

## **Title of manuscript**

Unpacking ambiguity in ideational change: the polysemy of the ‘Europe of Knowledge’

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## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful for the constructive comments provided by the participants of the LSE workshop on “The EU paradigm in crisis? Ideas, leadership, and the search of a new référentiel in Europe” (May 2019), as well as panel participants meetings of the International Public Policy Association conference (Montreal 2019) and the Council for European Studies conference (Madrid 2019). Special thanks to Jonathan Kamkhaji, Femke Van Esch, Nicolas Jabko, Waltraud Schelkle, Niccolò Durazzi and Mark Thatcher for their fruitful comments on earlier versions of the draft. I am particularly indebted to Claudio Radaelli for his invaluable support in revising the manuscript. I also wish to thank the editor of WEP, and two anonymous referees who kindly reviewed the earlier version of this manuscript and provided extremely helpful and attentive comments.

## **Funding sources**

This work was supported by a Fellowship Grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC – ES/S011005/1)

## **Keywords**

*Ideas, ambiguity, polysemy, knowledge economy, education, European Union*

# **Unpacking ambiguity in ideational change: the polysemy of the ‘Europe of Knowledge’**

## **Abstract**

What is ambiguity, and why does it matter in policy change? Often treated as an exogenous factor, the ambiguity of ideas has been considered a given for granted entity instrumental to actors’ strategic action. Less attention has been devoted to elucidating the nature and drivers of ambiguity in the policy process. Building on the concept of ‘boundary objects,’ originally developed within the sociology of science, this paper identifies polysemy as one explanatory factor through which multiple and contradictory meanings are shared across a constellation of different actors. Empirically, the paper examines how the idea of the ‘Europe of Knowledge’ in European education policy was first rejected in the mid-1990s and then adopted only a few years later thanks to its polysemy. By ‘objectifying’ an idea into a boundary object, polysemy can thus create entry or exit options in the institutional arena by legitimising actors’ cooperation and enabling (policy) entrepreneurship.

## **Introduction**

In 2000, the European Council launched the Lisbon Strategy, with the key aim of making Europe the ‘most dynamic knowledge economy in the world, capable of economic growth and social cohesion’ (European Council 2000). From that moment on, the Lisbon Strategy acted as a springboard for the expansion of European education policymaking, a policy field in which the European Union still lacks a legal mandate (Chou and Gornitzka 2014). Under the umbrella concept of the ‘knowledge economy’<sup>1</sup> – referred interchangeably to economic growth, social goals, citizenship and social cohesion, and research and innovation – Member States agreed to converge on common priorities in education to be achieved through the policy mode of the Open Method of Coordination (henceforth the OMC) based on common goals, diffusion of best practices, monitoring and benchmarking tools.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the last 20 years, the ‘knowledge economy’ has become a powerful notion used very broadly to define processes, ideas, and outputs based on the production, distribution, and use of knowledge and information (OECD, 1996). By contrast, the concept of ‘Europe of Knowledge’ possesses a more supranational connotation which refers to the goal of building a European education area, with the Europe of Knowledge considered as “the basis for a knowledge-based economy (or society)” (Chou and Gornitzka, 2014: 8). In this respect, the paper uses the two terms interchangeably, as also reflected in the European documents and discourse. I thank the anonymous reviewer who called my attention on this distinction.

Yet, intriguingly, only a few years earlier the same idea of the Europe of Knowledge – this time referring to a more narrow set of supply-side considerations but still presented alongside a similar set of policy proposals – had been widely contested, with Member States fearing that any supranational interference would overstep their national competence in a policy field strongly linked to national identities (Ertl 2006). This shift in the acceptance of the same idea raises a puzzling question: *Why was the Europe of Knowledge idea, rejected at the end of the 1990s, successful in the same institutional arena that had long resisted it?* This paper seeks to explain the success of the adoption of the Europe of Knowledge idea by examining its polysemy, namely its ability to possess multiple and contradictory meanings which in turn facilitated consensus and coalition-building among a heterogeneous group of actors.

