State Ethics in Practice
An Analytical Framework for the Causal Assessment of Migration Policies

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Abstract
So far scholars investigating the determinants of migration policies – referred here as the broad set of measures including both immigrants’ admission and integration in the host society – have favored exogenous accounts, paying special attention to the role played by external factors in constraining state action towards international migration. Notwithstanding the valuable insights offered, the current theoretical apparatus lacks of a point of view on the process of policymaking and overlooks the role played by ideational factors. Moving from constructivist-institutionalist assumptions, this article contributes to fill such gaps by offering an alternative analytical framework. The explanatory model presented introduces the concept of state ethics – conceived as the configuration of ideas underlying the policymaking process – and provides theoretical and methodological insights for an endogenous account of migration policies.

“If as Louis Wirth (1936) once said: ‘most important thing to know about a man is what he takes for granted’, the most important things to know about a society and its politics are its prevailing assumptions” (Mehta, 2011:45)
Introduction

International migration represents a structural dimension of an increasingly globalized world. More and more people leave their countries looking for better living conditions: they flee from wars and persecutions, they cross the borders to rejoin family members or to start a new family, they migrate to other countries to pursue professional expectations, or simply, a higher salary. At the end of 2013 the number of international migrants worldwide reached 232 million, up from 175 million in 2000 and 154 million in 1990 (UN, 2013). The increasing human mobility across states constitutes one of the most crucial challenges for the current politics all over the world, and especially for receiving countries. These – for most western states – set the “rules of the game” of international migration: they decide who enters, how many, and under what conditions; but also they determine which and how many rights are granted to immigrants living within their borders. The spectrum of admission and integration policies deployed by western states is highly heterogeneous. The attitude toward international migration varies considerably across countries and according to the specific policy-domain taken into account. Family reunification is easier in “new” immigration countries as Italy and Spain, rather than in “traditional” ones as France or the UK. Labour market mobility of foreign workers is promoted in Portugal while it is strongly penalized in Greece. Naturalization procedure is simple and fast in Sweden, while in Austria is long, burdensome and expensive. Why is that so? Why some countries make the knowledge of national language an indispensable requisite for entrance while others do not? Why, at a certain point in time, some states opt for more restrictive policies, while others do the opposite? What are the underlying reasons that account for such variation?

To answer these questions, during the last two decades, many political scientists have investigated the explanatory factors of migration and integration policies. This article addresses this branch of the literature pointing out its distinctive gaps. On this basis it is argued that in order to understand the ultimate reasons of migration policies, grasping the drivers of state action toward international migration, we should look at the ideational substratum that lies beyond the making of the policies. To this end it is proposed an analytical framework that allows for an endogenous account of migration policies relying on the concept of “state ethics”, conceived as the configuration of ideas underlying the policymaking process.

The paper is divided in four sections. The first one reviews the main theoretical contributions of the literature addressing the determinants of migration policies and it remarks the distinctive shortcomings of the current explanatory apparatus considered as a whole. Against this background, in the next section is justified the introduction of a new analytical framework for the causal assessment of migration policies based on ideational factors. Moving from the ontological and epistemological assumptions of constructivist-institutionalism it is defined the concept of state ethics and its theoretical connotations are specified in relation to actors and institutions. The third section offers methodological insights and strategies of inquiry to formulate a causal account of migration policies grounded on state ethics. The fourth section illustrates the value and the potential application of the framework proposed. Finally, concluding remarks are provided concerning the broad theoretical debate on the governance of international migration.

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1 To leave a country is, indeed, much easier than to enter another one. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own,” there is no concomitant principle to the effect that “everyone has the right to enter any country, or even some country” (Zolberg, 2012:14). On the issue of asymmetry between the right to entry and the right to exit see Cole (2006) and Goodin (1992).

