 2001). In the following case

studies, ideational processes are not depicted as the main locus of change but as central factors in understanding the content of policy alternatives and the manner in which elected officials attempt to legitimize path-departing reforms.

Two main sections comprise the empirical analysis. The first section of the study will point to the historical embeddedness of the idea of personal ownership in the liberal tradition and in contemporary—national—ideological and cultural repertoires. The second section explores how the idea of ownership has become a central frame and a source of institutional change in the United Kingdom and the United States. The study focuses on the fields of housing and old age pensions, which feature the debate over personal ownership prominently.⁵ Grounded in a qualitative analysis of political speeches, this study does not challenge historical institutionalism but draws on existing historical institutionalist scholarship, which is combined with ideational analysis.

Ownership, Old Liberalism, and Contemporary Repertoires

The best starting point for the analysis of the link between personal ownership and social policy is C. B. MacPherson's classic study of possessive individualism, an idea ever-present in the modern liberal tradition, which emerged during the 17th century. According to MacPherson, the modern individualism observed in the work of authors like John Locke and his followers is based on the following assumption:

[The individual is] essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owning nothing to society for them. (...) The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange (MacPherson, 1962: 3).

From this perspective, possessive individualism and the naturalization of property rights justify the limitation of state power, whose most legitimate goal is to protect such rights against internal

⁵ Although the field of health care reform could have been included, this would have increased the scope of the paper beyond reason. Furthermore, during the Thatcher era, health savings counts grounded in the idea of personal ownership had yet to become a significant policy alternative in the United Kingdom.

and external threats. To explore the meaning of possessive individualism as a central component of the liberal tradition, MacPherson analyses the work of John Locke, who formulated a coherent theory of possessive individualism supporting the advent of the modern liberal state (Locke, 2003).

A detailed discussion of the status of ownership and possessive individualism within the liberal tradition lies beyond the scope of the present analysis. As well, the enduring philosophical debates over the meaning of personal ownership featured prominently in the work of authors as different as Jeremy Bentham, Karl Marx, and Karl Polanyi (e.g. West, 2003; Polanyi, 1944) go beyond this article. Far more crucial here is the fact that possessive individualism and the cult of personal ownership have moved from modern political theory to contemporary economic and cultural representations. To sum up, “Individual ownership of material possession is deeply rooted in Western culture.” (Dittmar, 1992: 1) According to Dittmar, ownership is a crucial source of personal identity in advanced industrial societies, and the advent of mass consumption has expanded that logic to the vast majority of the population (*ibid.*). As suggested above, the centrality of a value like ownership increases its potential effectiveness as a framing tool, which may explain why personal ownership has become such a central feature of the contemporary debates over social policy and the UK and the US.

The truth is that the cult of personal ownership is a crucial aspect of what has become the dominant economic paradigm in many contemporary societies: neo-liberalism. Grounded in the idea that markets are generally more efficient than states in distributing resources and regulating the economic order, neo-liberalism promotes the application of market ideas to social policy issues (e.g. Campbell and Pedersen 2001). Possessive individualism and the related cult of private property are among these ideas. From the perspective of neo-liberalism, welfare state downsizing and the expansion of private ownership both favor economic growth and the triumph of personal responsibility over the “nanny state.” Because it is such a strong and popular idea, personal ownership is more than a key element of the neo-liberal paradigm, as it constitutes a common aspect of conservative blueprints such as Thatcher’s “popular capitalism” and George W. Bush’s “ownership society.” The comparative analysis below will provide ground to this claim.

Because personal ownership is such a powerful cultural symbol in advanced industrial societies, it has also become an effective framing tool for the right. Since the 1970s, neo-liberals

have publicly celebrated possessive individualism and personal ownership in order to construct the need to reform and legitimize their market-based policy alternatives. In the US, for example, conservative think tanks, books, and magazines have mobilized the gospel of personal ownership and responsibility against “big government” (e.g. Edsall, 1984; Rich, 2004). In such an individualistic discourse about capitalist ownership, there is a tendency to naturalize private property, which obscures the fact that the latter is a political construction that is impossible without the recognition of formal rights (Carruthers and Ariovich, 2004). To a certain extent, this allows neo-liberals to describe the state mainly as a potential predator, not an entity that *shapes* private ownership through rights granting. In the mirror of this negative vision of the state, neo-liberals embellish and elevate the idea of ownership, which is framed as a sacred value that brings both economic prosperity and personal freedom. Such a form of value amplification is present in the political speeches analyzed below. This is consistent with social movement literature.

The idea that personal ownership is a central aspect of modern culture and politics in countries like the UK and the US does not mean that possessive individualism has become hegemonic, or that it goes unchallenged. From modern socialism to “new liberalism,” alternatives to possessive individualism and the cult of personal ownership are well known (e.g. Freedman, 1978). Although neo-liberalism has become increasingly dominant in contemporary advanced industrial societies, possessive individualism and liberal representations about private property constitute only one aspect of the cultural repertoire prevalent in each of these societies. Take the case of the United States, for example. Against Louis Hartz’s claim that this country’s values and ideological representations are exclusively embedded in liberalism (Hartz, 1955), one can argue that other perspectives and representations exogenous to that tradition have impacted US social and political debates (e.g. Smith, 1993). In the field of social policy, concepts like solidarity, social rights, and social citizenship have long been powerful ideological alternatives to the unilateral celebration of personal ownership and personal responsibility.⁶ In many industrial countries, these concepts actually legitimized the development of comprehensive social policies after the Second World War. Such policies limited the reliance of citizens on market outcomes or, at least, reduced the level of insecurity traditionally associated with the status of waged worker

⁶ Popular in countries like Canada, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, the concept of social citizenship is not frequently used in the United States, at least outside the academia. Authors have even argued that there is no such a thing as social citizenship in the United States (Frazer and Gordon, 1992).

(e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990). According to Robert Castel, modern social protection based on the recognition of social rights emerged as an alternative to the traditional liberal vision of security focusing almost exclusively on personal responsibility and private savings (Castel, 2003). Although ideological variations exist from one country to another, the concepts of solidarity, social rights, and social citizenship that legitimize modern social protection are present in the cultural repertoire of most advanced industrial countries (e.g. Béland and Hansen, 2000).

