Introduction

While the concepts of policy paradigms and paradigmatic change now range freely through the policy literature, one of the most influential contributions to the currency of the paradigm and related concepts is that of Hall (1993). This is not to say that Hall invented the idea of transferring Kuhn’s (1970) original ideas from the sociology of science to politics and policy. Scattered references are found much earlier, for example in Manning (1976, pp. 26–7), where the succession of dominant ideologies is treated as an example of paradigm shifts. Nonetheless, for modern policy studies, Hall (1993) is the canonical reference. This chapter explores the connection between the contemporary debates about policy paradigms and the tradition in which Hall (1993) was written, namely neo-institutionalism. It is argued that much of the value of the concept, together with some of the unresolved problems and ambiguities surrounding its use, can be traced to its origins in the new institutionalism and the debates around variant “institutionalisms”. By returning to these debates, we get a better picture of both the strengths and the weaknesses of the idea of policy paradigm.

In the first section, I briefly review the emergence of the new institutionalism in political science and policy studies and the differences of approach among the three main variants: rational, historical and sociological institutionalism. The next section analyses the role of the paradigm idea in Hall (1993) in detail, paying particular attention to the institutionalist context of his argument. The penultimate section traces the career of paradigms and paradigm shifts in three versions of a “fourth institutionalism”, where each version is proposed as a remedy to an alleged failing on the part of the three older variants with respect to
the role of ideas in policy change. The conclusion argues that whether there really is a need for a fourth new institutionalism is much less important than how variant institutionalisms treat policy paradigms and the closely related idea of paradigmatic change in public policies.

The new institutionalisms

The advent of a new institutionalism – to be distinguished from a much older focus on the central institutions of government that characterized early twentieth-century political science – was given the status of a distinctive school by March and Olsen (1984, 1989). When the latter launched their now-classic attack on the narrow theoretical vision that excluded organizational factors from political life, their target was the behaviourist orthodoxy that had arisen at mid-century, primarily in the United States. The orthodoxy, they argued, was contextual, in the sense of embedding politics in society and reducing political life to the outcome of social forces, (what has been called epiphenomenalism); reductionist, in seeing politics as the aggregation of individual decisions; utilitarian, in ascribing calculated self-interest to the agents making these decisions; functionalist, in believing that history tends towards equilibrium and balance; and instrumentalist, in holding that decisions about the allocation of resources, rather than decisions about the allocation of meaning, are the stuff of politics (March & Olsen, 1984).

In programmatic fashion, March and Olsen called for a “new institutionalism” that will:

- deemphasize the dependence of the polity on society in favor of an interdependence between relatively autonomous social and political institutions;
- deemphasize the simple primacy of micro processes and efficient histories in favor of relatively complex processes and historical inefficiency;
- deemphasize metaphors of choice and allocative outcomes in favor of other logics of action and the centrality of meaning and symbolic allocation. (1984, p. 738)

For understanding policy, the most important argument derived from this programme turned out to be the seemingly innocuous observation that underlying non-institutional theories is the assumption that “things are ordered by their consequential connections”, in the sense of means linked to ends, causes to effects, solutions to problems and so on. Institutionalism, on the other hand, alerts us to the possibility of other kinds of ordering, particularly the importance of temporal ordering: