3　The Power of Ideas in Policy Research: A Critical Assessment

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

The importance of the role played by 'ideas' and knowledge in human affairs has been widely debated in social sciences. In spite of this fact, one has to admit that the concept of 'ideas' is not very clearly defined (see Braun in this volume). Its signification can be very miscellaneous, divergent as well as sometimes contradictory, depending on the various intellectual, theoretical, as well as political orientations of the theoretical approaches. Thus, referring in particular to the example of the 'ideational approaches' in policy analysis, one can observe that the uses of the concept can refer to meanings as diverse as: ideology, belief systems (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), values, world-views, social perceptions, norms (Muller 1995; Jobert and Muller 1987), cognitive tools, and knowledge. It may also refer to meanings such as scientific theories, sets of ideas (Hall 1989c, 1992), paradigms (Hall 1993), technical receipts (Jobert 1994), discourses, story-lines (Fischer and Forester 1993) (see Braun in this volume).

In my opinion, these different conceptions of the nature and the role of ideas can be respectively related to two opposed ideal-typical points of view. First, a 'neo-Marxist' and 'post-structuralist' view considering beliefs, ideas and knowledge as a source of hegemony and domination. Second, a more élitist and 'technocratic' view considering ideas and scientific knowledge as a source of rationality and social progress.

Thus, in the first perspective, ideas and knowledge, taking the form of individually internalised beliefs and values, are part of the 'hidden face of power' (Lukes 1974). The dominant social group (or the ruling class) has the 'hegemonic' power (Gramsci 1977) to impose its views of the world through its capacity to control the way individuals perceive the social reality. In this perspective, ideas and knowledge constitute above all a (re)source of symbolic power and violence, this kind of power being considered as the most effective power organising social relationships (Bourdieu 1977). Such a structural view of the 'power of ideas' implies that this latter does not result from the intrinsic power of true ideas, but rather from the capacity of institutions and/or dominant social groups to create the condi-

tions, for example through disciplinary devices (Foucault 1975) or intellectual activity (Gramsci 1977), for the diffusion of the dominant conception of the social order as well as for its (collective) interiorisation by the individuals. In this perspective, public policy is to be considered not only as a material apparatus furnishing concrete sets of measures in order to treat or solve objective social problems, but also, and perhaps above all, as an objective intellectual and symbolic contribution to the social construction and justification of the social order (Jobert and Muller 1987).

In the second perspective, ideas and knowledge, taking the form of scientific theories, cognitive tools, operative knowledge or even technical receipts, are viewed as a contribution to the rationalising process of public action as well as an instrument for a better governance of society (Keynes 1936). Ideas and knowledge tend to be considered as independent and autonomous from their social context of production, scientific knowledge and theories as well as technical receipts being considered as available intellectual tools and instruments allowing rational actors to reduce and control uncertainty in the policy-making process (Hall 1989c). In this perspective, ideas and knowledge do not necessarily maintain a narrow and immediate link with the beliefs and values of the social groups, actors or institutions supplying and using them. Their use is even characterised by a certain interpretative room for manoeuvre. Thus, though constituting a potential power for their eventual users, they are considered as rather socially and politically 'neutral' products partly independent from their conditions of production, as well as 'available' and interpretable in various and sometimes contradictory ways (Hall 1992, 1993). Finally the 'power of ideas' also results in this perspective partly from its intrinsic power of persuasion.

These two points of view are defined here in an ideal-typical way, stressing voluntarily the epistemological and theoretical differences between them. The various approaches dealing with the role of 'ideas' in the policy process do not of course correspond exactly to one or the other position as they are described here but can be situated more or less closely from one or the other point of view.

Departing from the question tackled in this book concerning the 'additional explanatory capacity of ideas', as well as from the statement of the diversity of the way ideas can be conceptualised, my contribution will consist in comparing various approaches, more or less close to these two different points of view. This will be done from the point of view of the relation between the way ideas are conceptualised and the explanatory power which is conferred on them. Analysing the relation between these two dimensions of the approaches, I will try (Section 2) to accentuate the differences concerning the relation between ideas, interests and actors, as well as (Section 3) to assess the internal coherence of the approaches concerning this aspect.

I do this in order to make (in the conclusion) some suggestions concerning possible steps in the direction of an eventual reconciliation of these opposed points of view.

