

Book Review

Alex Balch (2010)

Managing Labour Migration in Europe: Ideas, Knowledge and Policy Change

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How do ideas and knowledge affect labour migration policy-making? What are the roles they play in the policy process? In *Managing Labour Migration in Europe*, Balch argues for taking ideas and knowledge seriously in analyses of policy change, stability and framing. 'We know that knowledge and ideas can be buried or exploited and twisted in the service of interests, to legitimise decisions already made or de-legitimise those not made' (p.2). The heuristic device of *Who? What? Where? How?* is used to begin this investigation and four distinct approaches – Epistemic Communities (Haas), the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith), Discourse Coalitions (Hajer) and modes of immigration politics in liberal democratic states (Freeman) – are called into service in the development of twelve hypotheses. The main conclusion is that the different frameworks offer varying explanatory power at different times; the 'whole picture' is rarely captured by a single approach (p.200).

The book is structured into eight chapters. Chapter 1 succinctly introduces the subject themes, shows how studying the roles of ideas and knowledge in the policy process allows us to move beyond declaratory/evaluative statements about labour migration policies (e.g. 'illiberal'), and gives an overview of the remaining chapters. Here, Balch also explains briefly why Spain and the UK were chosen as case studies (i.e. they are both labour importing countries, albeit a new and an old one, respectively, whose policies are converging despite having followed different trajectories). In Chapter 2, we learn about the state of the art of labour migration policy theory. Balch offers a critique of seven different schools: political economy; institutionalism; rights-based/'embedded liberalism'; 'varieties of nationhood'; international relations; cognitive; and frames and paradigms. He finds that, although these approaches assist in identifying the actors involved, interests put forth, constraints and a range of intervening variables, they all fall short of fully conceptualising the roles of ideas and knowledge in the policy process.

To remedy this under-conceptualisation, Chapter 3 develops the analytical approach based on existing theories. What is particularly refreshing is that instead of trying to assemble the most compelling 'components' of the potential theories into one single analytical framework, Balch has decided to test their explanatory potential against one another. Three theories were chosen based on these four criteria: aim to account for policy developments; have certain 'robustness' through earlier applications; are concerned with the role of ideas and knowledge in the policy-making process; and are applicable to

national case studies. Amongst the theories singled out, Balch holds the three propositions derived from Freeman's model as the null hypotheses since in that approach idea and knowledge are merely vehicles for advancing interests. The methods are content analysis (of speeches, official documents, and newspaper articles...etc.) and semi-structured interviews of forty policy-makers and members of the policy communities.

Chapters 4 (Spain) and 5 (the UK) are the core empirical chapters. The data presented are rich and the synopses given here do not reflect the efforts involved. Both chapters are organised in the same way: they begin with a discussion of four intervening variables (political system, the demographics, economic and social policy, and the labour market structure) before continuing with immigration trends and the key policy developments (1995-2008). The second half of the chapters considers the hypotheses in light of each case study. In the case of Spain, Balch finds that membership to the European Union (EU) marked the start of national policy development and formation of an epistemic community followed. The main reforms can be attributed to the change in government (from the People's Party to the Socialists) and the shifting of migration policy competence from the interior ministry to work and social affairs. He notes that the idea and knowledge involved in the Spanish labour migration policy change are information about legal/irregular migratory flows and broader discourses instead of 'consensual knowledge'.

By contrast, Balch finds that British labour migration policy is shaped by its colonial history. The policy change observed, he argues, can be attributed to two competing story lines: First, the Treasury's expanding role in domestic politics and Labour's courting of business interests are manifested in more liberal reforms of work permits. Second, the argument for 'evidence-based policy-making' in the UK paved the way for experts and knowledge to play key roles in the change-process by including labour market effects in policy discussions. In comparison to Spain, 'consensual knowledge' had a greater role in the UK.

Chapter 6 turns to the EU-level to explore the effects of 'Europeanisation'. Balch reveals that EU's framing of migration policies is 'global' in nature/structure and, thus, its very ambiguity allowed Aznar and Blair to select specific elements and present them in turn as 'European'. In Chapter 7, we return to the four theoretical approaches and Balch offers a thorough discussion of both case studies and the importance of the intervening variables in setting the stage for policy change. The conclusions in Chapter 8 call for more comparative research in the future that takes ideas and knowledge into studies of labour migration policies in Europe.

Overall, Balch offers a perspective on European labour migration policy-making that is often, due to the difficulties in operationalising ideational variables, neglected. For this reason alone, it would be a welcome contribution for students and scholars of public policy, EU integration and migration. Practitioners would find the complex interweaving of actors, knowledge, ideas and organisational settings reflective of their daily work. The main critics could include those who prefer parsimony in the analytical construct (e.g. reduction in the numbers of hypotheses) and conclusive empirical support for one specific framework. Yet to do so would miss the aim entirely. This contribution is a strong attempt in bridging academia and policy practice and the evidence put forth confirms its success.