Overall, cultural repertoires are not homogeneous entities that reflect only one political and social tradition. In part because such repertoires are not ideologically homogeneous, political actors from opposite camps can refer to the very same symbols to legitimize their decisions and seek popular support. What is crucial here is that the discourse they frame resonates in the mind of social actors who have assimilated the symbols and ideas that comprise the cultural repertoire of their society. Considering all this, the argument that frames rooted in a common ideological repertoire can have a political impact and shape the need to reform is not identical to the traditional arguments about the close relationship between “national values” and social policy outcomes (Hartz, 1955; Lipset, 1996; Lubove, 1986). Because national cultures are never ideologically cohesive, the idea that “national values” create unilateral and unmovable obstacles—or incentives—to reform does not hold sway (Quadagno and Street, 2005). Certainly, one can argue that possessive individualism is more entrenched in the US than in social democratic countries like Sweden, or even in other liberal societies like Canada (e.g. Lipset, 1996). Furthermore, policy-makers can impose neo-liberalism upon a country where possessive individualism and the idea of personal ownership are not well entrenched in the existing national repertoire. This is what occurred in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s (Lane and Ross, 1998). As the transition to capitalism in the Soviet Union suggests, neo-liberalism can exist without strong, pre-existing cultural representations supporting personal ownership and other “capitalist values.” But, in the case of the UK and the US, possessive individualism and the cult of personal ownership are present in each national repertoire (e.g. Hartz, 1955; MacPherson, 1962). This situation provides neo-liberal actors with a central value to frame the need for policy privatization. This is true in the field of social policy, where personal ownership has been framed as a powerful symbol of autonomy and responsibility that legitimizes (without necessarily *explaining*) privatization or, at least, policy drift and the advent of new layers of market-based protection that could lead to significant institutional change. The following discussion underlines

such neo-liberal forms of value amplification in contemporary social policy debates. Although it does not offer a strict ideational argument about the *cause* of policy change, this discussion suggests that the analysis of ideas and frames sheds new light on the content and meaning of debated policy alternatives while complementing historical institutional arguments focusing mainly on institutional legacies and vested interests.

Framing the Ownership Society

The Politics of Ownership in the UK

In the late 1970s, Thatcherism emerged as the most spectacular political incarnation of the neo-liberal crusade aimed at restoring free market principles, including the cult of personal ownership rooted in possessive individualism. In the United Kingdom as in other countries, the idea of personal ownership served as a central ideological foundation for the neo-liberal paradigm. Moreover, in a country like the UK where the state owned many enterprises and housing facilities, private property became a central feature of the conservative blueprint for reform (e.g. Forrest and Murie, 1988). Finally, and more important for the present contribution, references to the virtues of personal ownership participated in the construction of the need for neo-liberal reforms in key policy areas. As opposed to what occurred in other advanced industrial countries, Thatcherism proved successful in framing the issues in a coherent manner, which help legitimizing neo-liberal reforms (Schmidt, 2002a). As for the counter-frame about the virtues of statism and post-war social citizenship, it remained a subtle yet low-profile academic construction (Béland and Hansen, 1998). From this perspective, Thatcherite discourse about personal ownership has dominated the British political arena since the 1980s.

Housing

When the conservative party of Margaret Thatcher came to power in the United Kingdom, that country had that largest pool of public housing in Western Europe. This situation was the outcome of decades of direct state investment in public housing. As early as 1938, the UK state had already built more than a million units of public housing (Forrest and Murie, 1988: 22). Furthermore, following the Second World War, both Labour and Tory governments expanded the stock of public housing (Pierson, 1994: 75-76). Considering such statist institutional legacy, the privatization of public housing constituted a key objective of the first Thatcher government. The centerpiece of Thatcher's housing restructuring became known as the

“right to buy” policy. Embedded in the Housing Act of 1980, this policy allowed tenants living in public housing facilities to purchase their property at a discount calculated according to the length of residence. With a maximum discount of 70 percent, this policy had a potentially strong popular appeal. In addition to the economic incentive, the Thatcher government enacted provisions to facilitate people’s access to mortgage while transforming the management of public housing associations in the sense of a neo-liberal model of governance (Whitehead, 1993: 111).

There is strong evidence that Thatcher and her government spent much energy framing the “right to buy” as a tremendous opportunity for millions of UK citizens to become truly autonomous and responsible for their own life. In a May 1979 speech to the Scottish Conservative Party Conference, for example, Thatcher warned voters that the failure to implement the “right to buy” policy would mean that millions of citizens would “face the prospect of paying rent for the rest of their lives with nothing to show for it at the end of the day. And nothing to hand on to their children and grandchildren. And they would be denied the freedom and mobility which owner-occupation provides” (Thatcher, 1979). Drawing on the old liberal components of the UK cultural repertoire, the new Prime Minister attempted to increase the support for housing privatization through an individualistic discourse about personal gain, autonomy, and responsibility. Through straightforward value amplification, Thatcher promotes and elevates ownership, which is framed as a major source of personal freedom and emancipation in order to convince citizens that privatization would their life better. Referring to public housing tenants as “people locked into local government tenancies with no present possibility of escape,” Thatcher also framed public housing as a genuine collectivist trap from which citizens should free themselves (Thatcher, 1980a). In another speech, the Prime Minister connected the issue of housing to her neo-liberal crusade aimed at restoring private ownership as the key organizing principle of UK society. She then framed home ownership as a fundamental human right: “It was Anthony Eden who chose for us the goal of ‘a property-owning democracy’. But for all the time that I have been in public affairs that has been beyond the reach of so many, who were denied the right to the most basic ownership of all—the homes in which they live” (Thatcher, 1980b). More than four years after the enactment of the Housing Act of 1980, Thatcher depicted the “right to buy” policy as one of the most crucial accomplishments of her government:

Spreading the ownership of property more widely is central to this Government's philosophy. It is central because where property is widely owned, freedom flourishes. (...) Since we took office in 1979, 1.7 million more people have come to own their homes—1.7 million more sole kings upon their own sole ground. That increase is one of our proudest achievements. (...) A house is most people's biggest asset. It is a large investment, and it needs protection. (...) But a house is more than this. It is a symbol of security, and a stake in the future. People who own houses do so not just for themselves, but for their children. They do so as members of a responsible society—proud of the heritage derived from the past, glad to care for it, and eager to give the next generation a bit of capital to give them a start. I believe in home ownership because I believe in individual responsibility, and I believe that by our actions we can shape the future (Thatcher, 1984).

This quotation shows once again that Thatcher, through what social movement scholars call value amplification, framed housing privatization as a neo-liberal journey towards personal freedom and responsibility. In part because this discourse resonated in the public's mind, the “right to buy” became one of the most popular policies of the Thatcher era. Overall, this policy had a strong impact on UK society: “There has been a revolution in home ownership over the past twenty years. Groups of people who in the past might never have expected to own their own homes now do so. The property owning-democracy has been extended and with it the proportion of people who have wealth in the form of private housing” (Johnson and Tanner, 1998: 368). Although it proved quite popular, Thatcher's “right to buy” policy had serious limitations, even from the perspective of the personal ownership crusade. First, about one third of the houses in the UK are still rented. This is due partly to the fact that a significant minority of citizens cannot afford to buy a home. As a consequence of reform, those remaining in the public housing system are significantly poorer on average than those who were in that system before the 1980 reform. Second, home ownership came with significant financial risks related to fluctuations in interest rates and real-estate prices (*ibid.*).

