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Putting policy paradigms in their place

Sebastiaan Princen and Paul 't Hart

Pierre-Marc Daigneault's article (2014) is a welcome attempt to clarify the meaning of the concept of 'policy paradigm'. The separation between paradigms and policies that he proposes is particularly important if we are to study systematically the role of ideas in policy-making.

Clear as the article is on the separation of paradigms and policies, it reintroduces a degree of ambiguity through the concept of 'policy theories', which Daigneault conceptualizes as a set of ideas that bridge paradigms and policies. Although in his sixth proposition, Daigneault argues for a focus on the material dimension of policies, in his earlier discussion he maintains that 'policies are not only 'material' and 'institutional' ... but also ideational'. In that sense, 'public policies share a similar ideational component with paradigms'. This ideational component is formed by policy theories, theories of action specifying means-ends relationships in the design of concrete policies and programmes (e.g., a national health insurance scheme). These are more limited in scope and more concrete than policy paradigms which pertain to whole families of interrelated policies (e.g., a market led vs a state led system of health care governance).

This raises the question of the nature of the relationship between policy paradigms and policy theories. One way to conceptualize this, implied in Daigneault's sixth proposition, is to see policy theories as a link between policy paradigms and the material aspects of policies. Policy theories are then seen as the 'operationalization' of policy paradigms for specific policies and the impact of paradigm change on policies runs through change in policy theories. So, when in the public health policy community, a paradigm shift occurs in favour of more market-based, demand-driven logics of steering health care, we can expect termination of a suite of existing more supply-driven, state-led health care programmes and the birth or expansion of programmes that put decision-making powers in the hands of individual patients and/or bargaining leverage *vis-à-vis* health care providers in the hands of insurance companies.

Such a conceptualization is likely to introduce a new degree of confusion in the debate. The distinction between broad and abstract policy paradigms and narrow and concrete policy theories is not always clear. The two represent

extremes on a continuum that encompasses assumptions and values at different levels of abstraction. Drawing a line somewhere on this continuum and calling everything on one side 'policy paradigm' and everything on the other side 'policy theory' feels arbitrary. The set of ideas underlying a policy normally encompasses assumptions at different levels of abstraction. The relationship between these levels of abstraction is better conceptualized as one in which policy-specific ideas are inherently embedded in more abstract and general ideas, similar to the relationship between Schön and Rein's (1994: 33) 'policy', 'institutional action' and 'meta-cultural' frames.

Having said that, not all ideational constructs underlying policies qualify as 'policy paradigms' in the sense put forward by Peter Hall (1993). It refers to a specific type of ideational construct. To determine how we can know a policy paradigm when we see one, it is important to acknowledge that Hall's concept was embedded within a specific empirical puzzle: the relatively sudden and fundamental change in United Kingdom (UK) macro-economic policy from Keynesianism to monetarism. The introduction of the concept policy paradigm, and the associated 'paradigm shift', was meant to explain why and how this particular change happened.

In order to explain the radical shift in his original case, Hall (1993) made two crucial claims. First, he argued that policies are shaped by underlying ideational paradigms which structure the way in which policy-makers look at reality, and identify problems and solutions. Second, these paradigms take a specific form, in that they are (1) internally coherent and (2) incommensurable with competing policy paradigms. Daigneault stresses the first characteristic of paradigms (their internal consistency – see his third proposition), but he doubts whether incommensurability is a defining characteristic of policy paradigms.

This is where we differ. Incommensurability is arguably a key element in Hall's explanation of radical change, because it precludes gradual change. The incompatibility of different paradigms implies that one cannot simply 'mix' elements from two different paradigms and formulate some kind of hybrid. The only possibility is radical reforms analogous to 'revolutions': one group of true believers trumps and removes from power the other. These are intense, messy junctures in policy and politics. They come with triumphalism, social experimentation and possible counter-revolutionary rear-guard action (see Hirschman 1991; Patashnik 2008). They tend to come with major funding, organizational, personnel and linguistic (a new 'speak' becomes dominant, the old is eradicated) upheavals, quite similar to those which Kuhn (1996 [1962]) associated with paradigm shifts in academia. The brutal politics of radical change notwithstanding, the underlying logic is, however, ideational and goes to the issue of incommensurability: if one adopts one part of a new paradigm, one is forced to accept the rest of the paradigm as well, in order to avoid mutually incompatible ideas. This tension is precisely what caused the seismic shift between macroeconomic policy paradigms that Hall (1993) analysed: policy-makers had to choose between two mutually exclusive philosophical bundles. Macroeconomic management is not the only domain in which we

can find such paradigmatic contests. Others include trade policy (free trade versus protectionism, one of the longest running paradigm contests in the history of public policy, still playing itself out in, for example, agriculture), health care governance (supply versus demand based systems) and detention (retribution versus resocialization). By contrast, if underlying philosophical ideas are not incommensurable, such a wholesale shift from one set to another is not necessary, as various kinds of hybrids between the two sets are conceivable and yield internally consistent perspectives. Shifts between those sets of ideas then need not be radical but can be much more gradual.

