1. Introduction

“As politicians know only too well but social scientists too often forget, public policy is made of language. Whether in written or oral form, argument is central in all stages of the policy process.” (Majone 1989, 1)

With these words, the political economist Giandomenico Majone was one of the first to explicitly formulate the importance of language for public policy analysis. He floated the idea that policy-making was never purely a question of simply finding solutions for policy problems by following formal techniques or scientific data analysis; in order to bring people around to their position, policy actors had to persuade them by using clear and relevant arguments.

Nowadays, these insights can be considered common sense. As a result of the ‘linguistic turn’ initiated by philosophers in the second half of the 20th century, analysing the role of language, discourse, narrative structures or rhetorical tools is today an essential part of most social sciences, including policy research. In revisiting the Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis, which they had themselves initiated in 1993, Frank Fischer and Herbert Gottweis recently remarked that this postpositivist perspective on policy-making has developed into one of the competing theoretical perspectives in policy research (2012, 1). They however noted that, within this perspective, attention slightly shifted from ‘argumentation’ to ‘discourse’ as unit of analysis. ‘Discourse’, being the larger of the two terms, can be seen as a broad set of ideas, which shapes concrete argumentative utterances within policy debates, while ‘argumentation’ is necessary in order to express
and communicate a certain discourse during all stages of the policy process. Considering the interdependence of argumentation and discourse during policy debates, it is surprising that many discourse-oriented policy studies focus their analysis on either final policy texts as the outcome of policy-making processes or on initial policy statements of clearly defined interest groups, who provide input into policy decisions. Instead of studying argumentative exchanges during policy debates, these studies treat policy-making as a black box, whose input defines its output and whose internal processes do not need to be considered in order to understand how final policy texts come to be about. At the same time, those studies, which do focus on the performative dimension of policy discourse and policy-making by analysing the argumentative struggles and competing discourses that lead to policy results, often lack a clear methodological framework that would allow for the assessment of both discursive utterances and dynamic interactions of policy actors at the same time.

It is, therefore, the objective of this paper to propose theoretical and methodological reflections about the possibility to conduct discourse-oriented policy analysis, which pays attention not only to policy discourse but also to the processes of policy-making, the multiple involved actors and their argumentative strategies. For that purpose, it elaborates a methodological approach that combines Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA), as developed by the Dutch scholar Marteen Hajer, with the conceptual ideas of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law for the study of creation processes in scientific laboratories. While the first approach allows us to assess argumentative structures and discursive exchanges leading to a dominant policy discourse, the latter is chosen in order to ‘follow’ the policy actors and to observe the creation of temporary power relationships through interaction. The recourse to Actor-Network Theory enables the researcher to meticulously track the behaviour, statements and ideas of policy actors as well as the ‘actions’ of all other elements that impact policy procedures.

The proposed methodological combination can, however, not aim at solving the problem of how to analyse policy and policy change in the full complexity of all its aspects; it is rather conceived as an attempt to draw the attention on the subject of the policy actors and their interactions, and, in that way, identify moments, when collective discourse shifts thanks to new elements in the argumentations among individuals.¹

¹ The theoretical and methodological reflections are part of an ongoing research on the policy-making processes within UNESCO and its elaboration of a policy discourse on the Information Society. Up to now, the research on international communication policies, in particular concerning digital technology and the Internet, has not often been connected to methodological reflections on discourse or decision-making processes in different moments of policy planning. Among the few exceptions stands out the recent examples of Dmitri Epstein’s discourse analytical research on the language applied in Internet Governance debates (2010, 2011) and Sandra Braman’s analysis of the interference of technical and legal decision-making for the Internet (2010; 2012). Both authors focus on discussion processes and the vocabulary applied in spoken and written debates as key to the understanding of their outcomes.
2. Approaching policy as discourse

Frank Fischer and John Forester launched the idea that, instead of facts and scientific evidence, it is often the commonly accepted interpretation and concrete formulation of a problem that eventually influence policy proposals. Indeed, during any policy process, competing formulations of a problem are tested and discussed by all involved actors in order to structure a policy problem and to propose corresponding solutions. The arguments and problem definitions shaped during these debates are, therefore, not simply rhetorical exercises; they are rather expressions about competing visions of the problem itself and the world in general (Dunn 2003:72). Hence, linguistic or textualizing approaches to public policy cannot be considered as an “attempt to reduce social phenomena to various concrete manifestations of language. Rather it is an attempt to analyze the interpretations governing policy thinking” (Shapiro 1989, 71).

Based on their idea that policy thinking is influenced by the definitions, notions and frames through which policy actors try to make sense of social, economic or political problems, Fischer and Forester described policy-making as:

“a constant discursive struggle over the criteria of social classification, the boundaries of problem categories, the intersubjective interpretation of common experiences, the conceptual framing of problems, and the definition of ideas that guide the ways people create the shared meanings which motivate them to act” (Fischer and Forester 1993:2, our emphasis).

It was mostly thanks to European scholars like Marteen Hajer (1993; 2002; 2006), Herbert Gottweis (2003, 2006) or Des Gasper (1996) that these reflections about argumentative policy analysis were translated into a discourse-oriented study of public policy. In particular Hajer developed the systematic approach of Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) which he uses for the assessment of policies and their ideological framing. Drawing not only on various strands of discourse analysis but also on the specific concerns of analysing policy-making processes, Hajer adds the performative dimension of argumentative policy analysis to the linguistic dimension of discourse analysis when he looks these dynamic processes of meaning production. For him, discourse analysis is, thus, “the examination of argumentative structure in documents and other written or spoken statements as well as the practices through which these utterances are made.” (Hajer 2006:66)

Based on his and his colleagues’ reflections, we can understand policy discourse as the ensemble of ideas, concepts, frames and definitions that gives meaning to a phenomenon of the real world and structures it as a concrete policy problem; by addressing the problem in policy texts, the world view behind it is stabilized and reproduced as common

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2 Although Hajer exemplifies his approach through the assessment of environmental policies, many of his methodological reflections can easily be adapted to other fields.

3 Hajer defines ‘practices’ as “embedded routines and mutually understood rules and norms that provide coherence to social life” (Hajer 2006:70).
policy thinking. Yet, only in rare cases, the ideas, definitions and frames behind final policy texts are build upon the meaning-making discourse of only one actor; more often it is a combination of various elements deriving from different, even competing discourses and actors. Policy discourse, thus, needs also to be seen as “the outcome of joint productions of meanings among various policy actors” (Mottier 2005, 256).

Focusing equally on argumentative utterances and these joint production processes, argumentative approaches to policy discourse require “a disciplined examination of both text and context as complementary” (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996:5, emphasis in original). But instead of analysing discourse as ‘text in context’, which treats ‘text’ and ‘context’ as separate though interconnected elements, emphasizing the performative dimension of discourse leads to a more radical understanding: Discourse is both text and context at the same time because it emerges from an interplay of textual and contextual elements. The focus on argumentation and argumentative structures does, therefore, not result in the linguistic examination of ‘arguments’ but of the interactive and dynamic processes of ‘arguing’ (Hajer 2002:63): in other words, the examination of the practice of discourse production during which various actors position themselves or try to impose their point of view to others during policy discussions.

Hence, the unit of analysis is not the argument uttered in debates but the argumentative exchange itself, which Schmidt categorizes as “coordinative discourse” among policy actors and the French political scientist Philippe Zittoun calls “low noise discussions” since these types of unofficial debates are normally not noticed by the public (Zittoun 2010, 16). To emphasize the difference to more traditional discourse analytical methods, Schmidt describes this enlarged understanding of discourse as “stripped of postmodernist baggage to serve as a more generic term that encompasses not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed” (Schmidt 2008, 305).

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4 ‘Policy discourse’ can be understood in various different ways, although most literature on the subject avoids concrete clarifications or explicit definitions. Carol Bacchi gathered a wide range of implicit and explicit different interpretations of the term from the policy discourse literature. Based on her analysis, she suggests that most policy-as-discourse theorists interpret the term in a way that suits their political purpose, by situating the process of ‘meaning making’ either on the side of the writers or of the readers, by interpreting policy discourse as a mean to stabilize existing orders by those who hold power or to foster change by those who lack it, etc. (Bacchi 2000, 51f).

5 According to Hajer it is crucial to differentiate between ‘discussion’ and ‘discourse’. For him, discourse refers to “a set of concepts that structure the contributions of participants to a discussion. [...] Illuminating discourse(s) allows for a better understanding of controversies, not in terms of rational-analytical argumentation but in terms of the argumentative rationality that people bring to a discussion. Hence discourse should be distinguished analytically from discussion so as to allow for the differentiation of plural discourses” (Hajer 2006:67f).