A detailed analysis of Thatcher's housing policy and its long-term economic and social consequences lies beyond the scope of the present article. What is interesting for this study is the profoundly ideological nature of the crusade for housing privatization, and the capacity of

Thatcher and her party to construct the “right to buy” policy as a form of economic liberation that would help citizens gain control over their lives through private ownership. Although the financial incentives associated with that policy explains its popularity for the most part, Thatcherite framing processes drawing on shared representations about the intrinsic value of home ownership contributed to legitimizing a truly path departing reform. There is no evidence that framing processes, especially those related to value amplification, *caused* the reform. Yet, such processes indubitably provided a strong cultural and ideological rationale for it. Without this type of rationale, support for housing privatization would have certainly been weaker, as individuals could have found it more difficult to make sense of it. As for the institutional nature of housing privatization, it mainly took the structure of a formal institutional revision, which is still a major source of institutional change (Hacker, 2004). This is especially true in the United Kingdom, where political power remains far more concentrated than in the United States (e.g. Pierson and Weaver, 1993). Moreover, this centralization of power reinforced the ideational role of the Prime Minister, who played a central role in the intense framing campaign that shaped the cultural and ideological meaning of housing privatization in the UK.

Interestingly, the return of the Labour Party to power in 1997 did not really lead to the repudiation of the Thatcherite, neo-liberal housing policy and the discourse about the virtues of personal ownership surrounding it. As mentioned above, the “right to buy” policy proved quite popular, and new Prime Minister Tony Blair did not attempt to reverse the path of reform. This is coherent with his Third Way approach to social and economic problems, which is grounded in the explicit recognition that the new government should preserve most of Thatcher’s economic legacy (Hefferman, 2000: 65). From this perspective, Blair and the New Labour have embraced that Thatcherite vision of a homeowner society. And, to make sure that the electorate understood the message, the 1997 Labour Manifesto’s section on housing began with that clear statement: “Most families want to own their own homes.” (Labour Party, 1997) Although that manifesto criticized many aspects of the Conservative housing legacy, it did not challenge the new ideological and institutional supremacy of personal ownership in housing policy. In that policy area as in others, New Labour has acknowledged—and even promoted—Thatcherism’s neo-liberal legacy. Unveiled in January 2005, for example, Labour’s new five-year housing strategy includes a “first-time buyer initiative” to “help people get on the property ladder” as well as an extension of the “right to buy” policy for public housing tenants (Hetherington, 2005). Overall,

personal ownership is still subject to value amplification processes that celebrate and embellish an idea so well entrenched in both neo-liberalism and the UK's cultural repertoire.

Pensions

During the Thatcher years, pensions emerged as another crucial policy area for the crusade in favor of personal ownership and possessive individualism in UK society. Yet, as opposed to the situation prevailing in the field of housing, the UK public pension system seemed modest in scope, at least when compared to the more generous public pensions schemes existing in most other advanced industrial nations (Myles, 1989). By 1979, this public system had three tiers: a modest flat—universal—pension, means-tested benefits for the poor and, finally, an earnings-related program enacted only four years earlier (SERPS). This program would start to pay full benefits only by 1998. In addition to that public system, almost 50% of the UK workforce was enrolled in firm-based, occupational pension plans. When SERPS came into effect in 1978, approved plans had the opportunity to opt out of the program. The large majority of them did (Fawcett, 2002: 10).

As in the field of housing, the conservative pension blueprint proved strongly embedded in the neo-liberal, personal ownership logic. The main objective of conservative pension reform became increasingly clear during the 1980s: through benefit cuts and new opting out opportunity, it would foster the reliance of citizens on private providers of protection. From this perspective, cutbacks in public sector pensions would create incentives for SERPS participants to seek market-based forms of protection rooted in the logic of personal ownership and financial investment. As for the framing processes that legitimized this institutional transformation, it proved strikingly similar to the one surrounding housing privatization. “We also believe in wider property ownership—houses, shares, building society accounts, pension schemes, savings—property in all its forms. For ownership brings dignity, self-respect, independence and security for the future. It is a fundamental freedom” (Thatcher, 1987). Overall, conservative pension reform, like housing privatization, would help transform the United Kingdom into “a nation of active participants, not passive spectators” (Thatcher, 1986). For Thatcher and her supporters, private pension ownership represented a form among others of participation in the capitalist economy that could both stimulate growth and personal responsibility against the “nanny state.” Through value amplification, these actors framed personal pension ownership as a crucial source

of freedom and opportunity that most, if not all, citizens could benefit from. Popular support for that vision seemed increasingly strong during the 1980s. For example, a survey conducted in 1985 showed that most UK workers would like to participate in a private pension scheme (Bonoli, 2000: 70). This clearly reflected the modest nature of public benefits, which made occupational pensions look more attractive. One of the objectives of Thatcherism was to further reduce the scope of public benefits to stimulate the development of occupational pensions and personal savings (Fawcett, 2002). Although framing processes alone cannot explain a transformation related to specific policy legacies and vested interests, such processes provided a strong rationale for pension privatization by linking this policy alternative with an ideological celebration of personal ownership grounded in the society's existing cultural repertoire.

The adoption of the 1980 Social Security Act constituted the first major, yet implicit, step to promote the development of private savings and pensions. By moving from earnings-indexing to inflation indexing, this reform favored a gradual decline in the real value of the flat pension. As a feedback effect, such change reduced the level of public spending while increasing the demand for private savings and occupational pensions. This reform seemed relatively uncontroversial because the consequences of the changes made to the indexation model were hard to grasp, and Thatcher could legitimately claim that the state was still indexing the flat pension (Pierson and Weaver, 1993: 130-131).

To promote the expansion of the private pension sector, conservatives needed to take a bolder step: abolishing SERPS or, at least, encouraging workers to opt out of that program to favor the expansion of occupational pensions and personal savings. To justify such reforms, Thatcher did more than praise personal savings and ownership: she used "demographic pessimism" to depict a bleak fiscal future for SERPS. Common in other advanced industrial countries (e.g. Prince, 2000), such pessimistic frame tends to undermine the public's confidence in pay-as-you-go pension schemes like SERPS. "I do not believe that the present SERPS system is deliverable. The burden on our children and grandchildren would be absolutely intolerable, and they would not be able to meet it. (...) [If] SERPS were to be carried on the benefit would have to be substantially reduced, even though the contribution would have to remain the same" (Thatcher, 1985). In the name of intergenerational equity, the Prime Minister stressed the need for personal responsibility and private savings in the context of demographic aging.