Thus, adhering more closely to the first 'neo-Marxist' or 'Gramscian' point of view, I have selected the *référentiel* approach developed by the French political scientists Bruno Jobert and Pierre Muller. Close to the second point of view, envisaging ideas on their more 'technocratic' dimension, I have selected Peter Hall's policy paradigm approach. Finally, I have also chosen the advocacy coalition frameworks approach developed by Paul Sabatier. This last choice allows us to illustrate the main epistemological and theoretical questions of the discussion.

2. IDEAS IN THE POLICY PROCESS: A COMPARATIVE ACCOUNT

In order briefly to present these different approaches, I will more particularly focus on their ideational dimensions departing from the two following questions:

1. How are ideas conceptualised and what are the relationships between ideas, actors and interests?
2. What are the main features of the theory concerning the analysis of the policy process and what is the role attributed to ideas in this perspective?

2.1 The French *Référentiel* Approach

Close to the neo-Marxist point of view, the concept of *référentiel* explicitly claims its affinity with the concept of hegemony developed by Gramsci. In this perspective, ideas are not reducible to a purely 'idealistic' dimension but link inseparably the cognitive and normative aspects of beliefs and values (see Braun in this volume). The concept of *référentiel* can analytically be divided into four levels (Muller 1995, pp. 158–9):

· the *values* constitute the most general and fundamental aspect of the *référentiel*, defining what is desirable or not for the society or the sector. They thus contribute to defining the conception of what is 'possible' or 'thinkable' or not in the context of public action;
· the *norms* define the principles of action that are compatible with the dominant values in the *référentiel*;
· the *algorithms* correspond to the determination of the causal relations considered as inducing the problem as well as to an explicit

description of the actions and measures that should be undertaken in order to intervene on the problem as it is perceived and defined;

· the *images* conveyed by a *référentiel* constitute a sort of short cut, a simplified or concentrated representation or definition of the situation, the problem or the target group of the policy. This last dimension of the *référentiel* is very important. Images constitute a socially powerful instrument for the diffusion of meanings and ideas as well as of values, norms and even algorithms.

Therefore, ideas are at the same time abstract mental schemes and concrete instruments to guide political action, and they can transform the social reality through their capacity to redefine the social perception of this reality. Ideas are thus inseparably values and instruments for action. In fact, it is precisely because ideas are values and beliefs that they can also lead to action. In consequence, ideas are not independent of their social basis and do not impose themselves through their own dynamic and supposed intrinsic 'power of conviction'. In the same way, there are social conditions for the emergence of a new set of ideas, which means that not all ideas are possible and 'thinkable' at any moment in time. Ideas do not constitute a disentangled piece of the social configuration. They are involved in a circular process in which social groups, collective actions and collective sets of ideas (*référentiels*) are, at the same time, both 'creators of' –and 'created by'– the two other dimensions of this circular movement.

This conceptualisation of ideas contrasts markedly with other major approaches dealing with policy ideas (Hall 1993, 1997; Majone 1996). In fact, the *référentiel* approach implicitly rejects the interpretation of the policy process as the result of a dialectical relation between ideas, institutions and interests considered as distinguishable components or 'variables' of a standardised and (in a Popperian way) 'testable' theoretical model. Jobert (1998, 1999, pp. 133–4) and Muller (1995) actually insist on the fact that the policy-making process is not the result of the concurrence between material-interested rational (groups of) actors instrumentalising ideas as cognitive tools in order to control and reduce uncertainties. They consider instead that 'ideas' are an intrinsic and indissociable part of the collective identity of actors as well as of the definition of their collective and individual interests. As a consequence, any attempt to distinguish clearly between these two aspects of what they consider as the same and unique process would be in vain.

Ideas are, therefore, at the centre of the analysis and are considered as playing a role in all the steps and aspects of the process. More particularly, ideas, taking the form of *référentiels*, contribute to the process of 'coherence building' between the sectoralised components

of society. Departing from the Durkheimian conception of the historical process of the social division of work, the authors consider the policy process as a result of the dialectical transformations of the different sectoral *référentiels.*[2] This process is induced by the necessary reciprocal adjustment of the increasingly divergent sectoral activities within the framework of an encompassing and constraining global conception of society (which Jobert and Muller call the 'global *référentiel'*[3]). This reciprocal adjustment of the definition of the role, the function and the place of the different sectoral activities is precisely achieved through a specific process called 'mediation'.