Hall's (1993) argument therefore relies more closely on Kuhn's concept of paradigms than Daigneault allows for. Hall does not only adopt the term 'paradigm' from Kuhn, but also his perspective on the development of paradigms: periods of 'normal' science/policy-making within an established paradigm are interrupted by radical shifts between paradigms, leading to scientific/policy-making 'revolutions'. Hence, Hall's use of the concept of paradigm is not just metaphorical, as Daigneault argues, but is much more strongly indebted to the explanatory scheme put forward by Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In this explanatory scheme, paradigmatic change (and the associated change in policies) is not simply a quantitatively different (i.e., larger than normal) form of change but a qualitatively different one. As a result, the process through which paradigm change takes place is different in character from policy change in situations of 'normal policy-making' and takes place through different processes (Hall 1993: 279–280; see also Hay 2001: 200).

Whether or not (or perhaps more usefully: under what conditions) this account of paradigm and policy change is likely to occur is the central empirical and theoretical question flowing from Hall's (1993) work. Some authors have criticized the notion of policy paradigm on theoretical grounds (Carstensen 2011), while others have found more gradual and layered processes of fundamental change in empirical studies (e.g., Kay 2006; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Skogstad 2011).

These findings may be taken as statements about policy paradigms, showing that paradigms may also change gradually. In that case, the concept of policy paradigm is broadened to encompass all internally consistent ideational constructs underlying policies. However, the findings may also be taken as indications that a 'Kuhnian'-style policy paradigm as defined by Hall (1993) is not a necessary feature of each and every policy sector. Such paradigms only develop under specific conditions. Hall himself hinted at these scope conditions when he stated that policy paradigms are most likely to be established in areas of technical policy-making that are administered by a relatively stable policy community of experts (Hall 1993: 291). In other areas, policies may still be underpinned by a variety of contending ideas, but these ideas may not take the form of fully fledged, internally consistent and mutually exclusive policy *paradigms*. This is important, because the presence or absence of policy paradigms can, we believe, predict the pattern of policy change that a policy sector is likely to display.

This can be put in the form of two propositions, offered here as an addendum to Daignault's.

> Proposition 1: In policy sectors where there is no policy paradigm, changes in policies and programmes can be both gradual or abrupt, but are loosely coupled.

In such sectors incrementalist policy dynamics are to be expected, yet *ad hoc* forms of punctuated equilibrium dynamics can also occur. This is because in the absence of the ideational puritanism that comes with the existence of ideologically powerful and contending policy paradigms, there is greater leeway for collapses of sense-making and pressure for change in the face of a particular dramatization of failures of established programmes to play themselves out in *ad hoc* changes to those programmes (as predicted by punctuated equilibrium theory [Baumgartner and Jones 2009]), even more so if change is effectively advocated and engineered by opportunistic and skilful policy entrepreneurs (as in Kingdon's [1995] multiple streams theory). In non-paradigm-driven policy sectors, the policy consensus maintaining the *status quo* is more shallow, so there is greater scope for Dewey-style pragmatist (Ansell 2011) or Bevir and Rhodes's style anti-foundationalist (Bevir and Rhodes 2003) ideational *bricolage* on the part of policy-designers, matched by a greater institutional scope for Lindblom-style political 'cogitation' (log-rolling, package deals, etc.) between key sectoral stakeholders and decision-makers. So, policy change in these domains may be either swift or gradual, but it is likely to be more *ad hoc* and isolated.

Conversely, policy sectors that are constituted through the struggle between fully developed policy paradigms as defined above, witness a markedly different pattern of stability and change:

> Proposition 2: In policy sectors characterized by policy paradigm contests, change is prone to be relatively rare, yet rapid when it occurs, and affecting entire bundles of ideationally related policies and programmes.

Through the ideational power of paradigms – whose adherents will find it impossible to 'do deals' with the fundamentally objectionable ideas and assumptions of their paradigmatic competitors – bundles of policies are likely to persist for longer, yet when the underlying paradigm that keeps them together collapses, they are likely to change quickly and in radical fashion. So, true policy 'revolutions' – across the board, rapid and far-reaching changes – are only likely to occur in paradigm-driven policy sectors.

This articulation of a differentiated logic of policy change rests on a narrower use of the concept of policy paradigm than Daignault advocates, but one that is probably closer to Hall's original conception. It opens the door toward a systematic study of the conditions under which policy paradigms, as opposed to other types of ideational constructs, are important in explaining stability and change in public policy. This is particularly relevant for examining empirically the extent to which the pattern of radical, bundled-up policy change that Hall

(1993) originally observed in British macro-economic policy in the early 1980s also occurs in other policy domains.

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