Although conservatives proved quite successful in selling the idea of personal pension ownership, their 1985 attempt to abolish SERPS altogether failed as both labor and business interests mobilized against it. This suggests that, in addition to framing processes that help transform personal ownership into a culturally meaningful symbol of emancipation, powerful institutional legacies and vested interests strongly impacted the reform process. On the one hand, unions and left-wing advocacy groups argued that private alternatives meant to replace SERPS would offer far less to elderly citizens, especially the poorest ones. On the other hand, employers and occupational pension fund managers feared the sudden increase in an administrative burden that such a reform could impose (Pierson and Weaver, 1993: 132). Even the UK treasury opposed the plan, for which “transition costs” proved excessively high (Bonoli, 2000: 72).⁷ Finally, in December 1985, the second Thatcher government put forward a more moderate reform blueprint in the form of a White Paper on pensions (HM Department of Health and Social Security, 1985). Instead of recommending to terminate SERPS altogether, this White Paper proposed to reduce its benefits while making opting out more attractive to current participants. Over time, the opting out process would erode the public earnings-related scheme and encourage the growth of personal savings, occupational pensions, and, consequently, financial investment. Perceived as less radical than the previous one, the plan nevertheless stirred up controversy, especially among trade unions and anti-poverty organizations (Bonoli, 2000: 76-77). Yet, in spite of Labour’s opposition, the parliament finally enacted the second reform plan as part of the 1986 Social Security Act (Glennerster, 2000: 170). This legislation reduced SERPS replacement rate from 25% of the best 20 years of earnings to only 20% of *lifelong* earnings (Fawcett, 2002: 13). This appeared as a major reduction in benefits. Furthermore, beginning in 1988, current participants could opt out of SERPS for a private savings account, known in the UK as “personal pension.” In part because of that new provision, the number of SERPS participants dropped from 10.9 to 6.5 million between 1987 and 1994. At the end of that period, the number of workers who had diverted their payroll tax contributions to a personal savings account reached 5.7 million (Bonoli, 2000: 80). This means that a larger than expected number of Britons now participated in financial capitalism and Thatcher-style “popular capitalism.”⁸

⁷ Yet, because SERPS had been enacted as late as 1975, it did not constitute a fully mature pension scheme, which reduced the scope of the “double payment problem” and made partial privatization possible (Pierson, 1994).

⁸ In the years following the enactment of the 1986 Social Security Act, the “misselling scandal” cast a shadow upon the optimistic spirit of “popular finance” related to the SERPS opting-out process and the expansion of “personal

As in the field of housing, New Labour has largely reproduced—and even expanded—the institutional and ideological legacy of Thatcherism (e.g. Heffernan, 2000: 23). This is due in part to the fact that new provisions like the “private pensions” have created powerful vested interests that New Labour must acknowledge. At the ideational level, Thatcherism successfully imposed a neo-liberal paradigm and discourse that New Labour leaders felt they had to embrace, at least partially, in order to win elections (Heffernan, 2000). Just like previous policy choices, ideas and frames can create enduring legacies that future politicians must take into account to succeed in the political field. This is the case regarding the framing of personal ownership as a major source of freedom and emancipation, which is still featured prominently in Blair’s public discourse about housing and pension issues (e.g. Blair, 2005).

The Politics of Ownership in the US

Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher are both considered powerful symbols of neo-liberalism, and it is common to compare their legacies. In the field of social policy, it is clear that the successive Thatcher governments accomplished far more than the Reagan administration. This is related to the fact that Reagan operated in the context of “divided government,” where political power is far more fragmented than in the UK. Furthermore, social programs like Social Security had created stronger constituencies than SERPS, for example, the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP). This further complicated the task of US conservatives (Pierson, 1994). Despite the lack of scholarly consensus of that issue, it is probably in the fields of taxation and military policy that the legacy of Reaganism proved the most enduring (e.g. Brownlee and Graham, 2003). Yet, because of their failure to profoundly reshape social policy legacies, the Reagan administration did not activate a full reconstruction of the US polity similar to the one achieved five decades earlier by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal (Schwab, 1991;

pensions.” This scandal occurred when the public realized that half a million workers had been misadvised to leave their good occupational pension for a less attractive “personal pension” (Blake, 2000: 227). As a response to this scandal, parliament had no choice but to regulate UK’s booming financial industry further. The 1995 Pensions Act ratified under John Major’s government constituted the most direct response to the misselling scandal (Benney, 1995). Ironically, if an anti-statist discourse about personal ownership and responsibility surrounded the 1986 reform, the Conservative-led parliament reinforced state regulations affecting the UK financial sector. SERPS reform indirectly brought more state intervention in a crucial sector of the UK economy. Far from challenging this new institutional path, the first Blair government promoted both the development of personal retirement savings *and* the expansion of financial regulations (Teles, 1999). Overall, the current Labour government seeks to expand the reliance of citizens on personal ownership and pensions at the expense of downsized and less attractive state programs, which increasingly serve as residual measures protecting those who are too poor to join the neo-liberal “ownership society.”

Skowronek, 1993; Stockman, 1986) During the 1990s, conservatives pushed for radical social policy reforms that could complete the unfinished political reconstruction of the Reagan era (e.g. Derthick, 2001). Ironically, it was in 1996, when president Clinton signed the most conservative social policy reform enacted in contemporary US society: the creation of the Temporary Aid for Needy Families, a program that imposed strict time limits and other workfare-style restrictions on most social assistance beneficiaries (Somers and Block, 2005; Weaver, 2000). Yet, as will be shown below, attempts to transform federal old age insurance (Social Security) into a savings scheme went nowhere during president Clinton's second mandate. This means that, when they took office in early 2001, George W. Bush and his team could still dream about creating a powerful conservative legacy through the neo-liberal restructuring of Social Security. To a certain extent, such a transformation would complete the unfinished institutional and ideological reconstruction that Reagan had launched exactly two decades earlier. During his first mandate, however, president Bush's agenda, like Reagan's, focused mainly on tax cuts and national security issues, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Béland, 2005).

Starting in late 2003, however, president Bush increasingly used the expression "ownership society" to refer to his new domestic agenda (Kosterlitz, 2004: 230) The idea of "ownership society" became ever-present in his discourse during and after the 2004 presidential campaign (Serafini, 2005). His model for an "ownership society" is nothing else than Thatcher's own economic and social policy reforms.⁹ More important, as evidenced below, the core policy objectives and the ideological framing processes surrounding Bush's pro-ownership platform is strikingly similar to Thatcher's. Drawing on the US cultural repertoire, president Bush and his allies constructed private ownership as the core principle of US society, a principle that must triumph against the New Deal's "big government" legacy.