The process of articulation and integration of a partially contradictory logic in a global societal project is essentially brought about by the mediators,[4] social actors that have the power and the intellectual resources allowing them to do this work of articulation between the 'sectoral' and the 'global' levels and, therefore, to elaborate the definition of the *référentiel*. Through their (unequal) capacity to produce a new *référentiel* in redefining the characteristics, limits, hierarchy, organisation and the social image of the sector, as well as the collective identity of the social or professional groups involved within it, the mediators attempt to establish a hegemonic leadership. They manage the ideological operation of 'decoding', interpreting and re-formulating a socioeconomic reality into a policy programme in accordance with the sociocultural project of the global society. In this sense, the mediators, according to Jobert and Muller, resemble the Gramscian figure of the 'intellectual' as well as the policy broker of Sabatier (Muller 1995).

Constituting the crucial moment of the elaboration of a new *référentiel*, the mediation process is complex and encompasses two main interdependent operations which are the central functions of the mediators. The first operation links the process of knowledge production with that of norms production. The idea is that there is a strong relation between the capacity to understand and interpret empirical reality and the capacity to produce norms and define policy objectives which are able to effectively transform the social reality. The second operation of the mediation process refers to the circular relation between the power of speech and the hegemonic power on policies, that is the link between the capacity to elaborate and impose a definition of the meaning of social reality and the power to act on and to transform it.

2.2 The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

The ACF has some affinityies with the *référentiel* approach in the way that it conceptualises the 'nature' of policy ideas. In its perspective, public policies are also both normative and cognitive processes. In the same way, policy ideas, conceptualised in terms of belief systems,

can also be analytically divided into several layers. In fact, the ACF's belief system is not divided into four layers, like the *référentiel*, but into three (the deep (normative) core, the near (policy) core and the secondary aspects), whose characteristics are shown in Table 3.1.[5]

Table 3.1 The Three Levels of Belief Systems According to Sabatier

	Deep (normative) core	Near (policy) core	Secondary aspects
Defining characteristics	Fundamental normative and ontological axioms	Fundamental policy positions concerning the basic	Instrumental decisions and information searches necessary to implement policy core
Scope	All policy areas	Policy area of interest and perhaps few more	Specific to policy area/subsystem of interest
Susceptibility to change	Very difficult	Difficult	Moderately easy through learning process

Source: adapted from Sabatier (1993), p. 31.

There is also in the ACF a strong explanatory link between beliefs or values and the more technical or scientific aspects within a set of ideas. The deep and policy cores define the limits of the learning process of the coalition's members on (technical) secondary aspects. Beliefs and values constitute the central explanatory principle of the actors' identities and behaviours as well as the structural division of the policy subsystem into several advocacy coalitions (AC); and this instead of a structuration in terms of organisational affiliations. In fact, the formation of the individuals' deep core as well as, later on, their policy core, is the result of a long socialisation process beginning during childhood and considered as having a more significant impact on the individuals' logic of actions than institutional memberships. So, belief systems strongly contribute to determine the field of the individuals' possible perceptions and actions. As a result, belief systems are considered as the central element explaining the coalescence of an advocacy coalition, the 'glue' of the AC (to use Sabatier's term) being the similarity of the actors' belief systems' structure belonging to the same coalition. It is this structure's similarity that allows the ACF to explain the existence of common actions of the AC members without an explicit and systematic relationship between them.

Concerning the relation between ideas and interests, the ACF, like the *référentiel* approach, rejects the presuppositions of rational choice theories. Sabatier (1993, p. 28) is very sceptical concerning the possibility of clearly identifying *a priori* objective and intrinsic 'interests' for the different actors involved in the policy subsystem. His choice of privileging belief system models is motivated by the

conviction that what one calls 'individual interests' are less a result of a universal disposition of the individuals to systematically develop rational and strategic evaluations of the likelihood to obtain clearly specified (material) gains than the result of various and sometimes divergent ways (depending more particularly on the process of so-cialisation or the organisational membership) of establishing its owns goals and preferences. So, in this approach again, interests are a result of the ideational perception of the social world by the actors through their interiorised values and norms.

Similar – in certain respects – to the *référentiel* approach, the ACF has nevertheless some important differences concerning the role at-tributed to ideas in the policy process. The most important difference is probably that, contrary to Jobert and Muller's theory, Sabatier is not preoccupied by the question of maintenance of social cohesion. In his view, ideas are not the vehicle for the 'necessary' adjustment and coherence between divergent and contradictory sectoral activi-ties and identities. This absence of a mediation process which can give coherence to sectors within the framework of a global *référentiel* implies that ACF's policy subsystems are less likely characterised by a hegemonic situation than the policy sectors.

