1 The Ideas of Politics

In June 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates published "The Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic.* The lengthy magazine article, blending journalistic storytelling with extensive scholarly evidence, makes a powerful case for reparations to remedy white America's assault on Black bodies and lives over the course of 400 years, which has resulted in durable, structural disparities in American education, housing, health care, and wealth. The article proved a sensation when it was published and has continued to influence American public debate. As a 2019 *New Yorker* article summarized: "It's not often that an article comes along that changes the world, but that's exactly what happened with Ta-Nehisi Coates. . .. Reparations have been discussed since the end of the Civil War . . . but now reparations for slavery and legalized discrimination are a subject of major discussion among the Democratic Presidential candidates" (The New Yorker, 2019). According to Google Scholar, "A Case for Reparations" has been cited 907 times at the time this book went to press in March 2021. In addition, the essay elevated Coates's reputation as a writer with national stature, providing him a springboard for his acclaimed 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*, and his prominent role in political debates around racial justice.

This Element was originally born of reflection upon Coates's piece and its reception and influence. As communication scholars working in the social scientific and empirical tradition and subfield of political communication, we found ourselves puzzling over how to study reparations. What exactly are reparations? Why was it Coates's essay that seemingly had the power to set part of the agenda for the Democratic presidential field five years after its publication? What analytical and methodological tools do we have as a field to understand why and how reparations were being talked about in the middle of a presidential primary race in 2020?

This Element argues that to answer these questions, we need an analytical framework for studying "ideas" and their "encoding" (Hall, 2001) in discourse in empirical communication and political communication research. While there are various ways of thinking about "ideas" and operationalizing them as objects of study, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2021) states an *idea* is "any product of mental apprehension or activity, existing in the mind as an object of knowledge or thought; an item of knowledge or belief; a thought, a theory; a way of thinking." The framework we develop in this Element details an approach to studying ideas across three levels of analysis: the cultural background provided by landscapes, socially defined domains of spheres, and meso-level sites of field interaction. We argue that ideas are encoded in time in discourse, including in frames, where they can become powerful through rhetoric, performance, and

status conferral, especially when political and social contexts in spheres and fields provide discursive opportunities. Ideas in discourse, in turn, help create the future contexts within which symbolic and social action occurs.

We demonstrate the potential of this framework for empirical research through three in-depth US-based case studies that illustrate our analytical and methodological approach to the study of ideas, their encoding in discourse, and their travel and influence. While we believe our analytical framework is applicable broadly across national contexts, we focus on US empirical cases given our research expertise. The first case centers on Ta-Nehisi Coates's "A Case for Reparations" and the idea of reparations as it traveled from 2014 to 2019. The second is Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's formulation of the idea of "free expression" in his influential speech about his company's values at Georgetown University on October 17, 2019, titled "Standing for Voice and Free Expression." While the idea of free expression is certainly not novel, Zuckerberg's speech formulated the idea in a distinctly Silicon Valley–specific way as furthering social connection and progressive ends – ends compelled by the technology itself. Meanwhile, the speech itself was a form of discourse that proved enormously impactful in capturing journalistic attention and serving as an index for much subsequent coverage of the company and industry as public debates over platform content moderation intensified. Our third case is that of universal basic income (UBI), an idea that also has a distinguished pedigree in political thought, including being embraced by Martin Luther King Jr. in his final book. However, the idea took on a new cast, relevance, and immediacy in Andrew Yang's unlikely campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020. The core idea behind Yang's candidacy – a basic income "Freedom Dividend" compelled by the rise of automation – and the campaign itself resonated after the candidate's appearance on Joe Rogan's podcast and YouTube channel. This appearance had an outsized impact on the spread of the idea of UBI and ignited Yang's primary constituency of young, tech-oriented men. Meanwhile, we illustrate the ways that ideas and their influence are contingent on social contexts by showing how even after Yang's presidential bid failed, in the wake of COVID-19 the idea moved even closer to the center of policy debates.

Taken together, these three cases reveal how the study of ideas as analytical and empirical objects of analysis in their own right is necessary for understanding political life. And, they show how the concept of "ideas" cannot be reduced to other, more familiar concepts in the field, such as "frames," which are also central to political communication. We seek to make a theoretical and methodological case in this Element for studying ideas through both interpretative and quantitative methods, revealing how in the right contexts ideas and their

travel can have the power to shape public discourse and define what is imagin-able, possible, right, and good in political life – at least for a time. And it is only by analyzing ideas and discourse – how ideas are encoded and performed in mediums as diverse as magazine essays, speeches, and podcasts – that political communication scholars can truly understand the dynamics of public debate.