Yet, before exploring the framing processes and the policy alternatives tied to the "ownership society," one must note that the present US institutional context is very different than the one Thatcher's first conservative government operated in. As opposed to the situation prevailing in the UK around 1980, the US was already considered an "ownership society," where the majority of the population owns a house and/or stocks. In a 2005 survey, for example, "72% [of the respondents] said they own their house and 60% have money invested in the stock

⁹ The President's chief advisor, Karl Rove, explicitly referred to a book about Thatcherism during recent private White House meetings related to the "ownership society" (Charter, 2005).

market” (USA Today, 2005). Moreover, the belief that personal ownership is something great for citizens and workers is reflected in a 2003 survey that shows that more than half of US citizens dream about owning their own business, while 10% already own one (Breedon, 2003).

Overall, the “ownership society” is a blueprint that subsumes and articulates well-known social and economic principles that have long been at the center of the neo-liberal paradigm. As early as 1964, presidential candidate Barry Goldwater used some of these principles against the legacies of the New Deal and the Fair Deal (Nash, 1996). Four decades later, Bush’s “ownership society” is more than an empty slogan, as it constitutes both a coherent blueprint and a powerful neo-liberal discourse legitimizing significant institutional change in US society. Conservatives believe that the implementation of the “ownership society” platform could reinforce their electoral coalition, and maintain the Republican political domination during the years and even the decades to come. Grover Norquist, president of the right-wing Americans for Tax Reform, summarizes these conservative hopes for ownership-centered coalition building: “You can’t have a hate-and-envy class if 80 percent of the public owns stock. That makes it impossible for Democrats to govern. It spells the end of their world” (cited in Kosterlitz, 2004: 231). For these reasons, the intense, strategic framing processes surrounding the “ownership society” should be taken seriously. This is what the following analysis does while paying specific attention to the similarities between Thatcherite discourse and Bush’s “ownership society.” Again, the objective is not to show that framing processes necessarily explain policy outcomes but that their analysis can shed crucial light on the meaning of political struggles and policy alternatives as well as the construction of reform imperatives.

Housing

As compared to the situation prevailing in the UK before and even after the 1980 Housing Act, public housing in the United States has long constituted a rather modest policy area. Authorized in the 1937 National Housing Act, public housing has faced much opposition from conservative leaders fearing “possible competition with the private housing market and the prospect of relocating poor people, especially blacks, to more affluent neighborhoods” (Pierson, 1994: 76). Targeting only the poorest citizens, public housing became increasingly associated with deprived, minority-dominated inner city neighborhoods (Popkin et al., 2000; Vale, 2000). Although public housing significantly expanded in the late 1960s and the 1970s, little more than

one percent of the US population lived housing projects by 1980. Additionally, less than three percent of the population received allowances for privately rented housing (Pierson, 1994: 76). Overall, US public housing programs proved both limited in scope and politically vulnerable.

Yet in the US, there is another aspect of housing policy that is a crucial aspect of what Christopher Howard labels “the hidden welfare state:” home mortgage interest deduction (Howard, 1997).¹⁰ Enacted in 1913 as part of the federal bill creating the individual income taxes, this low-profile fiscal measure has gained more political support over time. The bold expansion of these taxes during the Second World War increased the impact of the home mortgage interest deduction, which affected a far larger percentage of the population, especially members of the middle class, many of whom had to pay federal income tax for the first time ever. After the war, this policy became a major component of the federal push for *private* middle class residential construction. To a certain extent, home mortgage interest deduction thus became a hidden, indirect subsidy to the US construction industry (Glaeser and Shapiro, 2002: 2). Overall, well-off citizens disproportionately benefit from that deduction which, in 1995, represented an annual revenue loss of more than 50 billion dollars a year (Howard, 1997). Furthermore, other fiscal incentives meant to promote home ownership like deferral of capital gains on sale of principal residences cost billions of dollars annually to the federal treasury. Because home ownership is rightly viewed as a potential source of economic security (e.g. Winter, 1999), these policies are perceived as social ones, in spite of their commonly regressive nature.

During the Reagan era, Congress enacted significant cuts in federal public housing programs. Considering that organizations defending low-income housing interests were politically weak, public housing became an easy target for conservative budget cuts. Yet, because of the comparatively small size of the US public housing system, conservative attacks against it seemed less significant institutionally and politically than Thatcher’s “right to buy” crusade (Pierson, 1994). In addition to cuts in existing public housing programs, the 1980s witnessed something far less coherent with the Reagan administration’s conservative agenda: the reduction in tax provisions that have promoted home ownership since 1913. Although the Tax Reform Act of 1986 maintained the home mortgage interest deduction, for example, lower tax rates and higher standard deductions reduced the overall fiscal value of that measure by about 20

¹⁰ The two following paragraphs draw extensively on Howard’s seminal book.

percent (Howard, 1997: 109). During the 1990s, attacks against this measure multiplied in a context of fiscal austerity. During the 1992 campaign, for example, presidential candidate Ross Perot listed cuts in the home mortgage interest deduction as one of the possible ways to reduce the federal deficit. “Why should we subsidize interest on huge, expensive homes? The average mortgage in the US is \$104,000. I propose that we limit deductions on interest to mortgages of \$250,000 and that we eliminate this special deduction for vacation homes” (Perot, 1992: 42-43). But such proposals were never enacted, and the home mortgage interest deduction experienced a real (inflation-adjusted) growth of more than five percent between 1980 and 1995, in spite of the negative effect of the 1986 Tax Reform Act (Howard, 1997: 112-113). Overall, most fiscal measures meant to encourage home ownership in US society have survived the era of budget cuts of the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹

Despite the advent of new fiscal deficits in the early 2000s, president Bush transformed tax-sponsored home ownership as a central aspect of his domestic agenda. Even though about 70 percent of US citizens are homeowners, the president is mainly targeting racial and ethnic minorities, who have an average rate of ownership barely superior to 50 percent. The president’s official goal is to “*increase the number of minority homeowners by 5.5 million families by the end of the decade*” (White House, 2005). As home ownership is a popular feature of the so-called “American dream,” promoting ownership through modest, low-cost programs is perhaps a good political strategy to seduce minority voters who have long shown more support for the Democratic Party. “For millions of individuals and families, the American Dream starts with owning a home. When families move into a home of their own, they gain independence and confidence, and their faith in the future grows. The spread of ownership and opportunity helps give our citizens a vital stake in the future of America and the chance to realize the great promise of our country” (Bush, 2005c). This discourse is a clear example of value amplification as the president elevates the meaning and stresses the virtues of personal ownership in order to legitimize aspects of his domestic agenda. As in Thatcher’s discourse, personal autonomy is constructed as a source of independence that is synonymous with personal success and economic

¹¹ One must note that a measure like home mortgage interest deduction may not have a strong impact on the rates of home ownership. In fact, “Israel and Australia have home ownership rates significantly higher than the United States and no mortgage interest deductibility” (Bartlett, 2001: 3). During the 1990s in the UK, successive Conservative and Labour governments phased out the equivalent of that measure (Mortgage Interest Relief). In part because the 1980s house price boom had eroded the deduction ceiling, this phasing out had limited consequences, especially in a context of declining interest rates (Stephens, Whitehead and Munro, 2005: 23).

progress. Yet, in a truly US fashion, the president refers to the “American Dream” so central to the US cultural repertoire and political discourse.

