Ideas, paradigms and confusions

Frank R. Baumgartner
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Frank R. Baumgartner*

OUR COLLECTIVE 'DISCOVERY' OF IDEAS

Pierre-Marc Daigneault (2014) is correct in writing that Peter Hall's (1993) concept of policy paradigm has had an enormous and positive impact on studies of public policy. It rightly moved us from ignoring the power and importance of ideas to understanding that ideas undergird and justify powerful political positions. Daigneault correctly suggests that the collective academic recognition of the power of ideas has reached a level of maturity and that it is now widely accepted, especially in the field of public policy. It is central to both the advocacy coalitions framework (ACF) (Sabatier 1988, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and punctuated equilibrium (PE) (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 1993) approaches. More interpretivist policy approaches, such as those of Schneider and Ingram (1993) or Stone (1988, 1989) also put ideas and issue definitions at the core of their understandings of how policies are justified, and how they change.

Hall's 1993 article rightly deserves credit for helping to establish ideas as a central element of policy analysis. But ideas were not new at the time. Hall cites Heclo (1974, 1978) and a range of scholars working on nuclear deterrence, international political economy and other foreign policy domains in developing his ideas that ideas matter; clearly these communities of experts had been identified in such works cited by Hall (1993) as Krasner (1978), Nye (1987), and Haas (1992). Hall's article came at a moment in the development of the public policy literature that was ripe with rich discussions about the power of ideas; it was, as John Kingdon (1984) might have said, an idea whose time had come. Hall's article came at the right time and it has rightly been credited with pushing the concept of ideas, but more particularly that of policy paradigms, to the centre of our understandings of public policy: how they come about; what supports them; and how and in what conditions they might change.

IDEAS ARE MORE GENERAL THAN PARADIGMS

Daigneault lays out a series of important points where we could benefit from taking stock on where the literature stands today, now that the importance of ideas is so widely accepted; this is a very useful exercise. He particularly focuses on the term 'paradigm' as being problematic. I share some of these

concerns, but my reading of the issues is different and I think the route to research clarity and progress will differ from that suggested in his article. The first distinction I believe must be firmly made is what is an idea, and what is a paradigm.

In Hall's (1993) original formulation, a paradigm is certainly not the same as an idea. He writes that policy-makers work within a framework that features a shared understanding of certain ideas and that this makes communication and understanding possible:

> More precisely, policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing. Like a *Gestalt*, this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole. I am going to call this interpretive framework a policy paradigm. (Hall 1993: 279)

A paradigm is, on purpose, a tall word. Many policies are not supported by anything so grand. Hall was not interested in explaining first- or second-order changes with this grand term. Indeed, in his comments on the impact of the 1993 article on its 30th anniversary (Hall 2013), he focuses on such large-scale issues as whether the global neo-liberal paradigm might be shaken by the economic crises of 2008–9. His earlier article similarly had to do with Keynesianism and its challenge by monetarists. My point here is that Hall was and is interested in explaining some fundamental issues, and the phrase policy paradigm is appropriate for that. But most public policies are not so grand, and most are not supported by anything approaching a paradigm. Further, the sets of incumbent policy actors who support them may not garner such deference as the British Treasury, the United States Federal Reserve or other powerful actors whose prestige is often associated with a policy paradigm (see Baumgartner 2013).

If ideas are everywhere related to policies and the reasons to support them, paradigms are ideas on steroids: such powerful ideas that they become unspoken. These are similar to the price of entry, where if one does not share the paradigm, one is not part of the conversation. But many ideas are not so powerful. One way of considering the power of ideas is to note that this power is itself a variable: it might be high or low. In a policy paradigm, the power of the underlying idea is by definition extremely great, and changing it is tantamount to revolution. This is why Hall's (1993) focus on third-order change (truly dramatic policy reversals) jibes so well with his idea of a paradigm. But ideas can come in all levels of strength, from monopolistic and powerful to competitive, weak or completely ignored. We should recognize that policies may be associated with ideas that are more or less powerful, coherent and widely shared – paradigms are one end of a continuum describing the potential power of

ideas in politics. Paradigms are a small subset of the ideas that undergird various public policies.

IDEAS, ACTORS AND POLICIES

Daigneault (2014) correctly points out a number of problems with the literature on ideas: how do ideas become influential? How do ideas relate to the policy actors who support them, and what independent role do they have beyond the actors who use them? How do we measure ideas? How do we measure change in the power of an idea separately from observing a change in policy? This last one is particularly fundamental, as we cannot assess whether ideas cause policy if we cannot separately observe the two. He goes on to argue, however, that paradigms – more so than ideas in general – are home to confusion and inconsistencies in the literature. I think the problem is a more general one. Can we measure ideas separately from actors and policies? That is the crux of the problem.