A Framework for Studying Ideas

The field of social scientific communication research and especially the subfield of political communication has never developed the concept of an "idea" into a unit of analysis, despite theoretical (Wirth et al., 2016) and empirical (Jackson et al., 2020; Kilgo, Mourao, & Sylvie, 2019) studies that draw on the concept and substantial work on ideational analysis in political science (e.g., Gofas & Hay, 2010). There are so many varying approaches to ideas across disciplines that the concept is rarely consistently defined, operationalized, or theorized. To take a few, sociologists Camic and Gross (2001, 236) identify what was then a new "sociology of ideas" defined by a field that "focuses on women and men who specialize in the production of cognitive, evaluative, and expressive ideas and examines the social processes by which their ideas – i.e., their statements, claims, arguments, concepts, beliefs, assumptions, etc. – emerge, develop, and change." Political scientist Deborah Stone (1989, 282) analyzes "causal ideas" which identify problems, assign blame, and attribute responsibility. For Stone (1989, 282), "our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas; those ideas in turn are created, changed, and fought over in politics." Political scientists Béland and Cox (2010, 3) define ideas as "causal beliefs" and argue that ideas are "products of cognition" that advance through interpretation, posit connections between people and between people and things, and "provide guides for action." Communication scholar Thomas Hanitzsch (2007, 369) defines culture as a "set of ideas (values, attitudes, and beliefs), practices (of cultural production), and artifacts (cultural products, texts)."

One approach cited in communication research, although rarely systematic-ally applied, is Schmidt's (2008, 2010) framework of "discursive institutional-ism," which is focused on analyzing the contexts within which policy is formulated. Discursive institutionalism provides an analytical framework for conceptualizing ideas and their dimensions, as well as their circulation as discourse. Scholars working under this framework argue that attention to ideas has been particularly useful for understanding dynamism and change given the structural emphasis of most institutional theories. This work defines ideas in terms of policies, programs, and philosophies, both cognitive and normative. Cognitive ideas are about "what is and what to do," whereas

normative ideas define "what is good or bad" and what ought to be done (Schmidt, 2008, 306–307). Ideas also serve to legitimate actors, institutions, processes, or forms of social order. Scholars in this policy-oriented tradition tend to analyze ideas through the lens of the specifics about what is to be done in the context of political and social challenges and focus on the array of institutional supports for ideas, the fit of ideas to public sentiment and national cultures, and the context within which ideas emerge and take shape as explanatory factors for why they succeed or fail (e.g., Béland, 2019). This work has been cited in the communication discipline, including in studies of journalistic identities (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018), normative ideas of journalistic innovation (Creech & Nadler, 2018), media policy and regulation (Ali & Puppis, 2018), and European data protection reform (Minkkinen, 2019).

While generative for policy analysis, we believe this approach is ultimately narrow for the more expansive focus of communication scholars – namely, discourse in all of its forms, public and private. Our aim here is to synthesize these and other literatures to develop a model of how ideas are embedded, articulated, performed, and disseminated in diverse spheres of social life, with a particular focus here on political and civic life given that we are political communication scholars. Taken together (see Figure 1), our framework encompasses the background cultural landscape, the diverse contexts of various social
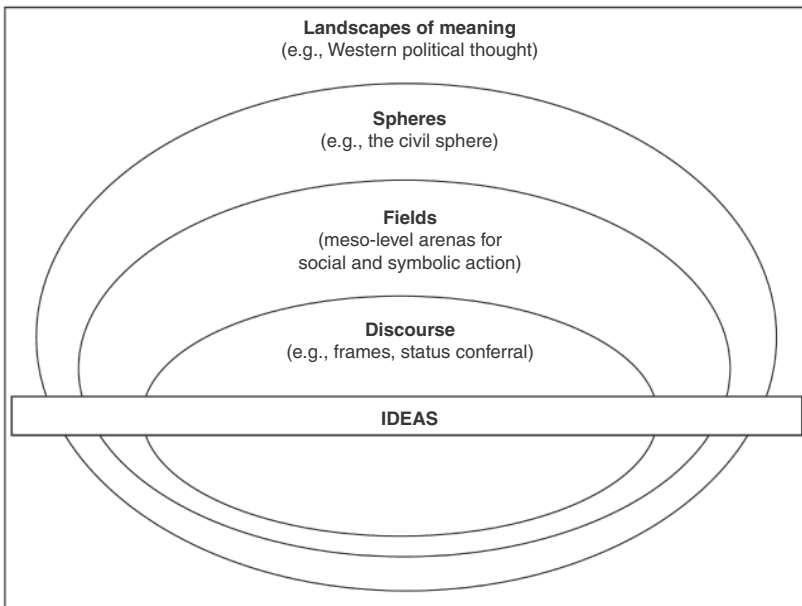
Figure 1 Ideas across levels of analysis