2 This part is based on evidences gathered in MIPEX III. For further details see www.mipex.eu

3 The literature tends to distinguish between migration and integration policies according to the concrete phase of migration addressed. Whereas the former refer to political actions and legal arrangements concerning border control and flows management, the latter refer to policy and legal actions concerning the inclusion of immigrants in the host society. That said, in order to make the text more fluent for the reader, this article will speak of migration policies as a whole, referring to the broad set of measures deployed by a nation-state to deal with transnational migrants.
1. What about ideas? Re-assessing the explanatory debate on migration policies

The academic discussion of migration policies, in the sense of a proper theoretical stream assessing laws and measures for the governance of transnational movement of people, took form in the early 90s as a “control gap” debate (Cornelius et al., 1994) in which two main questions were disputed: the inclusionary tendency of migration policies and their (lack of) effectiveness (Boswell, 2007). Both of them were matters of academic inquiry, still it is the former that spurred more scholars’ interests, who have been striving to clarify the gap between the generally protectionist bent of public opinion and the more lenient policies that often emerge. Or, as Joppke (1998) put it: “why liberal states accept unwanted immigration”. This issue was addressed as a part of a wider theoretical discussion calling into question the sovereignty of nation-states on the threshold of the 21st century (Bonjour, 2011), in which the dominant trend in the literature was to move from the assumption that in an increased globalized world national policymakers have lost part of their power to control immigration.

This prompted scholarship on migration to look for external determinants driving state action. Most of theoretical accounts can be ascribed either to the neo-classical paradigm of political-economy or to new-institutionalist one. For authors favoring the first logic of explanation, migration policies are essentially a matter of interests; as Freeman (2002: 94) put it “immigration policy is not a morality play: it is interest-driven like most everything else.” The same author (Freeman, 1995; 2006) highlights the potential agency-effect of employers associations and ethnic lobbies in influencing various political measures targeting international migration, including: quotas for permanent residence, temporary visa, and policies addressing asylum seekers. According to this view the typical mode of migration policies is that of client politics, due to the fact that immigration produces concentrated benefits and diffuse costs in the host society: actors in which such benefits are concentrated have more incentives to put pressure on the state to get more permissive measures. Messina (2007) corroborates this line of argument with his extensive study on post WWII recruitment programs, according to which these measures came into force essentially as a response to domestic labor market interests. More recently Menz (2011) echoes the relevance of interest groups – i.e. employers’ associations, trade unions and NGOs – as potential drivers of state action towards international migration.

Other works place emphasis on the institutional context and on the role played by national and supranational institutions. Within this branch of the literature special attention is paid either to the role played by domestic institutions – conceived in terms of judiciary system, legal framework or institutional setting – or by international norms and regimes (Hollifield, 2000). Joppke (1998; 1999; 2001) illuminates on the role played by national courts and constitutional provisions in “constraining” migration policies, while Guiraudon (2001; 2003) stresses the importance of supranational decision-making “venues” to circumvent domestic constraints and thus to legitimize restrictive policy measures. Other major contributions (Sassen, 1996; Soysal, 1994) focus on international institutions and point out the role played by global political organizations (e.g. GATT, NAFTA), international regimes (e.g. Schengen, Human rights regime) and supranational actors (e.g. European Court of Justice). The supranational dimension is in the limelight of recent research in the field, especially as regards the European context: Acosta Arcarazo and Geddes (2013) as well as Bonjour and Vink (2013) underscore the importance of the emerging EU rule of law and of the European Court of Justice as essential restrictions to the member states action in the areas of return and family migration.