Scholars have recently started paying more attention to the ambiguity of ideas as one of the key factors in achieving actors' cooperation and consensus-building. Notions such as *ambiguity* (Garritzmann *et al.* 2016), *multivocality* or *polysemy* (Hannah and Baekkeskov 2020; Skogstad and Wildern 2019; Béland and Cox 2016; Parsons 2016; Jenson 2010), *malleability* (Jabko 2006), *discursive ambiguity* (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004) and *seeming coherence* (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016: 324) have been employed – often interchangeably – to illustrate the importance of ambiguous ideas in shaping policy change, making discourse successful, promoting consensus-building and, ultimately, in making institutional change possible (Eisl 2020). Although the literature aptly acknowledges the ambiguity of ideas in a number of significant ways, the more fundamental and ontological question on the nature and sources of ambiguity itself has been largely ignored. Ambiguous ideas occupy a significant place in the explanation of policy change, but we know little about how they fully operate in the policy process in order to spark belief changes (Jones 2017). Put differently, ambiguity is often presented in terms of its effects on policymaking and is pictured as a tool in the hands of power-seeking strategic agents deploying their moral suasion. As a result, these perspectives could prevent our understanding of how ideas matter as ideas, thus capturing their 'content, valence, and intensity', rather than being instrumental to the explanatory frameworks in which they are embedded (Liebermann 2002: 699). If ambiguity opportunely refers to the appeal of one idea in the policymaking arena, the analytical pitfall of these approaches relies on addressing ambiguity itself in a tautological way, whereas it is the source of this appeal which needs to be analytically explained.

This article offers an alternative account of ambiguity, unveiling how it originates and is enacted in the policy process. In doing so, it takes the concept of *polysemy* – from which ambiguity results – as the primary object of analysis and empirically traces how it is interconnected with agents and contextual factors. To elaborate the argument, polysemy is explained through the concept of *boundary objects*, borrowed from the sociology of science and referring to the capacity of material and non-

material entities to become a platform for aggregating different groups, communities and organisations (Star and Griesemer 1989). Boundary objects, whether they are material (objects, collections, things) or non-material (ideas, processes, discourses) characterise themselves as being cohesive, possessing a shared language while maintaining their distinctive features, which in turn resonates with different groups (Carlile 2002). The advantage of using the notion of boundary objects when analysing polysemy is that this concept is closely linked to issues of shared meanings and interpretation in creating common grounds by translating and coordinating the interests and actions of different actors while preserving malleable meanings (Trompette and Vink 2009).

By focusing on polysemy as the primary cause of ambiguity, this paper also considers the relationship between ideas and actors. Agents of ideas - whether policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1984), ideational entrepreneurs (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013), or bricoleurs (Carstensen 2011) engaged in discourse and in constructing strategies of action - still matter, but this paper shows that, in some cases, it is polysemy that makes (policy) entrepreneurship actionable and not the opposite. Finally, congruent with the aims of this symposium and its first building site of definitional aspects, this paper contributes to the ideational strand of scholarship which has fruitfully moved from the traditional paradigmatic view of ideas as a stable and coherent bloc of meanings towards a more fine-grained analysis of their micro-foundations (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2020, in this issue; Jabko 2019; Jobert and Muller 1987).

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Ambiguous ideas and their effect in politics*

Ambiguity is a key feature of the policymaking process (Zahariadis 2008)<sup>2</sup>. In the political science literature, especially within the spectrum of institutionalist and constructivist approaches (Weiss and Carayannis 2001), the capacity of one idea ‘to be understood in multiple ways, combining shared and unshared interpretations’ (Parsons 2016: 456) plays an important role in contributing to policy solutions. For example, Peter Hall states that ‘the very ambiguity of Keynesian ideas enhanced their power in the political sphere. By reading slightly different emphases into these ideas, an otherwise

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<sup>2</sup> According to Zahariadis (2008) ambiguity is a key property of the policy process and it is elaborated under three dimensions: participants having unclear goals; fluid participation in multiple venues; opaque organizational technology (Zahariadis, 2008: 517). In his perspective, ambiguity is stretched to be a component of the decision-making process in order to explain how policy choices are made under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. By contrast, this paper refers to the ‘ideational’ dimension of ambiguity, hence taking the concept beyond the domain of organizations and decision-making.

disparate set of groups could unite under the same banner' (Hall 1989: 367). Ambiguous ideas are particularly powerful when enacted in highly salient and institutionally complex issues characterised by multiple actors and veto points. Here, they are particularly effective in mobilising actors' consensus and in acting as 'coalition magnets' (Béland and Cox 2016); this is the concept of ideas such as *solidarity*, *social inclusion*, *sustainability* and *social cohesion* (Béland and Cox 2016; Bernard 1999), or the idea of the *market* in Jabko's account of the introduction of the euro (Jabko 2006).