domains, the fields within which ideas are articulated, and the performative aspects of ideas in terms of their articulation at particular moments in time and the qualities of their expression as discourse. Ideas have power when they shape meaning, from broadly becoming part of the larger frameworks people have for understanding and valuing their lives to shaping the definition of particular situations. To become powerful, ideas have to fit within the cultural backgrounds found in landscapes and spheres and be effectively articulated as discourse in particular historical and social contexts and fields that include relations of meaning and power. Actors engage in symbolic action – including the development, articulation, and circulation of ideas through discourse – as social and mediated performances whose success is premised upon timing, the qualities of the discourse and the ideas themselves, and the contexts within which they are articulated. The durable or fleeting power of ideas is facilitated through political and social contexts that provide opportunities for their uptake and influence. To become powerful, ideas must meet the cultural and political moment, and in turn they shape the future contexts within which social action takes place.

Ideas and Their Potential Power

We start with our philosophical justification for focusing on ideas and their potential to shape social life. In his 1933 book, *Adventures of Ideas,* (mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead ([1933] 1942) lays out a framework for understanding ideas and their central role in history. For Whitehead, this conception of ideas is part of a philosophical tradition that originated with the ancient Greeks. As Isabelle Stegners, the feminist philosopher and foremost interpreter of Whitehead, details: "Plato is, for Whitehead, the first philosopher, because he defined the human being as 'capable of the Idea'" (Stengers, 2011, 498–499). (Whitehead ([1933] 1942) sees an "adventure of ideas" unfold across multiple domains of human activity and give rise to the tenor of social life over centuries. For example, Whitehead draws on the example of Jesus reimagining the nature of men as God's children and positing ideal social relations during a time of slavery to reveal the power of ideas. Whitehead argues that Jesus's ideas were seeds that grew through elaboration over centuries of human thought and culminated in the rights we recognize and grant to people in many political systems today.

For Whitehead, ideas are articulated in and have consequences for many domains of human activity, including those far from their origins – from philosophy and politics to religion and science. Jesus's religious teachings, after all, gave rise to conceptions of the "rights of man," in Whitehead's

([1933] 1942, 19) view. Given this, Whitehead details different types of ideas relating to morality, ethics, ontology, science, identity, citizenship, civilization, and people themselves. These ideas from multiple and often discordant "adventures" in the arts, sciences, religion, politics, and philosophy converge as a singular thread of human history, just as Jesus's religious and political reconceptualization of man for Whitehead brought about a world of normative "freedom and equality," which "constitute an inevitable presupposition for modern political thought" (Whitehead, [1933] 1942, 22).

As such, Whitehead takes ideas seriously as causal agents. For him, the foremost power of ideas is to bring civilization into being through a new form of social power and order premised on the victory of persuasion over force. Stengers (2011, 163) argues, "for Whitehead, the reference to the power of persuasion, in contrast to despotic power, is what is required by the very definition of what we call 'ideas.'" Ideas have power through "infection," their ability to spread and take hold over minds, habits, routines, and institutions. They do so on a long-term horizon. Ideas may start as little more than speculation among small groups but then get taken up in various ways that ripple outward. While an idea may not have sweeping implications at the beginning, it might end up being like "the faint light of the dawn of a new order of life" (Whitehead, [1933] 1942, 15), similar to Jesus's teachings. As Stengers (2011, 115) argues:

> Here, the power of ideas must be said to be suggestion rather than truth, for, like what we call suggestion, it travels along roads that do not have much to do with deduction, reasoning, logical necessity, or the principle of reality. What was originally an extravagant ideal, transported by a visionary thought, by an individual bereft of social or political power, became a "habit" or "routine," stabilized by institutions, laws, and professional regulations. If ideals are victorious, then, it is without glory or glamour, by all the practices that are indeed invented by men but that also fashion them in return, creating the social environment from which new risks, new experimentations with ideas become possible.