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4 This is obviously an oversimplification of the multifaceted theoretical context dealing with the determinants of migration policies, firstly because most of the authors offer theoretical account that reckon with both agency and institutions, and also because both political-economic and neo-institutionalist approaches represent two varied sets inside themselves. Nevertheless, for the aim of the article it is useful to describe the theoretical debate about migration polices making reference to the dichotomy agency/structure.
Taken together explanatory theories belonging to both political-economic and neo-institutionalist approaches make up a valid and compelling theoretical apparatus for the causal assessment of migration policies, which emphasizes the role played by interest groups and institutional constraints in determining state action toward international migration. Still, there seem to be further room for improvement. Despite the variety of factors identified, causal explanations offered by scholars look fundamentally similar to each other: western liberal states cannot pursue their goal of restricting migrant inflows and immigrants’ rights because of the pressure of external constraints that limit their action, being such constraints conceived as interest groups or as institutions. Most explanatory theories undertake a state-external perspective according to which policy-outputs are attributed to the role exercised by exogenous factors where the state plays a marginal role or no role at all. The trend in the literature is to place the burden of explanation outside the core of the policymaking process, which is kept outside the lens of analysis (Pennix, Garces-Mascareñas and Scholten, 2005). Instead of investigating actors involved in the making of the policies and its inner dynamics, scholars prefer to focus on restrictions that weight upon such process. Most of contributions on migration policies seem more concerned with the constraints that bound choice, rather than with the content of choice itself.

This analytical perspective lacks of a point of view on the role played by ideational factors that come into play during the policymaking process. Clearly, external factors do have an influence on the policy-decision, but they represent only a part of the story. Recent studies carried out on admission and integration policies (Bonjour and Lettinga, 2012; Grillo, 2008; 2012; Riaño, 2012; Van Walsum, 2012) highlight that policymaking in these areas is also very much about ideas: beliefs, causal expectations and moral assumptions held by the policymaker have a crucial effect in determining the concrete character of the policy.

In summary, notwithstanding the valuable insights offered, the current explanatory apparatus lacks of a point of view on the process of policymaking and overlooks the role played by ideas. Such remarks call for a constructivist-institutionalist approach applied to the study of migration policies. Emerged from the “ideational turn” that took place at the end of the 80s in political sciences (Campbell, 2002), this theoretical paradigm places the analytical lens inside the policymaking process and accounts for policies relying on the explanatory power of ideas. The academic debate on migration policies seems to have remained impervious to the theoretical insights brought by such turn happened in political studies. The analytical framework illustrated in the following section makes a step further in this direction and, moving from constructivist-institutionalism’s assumptions, aims at overcoming the limits of the current explanatory backdrop of migration policies.

2. An analytical framework to assess the causal role of state ethics in migration policies

Hereinafter it is described an analytical framework for the causal assessment of migration policies relying on an endogenous account of ideational factors. First of all are clarified the theoretical assumptions on which the framework is built (a). Moving from such premises it is defined the construct of “state ethics” in relation to the policymaking process in the area of migration (b). To conclude, the section identifies the other constitutive element of the framework – i.e. actors and institutional context – delineating their respective roles (c).

5 In her famous article, Christina Boswell (2007) offers an alternative theoretical account. However the value of her contribution lies more in pinpointing the limits of political-economic and neo-institutionalist accounts, rather than in addressing the distinctive gaps of the explanatory framework of migration policies as a whole. In particular, while offering a new “inner” perspective of the state, her theory of the functional imperatives of the state overlooks the potential role played by ideational factors.

6 These studies are mainly oriented toward empirical inquiry and even if they offer precious insights in this sense, their value lies more in spotting the limits of the mainstream theoretical accounts of migration polices, rather than in offering a renewed theoretical conceptualization.

7 Outstanding exceptions are represented by the works of Bonjour (2011) and Vollmer (2014).
**a) Theoretical foundation of the framework. Placing states ethics in the world of ideas**

The analytical framework proposed in this section is rooted in constructivist-institutionalism, a theoretical paradigm that emerged in the last decade to overcome the limits of the older forms of neo-institutionalism. These explain action in institutions according to a rule-follow logic centered on the role played by external structures. Thus, historical institutionalism focuses on the “path” influence of enduring structures, while rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism stress the role played by the context (respectively conceived in terms of incentive structures and cultural norms). According to these perspectives the agency turns out to be subordinated to structure and institutional change tend to be explained only in terms of exogenous shocks altering structural conditions. To ride over these limits some scholars turned their attention toward ideational factors and bring about the stance of constructivist-institutionalism.