Often, it is under conditions of institutional tension and political uncertainty that ambiguity intervenes with its plurality of meanings, and in turn helps policy actors to make sense of their own interests, concerns or beliefs (McNeill 2006: 335). For instance, one idea which has attracted considerable attention from the scholarship is *social investment*. Its ambiguity – intended as an active labour market policy to 'prepare' while appealing to a more traditional view of social policies 'to repair' market and institutional failures – has been recognised as an important factor in attracting a multiplicity of different actors' coalitions, including pro-market economists and social democrats (Durazzi 2019; Garritzmann *et al.* 2017; Jenson 2010). Ambiguous ideas also matter in ensuring continuity of policy choices and institutional frameworks, as in the case of the resilience of neo-liberal ideas explored by Schmidt and Thatcher (2013). Ambiguity is often related to the substantive content of ideas which is conveyed through discourse and its communication and coordination in the policy sphere (Schmidt 2008). Ideas are thus seen in interaction with their agents (Blyth 2002) who act as bricoleurs in (re)-combining a repertoire of ideas to create – and engender – political support (Carstensen 2011). Ambiguous language is a fundamental feature that can advance political aims or trigger policy change (Hannah and Baekkeskov 2020; Jegen and Mérand 2013).

Taken together, these perspectives greatly matter in advancing our knowledge of the importance of ambiguity in policy outcomes. However, although this paper agrees with these insights, a systematic analysis of how ambiguity emerges in the first place is largely absent, with the scholarly focus devoted to exploring how it impacts the policymaking arena and less oriented towards the policy process of ambiguity itself. Furthermore, despite ongoing and substantial policy research that better conceptualises the role of actors as (ideational or policy) entrepreneurs (Petridou and Mintrom 2020; Carstensen 2011), there is still a lack of theoretical clarity in the ideational research into which factors can account for actors' success in coordinating with each other or reaching agreements, especially when they display different views, beliefs, and interests. In both cases, there is the risk of conceptualising ambiguity as an intervening or exogenous factor in (ideational) policy change, whereas the theoretical and empirical challenge lies precisely in tackling ambiguity from the forefront, namely as a direct result of its polysemy (Lichtenberk 1991: 476).

*Unpacking the source of ambiguity: polysemy and boundary objects*

Polysemy is the capacity of a word to have different meanings that are related to each other (Serban 2016: 47). Language is an important foundation for understanding how the social world is constructed, shared and communicated; it provides objectivation to a specific reality, acts as a link between different social world internal and external realities, and is useful in understanding how processes of change in politics are developed through social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In this ongoing process of meanings which are sharing the same linguistic space, old and new words assume several values, as it is often impossible to establish a univocal meaning of a word (Nunberg 1995). Moreover, language matters when interpreting the functioning of interests and institutions (Dunne 2001: 235), and it is central to the power and conceptions of the global political order (Hurrell 2007: 134). According to semantic approaches, the meaning of words is not fixed, but rather it undergoes a process of evolution according to the beliefs of those participating in the discourse, which in turn makes it possible for a new meaning to replace – or be added to – an old one. Hence, the acquisition of new information becomes part of the active construction carried out by the individual; it is anchored to institutions, which can be seen as a form of language, and to a specific context in which language itself is deployed through forms of collaboration and social negotiation (Wittgenstein 1958: 43; Jonassen 1994). Meaning is also context-dependent. Besides being pervasive in languages and having an effect on the content and function of words, polysemy is also embraced in the concept of *boundary objects*, a notion which has its origins in science studies – with the seminal work of Star and Griesemer (1989) of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California – and has subsequently been employed in different disciplinary contexts. Although still under-theorised in ideational scholarships, this concept has been fruitfully employed in the political science literature; for example, with reference to energy policy (Harlow *et al.* 2018), international development (Barnett 2008), and economic practices (Stark 2011; Altomonte 2020). Boundary objects ‘have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognisable’ (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393). Boundary objects can be material or non-material (things, concepts, discourses, processes) and they are characterised by flexibility in their interpretation while at the same time constituting a solid nexus for communication and collaboration among disparate worldviews (Star and Griesemer 1989). In this respect, their boundary nature is distinguished by the fact that they are simultaneously concrete and abstract, specific and general, conventionalised and customised, ‘plastic enough to adapt to local needs’ yet ‘robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites’ (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393).