6 Schmidt distinguishes two basic kinds of policy discourse: the ‘coordinative discourse’ between policy actors and the ‘communicative discourse’ between political actors and the public. While the first one is made up of the ideas, narratives, notions and frames that policy actors exchange during the process of policy construction, the latter is reflected in the presentation of policy ideas by political actors trying to convince the public of the appropriateness and necessity of these ideas (Schmidt 2008, 310).
Shifting the focus from arguments and ideas to the performative dimension of policy-making, the analysis necessarily also comprises the policy actors, their perspectives and the views they criticize. Zittoun, therefore, interprets the attempt to understand how a policy is actually defined as a way to “reintegrate the subject” in the study of policy and its change; for him, it is the policy actor and his discourse which build the ultimate link between a policy problem and the outcome of the policy process (Zittoun 2009, 67). In a similar way, Hajer couples the analysis of discourse production with the subjects involved in the policy process and their interactions:

“The real challenge for argumentative analysis is to find ways of combining the analysis of the discursive production of reality with the analysis of the (extradiscursive) social practices from which social constructs emerge and in which the actors that make these statements engage. This is the function of the concept of discourse coalition.” (Hajer 1993:45, emphasis in original)

Hajer’s concept of ‘discourse coalition’ refers to “a group of actors that, in the context of an identifiable set of practices, shares the usage of a particular set of story lines over a particular period of time” (Hajer 2006:70). In order to build a discourse coalition, actors do not necessarily need to agree, coordinate their actions or share the same values and interests. But by employing the same narratives and practices, these actors can contribute – deliberately or unknowingly – to the emergence, reproduction and assertiveness of one common discourse. This capacity to agree on the same ideas and to build a discourse coalition can become apparent through the formulation of “minimal common policy statement” (Zittoun 2009, 78).

In essence, in ADA and similar approaches, instead of looking separately at the discourses and strategies of individual actors, the creation of policy discourse is analysed as interplay of various individual actors, groups and coalitions. Likewise, Zittoun demands: “Rather than identifying, on one side, the networks and on the other their beliefs, we would like to consider that it is during the experimentation with the connections between belief, problem and public policy that the contingent coalitions are formed which ultimately determine policy content” (Zittoun 2009, 80).

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7 Schmidt identifies several concepts of other authors, which could be considered as subsets of discourse coalitions, e.g. “epistemic communities” which are united by shared normative ideas and their recognized knowledge in a particular field (Haas 1992) or “advocacy coalitions” which in addition play an important role in policy decisions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

8 Zittoun sees the formation of coalitions and the formulation and stabilization of common policy statements as processes that are mutually dependent since a policy statement can only exist if it is supported in a constant way by a group of actors, and a actors’ coalition can only be noted when they agree on the same policy statement.
3. Studying policy discourse ‘in the making’

Looking at the emphasis that argumentative discourse approaches put on the behaviour of policy actors and the questions they raise about how public policies are formed or how actors create discourse and influence each other in policy debates, it comes as a surprise that they have so far not been combined with Actor-Network Theory (ANT).\(^9\) ANT was initiated in the 1980s by a group of French sociologists from the École des Mines de Paris, in particular Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, and their British colleague John Law as an attempt to study “science and technology in the making”, or to put it differently, as an approach explicitly dedicated to the study of creation processes (Cressman 2009, 3; Latour 1987). Most of ANT’s notions and methodological tools were initially developed during empirical case-studies in scientific laboratories (Callon 1980; Latour and Callon 1981; Callon 1986). Growing in acceptance, ANT became quickly a popular approach not only to observe the creation of knowledge in science and technology, but also the creation of meaning and the formation of social order in all different kinds of institutions, such as organization, health, economy, family and policy.

ANT’s originators claim that “the crucial analytical move made by actor-network writers [...] is the suggestion that the social is nothing other than patterned networks of heterogeneous materials” (Law 1992). For them, our social world is not only made of people, but also of machines, buildings, money and texts and any other kind of non-human entities: “If human beings form a social network it is not because they interact with other human beings. It is because they interact with human beings and endless other materials too” (Law 1992). Society – just as scientific inventions, technology and other institutions – is an effect produced by networks of these miscellaneous elements. As a consequence, social products as hierarchy, power and knowledge are also seen as generated by heterogeneous networks, rather than as underlying structures of the networks. This is the reason why ANT lends itself much more to answering how-questions than why-questions (Law 1992): It asks how social order (like power, organization, structure, etc.) is contingently created through relationships between human and non-human actors (and thus ‘actor networks’). It is therefore a useful approach to observe how policy actors form and transform coalitions, how they create and change contemporary power relationships, how they frame policy problems, formulate minimal common policy statements and, eventually, create policy discourse.