To date have been developed different constructs to define ideas as an empirical object of analysis and as an independent explanatory factor: in its seminal work Sabatier (1987: 660) advanced the concept of “belief system” as a “set of basic values, causal assumption, and problem perceptions”, while more recently Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss (2015:214) define ideas as causal “belief held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their attitudes and actions. These are just a few examples of an extended literature comprising different branches of knowledge in which a broad variety of ideational factors are identified depending on their inner qualities and/or on their level of abstraction.

Despite the variety of ideational factors identified, scholars embracing this paradigm share the belief that an endogenous account based on ideas helps to explain how and why public actors bring about institutional change through public action (Schmidt, 2010). This argument is grounded on precise ontological assumptions, concerning the nature of institutions and its underlying relationship between actors and structures. Institutions are conceived both as given structures influencing the action of political actors, and as contingent entities resulting from the action of political actors. Institutional genesis and transformation are not the result of external “pressures” determined by structural conditions (however conceived), but rather they result from the interactive process between actors and structures in which a key role is played by ideas. Ideas make institutions persists or change by orienting actors’ action, and thus they are acknowledged as a primary source of political action. Moving from these assumptions it is introduced the concept of state ethics.

**b) Defining state ethics in migration policies**

State ethics as regard migration policies is defined as “the configuration of ideas that come into play in the policymaking process in the area of migration”. Insofar this theoretical construct aims at explaining specific policy-outputs the policymaking process is circumscribed to the stages of agenda-setting, policy formulation and decision-making (Jann and Wegrich, 2007). That is, from the moment in which a political matter is acknowledged to the moment in which policymakers take a decision about the course of action to undertake (usually coinciding with the parliamentary agreements or government’s approval of a concrete measure).

8 Other scholars (Fischer, 2003; Schmidt, 2008; 2010) extend the epistemological and analytical scope of constructivist-institutionalism to discourse. This, along ideas with ideas is understood as independent causal factor affecting institutional transformation. For the aims of this article constructivism-institutionalism is conceived exclusively in its ideational meaning centered on the role of ideas.

9 The relevance of ideas as a major factor in politics is increasingly acknowledged across different domains of social sciences: from political science (Béland, 2006; Schmidt, 2010), to political sociology (Bleich, 2003; Lieberman, 2011) and international relations (Parsons, 2011; Wendt, 1998).

10 In agreement with the branch of the literature addressed, which investigates the underlying factors of policy outputs, the stages of policy implementation and policy evaluation are kept out from the analytical focus. For interesting insights about these stages of the policy cycle in the area of migration see Düvell and Jordan (2003), Triandafyllidou (2003), and Zincone and Caponio (2006).
State ethics pertains to the world of ideas inasmuch it is defined as a combination of different ideational factors. These are identified combining two different criteria: the intrinsic value of ideas and their function.11

The first criterion allows distinguishing normative and descriptive ideas, each one representing a specific category including different subcategories. Normative ideas include a) moral goods, b) moral understandings and c) moral assumptions. The former refer to the specific good pursued through a concrete measure dealing with migration (e.g. equality is used to be called into question to justify the extension of voting rights to immigrants’ population). Moral understandings regard the way through which either a moral good or a concrete issue are understood among all their possible meanings. Think about the different conceptions of the “proper” migrant family to be ensured through reunification procedures. Lastly, moral assumptions refer to the priority ascribed either to a moral good over another (e.g. to give moral priority to equality over individual liberty) or to a concrete moral understanding over another (e.g. to attribute more importance to equality of opportunities over equality of treatment; or to give moral priority to traditional union over same-sex union in the conception of the family). Descriptive ideas can be divided into two distinct subcategories: d) cognitive perceptions, which captures an aspect of the state of the world (e.g. a belief that inequality between natives and immigrants is high) and e) causal assumptions, which refer to a causal relationship among parameters (e.g. the belief that increased border enforcement reduces landing of illegal immigrants).