A focus on Hall-like paradigmatic change (third-order change) stems from a focus on the same types of grand-strategy issues that fascinated the big thinkers that Hall (1993) cited: Nye (1987) on nuclear deterrence; Haas (1992) and Krasner (1978) on large-scale political economy issues; Heclo (1974) on support for a large welfare state. Hall's own interest was of course in a fundamental aspect of a massive policy with great public salience: who controls macro-economic policy in Britain? But what about smaller issues, such as merit pay for teachers, crop subsidy programmes, school vouchers versus traditional neighbourhood schools, or limits on air pollution emissions from electrical power plants? My point is that many policies do not have an over-arching paradigm shared by all. In many cases there are competing actors, each brandishing rival ideas and justifications for their preferred policy outcomes. All the problems that Daigneault (2014) recognizes with separating out a paradigm change from a policy change can be generalized to a more universal problem: identifying separately ideas, actors and policies.

Can we do this? With regards to paradigms, Daigneault (2014) argues that it is 'fundamental to circumscribe the ontological nature of policy paradigms to the ideational level'. I think that means that paradigms should be considered to be ideas, but there is a simpler solution. All ideas are not paradigms, so I do not see the need or the value of limiting this discussion to paradigms. Paradigms should not be confused with the policies they support, but the problem is much more general than that. He goes on to list seven particular critiques of the use of the idea of a paradigm, but so much would be saved if we just considered the power of ideas. Can these be measured separately from policy change? Of course they can. Can they be identified separately from the set of actors who espouse them? No doubt.[1]

The discussion on paradigms reminds me in unpleasant ways of a previous debate a generation ago about the concept of corporatism. Schmitter (1974) proposed a definition of corporatism that conflated elements that were supposed

to make it possible (e.g., monopolistic labour unions and business organizations) and those which were the result (highly structured negotiations among responsible parties). The problem in the ensuing literature was that the very definition of the concept turned it more into a syndrome than a set of variables whose theoretical relations could be observed and tested. If corporatism broke down as one or another actor could not enforce the negotiation on its own members, then this was not a fault of the concept, just an indication that the country in question was not a corporatist one. Similarly, I think Daigneault (2014) is essentially arguing that the idea of a paradigm change is so inextricably linked to the idea of a third-order policy change that the two have become understood as a syndrome. Any policy change that is not accompanied by a paradigm shift may be seen as evidence not that paradigms are not related to policies, but that perhaps there was no paradigm established in the first place. Without the ability to measure a paradigm and a policy independently from one another, this is a valid concern.

What is the solution to this concern? To me it is easier simply to recognize that ideas matter, that ideas may be weak or strong, that a given policy may be associated with many or just a few ideas, and that actors use ideas, facts, evidence and other things to build support for the policies they support and to plead that analysts would move toward independent observations and measurements of ideas, actors and policies. Paradigm changes are policy revolutions in important and highly visible domains of public policy. Rather than build a theory about paradigms, we should build one about the much more applicable concept of an idea.

Daigneault (2014) writes that his list of seven critiques of the idea of paradigmatic change constitute only a first draft. He suggests that the application of his set of seven rules will hopefully 'ultimately translate into better research practices'. I would suggest a much simpler set of practices: first, clearly identify the ideas associated with a policy. Note that ideas are plural. Second, assess the power or salience of the underlying ideas, noting that some ideas may dominate and some may be only small parts of the overall supporting structure. Also note that contradictory and opposing ideas are also associated with the same policies that are supported by rival ideas. In sum, treat ideas as measurable concepts, and measure the ideas separately from the other variables in the equation. Third, identify supporting actors and treat these independently from ideas. Finally, identify policies and measure these separately from both the actors who support or oppose them and the ideas with which they may be associated. Only by distinguishing clearly among ideas, actors and policies can the linkages among them be clarified. And finally, for those few policies such as nuclear deterrence, home ownership and mortgage subsidies, or fiscal policy, rather than create a new category and call these policies paradigmatic because they have such powerful sets of actors and ideas that support them, why not simply treat them in exactly the same manner as policies with weaker supporting structures and let the data speak for themselves? Policy change is related to ideational change at all levels. Shifts in ideas affect shifts in policies. Policy actors use

ideas to promote their preferred policy positions. This occurs, rarely, when large and firmly entrenched policy communities all sharing a fully coherent set of policy ideas undergo a transformation. But it occurs more regularly in those issues where ideas are in constant struggle. For the health of a future literature on the impact of ideas in public policy, we should revel in the fact that we can observe ideas ranging from weak to powerful, and that this variation is the germ that makes the systematic study of the power of ideas possible. Let us study the full range of them than only those few extremely powerful ideas that rise to the level of the label that Peter Hall (1993) appropriately gave to them: paradigms.

Biographical note: Frank Baumgartner is the Richard J. Richardson Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Address for correspondence: Frank Baumgartner, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 358 Hamilton Hall, Campus Box 3265, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3265, USA. email: Frankb@unc.edu

NOTES

1 I've done it several times myself: identifying ideas on the death penalty separately from the state of the policy itself (Baumgartner *et al.* 2008); measuring the arguments of lobbyists in Washington separately from their success in protecting or changing the policies they work on (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009); or the strategies of individual policy actors in France (Baumgartner 1989). It is not that hard.

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