Although ANT has been widely used to study various kinds of processes, there is a common misunderstanding regarding the interpretation of ANT as theoretical approach

\(^9\) Up to today, there have been very few studies that combine policy or discourse analysis with elements of Actor-Network Theory. One of the few exceptions is the work on sustainable development by Marek Mikus, who combines an ANT approach with the analysis of policy argumentation in order to assess how projects become real through the work of generating and translating interests among actors (Mikus 2009). Focusing on the creation of a transnational discourse, he also raises the question how the different conceptual perspectives of ANT and discourse analysis can be combined.
without any methodological repertoire (Nimmo 2011, 109). But ANT has never been conceived to be a systematic theory with clear outline, neither as a rigid methodology that follows strict rules; it was rather thought to be a loose toolbox and a way of “describing, being attentive to the concrete state of affairs, finding the uniquely adequate account of a given situation” (Latour 2004, 64). In order to achieve this, three major methodological guidelines can be identified from the vast literature, which appear to have many shares with ethnographic methods, in particular with Clifford Geertz’s notion of a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973, 6ff) ¹⁰, and are particularly helpful for assessing the performative dimension of policy discourse:

Firstly, ANT-inspired research appears to avoid any sociological assumptions about roles, structures, motivations or relationships; for ANT there is no pre-established component that could be used as an incontrovertible starting point, in particular no assumed group or network. The refusal of any kind of a priori assumption about power relationships enhances this effect: Only the actual performance of actors and the social relations that can be observed by the researcher are considered as constitutive elements of the creation of a policy discourse.

Instead, and this is the second demand, ANT-inspired research needs to start by “following the actors” and the “traces they left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups” (Latour 2005, 29). Instead of studying the actors, the researcher observes them (Latour 1999, 20), and gives a precise account of their actions and thinking. Yet, his comments on these observations must stay behind the actors’ expressions in order to “let the actors have some room to express themselves” (Latour 2004:63).¹¹ This is an important requirement for the analysis of policy discourse, in which the assessed concepts and notions framed by the policy actors and discourse coalitions need to remain stronger than those of the researcher.

The description of actors, their behaviour, relations and beliefs is complete when all actors, who contribute to the construction of an object or meaning, are fully traced, and no additional explanation has to be added in order to explain their actions (Latour 2004, 67). The third common methodological guideline of ANT consists therefore – analogue to the abandonment of all a priori assumptions – in the renunciation of all a posteriori explanations that are added to the description in order to give external justifications for the behaviour of the actors.¹² Consequently, also the particular influence of one policy actor on others or the preference for one policy discourse instead of another cannot be justified a posteriori by referring to any kind of external system or source of power, interest

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¹⁰ ANT’s originator drew indeed much on Harold Garfinkel’s ethnographic approach of “ethnomethodology”, which has – similar to ANT – neither a formal methodology nor rigid theoretical claims (Latour 1999, 19f).

¹¹ For this reason, the language used by ANT does not consist in well-chosen, precise and sophisticated terms like in traditional sociology. In fact, Latour claims that he and his colleagues did not try to develop a ‘meta-language’ for ANT, but rather an ‘infra-language’. Therefore the ANT-terminology also varies across the different empirical studies and theoretical accounts. For the concrete terms used by the various ANT-authors see Akrich and Latour (1992).

¹² Latour criticizes in particular the idea of researchers referring to external theoretical frameworks in order to explain to the observed actors why they do the things they do (Latour 1999, 19).
and domination. All explanation needs to emerge from the observation of the actors and their meaning-building capacities.

The main distinction between Actor-Network Theory and other popular network theories consists in the fact that, for ANT, ‘network’ is simply an analytical tool, and not a form or theory of organization: A network does not exist in reality, where it could be approached and analysed by a researcher. In addition, the ANT-network does not limit itself to only human individual actors; it also focuses on interactions rather than relations, and observes the roles that result from these interactions:

“We are not primarily concerned with mapping interactions between individuals. Rather, in conformity with the methodological commitment to follow the actors no matter how they act, we are concerned to map the way in which they define and distribute roles, and mobilize or invent others to play these roles.” (Law and Callon 1988:285, emphasis in original)

Accordingly, for ANT, a network is simply a methodological instrument with two different functions: Firstly, the network is a tool used by the researcher to make his description; and secondly, a network is what is drawn by the description (Latour 2004, 63). For the analysis of meaning-making within intergovernmental policy processes, ANT’s tool of a ‘network’ allows the object of investigation to be, at the same time, broadened and restricted: On the one hand, the constitutive elements do not necessarily need to remain limited to the actors within the institution or institutional setting, in which the policy-making is allocated. All influences, which have a traceable impact on the process, are part of the considered sphere. This also includes actors, who are located outside the policy-making institution or excluded from the decision-making processes as long as their non-participation or exclusion plays a role for the results of the processes. On the other hand, there is no need to consider elements, which might officially be part of decision-making bodies or institutional settings, but do not contribute to the creation of meaning within the observed policy processes. Likewise, no external forces and motivations, as geopolitical tensions or political economic interests, have to be taken into consideration if their effects are not mirrored by the behaviour of the observed actors. In essence, similar to Hajer’s Argumentative Discourse Analysis, an ANT-inspired analysis limits relevant context to those settings, circumstances and elements that have a concrete and observable impact on discursive struggles.

13 In particular, the term does not relate to the common technical metaphor of a ‘network’ in the form of a strategically organized network of interconnected points, like a train or telephone network (Latour 2005, 129). ANT also profoundly differs from the study of social networks and the assessment of social relations between individual human actors or groups, as conducted by Social Network Analysis or Policy Network Analysis.

14 Latour uses the example of a painter who draws a grid on the background before painting a three-dimensional object. Similar to the grid, which is not what the artist is actually painting but simply a tool, the network is just a tool to describe something, but not to name what is being described (Latour 2005, 131).
From the above definition of networks follows that a policy actor, who does not act, cannot leave any trace which could be observed and described. In that case, for Latour, he is not an actor (Latour 2004:70). It is obvious that the common and in policy studies prevalent connotation of ‘actor’ as someone “who wishes to grab power” and tries to “extend his power – doing some ‘networking’” (Latour 1996) cannot be used in this context. For ANT, ‘actor’ is simply a semiotic definition, which comprises all kind of ‘actants’ that act or to which activity is granted by others. An ‘actor’ or ‘actant’ is therefore defined by its capacity to act or exert any kind of activity, even if it is only through other actors.\(^\text{15}\) As a methodological consequence, ANT studies cannot simply mention actors without giving an account of their actual activities. Likewise, the sphere around the actors, who leave traces, cannot simply be filled-up with actors, of whose actions no account can be given; this sphere has to be left blank like unknown spots on a map.

Conversely, everything that is a source of action is considered an actor – no matter if it is a human, individual actor or group, or a non-human actor, such as an animal, object, text, conversation, debate, rule and procedure. This principle of ‘generalized symmetry’\(^\text{16}\) makes it possible to methodologically frame the multiple elements leading to the creation of policy discourses in institutional settings. Policy makers interact through fixed *modi operandi*, which influence the outcome of decision-making as much as the human actors within it. The enlarged semiotic definition of ‘actor’ allows considering them and other elements as independent actants that are constitutive for the policy process.

To summarize, Actor-Network Theory and its enlarged understanding of actors and networks offer a methodological framing for the observation of production and creation processes. Combined with argumentative policy research, it supports the “understanding of the dynamics of policy making today” through a “contextually situated, ethnographically rich analysis of policy constellations” (Fischer and Gottweis 2012, 6). By focusing not only on arguments but also on processes of policy discourse creation, ANT allows us to add the subject of the actor as unit of analysis and to methodologically address it.

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\(^\text{15}\) Over the large amount of ANT-literature, the terms ‘actor’ and ‘actant’ are used interchangeably; it nevertheless seems that ‘actant’ instead of ‘actor’ is often used to emphasize that “the ability to act is considered an outcome of relations, rather than an inherent property of certain – typically human – entities” (Rutland and Aylett 2008, 628).

\(^\text{16}\) With this principle, ANT tries to overcome the duality between human and non-humans, subjects and objects, society and nature. By declaring that “We have never been modern”, Latour argues that the modernist distinction between the natural and the social is artificial: It is simply inscribed upon the real world through knowledge practices invented by modernist thinkers (1993a). For Latour, even postmodernism, which focussed on discourse and language as medium between nature and society, could not leave the distinction behind; it simply added the sphere of discourse to the other two spheres.
4. Opening the black box of policy-making

The integration of concepts and ideas framed by Actor-Network Theory must not be misunderstood as an attempt to impose any kind of rigid framework on the processes of argumentation and its analysis. The internal workings of the ‘black box of policy-making’ are often a mess of parallel or consecutive, independent or interrelated procedures and debates, which do naturally not follow any patterned schema. By understanding ANT as a loose set of conceptual tools that can, but do not need to, be used during the different analytical steps, the combination of ANT with argumentative discourse research builds a flexible analytical frame to understand how, within this messy environment, change in policy discourse occurs. The various methodological concepts, which are introduced in the following, can, thus, be understood as tools that might help to theoretically frame, but should not limit, the researcher’s observations.

In particular the principle of ‘generalized symmetry’ is interesting for the analysis of policy actors and their discursive strategies, as it can be understood as the epitome of ANT’s relationalism. It derives from ANT’s claim that an actor cannot simply possess agency; agency needs to be acquired or granted and can only result from the interaction with other human and non-human actors. Agency is thus always relational and never inherent (Rutland and Aylett 2008, 632). As a result, ANT does not conceive actors as stable entities, but rather as flows or changing objects. Every time an actor starts to act and interact, he (re-)shapes the other actors and the actor-network itself (Latour 1993b, 262). The interaction leading to the reshaping of one or several actors is called ‘translation’, a term borrowed from the French philosopher Michel Serres, in whose work “translation appears as the process of making connections, of forging a passage between two domains, or simply as establishing communication” (Brown 2002:5; see also Cressman 2009:9). In ANT, the notion of translation refers to all processes of negotiations, persuasions, calculations and intrigues, which allow actors to construct common definitions and meanings, and to mobilize other actors to share their interests. Accordingly, the process of ‘translation’ can be considered as an alignment in interest (Rutland and Aylett 2008, 635).