The second criterion differentiates ideas according to their function. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between i) policy solutions, ii) problem definitions and iii) public philosophies. When they take the form of policy solutions, ideas are propositions of varying degree of complexity that are advanced by different institutions, groups and individuals to handle a specific matter. Think about different policy-solutions undertaken by national policymakers to face the current refugee crisis, which go from the build of refugee camps to coordinated resettlement. As problem definitions, ideas operate by framing a given situation according to specific terms and defining the range of alternatives to be taken (e.g. the “immigration-problem”, due to a rapid growth of inflows, can be framed either as a matter of welfare, or as labor market issue, or as security concern). Finally, at a broader level ideational factors can take the shape of public philosophies. These meta-ideas refer to broad political, cultural, social, or economic assumptions that prevail in a given society and in its politics at a given moment in time. Due to the extension of their scope, which goes beyond the boundaries of political arena to capture some of the distinctive traits of a society in a specific historical moment, it is hard to specify the theoretical connotations of this category; indeed, different public philosophies could be identified according to the specific level of analysis undertaken. To better clarify this category the concepts of “national mood” (Kingdom, 1984), “policy paradigms” (Hall, 1993), and zeitgeist (Mehta, 2011) could be referred to as a way of example.

On the whole, this typology allows identifying the set of ideas which constitutes state ethics as a potential object of empirical inquiry. As a compound-ideational factor, state ethics channels political action toward certain causal possibilities instead of others, towards specific goods to be pursued and provides a basis for a value assessment of events as well as for policy solutions. Still, in line with constructivist-institutionalism – especially as recently pinpointed by scholarship (Béland and Cox, 2011; Mehta, 2011; Hay, 2006; Saurugger, 2013; Schmidt, 2008; 2010) – an endogenous account of policies that relies on ideational factors is inseparable from a careful consideration of actors that take part in the policy process and of the institutional context in which the process unfolds.

11 This typology takes the cue from the works of Bleich (2003) and Mehta (2011), combining and adjusting respective categorizations to the case of migration policies. The two criteria chosen are not mutually excluding, but still complementary to each other. The ultimate purpose is to provide a novel taxonomy embracing different ideational factors pointed out by the literature.
c) Actors and institutions in migration policy-area: carriers and constraints of state ethics

It is an undisputed matter in the literature that although the arena of domestic politics remains the fulcrum of policymaking in the area of migration, this is placed in a broader and diversified context of governance in which different actors come into play at both local and supranational level (Bauböck and Guiraudon, 2009; Pennix, Garces-Mascareñas and Scholten, 2005). Thus, in the current scenario of multilevel governance of migration it is possible to identify several state and non-state actors, characterized by different ranges of action. The set of state-actors includes legislative and executive entities involved in the policymaking process in the area of migration (e.g. ministries and other governments representatives, members of the parliament, parliamentary work-units and commissions), as well as judiciary courts, which at some point can intervene in the process by means of specific judgments addressing migration issue. Among non-state actors it is worth differentiating between domestic actors (i.e. NGOs, immigrant associations, ethnic lobbies, employers associations, trade unions, experts and think thanks specialized in the field of migration) and supranational actors (i.e.: international organizations and NGOs, supranational institutions). Political parties deserve a special mention as long as they cut across the categories of state/non-state actors depending on the specific role they play and on the concrete position they hold in domestic politics at a precise moment in time. Actors can bear upon the policymaking process either on their own or by forming networks and coalitions, giving rise to a different typology of agents. To this regard, depending on the type of actors involved and the nature of their ties, the literature speaks of policy networks (Marin and Mayntz, 1991), advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) or epistemic communities (Haas, 1992).

Actors and networks of actors represent active carriers of ideational factors. This means that their “use” of ideas can be either sincerely committed or rationalized and strategic. In this sense the agency is conceived beyond the traditional dichotomy “ideas vs. material interests” (Saurugger, 2013; Schmidt, 2011), so that ideas can either represent the motives for action or be used for strategic purposes to cover other reasons. The relevance of each actor or each network of actors is strictly related to the specific domain of policymaking and their impact on the decision-making process is strongly influenced by their coalition building capacity and by the institutional context (Menz, 2011).