The modest nature of the measures put forward to promote home ownership contrasts strongly with the president’s optimistic and ambitious rhetoric. An example of the modest measures aimed at encouraging minorities to become homeowners is the \$200 million-per-year American Dream Downpayment Act. This measure is meant to help about 40,000 families each year pay their down mortgage. Furthermore, the president proposed the Zero-Downpayment Initiative, a measure that would “allow the Federal Housing Administration to insure mortgages for first-time homebuyers without a down payment” (*ibid.*). Finally, the president proposed measures to support rural home ownership.

Generally, the president, like Margaret Thatcher and many other conservatives before him, frames home ownership as the best source of economic security for workers and their families. Interestingly, in a 2004 speech on housing policy, he referred to growing job insecurity in the US to legitimize his “ownership society” and, more precisely, his proposals to help first-time homebuyers.

Today, people are changing jobs and careers quite often, and the workforce has changed. (...) And in times of change, I understand that ownership brings stability to our neighborhoods and security to our families. In changing times, it helps if you own something. It helps bring security to you. By paying a mortgage instead of rent, by putting money into your own retirement plan, you're storing up wealth for your family (Bush, 2004).

To a certain extent, this illustrates a central aspect of neo-liberalism: accepting job insecurity and the lack of comprehensive social protection as a fate while framing possessive individualism and personal ownership as the most, if not the only, reliable source of economic security. Instead of trusting the state to provide protection, citizens should embrace traditional “American values” like economic individualism and self-reliance.

What is striking about president Bush’s campaign to expand home ownership is the ideological and political logic that drives it. The United States has a comparatively high home ownership rate (Bartlett, 2001) and yet, the president pushes for new measures to favor access to that ever-popular institution. Meanwhile, public housing is facing tremendous challenges (e.g. Popkin et al., 2000) and, considering the political weakness of the public housing lobby,

relatively little is done inside the beltway to correct that situation. This genuine form of policy drift confirms the common wisdom that, in the US at least, “programs for the poor are poor programs” (e.g. Skocpol, 1990). The small size of the measures president Bush supports to increase home ownership among low income families provides more ground to that common wisdom. Part of an ideologically coherent neo-liberal project linked to the concept of “ownership society,” the push for an increase in home ownership rates is part of a coalition-building strategy that, conservatives hope, could convince more members of ethnic and racial minorities to support the Republican Party. Meanwhile, federal inaction regarding public housing is an enduring source of policy drift that contributes to a deterioration of the low-income housing in the US. The White House’s almost exclusive focus on home ownership is unlikely to improve that situation. Implicitly, the dominant neo-liberal framing processes regarding possessive individualism and private property legitimizes the absence of reform in the field of *public* housing. From this perspective, a coherent neo-liberal discourse can legitimize policy drift. In the case of housing policy, the widely held belief that social policies have “perverse effects” that *create* social problems (Somers and Block, 2005) may reinforce the neo-liberal case for legislative inaction and, implicitly, policy drift.

Pensions

As in the UK, the US public pension system is relatively modest in scope. This system is divided into two main parts: federal old age, survivors, and disability insurance (OASDI)—an earnings-related pension scheme similar to the pre-1986 SERPS; and, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), an income-tested federal assistance program covering poor elderly citizens not entitled to OASDI benefits. Additionally, tax-subsidized private pension schemes cover less than 40% of the working population. These private schemes take various forms, from defined-benefit plans to individual savings accounts (Sass, 1997).

Enacted in 1935, OASDI is commonly referred to as Social Security. As opposed to SERPS, which was enacted only in 1975, Social Security was a mature pay-as-you-go program when Reagan came to power. This means that Social Security had created powerful constituencies supporting its preservation (Pratt, 1976). Yet, this popular program faced significant fiscal problems years before the election of Reagan. During the mid-1970s, stagflation and an overly generous indexation system enacted under the Nixon presidency

negatively impacted the actuarial situation of the program. In 1977, Congress passed legislation that modified the indexation system and increased tax rates to prevent fiscal imbalance in Social Security (Snee and Ross, 1978). Six years later, the Reagan administration made several strategic mistakes when dealing with the emergence of a new fiscal imbalance in that popular program (Stockman, 1986). To avoid being blamed for attacking what has long been perceived as “the third rail of American politics,” Reagan launched a bipartisan commission that finally issued a report in early 1983. This report did not contain radical proposals similar to Thatcher’s 1985 project to dismantle SERPS (National Commission on Social Security Reform, 1983). Later that year, Congress enacted technical changes—for example new payroll tax increases—in order to solve the short-term fiscal crisis in Social Security. Additionally, the 1983 legislation made provisions for a rise in retirement age from 65 to 67 that would gradually take effect between the years 2000 and 2022 (Light, 1995). Overall, the Reagan administration and Republican members of Congress proved unable to pursue a radical reform agenda similar to Thatcher’s.

Although economic growth and the content of the 1983 reform improved the fiscal situation of Social Security during the rest of the 1980s and most of the 1990s, conservatives organized to erode support for that program (Teles, 1998). Adopting a “Leninist strategy,” conservative experts and politicians supported the enactment of new fiscal incentives that would promote the expansion of private savings and financial investment (Butler and Germanis, 1984). Since the 1980s, the US witnessed the swift growth of 401(k)s and other tax-sponsored savings schemes in a context where many employers moved away from traditional define benefit plans in order to shift economic risks from the firm to workers (Hacker, 2002).¹² In the long run, this clear example of institutional layering could further diffuse the “financial culture” among the middle class while reducing the support for Social Security among wealthier citizens. An optimistic discourse about the rewards of personal investment legitimizes such institutional layering through rhetoric about the virtues of “popular finance” (Teles, 1998). Ever-present in the mass media and the financial sector’s advertising campaigns, “popular finance” is an optimistic, neo-liberal frame rooted in possessive individualism and the cult of private ownership. From this perspective, institutional layering is not only related to the economic interests of the financial sector and the strategies of political actors who attempt to reduce middle

¹² In 2003, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) “insured about 29,500 single-employer defined benefit plans, down from an all-time high of 112,000 plans in 1985. This decline primarily reflects a large number of terminations among small plans” (PBGC, 2003: 11).

class support for Social Security; it is rooted in coherent neo-liberal paradigm and frame that constitute the foundation to what would become known as the “ownership society.” Like in the UK, the promotion of such a neo-liberal platform involves value amplification, as US neo-liberals frame personal ownership as a supremely positive value that always brings emancipation, freedom, and economic prosperity to ordinary people.

Ironically, it was under the democratic presidency of William Clinton that the push for “Social Security privatization” finally gained much political ground. In the US, this expression refers to a shift from state-guaranteed, defined-benefit pensions to defined-contribution, individual savings accounts. Like in the UK, full privatization constitutes a highly problematic option for policy-makers because current workers would have to finance the pensions of current Social Security beneficiaries and, at the same time, save for their own retirement. Because of this “double payment problem,” partial privatization—diverting only a fraction of the pension contributions to personal savings accounts—has increasingly been perceived as a more realistic policy option in the 1990s (Derthick, 2001; Weaver, 2005). Exceptional stock market performances and the multiplication of tax-sponsored private savings schemes created greater financial optimism which, in turn, provided conservatives with new ideological ammunition to construct the need to reform Social Security. In the conservative discourse about Social Security privatization, the idea that this program is a “bad investment” for workers is crucial. From this perspective, the carving of personal savings accounts out of the existing program would enrich workers through significantly higher returns (e.g. Ferrara and Tanner, 1998). Conservatives used reforms enacted during the 1980s in Chile and the UK to legitimize financial optimism and stress the administrative feasibility of their proposals (Béland and Waddan, 2000; Piñera, 1996). In addition to this rhetoric about financial optimism, conservatives used growing fears about the negative fiscal consequences of demographic aging to argue that only the advent of a fully funded program would “save Social Security.” At that time as today, framing privatization as an attempt to “save Social Security” proved crucial considering the popularity of the program and the apparent power of the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP). Yet, for privatizers, saving Social Security meant altering the very nature of that program. Left-leaning activists, scholars, and politicians depicted that conservative project as a way to destroy genuine economic security and transfer financial risks from the state to individuals (e.g. Baker and Weisbrot, 1999; Skidmore, 1999).

In the late 1990s, Clinton's increasingly opposed privatization and, on the Republican side, the acute perception of electoral risks stemming from that policy alternative prevented reform (Weaver, 2005). Yet, the intense debate over Social Security privatization that took place at that moment paved the way to George W. Bush's campaign to transform Social Security into a neo-liberal scheme coherent with possessive individualism, personal ownership, and the financial logic of contemporary capitalism. As early as the spring of 2000, presumed republican nominee George W. Bush endorsed the partial privatization of Social Security "saying that he favored permitting individuals to invest a portion of their Social Security payroll tax" (Derthick, 2001: 208). Once in power, the new Republican president appointed a commission on Social Security reform (*Strengthening Social Security and Creating Wealth for all Americans*) composed of individuals who all supported several key principles consistent with the president's neo-liberal vision (Weaver, 2005). The day he launched that commission, the president made it clear that Social Security reform should reinforce personal ownership and possessive individualism: "Personal savings accounts will transform Social Security from a government IOU into personal property and real assets; property that workers will own in their own names and that they can pass along to their children. Ownership, independence, access to wealth should not be the privilege of a few. They're the hope of every American, and we must make them the foundation of Social Security" (Bush, 2001). This populist *and* neo-liberal rhetoric is analogous to Thatcher's "popular capitalism" creed. In framing ownership, independence, and access to wealth as closely-related principles all citizens should benefit from, the president attempts to construct Social Security privatization as a source of economic emancipation for the population as a whole. This form of value amplification transforms ownership as one of the most positive principles of US society. This embellished and elevated principle, related to core "American values" like independence and self-reliance, legitimizes the neo-liberal policy alternatives stemming from it. Social Security privatization is among these principles. Because those who support privatization face accusations of working for the "special interests" of Wall Street, linking this policy alternative to the idea of ownership as personal emancipation constitutes an attempt to convince ordinary citizens that they (and not only Wall Street) have an interest in supporting privatization.

The potential effectiveness of this discourse about personal ownership as emancipation is related to financial optimism and concrete stock-market performances. This means that excellent

stock-market performances, like those witnessed during the 1990s, potentially makes this discourse more attractive and realistic to citizens. Unfortunately for privatizers, the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the following downfall in stock-market performances reduced the visibility of and the short-term support for Social Security reform (Béland, 2005). When the presidential commission published its report in December 2001, Social Security reform had become a marginal issue on the federal policy agenda. It is only the gradual return to financial and economic prosperity in 2004 that helped move this issue back onto the federal agenda. At that moment, this issue became an explicit and central element of president Bush's discourse about the "ownership society" (e.g. *The Economist*, 2004).

During the 2004 presidential race, president Bush aggressively supported partial Social Security privatization as a central aspect of his "ownership society" platform. Like Thatcher's, his rhetoric about ownership is grounded in the idea that private property and personal savings represent the best—and the most legitimate—source of security for the individual. For conservatives, Social Security privatization has long been part of a broader neo-liberal agenda that aims at fighting economic redistribution while increasing the reliance of citizens and workers on individualistic, market-based forms of protection (Quadagno, 1999). "I think government ought to promote an ownership society. We ought to encourage more people to own their own home, encourage entrepreneurs to be able to take risk and own their own business -- and in this case, encourage Americans from all walks of life, if they so choose, to manage their own retirement account" (Bush, 2005a). As mentioned above, this discourse is strikingly similar to Thatcher's neo-liberal rhetoric about personal ownership and the virtues of possessive individualism used to justify both housing and pension privatization in the 1980s. More specifically, this discourse frames ownership as a source of personal autonomy while stressing the idea that citizens should take control over "their own" economic destiny instead of depending on unreliable state-managed programs like Social Security. Instead of directly attacking the redistributive nature of Social Security, the president draws on cultural representations about the virtues of personal autonomy and risk-taking without acknowledging that the triumph of personal ownership could actually undermine the economic security of specific segments of the population. Another aspect of Bush's ideological campaign is an appeal to personal gain ever-present in Thatcher's rhetoric and in the US conservative discourse that has promoted Social Security privatization since the 1990s. "One, the government does a lousy job on getting a good

rate of return on your money. As a matter of fact, people calculate that in the Social Security system you earn about 1.8 percent on your money. That's not a very good deal. You see, if you have a personal savings account, you could do a lot better than 1.8 percent. A conservative mix of bonds and stocks, you can get up to 7 percent or 8 percent" (Bush, 2005b). This discourse reinforces the neo-liberal wisdom that "big government" is inefficient, and that individuals could do better on their own. For president Bush and his conservative allies, the state is mainly there to promote possessive individualism and personal responsibility, and the partial transformation of Social Security into a system of individual savings accounts would correspond to that neo-liberal mission. Once again, this anti-statist rhetoric emanating from the top national elected official is strikingly similar to Thatcherism's crusade against the "nanny state." Yet, such framing processes alone cannot lead to reform; powerful economic and institutional factors like changing stock-market performances and the existence of an army of beneficiaries fighting against path-departing reforms can prevent their enactment despite the powerful rhetoric surrounding them.