When assessing the processes of ‘arguing’ through which participants of policy debates position themselves at particular sites of discursive production, the ‘translation’-tool allows the actors’ argumentation strategies to be approached as means of finding compromises or persuading other actors, not simply in order to work towards the same objectives and priorities, but to share the same vision of a certain policy issue. Translations are, hence, successfully employed when a specific discourse coalition becomes dominant by convincing central actors, e.g. a group of influential government representative, to adopt its view. Hajer calls these moments ‘discourse structuration’, which “occurs when a discourse starts to dominate the way a given social unit [...] conceptualizes

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17 Brown not only gives a comprehensive introduction to the term ‘translation’ in Serres’ work but also to Callon’s interpretation of it (Brown 2002, 5–8).
the world” (Hajer 2005, 303). In a similar way, phrasing it in Zittoun’s terms, it could be seen as a first step in the formulation of a common policy statement.

Another means to structure the network according to an actor’s interest, is the establishing of – what Callon first called – an ‘obligatory passage point’ (OPP) (Callon 1986). In order to render himself indispensable, an actor (which can be an individual or a group of actors) aims at creating a situation that has to occur if all actors want to achieve their goals: This situation suits the interest of the first actors and makes him, or the situation he created, an OPP for the entire network. In order to identify moments of discourse structuration and the establishment of OPPs, Actor-Network Theory – in accordance with the ambition of Argumentative Discourse Analysis of “taking into account not only what is said, but also how it is said, to whom and to what effect” (Hajer 2005:305, emphasis in original) – proposes a combination of two perspectives: The observer has to follow not only the actors, but also all processes of translations through which they define their interests and set each others’ roles in the network (Schulz-Schaeffer 2000, 198). This way, the research is not only able to trace the development of a certain policy discourse; he can, in addition, observe the creation of relationships of power and domination within the policy subsystems. ANT’s relationalist perspective implicates that not only actors and networks but also the position of actors within the network are considered results of the relationships in the network. An actor’s importance and power only depends on his position in the network and his capacity to convince other actors to share his interest and act accordingly. Therefore, actors steadily position and re-position themselves within the network by translating their interests, trying that way to stabilize their position in the network.

As outcome of the processes of negotiations, argumentations and discourse structuration a temporary order is established within the network. It is, however, instable and precarious (Latour 2004, 63). A good strategy to stabilize the order in favour of a particular actor, is to inscribe it in the most durable materials: In the ANT-tradition, ‘inscription’ refers to the efforts of an actor to fix an alignment of interests, which has been achieved through various processes of translation, in a stable way. In order to do so, policy actors might prefer to announce the final result of negotiations not simply in an oral speech or statement, but rather have it fixed in a written text or – more ideally – in an organisational setting, as e.g. the creation of a certain procedure to be followed or a project to be launched. This is what Hajer calls ‘discourse institutionalization’: “If a discourse solidifies in particular institutional arrangements [...] then we speak of discourse institutionalization” (Hajer 2005:303). Likewise, Zittoun speaks about the “stabilization process” of a policy statement (Zittoun 2009, 76).

Hajer sees the concepts of discourse structuration and discourse institutionalization as a

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18 In institutional theory, institutionalization is considered the process through which institutions are (re-)produced. The idea that these institutions are not simply social constructions, but always constituted through discourse is elaborated in great detail in Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004).
way to measure the influence of a certain discourse within policy-making processes. A first level of influence is reached if a discourse structures the vision of an important discourse coalition; if the coalition’s actions lead to the creation of institutions and organizational practices that reflect this discourse, the second level is reached. For Hajer, a discourse is dominant if both conditions are met (Hajer 2006:71).

During the processes of translations and inscriptions, actors circulate and exchange – what ANT calls – ‘intermediaries’ and ‘mediators’. Intermediaries and mediators can be immaterial, such as transactions, services, conversations, or material, such as texts, products and other kind of objects. Not its form makes a thing or activity an intermediary or mediator, but the fact that actors exchange it among themselves in order to create a temporary order and, eventually, to define and stabilize their own position in the network. In the course of this exchange, mediators and intermediaries can become actors, too. The difference between the two notions is crucial: Latour defines intermediary as “what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs” (Latour 2005, 39); it is what ANT calls a “black box”. Mediators instead “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry”; hence, “their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time” (Latour 2005, 39). Accordingly, mediators have to be considered in the full complexity of their inner parts, even if they may look simple from outside.