Political action takes place within a particular structural context (material resources, historical institutions and cultural norms) that favors some courses of action over others. Here special attention is given to political institutions (Lieberman, 2011) as made by the set of rules, procedures, organizational structures and power-relationships which frame the political setting where the policy process takes place. Thus, for instance, the constitutional design and provisions the specific type of polities, the electoral system and the overall legislative framework (Jann and Wegrich, 2007) are considered. The institutional context in force at the moment in which policy process takes place represents the framework of opportunities and limitations for both ideational diffusion and actors’ action. Taking Schmidt's distinction between “simple” and “compound” polities, as regards the degree of dispersion of governing activity, it is reasonable to expect that the constellation of actors involved in the policy process in “simple polities” will be narrower that in “compound polities”. And this, obviously, has an impact on the types and variety of ideas that come into play.

Sharpening the analytical focus on the policy process draws the attention to the inner elements of the policymaking process and to their reciprocal interplay. While ideas provides motives for action, the way through which ideational factors can determine the final policy-choice are strictly related to the constellation of actors involved in the policy process – to their “use” of ideas – as well as to the framework of opportunities and limitations given by the institutional context.\[12\]

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\[12\] See the Annex for a sketch of the overall framework.
3. Empirical challenges and methodological insights

State ethics guides the action of the actors involved in the policymaking process by helping them to specify goals, to define problems, to interpret the context and, ultimately, to elaborate strategies of action. According to such standpoint a causal argument based on state ethics is an account that explains a given policy-choice by reference to ideational factors that come into play during the policy process in the area of migration. The matter at stake is to find evidence that given ideational factors are both external and antecedent to the policy-decision they aims to explain, capturing if there are stable and durable ideas over time and if they truly affect the final policy choice.

That means to establish either whether their transformation makes policies to change, or their endurance is a condition of policy continuity. Such aim poses specific challenges in terms of empirical inquiry: a causal argument based on ideational factors requires evidences i) that a specific configuration of ideational factors – a particular state ethics – is held by policy actors involved in the policy process (i.e. measurement of state ethics as an independent variable), ii) that the set of ideational elements identified are causally linked to the final policy output (i.e. verification of the causal mechanism), and iii) that such elements are not reducible to structural features related to of the circumstances of policymaking (i.e. exogeneity of the independent variable). To face these challenges some methodological insights are provided.

The first issue brings to the operationalization procedure. In order to empirically assess state ethics the focus has to be placed on political discourse. Policymaking is a social practice with a discursive basis: eventually it is through written and spoken words that actors carry out the policymaking process and it is by means of discourse that they legitimize and justify their decisions (Campbell, 2002; Jacobs, 2009). Here discourse constitutes the empirical substratum through which gather ideas held by the policy actors.13 It is by analyzing statements of the actors involved in the policy process that it is possible to capture ideas held by the policy actors and to identify those that influence the final policy decision. For such aim scholars rely on content analysis and draw on a variety of data (e.g. parliamentary debates, official reports, press release, etc.) gathered combing different techniques (archival research and interviews). Yet, political discourse may not always reflect sincere moral thoughts and cognitive criteria, but may serve as a post-hoc justification hiding different reasons. In order to reduce the risk of strategic behavior the analysis should account for context in which the discourse takes place, or, to say with George and Bennett’s (2005:100) “who is speaking to whom, for what purpose and under what circumstances”. In particular, special attention should be paid to what Schmidt (2008) defines the coordinative discourse, which usually takes place among political actors in private settings. In such conditions political discourse can serve not only as a measure of the independent variable, illuminating about the configuration of ideas held by the policy actors, but it can also provide significant insights as regards the underlying causal mechanism.

The second empirical challenge concerns precisely the latter: the difficulty of providing evidence about the causal mechanism linking ideas and final policy-choice. This is because the causal mechanism at stake takes places inside the ‘black box’ of individual mind; even though the researcher can prove that actors possess certain ideas, the intrapersonal nature of much of the causal process makes it hard to establish that actors effectively apply such elements to the policy-decision being explained (Jacobs, 2013). Moreover it is reasonable to expect a high correlation between ideas and material interests. And this refers to the last empirical challenge pointed out concerning the exogeneity of the independent variable.