The truth is that, even with the ideological dominance of neo-liberalism and possessive individualism, as well as the massive development of tax-sponsored savings schemes in the private sector, president Bush faces strong opposition to his proposal to allow individuals to divert some of their payroll tax contributions into personal savings accounts. Feminist groups, labor unions, the AARP, and the Democratic Party still oppose Social Security privatization. For many of these actors, the true issue at stake is not the restoration of "American values" through Social Security privatization but the declining confidence in a program that actually works. Against the individualistic rhetoric concerning "American values" and the virtues of personal ownership, they tend to frame Social Security as a great national "success story," while framing the need to reshape it is a pure ideological construction, a "phony crisis." (Baker and Weisbrot, 1999) Counter to the idea that privatization would benefit everyone, supporters of Social Security argue that privatization would hurt most women, African-Americans, and low-income citizens (Béland, 2005). Perhaps more importantly, despite genuine demographic fears about the future of the program, public support for privatization remains limited (Cook, Barabas and Page, 2002). And, even if they have a significant majority in Congress, Republicans fall short of the 60-vote threshold that would allow them to dominate the Senate and avoid Democratic filibuster.

For these reasons, political risks stemming from Social Security privatization have not declined and Democrats are still willing to use the fight to preserve Social Security as a powerful

electoral weapon against Republicans (Weaver, 2005). Democrats, although critical of the potentially regressive nature of the president's "ownership society," seldom question possessive individualism and the cult of personal ownership at the center of his framing strategies. Paradoxically, scandals like Enron have undermined the confidence in big business and financial capitalism.¹³ This is perhaps why the president and his conservative allies focus so much on small businesses and personal ownership in an economic system that is still dominated by large firms (e.g. Meeks, DeCastro and Meyer, 2002). As shown above, such populist focus on personal ownership and possessive individualism is what unites Thatcherism and president's Bush "ownership society." Only time will tell how much the latter will prove successful for increasing the influence of possessive individualism in US society. In the field of pensions, the growth of tax-sponsored savings schemes in the private sector may increasingly clash with the redistributive logic of Social Security. This could undermine the support for that program among the investing middle class, who may view Social Security privatization and the related "ownership society" platform as potential sources of financial gain and economic freedom. The ongoing, tax-sponsored expansion of defined contribution pensions and savings schemes in the private sector is a form of layering that is favoring a concrete, incremental expansion of the "ownership society" that may erode the institutional and ideological foundations of Social Security, a program based on the idea of social rights and guaranteed protection (Hacker, 2004).

Conclusion

The present contribution has underlined the central role of personal ownership and possessive individualism in the current neo-liberal attempt to restructure modern social policy and encourage the spreading of financial capitalism. From this perspective, Thatcher's and Bush's discourses on social policy privatization are strikingly similar, as they both stress the virtues of possessive individualism and financial investment to undermine support for redistributive social programs like public housing, SERPS, and US Social Security. This ideological convergence between Thatcherism and the "ownership society" platform is not surprising considering that possessive individualism is at the core of neo-liberalism, and that the cultural repertoires of both countries feature the cult of personal ownership prominently.

¹³ A recent Gallup Survey shows that, besides HMOs, big business is the least trusted institution in US society (Saad, 2005).

Overall, this analysis underlines the crucial role of ideas and frames in the construction of reform imperatives and in the elaboration of a coherent reform agenda. Ideas and frames constitute important technical and cultural resources for political actors, they help put together coherent reform proposals, and, they participate in the social construction of the need to reform. Such ideational forces are embedded in long-term historical processes that shape cultural repertoires that actors must draw upon in order to convince the public to support their proposals. Furthermore, policy ideas and frames take their meaning in broad institutional contexts, and the study of ideational politics must take into account factors like policy feedback discussed in the historical institutionalist literature. Finally, ideational analysis would gain much from bridging the political science literature on policy paradigms and the sociological literature on framing processes. For example, the present article has evidenced the central role of value amplification in framing processes emanating not from social movements but from top elected officials. Value amplification is a major ideational construction that political scientists and sociologists interested in policy-making must take seriously.

The argument of the article regarding the central role of ideational processes is not that ideas and frames constitute the main cause of institutional change. What this paper suggests is that ~~the~~ taking these processes seriously can shed crucial light on the content of, the cultural meaning of and the institutional and ideological rationale for policy reform. In the two above case studies, ideational analysis *supplemented* the analysis of institutional legacies and vested interests that impact policy outcomes. If ideational processes can become the locus of institutional change (e.g. Cox, 2001; Schmidt, 2002a), it is not even necessary to formulate strict causal arguments about them to make a strong case for ideational analysis as a much needed complementary perspective that can aid in understanding what policy debates and policy alternatives are really about. Focusing solely on outcomes and causal models may prevent sociologists and political scientists from grasping the true cultural and ideological meaning of political and economic forces affecting policy reform and institutional change.

From this perspective, what the present article calls for is the beginning of a more direct dialogue between historical institutionalism and ideational analysis, both in political science and in sociology. This dialogue has already begun (Schmidt, forthcoming), and this article has shown how the study of ideas and frames can successfully complement the insight of historical institutionalism without challenging this approach's core assumptions about the structuring

impact of policy legacies and formal political institutions. Although recent theories of institutional change improve our understanding of public policy restructuring, such theories would gain from paying greater attention to ideas and frames. The above empirical analysis suggests that, while essential to the understanding of institutional revision, the systematic analysis of ideas and frames can also shed greater light on processes like layering and policy drift. Overall, ideas give sense to the interests and institutional processes that affect policy-making. For these reasons, even in situations where ideas and frames alone could hardly cause institutional change, neglecting ideational processes could leave many crucial aspects of policy-making in the dark.

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