That Whitehead focused so centrally on the relationship between force and persuasion prefigures contemporary debates about power. As Stengers (2011, 25) argues, for Whitehead "the creation of the world – that is to say, the world of civilized order – is the victory of persuasion over force." Whitehead is broadly concerned with the power of ideas exercised through the definition of meaning – both ontologically about the things that are in the world and normatively about the things that should be, the domain of morality and ethics. Indeed, Whitehead ([1933] 1942, 17–18) argues that ethics prescribes the right forms of social

action and is "the supreme example of consciously formulated ideas acting as a driving force effecting transitions from social state to social state."

While a thorough exegesis of the concept of "power" is well beyond the scope of this Element, forms of symbolic power and their embedding in social relations, institutions, systems of knowledge, and technologies have animated much contemporary social thought. W. E. B. Du Bois ([1903] 2008, 36), writing in 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk,* conceptualizes power as in part ideational and oriented toward producing consent and resistance to domination:

> When sticks and stones and beasts form the sole environment of a people, their attitude is largely one of determined opposition to and conquest of natural forces. But when to earth and brute is added an environment of men and ideas, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take three main forms, – a feeling of revolt and revenge; an attempt to adjust all thought and action to the will of the greater group; or, finally, a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion.

John Gaventa's 1982 classic *Power and Powerlessness* develops the idea of a "third dimension" of power. The first two dimensions concern observable conflict and discernable rules of the game respectively, whereas the third addresses "the means through which power influences, shapes, or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict" (Gaventa, 1982, 15). Relatedly, in his body of work, Lukes (2004, 13) influentially focuses on the contexts that give rise to meanings and lead those subject to them to "acquire beliefs and form desires that result in their consenting and adapting to being dominated, in coercive and non-coercive settings." Andrew Chadwick (2017, 21) builds on these insights and shows how power is produced through complex interactions among many and diverse social actors over time, which often take shape through media.

These bodies of work reveal the potential power of ideas to define the meaning of social situations, including relations of domination and contestation. This is a form of what Reed (2013, 23) calls "discursive power," or "the degree to which the categories of thought, symbolizations and linguistic conventions, and meaningful models of and for the world determine the ability of some actors to control the actions of others, or to obtain new capacities." Important for understanding discursive power is its temporal dimension, as well as the way that it often works through media in contemporary societies. Jungherr, Posegga, and An (2019) argue that within hybrid media systems, power is exercised discursively. For Jungherr and colleagues (2019, 409), power is located in "the ability of contributors to political communication spaces to introduce, amplify, and maintain topics, frames, and speakers that

come to dominate political discourse. This can take the form of episodic discursive power, when contributors are able to shape topics, frames, and speakers in isolated discursive episodes, or consistent discursive power, when contributors are able to do so repeatedly over time" (to which we would add ideas, which would fall under "topics" in their conceptualization). These authors make a compelling case that "discursive power" works better for conceptualizing influence than the various traditions of agenda setting and provide a structural account of the forces that shape information flows, both at the organizational (e.g., reach, norms, and business models) and media-system (e.g., the relations between media and politics and regulatory contexts) levels.

While this latter line of work often focuses on the concrete settings within which social interactions and their symbolic dimensions are defined – often within fields of strategic action, which we return to in the "fields" section – Whitehead's epochal approach reveals the potential power of some ideas to shape the very landscape, or background, of social and symbolic action across centuries. This is where we start, before turning to consider ideas at a smaller scale, in spheres and fields, and with comparatively more fleeting forms of discursive power.

Landscapes

In his book on the necessity of interpretative social theory, cultural sociologist Isaac Reed (2011, 113) argues that all of human life takes shape within a symbolic and communication-based "landscape of meaning" that is "historically located and culturally specific." Symbolic landscapes, like their geographic counterparts, are vast and varied, not uniform. Meaning is not universal or completely shared within cultural entities – but similarly situated social actors traverse a common landscape and take up residence and pursue action from diverse locations within it. For Reed (2011), landscapes are aggregated and historical instantiations of human meaning making, and people are at once subject to and act through them. Landscapes simultaneously constrain and cause social action. A complementary concept is that of the "background," which Abend (2016, 64) develops in the context of morality, which forms the "conditions of possibility" for moral claims. Similarly, Reed makes a distinction between "forming" and "forcing" causes. With respect to the former, "forming causes are the arrangements of signification and representation that give forcing causes their concrete shape and meaningful character" (Reed, 2011, 143). While social scientists are often concerned with forcing causes (Reed, 2011,146), or proximate causes relating to motivation (i.e., why people do what they do) and mechanism (defined broadly in terms of economic, social, structural, or

communication processes), they only take shape in the meaningful forming contexts that give rise to them. Reed (2011) provides numerous examples that illustrate both this theoretical approach and his necessarily interpretative methodology, including the following:

> When an investigator reconstructs the layers of meaning in which the social actions under scrutiny are embedded, what she does is paint a picture of the meanings – historically located, fabricated by the human imagination – upon which social life proceeds. . . . The landscape metaphor captures the variety of ways in which meaning and processes of communication provide the basis for, and give form to, actors' subjectivities and strategies. The landscapes that surround certain actions are not necessarily similar to, or easily transformable into, other landscapes that surround other actions – or even landscapes that overlap and thus provide certain actions with more than one meaningful context. A joke made in one landscape makes no sense in another; a certain performance finds an avid audience here, but not there; the technology of printing is useful for spreading the oral authority of ministers in one landscape of meaning, and for spreading democratic demands for transparency in another. (Reed, 2011, 110)

As a concept, landscapes are similar to what Schmidt (2008, 206), in her framework around policy ideas, identifies as an analytical approach to "philosophies," which are world views "that undergird the policies and programs with organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society." It also is complementary to the ideology/social systems level of the hierarchy of influences approach in communication and journalism research, which represents "the idea of larger, more complex systems" at the macro level (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, 402).

Spheres

Analytically, we see landscapes being differentiated by "spheres." Pluralistic contemporary societies contain many spheres of social and cultural activity, such as religious and market spheres, that are adjacent to one another and at times overlap. Spheres are differentiated from one another as distinct social domains, even as they are embedded within and bounded by larger, shared symbolic systems (those landscapes of civilizations, nations, cultures, etc.). Spheres contain background values and codes from which the social and symbolic action within them is derived.

Most relevant for political communication research in democracies is the "civil sphere," which Alexander (2006, 4; 2010) defines as "a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time." In the civil sphere, arrangements consist of the

underlying democratic values (or ideas) of equality, liberty, and justice, and
ideal civil expressive practices that provide frameworks for legitimate action
and give rise to the specific scripts political actors and publics can perform.
Institutions that are communicative (e.g., media and public opinion) and regu-
lative (e.g., parties, laws, norms, and processes) instantiate, enshrine, and
protect these values.

We have a less teleological and ultimately stable view of the civil sphere than
Alexander (see Kreiss, 2019). Instead of deep and enduring cultural structures,
we see the civil sphere as made up of accreted traditions of political culture and
thought, "institutionalized, taken-for-granted understandings of political and
social arrangements (Lieberman, 2002, 709). While ideas of equality, liberty,
and justice are powerful in the United States, these are not the only ideas with
animating or historical force. Patterson (1991), for instance, analyzes the
Western ideal of "freedom." Meanwhile, Rogers Smith (1993) powerfully
shows how there are "multiple traditions" of American political thought and
ideas, not simply the democratic liberalism of Tocqueville but also systems of
ascriptive hierarchy that include racist, exclusionary, and social-hierarchical
cultures and institutions (see also Sinha, 2016). Changes in landscapes and
spheres are slow and difficult and often occur through the porting of the
meanings from one landscape or sphere into another – for example, using
civil democratic values of transparency and accountability to shine a light
onto pedophilia in the Catholic Church (Alexander, 2018). As a result, "actors
who act at the intersection of more than one landscape of meaning tend to invent
clever ways of switching between them rather than trying to overhaul one of
them" (Reed, 2011, 111).

The discussion thus far complements and provides an analytical framework
for other work. Political communication research on "populism" as "a distinct
set of political ideas" (Hawkins, 2010, 5), for instance, analytically places
emphasis on the importance of ideas and demonstrates the utility of our con-
ception of landscapes and distinguishing between social domains of meaning.
For example, Wirth et al. (2016, 8) argue: "In brief, the populist ideology argues
that the people have the right to sovereignty, the elite or the others (threaten to)
deprive the people of this right, and the populist (protects or) restores the
sovereignty of the people" (see also Abts & Rummens, 2007, 408). Here,
populism is a relational concept that takes on meaning only through ideas
about "sovereignty" and "the people." This formulation only makes sense
according to both the meanings of the civil sphere (concerned with the cultural
logic of democracy) and a landscape of Western political thought built up over
centuries. Indeed, the sovereignty of the people is only intelligible in democratic
contexts; it would not be a legitimate order of relations or at the very least would