13 In the present paper political discourse is acknowledged only as the means through which analyze underlying ideational factors. In this sense ‘ideas’ and ‘discourse’ are kept separated inasmuch it is assumed that they pertain to two distinct categories, respectively that of ‘mind’ and that of ‘language’. Other scholars have a more fundamental view of discourse and conceived it as a meta-category of politics constituting the very meanings upon which ideational factors are constructed, as well as other kind institutions (Fischer, 2003; Schmidt, 2008; 2010).
Taken together these issues make the case for process tracing method and, in particular, for specific strategies of inquiry closely related to each other. The first one consists in *tracing ideas back to their origin* (a). According to the analytical framework introduced, an important way to explain how ideas exercise influence on a policy output is to show how specific actors and group of actors possessing certain ideas, bring them into the policymaking process and use them effectively. The second strategy of inquiry concerns the *identification of paths of transmission* (b), which emphasizes the salience of non-state actors in the policy process. NGOs and employers organizations, just to name but a couple of actors pointed out by the literature (Menz, 2011), usually operate outside the boundaries of parliamentary arena. Thus, a further element to improve the soundness of a causal argument based on ideas is to trace the way through which ideas enter into the policymaking arena, from the outside.

Finally, in order to minimize the risk of multicollinearity between ideational factors and structural conditions present in a given time, the analysis of actors' statements and action should be *stretched over long period of time* (c). Because ideas are relatively resistant to change it is reasonable to expect evidence of relative stability over time in both actors’ ideational commitment and in the decisions that are hypothesized to result from them, even as structural conditions change (Jacobs, 2013).

4. Value and scope of the analytical framework: reappraising the state from its ethics

Explanatory accounts that belong either to the neo-classic paradigm of political economy or to older forms of neo-institutionalism point to important determinants of migration policies, but they tend to overlook the role of ideas and the decision-making arena in which policies take shape. They address the causal explanation from an external perspective, through which state action in the area of migration is driven and “constrained” by exogenous factors. Reversing this analytical perspective, the framework introduced places the analytical lens inside policymaking process in which ideas flows, interacting with actors and with the institutional context. Institutional transformation – and thus policy-outputs – is the result of such interactive and iterative process between ideas, actors and structures in which the former play a key role, providing the motives for political action.

This is particularly true in the case of migration policies, whose genesis is characterized by high symbolic value and, often, by lack of information. International human mobility is still a phenomenon largely uncertain, especially due to unpredictability of many of its causes (interstates wars, internal insurgitations and repressions, political persecutions, natural disasters, etc.). Furthermore, the substantial interdependence of states’ emigration and immigration policies, increase the difficulty to foresee the scope and the direction of migratory flows. To this regard, several scholars pointed out that policy-responses to international migration have been often ill-informed and ill-prepared (Cornelius et al., 2004; Düvell, 2009), based on unfounded assumptions and expectations (Sciortino, 2000; Vollmer, 2014). Such lack of rationality due to scarcity of information is enhanced by the high symbolic value that characterizes “migration” issue as a political matter. This is not only for being “migration” as easily exploitable topic by political parties in electoral competition, but in the first place because under the issue of migration lies the fundamental distinction between citizens and non-citizens – between us and them – upon which rests the legitimacy of nation-state (Zolberg, 1989).

To understand the complexity of the ideational substratum that lies beyond such policymaking process it was introduced the concept of state ethics. The ideational and contextual nature of this theoretical construct makes it a difficult object for empirical analysis, but at the same time heightens its scope of application. As regard the first issue, some methodological insights have been provided relying on process tracing literature. As for the range of application of the framework, it covers the broad range of measures dealing with international migration, including policies dealing with migrants’ admission as well as those addressing immigrants’ inclusion into the host society. Yet its scope goes beyond the policymaking process that takes place at national
level and embraces the making of migration policies at both local and supranational levels. The framework, for instance, could be applied to analyse integration policies arranged at local level, as well as to study the making of European Union's Directives concerning the mobility of third-country nationals through and within Schengen area.

