Bringing Ideational Power into the Paradigm Approach: Critical Perspectives on Policy Paradigms in Theory and Practice

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Introduction

The work of Peter A. Hall (1993) on the role of policy paradigms in public policy is remarkable. Unrivalled by any other publication in ideational scholarship in terms of citations and impact, it – together with the work of scholars like Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993), Kingdon (2003), Baumgartner and Jones (2009), and Stone (1988) – drew on the social learning-tradition (Heclo, 1974) to help bring ideas on the agenda of mainstream political science and policy studies (Béland & Cox, 2013; Blyth, 2013; Daigneault, 2014). With the subsequent important work of what may be termed ‘second generation ideational scholarship’ (e.g. Béland, 2007; Berman, 1998; Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Pedersen, 2001; Cox, 2001; Lieberman, 2002; Schmidt, 2002), ideational frameworks for analyzing policymaking grew into a more or less coherent approach in its own right, what Schmidt (2008) later dubbed ‘discursive institutionalism.’ Hall’s (1993) theory of policy paradigms was essential for the coming of age of the ideational approach because while it placed institutions and interests centrally in its explanatory framework, ideas were the primary factor in accounting for processes of stability and change.

So successful was Hall’s (1993) paper that for years it stood largely unchallenged regarding its ontological basis and the theory of change it posited. More recently, however, a number of key characteristics of Hall’s (1993) approach have been subject to critical appraisal. Although fundamentally sympathetic with Hall’s (1993) aim of placing ideas centrally, ideational scholars have reacted to the structuralist predilection of a Kuhnian approach to policy paradigms. Hall (1993) has thus been criticized for overemphasizing punctuated equilibrium-style change.
(Béland, 2007; Carstensen, 2011a; Cashore & Howlett, 2009; Kay, 2007; Lieberman, 2002; Orenstein, 2013; Seabrooke, 2009; Wilder & Howlett, 2014), conceptualizing ideas as static and monolithic, and downplaying agency in processes of ideational change (Berman, 2013; Campbell, 2004; Widmaier, Blyth, & Seabrooke, 2007; Wood, 2015; see also Parsons, 2007) by claiming that actors effectively internalize the policy paradigm they adhere to (Carstensen, 2011b; Jacobs, 2009; Schmidt, 2008).

Taken together, these authors have shown that by basing his theory of policy paradigms on a crude version of Kuhn's (1970) notion of science paradigms, Hall (1993) ends up with an overly systemic understanding of the role of ideas in policymaking (Schmidt, 2011). This is a somewhat paradoxical outcome, since ideas were in the first place brought into new institutionalist theory to balance the scale toward a greater emphasis on explaining processes of change to supplement the characteristically strong focus on stability (Blyth, 1997). Just as he had so successfully framed the scholarship on ideas and politics, Peter A. Hall moved on to other debates, so ideational scholars were left with the task of figuring out how to develop the concept of policy paradigms and its central message of the importance of ideas in policymaking without succumbing to its overly systemic implications. More than two decades later it seems safe to claim that the tradition has to a large extent been successful in this endeavor: ideational approaches to policy studies have enthusiastically been taken up by a new generation of scholars, while important advances have been made to bring more agency into the analysis of the role of ideas in policymaking. Thus, the chapters in this volume reflect well the current status of the use of paradigm theory in public policy research. Although varied in theoretical and methodological approaches, the contributions are joined in their commitment to placing ideas and policy paradigms centrally in explanations of political change and stability. Moreover, and importantly, the chapters seek to push the use of paradigms as an analytical concept toward greater room for agency, in turn allowing for more gradual forms of change.

This chapter has two overall aims. First, based on the contributions to this volume, it takes stock of the main debates concerning the role of paradigms in public policy research. Specifically, it argues that three dimensions of Hall's (1993) policy paradigm framework are increasingly recognized as problematic for understanding dynamics of stability and change: the incommensurability thesis, the role of policy anomalies in setting off processes of change, and the focus on punctuated equilibrium as the only dynamic of significant policy change. With the increasing recognition of the analytical limitations of these key parts of the
paradigm approach, it begs the question whether policy studies should at all invoke the concept of a paradigm in explanations of policy developments. Starting from a positive response to this question, the second part of the chapter suggests a potential way forward in dealing with these issues, namely to develop a clearer understanding of how varying forms of power play into processes of paradigm change and stability. In short, it argues that instead of conceptualizing paradigms as enjoying monopoly over the minds of political actors, seeing paradigm shifts as originating in diminishing problem-solving abilities, and in the end understanding paradigmatic contests as decided through electoral politics, more should be done to understand the varying roles of power in explaining processes of stability and change in paradigms. Specifically, it suggests that ideational power can be conceptualized as a form of power in its own right, which should be connected with other forms of power like institutional and structural power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2014). Given limits on space, this argument necessarily remains a sketch, but the chapter nonetheless defends the claim that developing a clearer notion of ideational power offers a promising path for furthering our theoretical and empirical understanding of paradigms in policymaking.

Taking stock of Hall's paradigm approach

The starting point for Peter A. Hall's paradigm approach to understanding dynamics of policy stability and change was the question: what motivates state action? Hall's (1993) seminal paper was thus published in the slipstream of a broader effort in American political science to bring the concept of the state back in. Although the work of this group of scholars was more diverse than the common allegiance to 'bringing the state back in' indicates, Hall's (1993) approach fit well with broader neo-statist efforts to balance between statist and pluralist approaches, as well as combining ideas and institutions (see Adcock, Bevir, & Stimson, 2007, p. 274). This context seems to have mattered for how ideas were conceived by Hall (1993). As noted by Parsons (2007), institutional and ideational types of explanations are both characterized by starting from ambiguity in the objective environment:

Both then see people themselves creating the constraints that resolve the ambiguity and channel their action along a certain path. One big difference is that institutionalists only see ambiguity in environmental conditions at the starting point of their arguments, while a-rational ideational claims see ambiguity throughout. For institutionalists,
their situation external to the individual eventually clarifies thanks to the unintended consequences of earlier institution-building. In a rational ideational claims it is the actor's interpretation of the situation, not the situation itself, which ultimately indicates a way forward. (pp. 98–9)

Writing at a time when the rational choice offensive was at its height (Blyth, 2013, p. 212), Hall (1993) found a way to straddle institutional and ideational explanatory logics, although it might be claimed that he placed too much emphasis on the resolution of ambiguity rather than the continual need for interpretation. The solution was to transpose Thomas Kuhn's (1970) theory of scientific revolutions into a theory of policymaking, which proved useful for the effort to develop an institutional understanding of the role of ideas in politics. Despite Kuhn's (1970) recognition that his theory was ill suited for understanding social science – and thus even less useful for studying society (see Schmidt, 2011) – Hall (1993) enthusiastically applied key parts of Kuhn's framework in his analysis of the role of paradigms in policy development, namely the incommensurability thesis, the importance of anomalies, and the division between 'normal science' and paradigm shifts. As discussed below, this analytical framework – although useful for building a strong argument for the role of ideas in policymaking – has increasingly been subject to criticism in ideational scholarship.

The Incommensurability thesis

With the argument that policy paradigms are incommensurable – 'Because each paradigm contains its own account of how the world facing policymakers operates' (Hall, 1993, p. 280) – Hall took a strong position on both the internal purity of a paradigm and the mutual exclusivity of paradigms. That is, paradigms were believed to be internally coherent, composed of logically connected elements that originated in fundamentally different accounts of how an economy works. On both counts, the approach has been subject to criticism. One of the first critiques came from Surel (2000, p. 499), who suggested that instead of seeing a paradigm as a unifying and homogenizing social sphere, a policy paradigm is best understood as a bounded space for conflict, which 'marks out the terrain for social exchange and disagreements, rather than simply supporting an unlikely consensus.' An important implication is that a dominant paradigm 'by no means is an exclusive one' (Surel, 2000, p. 502).

This broadly aligns with Oliver and Pemberton's (2004) re-evaluation of Hall's (1993) case of British economic policy. Here they show that
rather than exhibiting the incommensurability posited by Hall, the
degradation shifts that occurred were less than wholesale with new ideas
being incorporated into the prevailing policy paradigm. That is, para-
digm replacement need not be absolute (see also the contributions from
Wilder and Wilder & Howlett, this volume). This happened during the
1930s with the Treasury’s partial integration of Keynesian instruments
into the prevailing neoclassical framework, as well as in the 1960s and
late 1970s where no paradigmatic shift occurred but a ‘subset of the new
ideas was incorporated into the prevailing framework of policy, which
thereby underwent a marked evolution’ (p. 436). In sum, Oliver and
Pemberton’s (2004) comprehensive analysis of the British case showed
clear signs that the strong version of the incommensurability thesis
did not hold even in a specialized and theoretically heavy policy area
like economic policymaking, and that paradigms may often be joined
in synthesis (see also Wilder & Howlett, this volume). Schmidt (2011,
p. 42; 2002) voices a similar argument, when she points out that in the
social sciences and society there rarely is only one predominant para-
digm ‘since there are ordinarily other minority (opposition) programs
waiting in the wing,’ perhaps made up of once dormant ideas that may
be resurrected when new events call for new explanations. In addition,
Schmidt (2011) argues that policy paradigms are not as coherent as the
Kuhnian approach leads us to expect, since they are the result of con-
flicts as well as compromises among actors who bring different ideas to
the table.

Variations exist as to how forcefully the notion of ‘pure’ policy para-
digms is rejected. Thus, while Schmidt (2011) suggests we dispense with
the use of the incommensurability thesis altogether, Daigneault (2014;
this volume) instead suggests a loosening of the concept. Although
Daigneault claims that elements from one paradigm can be understood
by people who subscribe to another paradigm, and that often ideas are
simultaneously compatible with different policy paradigms and policies,
he maintains that in order to speak of a paradigm, a high degree of inter-
nal coherence between the ideas of the paradigm must be observed. By
this he means, ‘the ideational content of all dimensions is compatible
and logically consistent.’ According to Daigneault (2013), in the absence
of this condition, paradigms do not exist and are only a loose collection
of ideas (for a similar view, see Princen & t’Hart, 2014). But, how do we
determine whether a paradigm is logically consistent? And is this really
what matters in the policy process?