Because of their shared meanings, boundary objects act as cooperation facilitators among heterogeneous actors (Stark 2011). In their capacity of (re)structuring complex relations, boundary objects spark opportunities of cooperation and coordination between a multiplicity of actors, whether they are networks, communities of practice, stakeholders or policy entrepreneurs (Wenger 1998), and allow them to implement similar practices while instilling them with different meanings (Zilber 2002). In this case, actors' communities are characterised by the fact that their members (politicians, epistemic communities, academics, scientists etc.) share which facts need to be attributed to the objects, in a sort of naturalisation process in which taking some meanings for granted (rather than others) is a key requirement of being part of, or belonging to, these communities.

Boundary objects gain their legitimacy from a wider range of actors, precisely for their ability to create a sort of 'oxymoron' in the political landscape by virtue of their coherence on the one hand, and cognitive dissonance – that is the tension of having contradictory meanings at the same time (Festinger 1962) – on the other. They create common ground by translating and coordinating the interests and actions of different actors while preserving malleable meanings (Bechky 2003). Each actor has their own project, as with the museum director, the collector or the manager in the case of Star and Griesemer. In other words, because of the different lenses through which boundary objects are reflected, there is not a common project, and they act as the lowest common denominator, thus achieving coordination among very heterogeneous actors. In the case studies examined by Star and Griesemer, different communities did not share a common set of attributes with regard to the museum objects. Owing to the fact that these meanings were structured enough to be recognised and malleable enough to be translated according different worldviews, actors were thus able to maintain their coherence, negotiate their differences, and, ultimately, reach an agreement on their different points of view (Star and Griesemer 1989).

This argument is analytically applied to the case of the 'Europe of Knowledge' in European education policy. The empirical case is developed through process tracing the diffusion of this idea, starting with the mid-1990s when the idea was initially rejected and continuing to the beginning of the 2000s when it was subsequently adopted. Process tracing was particularly valuable in observing and interpreting the sequence of events, including details on the relevant actors, their beliefs, and how these beliefs "aggregated to produce the collective outcome" (Schimmelfennig, 2015: 105). Translated into an empirical strategy, the analysis of documents and policy debate should provide evidence of a concept – or idea – which was interpreted in different ways. In short, if polysemy is present, the empirical account should show how the idea exhibits a polysemantic trait and how, in turn, this creates a coalition of actors with different interests. Evidence of polysemy would be present if we were to observe in the policymakers' discourse the presence of a different notion attributed to

the same idea. Data were collected from official EU documents - including Commission communications, Commission reports, Council decisions and conclusions of Council summits - and secondary literature in order to gather evidence of the key developments in European education policy with reference to the 'Europe of Knowledge' agenda. In addition, for the period 2000-2005 the position of Member States was assessed through the articles published in the Bulletins of Agence Europe (henceforth AE), the press agency that publishes news about the EU's activities. A total of 192 articles were collected through a keyword research using 'education', 'Europe of knowledge', 'knowledge economy', and 'Open Method of Coordination', and 11 were identified as relevant to capture actors' positions on the Europe of Knowledge/knowledge economy and education, and to detect potential boundary objects generated from the discussion.

## **The ambiguity of the 'Europe of Knowledge' in European education policy: genesis of one idea**

### *The Lisbon Strategy and the 'Europe of Knowledge'*

In March 2000, the Council of Ministers held in Lisbon under the Portuguese Presidency launched the Lisbon Strategy. Lisbon marked a significant change in the role of education at the European level. Within the institutionalisation of the 'Europe of Knowledge' discourse (Ravinet 2018: 28), the first change was the prioritisation of the economic value of education over more social dimensions, with the framing of education as a 'supplementary market and workforce tool' (Walkenhorst 2008: 569). The second change was an increased process of coordination of Member States' education systems. As recognised by many scholars, the Lisbon Strategy represented a 'turning point' for education policy with education becoming 'a key component of the European knowledge-based economic model' (Novoa and deJong-Lambert 2003: 55). The Lisbon Strategy explicitly recognised the importance of education as part of European economic and social policies, and the role of the knowledge economy as a priority to promote employment (European Council 2000: 3). In order to meet the goal of becoming the 'most competitive knowledge-based economy', Lisbon called for an increase in investment in human resources, an improvement in attainment levels, the development of basic skills and competences in the labour force, and an increase in European mobility, with knowledge and skills defined as a necessary component of the economic and social reform strategy (Gornitzka 2007). In addition, further cooperation in education was advanced through the institutionalisation of the 'Bologna process' of 1999 (Musselin 2009), which aimed to create the 'European Higher Education Area' (EHEA) by 2010, and through the 'Copenhagen Process'

launched in 2002, whose purpose was to develop a common European framework for vocational education and training (Veiga et al. 2018). Member States agreed on a common strategy for education – the ‘Education and Training 2010’ programme followed by ‘Europe 2020’ – based on common goals which intended to meet the needs of the ‘knowledge economy’ to be achieved through the new policy mode of the OMC, a non-binding method of cooperation based on common benchmarks and indicators and enacted through ‘effects of socialisation, imitation and shame’ (Ravinet 2008: 365). In sum, since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the ‘idea’ of the knowledge economy appears to have become the corollary of the institutional design of the European education agenda. Only a few years before the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, the ‘idea’ of the knowledge economy with regard to strengthening supranational coordination was proposed by the European Commission but it encountered strong resistance from Member States. Why, at a certain point, was there a shared understanding of the ‘knowledge economy’, which had been absent only a few years before?

### *The ‘contested’ idea of the ‘Europe of Knowledge’*

The concept of ‘knowledge’ in relation to improving the development of human capital in European education policy did not suddenly appear in 2000 with the Lisbon Strategy. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, the importance of investing in knowledge featured among the objectives promoted by the then Commissioner for Education, Édith Cresson. Embedded within the ideological backdrop of neo-liberal theories and policies regarding faith in the markets in ensuring an optimum redistribution of wealth (Leibfried 2005), the concept of the ‘knowledge economy’ was at that time part and parcel of a discourse that – promoted also by the OECD – defined it as a precondition for economic growth (OECD Observer 1990: 29). At the European level, the concept of the ‘knowledge economy’, used interchangeably with the term ‘Europe of Knowledge’, was rooted in a discussion that stressed its importance to Europe’s economic development. In 1995, the European Commission published the White Paper Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society (CEC 1995), followed in 1997 by the paper Towards a Europe of Knowledge, which emphasised the creation of an ‘open and dynamic European education area’ (CEC 1997: 2). Within this context, the EU publications promoted by Cresson were intended to stimulate debate at the EU level on the importance of human capital to Europe’s economic growth, and they were also an attempt by the Commission to increase its role in education policy (Cino Pagliarello 2020). Indeed, as stated in the report Towards a Europe of Knowledge, ‘economic competitiveness could only be achieved if education systems started to produce and disseminate quality education [...] everything must be done to build that Europe of Knowledge which we need in order to face into the twenty-first century’ (CEC 1997: 1).

Interestingly, both publications were widely criticised, precisely for their excessive focus on ‘knowledge’ as a component of employment and economic growth to the detriment of social and cultural issues (Field 1997). The Council of Education Ministers attacked the White Paper for its ‘vocational emphasis and instrumental approach’ (Field 1997: 81). They lamented the dominant discourse of globalisation and new technologies in which education was equated to economic growth, as well as the lack of reference to social aspects, such as demographic changes, dialogue between cultures and social exclusion, adding that ‘the framework for analysing education and training problems in Europe now and in the future should place suitable emphasis on the cultural and educational aspects as well as the strictly economic aspects of development’ (Council of European Union 1996). Similarly, the Association of European Teachers (AEDE) felt that the Commission’s analysis tended to exclude or suppress the problems of disadvantaged groups, and neglected policy areas such as special needs education, while accepting the point of view of industry (AEDE 1996). Meanwhile, the Committee of Regions (CoR) warned that ‘a knowledge-based society cannot be based primarily on the aptitude of persons for economic life [...] it feels it is absolutely necessary to give the same attention to promoting personal growth’ (AE 3 April 1996). Moreover, the Economic and Social Committee (CES) noted the lack of consideration of the humanist dimension of education and learning. Therefore, from the mid-1990s, Europe’s lack of competitiveness was framed as a problem of inadequate human capital supply, with goals such as investment in skills, lifelong learning and mobility considered as crucial to make education systems more responsive to labour market needs (Dehmel 2006). Here, the concept of a ‘Europe of Knowledge’ had a specific economic connotation, which attracted criticism for being considered instrumentally and exclusively a precondition for economic growth.

### *The ‘Europe of Knowledge’ becomes polysemantic*

The beginning of the 2000s saw several economic and social uncertainties for the European Union. On the one hand, the EU’s economic outlook was characterised by concerns about the ‘dot.com’ bubble, low economic growth and income disparity, with levels of productivity and growth still falling behind those of the US (Błaszczuk 2005). On the other hand, changes in work structures, with more precarious contracts of work, and an increasing unemployment rate, in particular for women and older workers with low or obsolete skills, were also creating further pressure for reforms in the light of the new social risks (Hemerijck 2013). In addition, the challenges posed by the 2004 enlargement increased the need to develop policies for growth, employment and competitiveness that could also avoid socioeconomic disruption (Best *et al.* 2008).