Although the term of “state ethics” implicitly hints at a figure of the state as a sharp and single political actor, the theoretical constructed developed shows the opposite. The “state”, addressed from the inner perspective of the policy making process, takes the shape of a conglomerate of actors and institutions, strictly connected to other non-state actors and institutions, which varies in accordance with the specific policy-domain taken into account. The pool of actors and the institutional environment that come into play in the policy process to reform family reunification procedures are not the same than those concerned when a refugee management is at stake. According to the framework of state ethics, indeed, every decision related to a particular policy-domain takes place within a specific institutional context and it involves a concrete pool of actors which varies each time depending on the coalitions building capacity of such actors, given the opportunities and limitations offered by the institutional context.

After all, this is what was expected by re-addressing the explanatory apparatus of migration policies from the perspective of constructivist-institutionalism. By gearing the analytical lens towards the process of policymaking, focusing on ideas, the figure of the “state” melts away (along with external constraints) to makes room for its ethics. Looking at state ethics let us inspect the underlying reasons of migration policies and at the same time it allows us to grasp, from time to time and for each individual case, what and who “make the state”.

5. Concluding remarks

Focusing on the role played by ideational factors, the analytical framework introduced aims at offering a richer explanatory account of migration policies. In doing so it aims at filling the gaps that characterize the explanatory apparatus as it currently stands in the literature. To this regard it is worth stressing the complementary nature of the contribution offered. Drawing on an ideational perspective to account for policy outcomes does not imply setting aside non-ideational factors. If the influence of ideas is assumed relying on constructivist-institutionalist assumptions, the way through which ideas exert their influence is strictly connected to the particular constellation of actors that take part in the policy process as well as to the specific institutional context. In order to investigate underlying reasons and explanatory factors of migration policies, rather than looking at external constraints that weigh upon the state we should focus on the ideational substratum that lies beyond policies. We should look at the set of ideas, beliefs and assumptions underlying policy process; what has been defined here as state ethics.

Truth be told, the term “state ethics” is not new in the literature on migration. On the contrary it finds large room inside the domain of political philosophy, in which scholars evaluate how state behaves toward transnational migrants, assessing the compliance of migration policies with normative principles of liberalism and democratic theory (Bader, 2005; Barry, 1986, Carens, 1987; 1996; 2013; Heath Wellman, 2008; Kukathas, 2005; Meilaender, 1999; Miller, 2008; Walzer, 1983). During the last decades political philosophers engaged in the so called field of the “ethics of migration studies” pointed out the need to ground the normative debate about migration not only on abstract principles, but also on empirical evidences regarding actual criteria that drive migration policies deployed by western states; and they underlined the need for analytical tool to pursue such aim (Bader and Engelen, 2003; Bader and Saharro, 2004; Carens, 2004; 2013; Zapata-Barrero, 2012). To this regard this article may offer interesting insights. By applying the analytical framework proposed to real policy-cases it is possible to get knowledge of the configuration of ideas that drive the making of the policy in western liberal states. This makes the case for normative assessment of existing policies that takes into consideration the relationship, and the inherent tensions, between abstract principles of freedom and equality and concrete criteria that “make” the policies. The framework proposed may represent a useful tool to link the
explanatory perspective of political scientists and the normative perspective of political philosophers, which have proceeded along separate paths in the study of migration policies. In this sense it may constitutes the first step towards a refined understanding of the relationship between ethics and politics in the area of migration, including how various ideas related to the governance of migration fit into different policy arguments and, thus, lead to concrete outputs in terms of laws. Ultimately, by making state ethics clear and evident it is possible to critically assess and rework policies on such ground.

References


Annex

An analytical framework for the causal assessment of migration policies. Theoretical elements