Here I would suggest instead taking a political and historical
approach. That is, what makes a paradigm coherent is whether policy
actors conceive them as coherent – whether they can forcefully make an argument for its problem-solving abilities – and the historically founded embeddedness of the paradigm in the culture of the polity, that is, its resonance with established values (Schmidt, 2002, see also Campbell & Pedersen, 2014). This interpretation is consonant with Wilder’s (2015; this volume) argument that paradigmatic incommensurability is relative. That is, notwithstanding the particular logical coherence of a paradigm, what matters is whether policy actors perceive paradigms as incommensurable, not that they are logically coherent and thus in any ‘objective’ sense fundamentally different in their ideational structure. Importantly, the perception of incommensurability is subject to change through deliberation and strategic framing on part of policy actors. What matters for Wilder (2015) are the positive correlations individual actors make between lower and higher order components of a given policy (this volume). According to Wilder (2015), as policy ideas that are part of paradigm move from the agenda setting stage to formulation on to implementation, the paradigmatic purity of policy ideas is often compromised as incommensurability among alternatives is eroded. This line of argument emphasizes the politics of paradigms and ideas—something Hall (1993) has been criticized for neglecting (e.g. Campbell, 2002; Wood, 2015) – in that policy actors’ coupling of sometimes disparate policy programs during agenda setting and the marginal adjustments made to policies when actors confront unexpected problems is theorized to contribute to the erosion of paradigmatic purity. In other words, from the perspective of policy scholars, a paradigm might appear as logically incoherent, but what matters is the perception of policy actors that the paradigm is coherent enough for them to subscribe to it, and whether the ideas of the paradigm are shared by an entire policy community (Baumgartner, 2013, p. 251; see also Carstensen, 2011b; Wilder & Howlett, 2014).

Attesting to a growing consensus about the heterogeneous nature of policy paradigms, a number of chapters in this volume present different versions of the argument that policy paradigms often contain conflicting ideational elements, but also, importantly, that this might turn out to be a political strength. In their chapter to this volume, Cairney and Weible, for example, suggest that we think of paradigms as system-wide, which means that all participants operate within a common discursive framework, while subsystems may work with competing frames. In a similar vein, the chapter by Kern, Kuzemko, and Mitchell argues that in the case of energy policy, two different narratives, one on climate change and another on geopolitical energy, were combined leading
the authors to conclude that instead of exhibiting coherent unity, the new energy governance system was structured by multiple ideational perspectives.

In his critique of the paradigm approach, Zittoun draws inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault to make the argument that policy paradigms are most often made up of heterogeneous ideational elements ordered on a macro level by an *episteme*. What matters for the political strength of this assemblage is not its logical coherence, but if it makes sense to its promoters and is able to garner the necessary support. Although he prefers to use the concept of a policy statement to refer to a discursive assemblage of different heterogenous components without any presupposed coherence that gives specific meaning to a policy proposal, Zittoun's conceptualization is not that different from the burgeoning consensus on the composite structure of policy paradigms.

Instead of seeing a lack of logical coherence in a paradigm as a weakness – or as indicating that we are not really witnessing a paradigm in the first place – it is worth recognizing that the malleability of a paradigm also has important political strengths in dealing with challenges that arise through political battles and the rise of policy anomalies. As argued by Mondou, Skogstad, and Houle (2014), the resilience of a paradigm is connected to the capacity of its policy images to respond effectively to criticism from competing policy images, which may entail ‘rejecting or fending off attacks, but can also entail integrating external criticism into the understanding of the policy issue’ (p. 159). Schmidt and Thatcher (2013) similarly point to the mutability of paradigms as a strength in encompassing evolving and sometimes conflicting ideas leading to conceptual expansion, rather than retreat (see also Schmidt, 2006, p. 251). And Bélanger and Cox (2014) have recently coined the term ‘coalition magnet’ to refer to the capacity of ambiguous or polysemic ideas to appeal to a diversity of individuals and groups, and to be used strategically by policy entrepreneurs (i.e. individual or collective actors who promote certain policy solutions) to frame interests, mobilize supporters, and build coalitions. The lack of ideational purity that results from both necessary political compromises, coalition building, defense of the reigning paradigm, and the movement from the agenda-setting stage to the more concrete policies related to the institutionalization of a paradigm, suggests that strategic ‘ideational bricolage’ is more pervasive in both theory and practice than is often recognized (Wilder, 2015, p. 2). In turn, the incommensurability thesis seems increasingly regarded as unnecessary for claiming that policy paradigms structure the policymaking process.
The role of policy anomalies

Another central argument in Hall’s (1993) original framework was the important role of experimentation and policy anomalies in spurring processes of paradigmatic change in policymaking. Thus, as the supporters of a paradigm encounter developments that contradict the basic tenets of the paradigm – that is, anomalies – ad hoc attempts will be made to stretch the terms of the paradigm. In the end, Hall (1993) argued, this is likely to undermine the authority of policymakers and experts that adhere to the faltering paradigm, paving the way for a shift toward a competing paradigm.