In Hajer’s methodological approach, there are at least two important immaterial means to exchange meaning, which can either serve as mediators or as intermediaries: ‘emblematic issues’ and ‘story lines’. For Hajer, emblematic issues play a primary role for the general understanding of policy problems as they are often used as vehicles to discuss more complex sets of problems (Hajer 2006: 68; 2002: 64). By reducing these sets to simple problems, which are “emblematic for a bigger ‘problematique’ […] or, to be more precise, for the understanding of that problematique” (Hajer 2006: 65, emphasis in original), actors are able to exchange opinions and develop solutions, which ideally address the issues in their full extent complexity. Another way to exchange meaning in debates among policy

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19 This postulation, however, needs to be relativized because – as everything else in ANT – also the ‘durability’ of materials is a relational effect of the network and not a characteristic of the material itself: Written text could be easily ignored and fixed procedures abolished or circumvented when the network shifts in another direction; at the same time, an oral statement could cause far-reaching consequences, which cannot be overcome very easily by other actors trying to reshape the network in their favour (Law 1992). Consequently, a dominant discourse, even when institutionalized, can be very quickly overruled.

20 Borrowed from the field of natural sciences and technology, where this terms stands for a device whose complex internal workings must not be known in order to predict its outputs, a black box is the metaphor for a stable situation: “A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter indifference” (Latour and Callon 1981, 285).

21 A prominent example for such an emblematic issue within international policy debates in the field of communication geopolitics is the debate about the ‘Digital Divide’: The general understanding of the complex political, economic, cultural and social matters related to digital technology is – in a simplified manner – constructed around the emblem of a gap between those who have access to digital technology and know how to use it and those who do not.
actors is referring to story lines through which policy actors convey facts and data. Many statements uttered in policy debates have the form of a story that fulfills an important role within the argumentation. A story line can, thus, be understood as “a condensed statement summarizing complex narratives, used by people as ‘short hand’ in discussions” (Hajer 2006: 69). By evoking associations, the person speaking assumes that the complex narrative is available in the mind of the other participants of the discussion and is understood in a similar way as intended by the speaker.

In the context of scientific knowledge creation or technological inventions, for which ANT was initially developed, Latour and his colleagues describe most elements exchanged between actors as an infinite number of mediators; only very exceptionally, towards the end of the creation process when a temporary order has been achieved, did the exchanged elements turn into “faithful intermediaries” (Latour 2005, 40). For policy discourse creation in highly institutional and administrative settings, in which repetition and the correct compliance with procedures and rules dominate all processes, the situation appears to be very different: Here, not intermediaries are exceptional, but mediators. While the number of predictable texts, statements and debates, which do not add any new features to the policy process, might seem endless, it can turn out to be difficult to identify those few discursive elements that - added to a policy formulation or discourse - modify its meaning and create something new. An emblematic issue might be discussed as a black box; since its employment, however, often entails an oversimplification of the multiple problems linked to it, its re-interpretation might lead to a surprisingly new understanding of the issues at stake. Correspondingly, the general “assumption of mutual understanding”, which comes along with the use of story lines, sometimes proves to be wrong if the listener does not necessarily share the interpretation of policy issues that was intended by the speaker (Hajer 2005:302). In both cases, the emblematic issue and the story line were used as mediators, but turn into intermediaries. The methodological tools of ‘mediator’ and ‘intermediary’, thus, make it possible to couch in terms the few exceptional moments, when – due to the introduction of a new actor, concept or notion - an entire discourse or debate changes its connotation.

In order to schematize the various tools proposed by Actor-Network Theory and Argumentative Discourse Analysis and to develop them into a methodological framework through which the creation and change of policy discourse can be observed, we need to come back to Hajer’s idea that all discourse-oriented policy analyses must be based on three interrelated elements: discourse, practices and meaning. While meaning is constructed within certain discursive structures, discourses are produced within the context of particular political practices. Based on these three elements, the proposed layout appears simple at first sight: The methodological concepts deriving from discourse analysis allow to assess the discursive structures in policy debates and documents from various phases of the policy-making process, and how they attribute meaning to the discussed issues; at the same time, the
selected ANT-tools can be used to observe and describe how discourse is produced through actor’s practices in a heterogeneous policy-making environment and the creation of temporary power relationships.

Figure 1: Combination of ADA and ANT in the triangle of meaning, discourse and practices

Yet, it is more complex than this since the challenge of combining the two approaches does not consist in applying each of them separately to two distinct dimensions of policy discourse; in order to analyse policy discourse ‘in the making’ it is rather necessary to consider at all times the full triangle of discourse, practices and meaning (Figure 1) as an inseparable object in which all elements mutually interfere with one another.