Within this political climate, underpinned by the ideology of the Third Way, education was considered to be a productive factor that could help solve the challenges of globalisation, as well as those posed by the knowledge-based economy and the skills requirement in the post-Fordism economy (Schellinger 2016). The Lisbon Strategy received an enthusiastic response from several European state and non-state actors. Tony Blair praised the ‘end of the social model of the 1980s and the transition to an active employment policy’, and French President Chirac was ‘struck by the unity displayed among Member States’. Aznar stated that ‘we are on the right track to rivalling the United States and achieving full employment’ (AE 25 March 2000). The European Trade Union Confederation welcomed the Lisbon Strategy as a ‘turning point for its balanced and integrated approach between economic, social and environmental policies’ (Etuc 2000: 1), while Janssen, the chairman of the European Round Table of Industrialists, praised it for ‘transferring many of the nation-state’s powers to a more modern and internationally minded structure at the European level’ (Janssen 2000). Within the framework of Lisbon, and although remaining a Member States’ competence, education was seen not only as the ‘first domino on the path to full employment’ (Latham 2001: 32) but also as the main tool to meet the needs of the knowledge economy and combat social exclusion. For example, Blair and Schröder, who co-authored *Europe: The Third Way – die NeueMitte*, proposed a general framework for European social democratic parties in which the role of the Welfare State would be to promote work through education, training and active labour market policies (Blair and Schröder 1999). This means that the broader political and ideological climate of the time was receptive to the idea of education being used as a tool to meet the needs of the knowledge economy and this might have contributed to providing credibility to the already existing interpretation of the problems of education, helping political actors to focus on the problems of unemployment and lack of competitiveness, and to see education as a solution to these problems.

According to several intellectuals, investment in education would have promoted different goals, such as economic growth, social inclusion and social capital, in order to meet the changing needs of the economy (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2002: 27; Giddens 1998). Those supporting the Lisbon Strategy from a supply-side perspective praised education and training as a productive factor that was strengthening growth, under the assumption that ‘new technologies required – and rewarded – a growing skill supply’ (Ansell and Gingrich 2018: 226). Those who supported a demand-side perspective praised it because increased spending on social policies could help to reduce inequalities (Bsirske and Busch 2013). Since the Lisbon Strategy was implemented, the idea of the knowledge economy – also known as a ‘Europe of Knowledge’ – has been used malleably by national and supranational actors.

The first polysemantic use of the term of ‘Europe of Knowledge’ was introduced by the European Commission. With the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, the term a ‘Europe of Knowledge’ became the main aim of the European Union. In this respect, the European Commission used the terms ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘knowledge society’ interchangeably, linking knowledge to both economic and social goals. For instance, as Maria Joao Rodrigues, one of the ideological architects of the Lisbon Strategy, stated in the preface of the publication, *The New Knowledge Economy in Europe*: ‘Knowledge is becoming the main source of wealth of nations, businesses and people [...] A new paradigm is emerging creating knowledge-based economies and societies’ (Rodrigues 2002: 3). In the same vein, the Portuguese Prime Minister, Antonio Guterres, commented that the EU would commit itself to ‘the construction of a true knowledge economy, which means reflecting on Research and Development, education and training, while respecting what is untouchable in national educational instruments’ (AE 11 January 2000). In the words of the Commissioner for Social Affairs, Anna Diamantopoulou: ‘If we can combine competitiveness and cohesion in the new knowledge economy, Europe will act as a model to the world’ (AE 8 February 2000). In presenting the new European Social Fund programme for 2000–2006, Diamantopoulou announced that the programme ‘will facilitate the transition towards the knowledge economy and enhance the competitiveness of the European economy’ (AE 16 January 2001).