What is particularly interesting – and, in my view, problematic – about this argument is that it juggles two competing ontologies. On one hand, what Blyth (2013) calls Bayesian social learning – taking place in instances of 1st and 2nd order change – that views ideational change as occurring following information updates and experiments, and, on the other, a constructivist approach that understands information updates and experiments as fundamentally in need of interpretation, a process that can never be objective or unmediated and remains fundamentally structured by contests over authority and power. According to Blyth (2013), this tension in Hall’s (1993) approach does not develop into a paradox, though, because of the central position of the concept of ‘authority’ in his account. That is so, because

Bayesian learning does not ‘hollow out’ the existing paradigm, like acid eating away at cavity. Rather, events identified as anomalies can either add to or subtract from the ‘authority’ of those arguing for political power. Agency, via contests of authority is the key move in this part piece, but it is a move that the article fails to sustain consistently throughout. (Blyth, 2013, p. 200)

Thus, according to Blyth (2013), the tension between the two ontologies is not a problem for the approach, but it is something that is not dealt with systematically in the empirical account of British economic policymaking. Thus, the move from a traditional social learning perspective to a Kuhnian approach supposedly leads to ‘autonomization’ of the paradigm from the incremental processes of Bayesian learning. However, for Hall (1993) emphasis remains on the ability of the paradigm to solve problems, not only in the empirical part of the paper – as argued by Blyth (2013) – but also in the central role of anomalies in accounting for change. That is, the question of how anomalies play into the competition for the authority of a paradigm remains open. In Blyth’s rendition
of Hall’s argument, the question is not about whether the paradigm is ‘genuinely incapable of dealing with anomalous developments’ (Hall, 1993, p. 280, my emphasis), but rather a matter of the capacity of actors to authoritatively interpret an event as anomalous. But, this begs the question: how do agents gain such authority? Or, how is such authority exercised?

Except for noting that ‘the policy community will engage in a contest for authority over the issues at hand’ (Hall, 1993, p. 280), Hall is conspicuously silent on this matter. This, however, is not very surprising given his simultaneous adherence to a Bayesian understanding of learning. In other words, this is a paradox that does not only play out in the empirical section of the paper, but a confusion that permeates Hall’s (1993) account of how paradigms develop and change, and it amounts to an unwarranted stretching of Hall’s use of the concept of anomalies to claim that what is really meant is that it is *interpretations* of developments as constituting anomalies that undermine the paradigm, not anomalies as ‘developments that are not fully comprehensible, even as puzzles, within the terms of the paradigm’ (Hall, 1993, p. 280). It is anomalies – and the policy failures that ensue from stretching the terms of the paradigms through experiments – that ‘gradually undermine the authority of the existing paradigm and its advocates even further’ (p. 280) – not actors’ capacity to persuade the policy community and the public that the paradigm has failed.1

What is important, then, is how and when policy actors are able to successfully frame instances that threaten the authority of the paradigm as anomalies. In that regard, post-crisis developments in the ideas that structure financial regulation is interesting. As argued, for example, by Mügge (2013), in the case of financial regulation, debates continue to emphasize ideas that are directly borrowed from neoliberal conceptions of financial markets. But, if the financial crisis did not attest the failure of the neoliberal efficiency market-paradigm, what then could? Succinctly put, given that paradigms are fundamentally political in nature, *they cannot be proved wrong*. Gaining a more analytically sophisticated understanding of how policy problems develop into anomalies thus requires in the first place a greater appreciation of the interpretive battles behind such processes. To this end, Wilder and Howlett, in their contribution to this volume (see also Wilder & Howlett, 2014), point out how

Policy anomalies are informational signals that must be interpreted by human agents . . . while anomalies contribute to the perception and definition of policy problems, they are not synonymous with the
problems but rather present images necessary to understand them as such. (p. 113)

So, ‘while anomalies contribute to the perception and definition of policy problems, it is important to stress that anomalies are not synonymous with problems’ (Wilder & Howlett, 2014, p. 190). How then do actors interpret policy developments as anomalies? Particularly important in that regard is the availability of a credible alternative paradigm (Baumgartner, 2013; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004). If there is no coherent and credible alternative paradigm to help along the delegitimizing interpretive process, policy actors are likely to use the cognitive filters of the existing paradigm. That is, to act despite the uncertainty brought on by crisis, agents need creativity to ‘act back’ upon their environment in purposive ways (Blyth, 2010, p. 97), and since they have no standard solution to turn to, actors have to make up new solutions as they go along. With no realistic alternative available, they move outward basing their new solutions on their experience of the world before the crisis hit (Carstensen, 2013). Thus, in contrast to Hall’s (1993) approach, anomalies may lead to paradigm stretching that restores trust in existing strategies for action, while simultaneously changing the paradigm in a significant fashion. In the words of Wilder and Howlett (this volume), ‘anomalous observations may thus allow dominant ideational frames to be stretched, promoting innovative bricolage which brings solutions previously deemed not worthy of consideration into the ambit of acceptable ideas.’

Viewed this way, the process of paradigm change need not be divided between the survival and return of the paradigm (‘normal policymaking’) or a complete overhaul of the paradigm. We might additionally – and perhaps more likely – expect the construction of and reaction to crisis to lead to a gradual change inside the paradigm. Moreover, this process is fundamentally political rather than ‘Bayesian’ in nature, with policy actors seeking strategic advantage and bending interpretations of reality to suit their needs (Wood, 2015). To this end, Wilder and Howlett (2014, p. 194; see also this volume) usefully employ the term ‘gatekeeper’ to designate the policy actors who adapt evidence, either positively or negatively, to conform to political preferences, and amend existing solution sets or complement cognitive schemas.