Thanks to the introduced methodological tools, it is possible to split up the analysis into multiple, iterative and optional steps that allow approaching this abstract triangle from various sides and perspectives and, thus, make the performative and discursive dimensions more tangible. Figure 2 shows how tracing the various elements and processes helps to grasp at the same time the interplay of practices, discourse and meaning, and to connect them all in order to describe the ensemble as a dynamic network, an actor-network:
Various policy actors try to influence the discourse by translating their interests and/or establishing themselves as Obligatory Passage Points within the policy-making environment. They attempt to stabilize their discursive elements and argumentations, which might be expressed in form of emblematic issues or story lines, by inscribing them in a stable manner and structurating the policy discourse of a larger group of actors (e.g. a discourse coalition). Through the exchange of intermediaries and mediators the stabilized discursive elements, argumentations and statements continue to gain acceptance, until they become institutionalized and thus start to dominate the general policy discourse. By observing and tracing these processes, the researcher can draw a network of the involved actors, their activities and argumentative strategies and, in this way, observe the entire policy-making process as an actor-network. This actor-network needs, however, to be regarded as a fragile and temporary construct as it can change at any moment when power relations in the network shift due to a new actor entering the network or a new argumentation gaining acceptance.

5. Conclusion

The combination of Actor-Network Theory with Argumentative Discourse Analysis or similar linguistic policy approaches make it possible to study policy discourse and policy change as outcome of deliberative processes; this constitutes a move away from the established teleological perspective of policy analysis, which considers policy in terms of
input, output and their causal relations. Instead, the proposed methodological setup takes two dimensions of policy-making into account: On the one hand, the assessment focuses on the discursive dimension of policy, namely the ideas and arguments expressed in debates at various phases of policy-making. On the other hand, the analysis considers the performative dimension of policy-making, which comprises the concrete settings of decision-making and the practices through which multiple policy actors – being humans, objects or processes – aim at securing their role within the policy processes and impose their ideas on other groups of actor. Conducting discourse analysis looking only at (final) policy texts, neglecting thereby concrete argumentative exchanges and political constellations among actors, cannot be sufficient to assess how language, ideas and other practices of actors influence concrete policy outcome. To make the creation and change of policy discourse more transparent, the often chaotic and irrational internal workings of the black box need to be unraveled.

The focus on argumentative exchanges and the limitation of the considered context to the perceivable elements only can give the impression that interests, institutions or structures of power and domination do not have any influence on the policy-making processes. This is however not the case. On the contrary, Actor-Network Theory – being an approach “concerned with the mechanics of power” (Law 1992, 380) – is chosen as a tool to observe how power relations behind argumentative struggles are established, maintained and changed during the process of policy elaboration.

However, ANT utterly denies the existence of structural relationships of power that influence the observed processes as external factors (Teurlings 2004, 80). It considers power – just as much as everything else – as a result of the network and not a cause. Latour and his colleagues, therefore, particularly reject the idea of a powerful actor, who is able to dominate the other actors from above because of its established position in the network; for them, an actor can not simply possess power, but needs to exercise it through action:

“The problem of power may be encapsulated in the following paradox: when you simply have power – in potentia – nothing happens and you are powerless; when you exert power – in actu – others are performing the action and not you. […] Power is not something you may possess and hoard. Either you have it in practice and you do not have it – other have – or you simply have it in theory and you do not have it.” (Latour 1986:264f, emphasis in original)

It appears that ANT’s approach to power has many shares with Foucault’s thinking on this issue, in particular as regards the belief that power relationships are always relational and created through interaction. The difference consists in the fact that Foucault does not contest the existence of overarching structures of power, which need to be reproduced in specific contexts in order to persist. Thus, when Foucault is able to theorize observations of concrete power relations and develop general statements about modern power, ANT simply “tells empirical stories about processes of translation” (Law 1992, 388) by giving a detailed description of how power relations function on a micro-level.
The consequent exclusion of any kind of overarching questions as to why actors behave the way they do might make it easier to focus on how they define problems, translate precise interests, exchange intermediaries and create meaning. External motivations as well as structures of interest and domination on a macro-level are only taken into consideration as far as they are reflected in the communicative and argumentative practices of actors. As a consequence, while the proposed methodological frame might allow us to tell how certain ideas come to be adopted in policy thinking, it will never enable us to answer the question why changes in policy discourse occur.

7. References


Actors, and Contexts, edited by Chrisanthi Avgerou, Claudio Ciborra, and Frank Land, 62–76. Oxford University Press, USA.