Although the use of the term ‘knowledge economy’ was oscillating between economic and social goals, the economic ones seemed to prevail. For instance, Jan Figel, the European Commissioner for Education from 2004 to 2009, argued that ‘investing in the knowledge economy is a prerequisite for growth’ (AE 16 February 2005), whereas for the then President of the European Commission Manuel José Barroso, the ‘knowledge economy is a critical factor with which Europe can ensure competitiveness in a global world where others compete with cheap labour or primary resources’ (CEC 2005). Yet, growth was also used in relation to achieving more social goals. As the Commission put it: ‘Growth is not an end in itself but essentially a means to achieving a better standard of living for all. Social policy underpins economic policy and employment has not only economic but also social value’ (CEC 2000). When addressing a conference on ‘Education for the Knowledge Economy’, Viviane Reding declared: ‘Education must serve the economy, competitiveness and employability, but also citizenship and social cohesion’ (AE 3 May 2000). Therefore, this evidence suggests that the term came to be used interchangeably by the European Commission to refer to either economic growth – the knowledge economy – or to social goals – the knowledge society. At the same time, the ‘knowledge economy’ was also presented as a tool for knowledge-based policy, with investment in research and innovation considered as an instrument to improve Europe’s growth (European Commission 2000). Third, knowledge was also related to more humanistic values. Indeed,

the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration (which then paved the way for the Bologna process) stated: ‘The Europe we are building is not only that of the euro, the banks and the economy, it must be a Europe of Knowledge as well’ (Sorbonne Joint Declaration 1998).

The knowledge economy was also ambiguously linked with equity and quality. With reference to equity, the Commission cited the extent ‘to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes’ (CEC 2006). This suggests that equity was considered to be a product of education, but above all an economic commodity, as the less qualified ‘are least likely to participate in further learning and so improve their employment prospects’ (CEC 2006: 9). Knowledge was also linked to quality. There was no clear definition of quality, but in the European agenda it was linked to competitiveness in the sense that competitive education was also seen as quality education. Quality was intended not only in terms of employment, ‘better jobs and more balanced ways of combining working life with personal life’, but also in terms of social policy, a ‘high level of social protection, real opportunities for all and the guarantee of fundamental and social rights’ (CEC 2000: 81). The knowledge economy was also presented as a tool for ‘knowledge-based policy’, with investment in research and innovation considered, once again, as an instrument to improve Europe’s growth. This was, for instance, the aim of the ‘European Research Area’ and the ‘European Higher Education Area’, which would in turn strengthen European scientific and technological resources (Chou and Gornitzka 2014). Another polysemantic use of the ‘knowledge economy’ was its value as a norm, namely as evaluation linked to benchmarking and the exchange of good practices.

The ‘Europe of Knowledge’ appears to have also been used in a polysemantic way by Member States. As argued by Dehmel, the term ‘knowledge’ (referring to economy or society) can have multiple meanings: it can refer to the various preparations that individuals undertake during their lives; the various educational credentials and qualifications that people attain; what an individual learns through his/her life experiences; and, finally, market interests and employment (Dehmel 2006). Alongside these considerations, this polysemy of the term ‘knowledge’ seems to be reflected in the debates among Member State shortly before and after the Lisbon Strategy was introduced. For instance, for Germany and France, it meant improving the unemployment rate among young people and equipping them with skills (AE 4 June 1999; 7 June 1999); Finland underlined the role of the knowledge economy in the context of new job opportunities offered by information and communication technologies (AE 25 November 1999); Greece emphasised the role of the knowledge economy/society under several dimensions such as employability, social cohesion, citizenship, linguistic diversity and e-learning (AE 4 February 2003); while Italy and Ireland stressed the

significance of lifelong learning to meet the needs of the knowledge economy (AE 28 October 2003; AE 19 January 2004).

Finally, the term ‘knowledge’ is not only open to several interpretations that can be used for different goals, as illustrated above, it also has scientific legitimacy within the academic community (Jenson 2010: 71). Indeed, the idea of a knowledge economy/society has also been formulated in a polysemantic way by intellectuals and scholars, and embedded within the ‘social investment strategy’ in which investment in human capital (and hence education) can promote different goals such as economic growth, social inclusion and social capital in order to meet the changing needs of the economy (Giddens 1998; Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2002: 27).

## **Conclusion**

To date, studies on the ambiguity of ideas have tended to rely on analytical frameworks to highlight its effects on the political landscape. Often treated as an exogenous factor, the ambiguity of ideas has been considered a given for granted entity instrumental to actors’ strategic action. This paper has attempted to contribute to these limitations by embracing the nature of ambiguity through its polysemy and by employing the concept of boundary objects to elucidate how different meanings can trigger coordination and policy agreement. By circling around the boundaries of different social worlds – with their synchronous stability, elasticity, and multiple meanings – boundary objects can thus be recognised by different actors in a dissimilar way. Consensus and actors’ cooperation are thus the result of misunderstanding rather than the outcome of their strategies and pragmatism.