Significant gradual change in paradigms
The larger issue at stake underlying the question of the incommensurability of paradigms and the role of policy anomalies is how to conceive the
dynamics of paradigm change. By distinguishing between two options of change—‘normal policymaking’ and paradigm shifts—Hall (1993) employed a strong version of the Kuhnian (1970) take on paradigm shifts. As mentioned above, the approach allows for only two forms of change: incremental shifts in the instruments and settings of the paradigm—which in Hall’s (1993) original version does not entail change in the ideas that structure the paradigm, and thus does not amount to significant change—and a wholesale shift in the goals and discourse that structure policymaking through the introduction of a rival policy paradigm. In effect, Hall (1993) adopted a punctuated equilibrium model of change based on an assumption about the incommensurability of policy paradigms and the inability of actors to incorporate elements from other paradigms.

As mentioned above, subsequent studies of Hall’s (1993) case of economic policymaking in Britain (Hay, 2001; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004) have showed that in fact the processes of policy change were not easily characterized by being revolutionary, but rather as a series of iterative changes that develop rather through ‘punctuated evolution.’ As noted by Daigneault (2014, p. 465; this volume), a strong conception of incommensurability precludes gradual transformative paradigm shifts, which makes it all the more important to develop alternative conceptions of paradigms and how they change. Thus, taking up the challenge of accounting for instances of significant gradual change in paradigms, recent scholarship has sought to develop a less systemic take on paradigms while analytically leaving more room for actors to reinterpret their ideas and perhaps practice ‘inter-paradigm borrowing’ (Hay, 2011) to answer to the rise of anomalies or pressure from competing paradigms. One approach suggests viewing paradigms as made up of relationally structured webs of ideas (Carstensen, 2011a). Viewing paradigms as composite and historically founded through political battles and compromises, rather than taken over more or less directly from science paradigms (e.g. economics), allows policy actors through processes of policy bricolage to strategically, reflectively, and gradually adjust their ideas, even in cases where decision-making authority does not change hands (Wilder & Howlett, this volume). The change that ensues may take the form of a new hierarchical ranking of elements that already exist (Surel, 2000), perhaps with the addition of new ideational elements from another paradigm (Carstensen, 2011a). In this perspective, seemingly small changes over time, which appear not to have visible or immediate impact on the basic characteristics and goals of a policy paradigm can nonetheless add up to a change in its basic philosophy (Skogstad & Schmidt, 2011).
The increased focus on significant cumulative change over long periods of time is also matched by greater awareness among more traditional historical institutionalists of gradual transformation through processes of institutional change like layering or conversion (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). The gradualist strand of historical institutionalism does not employ an explicitly ideational approach—which is surprising given their frequent reference to the importance of interpretation—but as shown by Nohrstedt in his contribution to this volume, the degree of policy actors' compliance to the policies emanating from the paradigm is key for understanding its development over time. Much in line with recent arguments of historical institutionalists, Nohrstedt emphasizes how unforeseen consequences of paradigmatic reform have impacted on how policy actors in the Swedish public sector have received and acted upon ideas coming from the New Public Management paradigm.

Similarly, Wilder, in his contribution, points out how advocacy groups—which play a central role in policy formulation and bringing new ideas on the agenda—are unlikely to have a clear conception about the appropriate instrument mixes and seldom any ideas about the more specific settings of those instruments, leaving greater room for epistemic communities and technocrats to more concretely develop what the paradigm should mean in practice. This perspective is helpful in pointing out how the ways in which normative values and technical expertise impact the policy process may be temporally discrete. Feeley and Horan, in their chapter, emphasize how the practice of a paradigm—both the formulation and implementation phase—in important ways, depends on the development of routines that help guide policy makers. This process takes on a central role in the actual institutionalization of a paradigm, where the establishing of routines is iterative with the result that the paradigm may slowly, but significantly, change shape (see also Wilder & Howlett, 2014).

Given these developments in the literature, it seems safe to say that the study of policy paradigms has moved beyond the one-sided focus on change through punctuated equilibriums. A factor that may further push this agenda is the recent financial and economic crisis. The financial crisis of 2007–2009 dealt a severe blow to the ideational and institutional structures of advanced financial capitalism, and its ramifications continue to ripple through the world economy. With policymakers scrambling to address these challenges, resulting in institutional and ideational change in a host of policy areas, one could reasonably expect theories that use notions of critical junctures and paradigm shifts to reign strongly among current accounts of change in wake of the crisis.
So far, however, in areas like financial regulation and economic governance, scholars are finding signs of significant gradual change rather than the paradigmatic shifts hypothesized by Hall’s (1993) paradigm model (see, for example, Crouch, 2011; Helleiner, 2014; see also the edited volumes by Bermeo & Pontussen, 2012; Moschella & Tsingou, 2013; Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013). Even in the studies that do identify a paradigm shift – notably Baker (2015) that argues for a paradigm shift toward macroprudential ideas in financial regulation – it often turns out upon closer inspection that the change amounts rather to a significant add-on to the pre-crisis regulatory paradigm (see also Mügge, 2013). Although further studies are necessary to reach a clearer understanding of the dynamics of change following the crisis, studies so far seem to corroborate the growing consensus that significant gradual change in paradigms is not only a possibility, but also the most prevalent outcome, not least in times of crisis (see, for example, Braun, 2015; Carstensen, 2013; Salines, Göckler, & Truchlewski, 2012).

A way forward: Bringing in ideational power

If we dispense with the Kuhnian components that Hall (1993) first introduced to the paradigm approach, it begs the question: What should we put in its place? Considering the central position of the assumption of incommensurability to explain stability and the important role assigned to policy anomalies in setting off processes of paradigm change, it is necessary to conceptualize alternative factors that might account for stability and change in paradigms. Instead of basing the drivers for stability and change on two competing ontologies – one on Bayesian learning and another one on battles for authority, respectively – this chapter suggests that focus be shifted to the importance of different forms of power, ranging from the direct force of compulsory power, to the more indirect – but no less important – effects characteristic of institutional, structural, and ideational power. Within the confines of this concluding chapter, the framework necessarily remains a sketch and in need of further elaboration and development. However, hopefully it is clear enough as to provide a sense of a potential way forward for the analysis of stability and change in policy paradigms.

Ideational power versus ideas matter

To some the suggestion to focus more strongly on ideational power might come as a surprise. After all, was ideational power not brought in as a relevant concept the moment researchers started taking ‘the power
of ideas’ seriously? Yes and no. Yes, ideational research has been premised on the ontological argument that ‘ideas matter’ in politics, meaning that policy actors need intersubjective ideas to make their interests actionable, and so ideas have been understood as ‘powerful’, since they have effect on how actors interpret their world (Parsons, 2007). On the other hand, this basic argument that ideas matter – that they are important – in political processes, has been conflated with the more specific claim that ideas are connected to relations of power. With most of the effort going into making the case that ideas matter and should be included in the mainstream of political science, much less has been done to conceptualize what is meant by the notion of ideational power and how it relates to other forms of power, for example, compulsory, institutional, or structural forms of power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2014; a notable exception is Béland, 2010; see also Barnett & Duvall, 2005 on power in international relations).

It might also be objected that Hall’s (1993) original framework already includes power as a central analytical component. This is true, but its focus is too one-sidedly on institutional power, and what is left for ideational power to explain is underspecified. That is, on one hand, it is evident that the paradigm is ‘powerful’ in the impact it has on policy actors’ view of the world: it is after all the prism through which policymakers view the world and thus instrumental in identifying what should be considered a problem and what kind of solutions are relevant. On the other hand, because Hall (1993) injects a strong assumption about the incommensurability of paradigms – that the merits of each cannot be determined through comparison or tests, and thus it is impossible to persuade competing fractions about the merit of one’s paradigm – the battle over paradigms effectively takes place in the political arena. A paradigm shift will thus not occur until the proponents of the new paradigm have secured power to institutionalize the paradigm. In this perspective, power relates more to gaining access to institutional positions of authority than to the ideational or discursive power of a paradigm. That is, the triumph of a new paradigm is secured not through one fraction persuading others about the legitimacy of its paradigm, but by the institutional power that actors are able to wield.

How, then, are policy actors to attain these positional advantages? Hall (1993) is not all too clear on this matter, but it is noted that the contest over authority

may well spill beyond the boundaries of the state itself into the broader political arena. It will end only when the supporters of a
new paradigm secure positions of authority over policymaking and are able to rearrange the organization and standard operating procedures of the policy process so as to institutionalize the new paradigm. (pp. 280-1)

The formulation ‘may well’ is what creates the confusion. Does the contest end in the electoral arena or does it not? Hall (1993) is conspicuously vague on this point. It seems safe to assume, however, that given the central role of the electoral triumph of Margaret Thatcher in the empirical part of Hall’s (1993) paper, and Hall’s (1993) statement that ‘The monetarist paradigm ultimately triumphed over its Keynesian rival by means of partisan electoral competition’ (p. 288), what makes and breaks paradigmatic authority is institutional power secured through electoral contest. There is little doubt that who holds government power can be important for which paradigm structures the policymaking process, and that electoral success matters for a change in paradigm, but it is also clear that it is not the only factor of importance in understanding the dynamics of paradigms in policymaking – a point also recognized by Hall (1993), but with little further specification.

Conceptualizing ideational power

To develop an account of policy paradigms that more explicitly deals with the role of ideational and non-ideational power in processes of stability and change in paradigms, it is necessary first to provide a definition of ideational power. Thus, following Carstensen and Schmidt (2014), we may think of ideational power as the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements. This may occur directly through persuasion or imposition or indirectly by influencing the ideational context that defines the range of possibilities of others. In this perspective, acts of ideational power – whether successful or not – only occur in a subset of the relations relevant for understanding how ideas matter, namely when actors seek to influence the beliefs of others by promoting their own ideas at the expense of others.

We may further specify three forms of ideational power that are relevant for understanding developments in policy paradigms. First, power may be exerted through ideas, that is, as a capacity of actors to persuade other actors to accept and adopt their views of what to think and do through the use of ideational elements. Persuasion is clearly central to this form of ideational power. Rather than viewing power as making someone do what they would otherwise not have done based on
force, threats, institutional position, material resources, and so on, the ideational power actors exert is based on their capacity to induce other actors to do something through reasoning or argument. This form of power relates both to the efforts of elites to convince each other about the pertinence of certain programmatic ideas – effected through the use of coordinative discourse, and perhaps enhanced by actors’ ability to accumulate authority from combining knowledge from different kinds of policy areas (Seabrooke, 2014) – as well as the communication that goes on between elite and the mass population, what Schmidt (2002) refers to as communicative discourse. In both cases, the exercise of power is strategic. That is, although actors are dependent on the ideational framework of the paradigm they seek to support, the selection of symbols and rhetoric is a ‘deliberate activity because framers are acutely aware that a frame that fits the prevailing public mood is important in generating support for policy proposals’ (Campbell, 1998, p. 397).