This theoretical perspective has provided a fruitful analytical framework to illustrate how the polysemy of the Europe of Knowledge acted as a boundary object in European education policy. The empirical account has demonstrated how the very same idea of the Europe of Knowledge, as presented in the mid-1990s, was criticised precisely for its monosemantic supply-side notion, whereas when in the 2000s it began to mean ‘all and nothing’, it became the cornerstone of the European agenda for education and the OMC precisely for its malleability and ambiguity, as also stressed by the copious literature on European Higher Education (Elken *et al.* 2011; Ravinet 2014).

Actors’ strategic agency mattered as well. A key role was played by the community of Third Way thinkers who pointed to the combination of social and economic goals and who used the knowledge economy as a quasi-concept (Bernard 1999; Jenson 2010). However, the Third Way was not the only ideological hub for the Lisbon Strategy. The notion of recalibrating economic and social policy by finding a compromise between more neo-liberal stances and a more social democratic emphasis on solidarity and social cohesion was also promoted through academic publications, such as the studies

published under the Portuguese Presidency by Maurizio Ferrera, Anton Hemerijck and Martin Rhodes (2000). The establishment of the knowledge economy to raise Europe's credibility in a global world but also to address the contemporary socioeconomic challenges of the 2000s – a sort of 'Make Europe Great Again' – progressively became the key component of an interpretative framework of the goals and objectives of education policy under the OMC, and a politically – although not legally – expanded role for the European Commission. Indeed, the idea of the knowledge economy, promoted by the Lisbon Strategy and pushed forward by the European Commission, appears to have been systematically used to enhance the Commission's legitimacy and discursive power in education despite the lack of formal competences in this domain (Ravinet 2014). Furthermore, the knowledge economy brand, as presented in its prismatic dimension with the Lisbon Strategy and championed by the European Commission according to this dimension, managed to become influential because its polysemy was able to embrace different interests. In this respect, it seems difficult to identify in the empirical case a leading policy entrepreneur who had ownership of advocating this idea and hence could be credited with its success; rather, it was its polysemy that acted as an enabling factor for sustaining policy entrepreneurship and as a hub for the formation of a political coalition of heterogeneous actors. In addition, the case has illustrated how polysemantic ideas are more likely to acquire influence when they resonate with widely held social objectives for which there is a broad consensus among the relevant actors. If polysemantic ideas can better elucidate which attributes make one idea influential, the role of the social, economic, and ideological context in which these ideas are embedded is equally important (Wittengstein 1958).

The key takeaway from this paper is that if we want to expand the 'conceptual vocabulary that allows us to capture the pervasive influence of ideas' (Cox and Béland 2013: 323), we must lean towards the analysis of the policy process through which ambiguous ideas are presented, debated and ultimately enacted. By endogenising the domain of ambiguity, this paper has identified polysemy as one explanatory factor through which the ambiguity of ideas becomes influential and opens new political spaces. In so doing, the paper contributes to challenge the 'ex-post' articulation of ideas raised by Kamkhaji and Radaelli in this issue and to identify the concept of 'ideational ambiguity' as a useful analytical tool to expand our knowledge of how ideas enable cooperation and entrepreneurship by virtue of their misunderstandings.

This discussion attempts to be suggestive rather than conclusive and it provides a starting point for opening new ideational theoretical and empirical research avenues in two important directions. First, it expands on the concepts of polysemy and boundary objects as explanatory factors that enhance the capacity of ambiguous ideas to be translated across defined boundaries and diverse policy agendas. Methodologically, this would require diachronic analysis and cross-comparative case studies, and

would be particularly fruitful in policy fields characterised by issues and institutional complexity and in which policy actors constantly acquire and utilise knowledge while dealing with uncertainty (Radaelli 1995: 162). Second, the analytical perspective suggested in this paper leads the concept of actors' agency – and the longstanding tension in the relationship between ideas and actors – along new intriguing research paths relating to a more dynamic process of interaction with ideas. In this process, the polysemy of ideas could facilitate and mediate entrepreneurial activity. By 'objectifying' an idea into a boundary object, polysemy can create *entry* or *exit* options in the institutional arena by legitimising actors' power or cooperation. In other words, can boundary objects facilitate or anticipate transformations by creating new room for cooperation in the absence of consensus? Focusing on this question would allow us to better identify how ambiguous ideas intervene in changing ways of governance and to elucidate dynamics of change in public policy research.

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