However, as Campbell (1998) also notes, the effectiveness of power through ideas also depends on the kinds of material resources brought to bear by policy actors, that is, how effectively actors are able to project their ideas to the mass public.

Second, the capacity to exert power through ideas, also in large measure hinges on the power over ideas, which Carstensen and Schmidt (2014) refer to as the capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas. This form of power may take multiple shapes, including when actors deploy ideational power to ensure that their ideas remain predominant so as to guard against challenge to their exercise of coercive power, or questioning of their structural and institutional powers (a classic example being authoritarian regimes); or, at the other end of the scale, when otherwise powerless actors successfully employ discursive means to pressure otherwise powerful actors to act in ways they would not otherwise have done (e.g. social movements). But, in the case of policy paradigms, the most relevant deployment of power over ideas comes in the form of the ability of actors – normally quite powerful also in terms of institutional position and authority – not to listen, that is, a capacity to resist alternative ideas. Not rarely does it characterize policy actors clustered in closed groups of people, as part of, say, epistemic communities, discourse coalitions, or advocacy coalition networks that are able to harness enough legitimacy around their policy ideas to avoid considering alternative approaches. One policy area where this form of ideational power has been especially prevalent is financial regulation. Many of the most important ideas in financial regulation – ideas generally consistent with private sector preferences – were thus hatched
inside transnational networks of experts held together by elite peer recognition, common and mutually reinforcing interests, and an ambition to provide global public goods in line with values its members consider honorable (Tsingou, 2015). Clearly institutional position matters as well, since granting certain professional groups near-monopoly on developing regulation and policy provides a privileged position for dominating which policy ideas and discourses are allowed onto the decision-making agenda.

Third, and finally, ideational power shows itself as *power in ideas*, which refers to the authority certain ideas enjoy in structuring thought at the expense of other ideas (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2014). This power is exerted through background ideational processes – constituted by systems of knowledge, discursive practices, and institutional setups – that in important ways affect which ideas enjoy authority at the expense of others. One way to think about this kind of authority of ideas at the expense of others is in terms of the power of public philosophies (Schmidt, 2008) or public sentiments (Campbell, 1998) that form the background of policymaking processes. That is, while the other forms of ideational power are focused more directly on the interaction going on between ideational agents, *power in ideas* concerns the deeper-level ideational and institutional structures that actors draw upon and relate their ideas to in order for them to gain recognition among elites and in the mass public. Power in ideas also affects how actors are able to exert power over ideas. That is, if over time certain sets of ideas become so firmly entrenched that they become part of the public philosophy of a polity, it may enhance the ability of actors to maintain and defend their ideational authority. One particularly relevant example is the transnational spread of economic discourse in the post-World War II period that has reshaped how non-economist policymakers understand a given issue (Hirschman & Popp Berman, 2014).

**Ideational power and policy paradigms**

Conceptualizing ideational power in this way has important implications for how we think about policy paradigms. Here I want to draw out four of these. First, bringing in ideational power, points us toward the importance of authority. Where Hall (1993) creates an analytical split between the Bayesian automatic loss of authority following the onslaught of policy anomalies, and the constructivist contests for authority between incommensurate policy paradigms, a perspective on ideational power instead puts the emphasis squarely on the constructivist battle of ideas. This aligns with Blyth’s (2013, p. 204) point that coalitions of policy
actors 'may both "power and puzzle," but successful ones authoritatively dictate what a puzzle is and how power should be applied to solve it.'

The question then becomes: how are certain paradigms identified by policy actors as being incommensurate and what kind of material and non-material resources are policy actors able to muster in the fight for the authority to make such a call and have it accepted? When is something considered an anomaly and when are the opinions of experts considered controversial? Why are actors able to resist the interpretation of their paradigm as failing while keeping alternative paradigms off the table? A focus on ideational power opens up the question of how actors perceive paradigms and their ability to solve problems, and it connects the question to relations of power — in as well as outside crises — rather than to the effects of experience and information updating.

Second, the agency-orientation of this understanding of ideational power distinguishes it from the structural theories of theoretical dominance like Hall’s (1993) paradigm approach, since it emphasizes actors' ability to 'stand outside' and critically engage with the ideas they hold and promote. This follows from the distinction between ideational power at the subjective and intersubjective level implied by the inclusion of power through ideas as central for understanding processes of paradigmatic change. In such a perspective, ideas are not thought of as internalized or 'contained' in the minds of actors, but instead as a resource — a toolkit and not a coherent system — that exists between and not inside the minds of actors, and the use of ideas thus demands some creativity and critical faculty of the actor (Carstensen, 2011b), at times enabling him or her to 'buck the system' (Widmaier et al., 2007). That is, actors not only have 'background ideational abilities' that enable them to think beyond the (ideational) structures that constrain them even as they (re)construct them. They also have 'foreground discursive abilities' that enable them to communicate and deliberate about taking action collectively to change their institutions (Schmidt, 2008). From this perspective, ideas do indeed become powerful when they are taken for granted (see also Baumgartner, 2014, p. 476), but here 'taken for granted' does not mean that the ideas have become internalized, but instead that an intersubjective consensus has arisen — a consensus subject to challenge from competing coalitions and in need of continual ideational power wielding to remain stable.

Third, by analytically granting actors the ability to think outside and strategically about the policy paradigm they support, bringing in ideational power opens up the possibility for gradual, but significant, change inside paradigms. As noted in the previous section, the Kuhnian
understanding of paradigms employed by Hall (1993) has the effect of disposing the paradigm approach for only acknowledging punctuated equilibriums, but if we open for the possibility that indeed actors are able and willing to adjust a paradigm, for example, in the effort to bro- ker between coalitions of actors, or in adjusting it to unforeseen conse- quences, the approach is better able to detect significant gradual change either over long periods of time, or even following a crisis. The idea- tional power of policy actors is important in this context, since it helps account for the cases where actors have had to defend the status quo by acknowledgment competing ideas and discourses.

Finally, employing the concept of ideational power in no way excludes the possibility of considering the relevance of other forms of power, like structural or institutional power. To the contrary, the approach explicitly includes other forms of power – like institutional or structural power – to understand why a paradigm changes, or why it survives despite the appearance of anomalies and pressure from competing advocacy coalitions.

Conclusion

Western economies are currently coping with tough times of sluggish growth and austerity, but despite the hardship, for scholars interested in how paradigms matter for policymaking, these are also quite exciting times. Thus, the financial crisis and the Great Recession that ensued offer something of a laboratory for studying the dynamics of policy stabi- lity and change. At the outset of the crisis, a fundamental shift in the ideas that guide economic governance were considered realistic, if not outright preordained (e.g. Fukuyama, 2008; Hobsbawm, 2009). As the years have passed, and pre-crisis neoliberal ideas still stand strong, arguments about a pending paradigm shift in the coming years is increasingly viewed as ludicrous. From another perspective, though clearly not fully borne out, the predictions were not totally off the mark. The world has thus witnessed the enactment of policies that could not have been imagined within the standard ‘normal policymaking’ of the pre-crisis paradigm, including the introduction of policy ideas from competing paradigms that received little or no hearing in the decades preceding the current crisis. In other words, we are seeing significant gradual ideational change rather than the major overhaul critical voices had hoped for.

Approaches to policy paradigms that only allow only for either general stability or the drama of punctuated equilibriums have a hard time dealing with such developments. One of such frameworks, Hall’s (1993)
policy paradigm approach, seems particularly vulnerable to this critique. As argued in this chapter, despite the profound success and significance of this seminal statement about the role of policy paradigms in policymaking, the transposition of a Kuhnian understanding of paradigms into a context of policymaking is not without its weaknesses. Notably, it leads to an understanding of political actors as unable to critically scrutinize the paradigm they hold, thus understating the transformative potential of agency, and, in turn, it accounts for significant ideational change with reference to exogenous shocks and the rise of anomalies that undermine the authority of the policy paradigm, allowing only for the possibility of paradigm shift, or continuing 'normal policymaking.'

Given the criticism leveled at Hall's (1993) paradigm approach, would it make best sense to altogether simply stop using the concept of a paradigm? I do not believe that is the best way forward. The concept of policy paradigms is intuitive, simple, and powerful and has gained wide recognition in the policy literature and beyond, a status worth defending. Rather than suggesting that we dispense with the concept of a policy paradigm, further work is necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of change in paradigms. This volume suggests that important steps in that direction have already been taken. By flagging the importance of recognizing strategic and creative agency, as well as placing greater emphasis on the flexibility and malleability of policy paradigms, these contributions are helpful in solidifying a promising new direction for the study of paradigms in policymaking. Moreover, this chapter has suggested a potential new agenda for research on policy paradigms, namely, first, to divest the paradigm approach of the Kuhnian inspiration brought in through Hall's original formulation and instead attenuate its constructivist base to open for a more dynamic and agency-centered approach to policy paradigms, and, second, to emphasize the role of different kinds of power relations in the workings of policy paradigms. To be sure, throughout Hall's (1993) paper are sprinkled elements of power through, over, and in ideas – for example, reference to the importance of media debates, or 'organized interests trying to influence the political discourse of the day' (p. 290) – but these insights are never really developed and play an underspecified role in the paradigm framework. In the end, the institutional power accrued from electoral success ends up in an analytically too-singular position. It is thus the hope that by bringing in a more developed notion of ideational power, we may gain a firmer grip on how different forms of power play into processes of stability and change in policy paradigms – an issue that is more relevant than ever in these times of crisis.
Notes

1 Blyth (2013) seems to generate a bit of a paradox himself, since despite good arguments for the constructivist approach, and very few good arguments for the usefulness of Bayesian logic in understanding ideational change—together with a convincing demonstration that the constructivist logic clearly does the better job in explaining the outcome of paradigm stability in face of the largest financial crisis in 80 years—Blyth maintains that the tension in Hall’s (1993) model is ‘generative’—or at least was generative in bringing ideas into historical institutionalism (p. 212) and ‘demands acknowledgement rather than resolution’ (p. 211).

2 The conceptualization of ideational power is presented at length in Carstensen and Schmidt (2014).

References