Thus, the ACF departs from the idea that the policy process would be better conceptualised in terms of policy subsystems (Sabatier 1986; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). A subsystem is composed of all (collective and individual) actors who are concerned by and in-volved with a policy problem. Sabatier is hence widening the tradi-tional definition of the 'iron triangle' (Heclo 1978) including, in addi-tion to bureaucracy, interest groups and elected politicians, also ex-perts, academics, researchers, journalists, think-tanks as well as oth-er actors from different institutions and at all levels of government.

In order to analyse the internal structure and dynamic of the poli-cy subsystem, Sabatier proposes to aggregate the numerous actors acting within it into 'smaller and useful sets of categories' which he defines as 'Advocacy Coalitions' (AC) (Sabatier 1993, p. 16). The cen-tral principle of the ACF is that AC, regrouping actors sharing the same set of basic beliefs, compete for the capacity to influence the decision-making process and impose their policy goals, their respec-tive room for manoeuvre being limited by external parameters[6] and events.[7]

The central argument of Sabatier is that changes in the 'core' as-pects of the AC's belief systems are the result of non-cognitive factors occurring outside the subsystem; these changes are therefore very difficult and rare. On the contrary, changes in the secondary aspects of the AC belief systems are the result of learning processes interven-ing between competing coalitions, such changes occuring more easi-ly.

So, contrary to the *référentiel* approach as well as, as we will see, to Hall's approach, the power of ideas in the policy process is not omnipresent. In fact, if ideas, taking the form of belief systems, constitute a fundamental component of the subsystem's structure over a decade or more, the ACF, excluding (contrary to the process of mediation) the possibility of a substantial role for ideas in radical and fundamental changes, at the same time significantly limits the power of ideas to explain the policy process.

2.3 Peter Hall's Paradigm Approach

The third approach represents a very different way of envisaging the explanatory power of ideas in the policy process. In Hall's institutionalist approach, the conduct of policy-making is determined by the institutional context shaping the configuration of interests and ideas. Such a point of view has an important consequence for the way ideas are conceptualised in the sense that it necessitates a clear distinction between 'ideational', 'interest' and 'institutional' variables. Thus 'ideas' constitute only one (significant) set of variables among others explaining economic policy changes. Ideas are therefore clearly distinct from actors' interests and do not intervene in their definition: interests are considered as *a priori* and clearly distinguishable components of the social reality.

Thus, Hall does not accord too much importance to beliefs and values in explaining the logic of actors' actions. This can be observed, for example, in the way his conceptualisation of economic ideas in terms of 'paradigms' allows different interpretations of the relation between ideas, actors and their actions. On the one hand, economic ideas are credited (like institutions) with a very strong structuring capacity of the actor's perception of the social reality, whereas, on the other hand, actors are considered as being able to appeal to these same economic ideas, considering them as ideologically 'neutral' resources as well as available political weapons:

> Seeking a weapon with which to attack the vulnerable leadership of their own party and then the Labor government, Margaret Thatcher and a few others took up a competing economic paradigm based on monetarist doctrine. They were genuinely seeking new solutions to Britain's economic problems, but they embraced the monetarist solution in large measure because it also had substantial political appeal. (Hall 1993, p. 28)

An important aspect of Hall's perspective consists in the proposition that ideas, taking the form of 'policy paradigms', can exercise a real direct and specific power of persuasion on actors. This 'persuasiveness' consists in the capacity of ideas to persuade social groups or actors of their relevance. This capacity depends on their ability to explain the persistent anomalies more accurately than the former set of

ideas (or paradigms) did. One has to admit that the way Hall focuses on this type of 'internal' power of autonomous and self-existing ideas is of course an attractive idea and neglected by the ACF.

Hall's analysis of the policy process consists mainly in developing an analogy with the Kuhnian explanation of scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1962). By developing this analogy, Hall clearly focuses his analysis of the policy process on the periods of more radical changes (the 'policy paradigm changes'), rather than on the stable ones. Consistent with the Kuhnian theory, paradigm shifts are explained by an accumulation of different factors, scientific as well as political. Thus the process of replacing one paradigm by another is a result of the accumulation of enduring apparent anomalies leading to policy failures. This process also creates political struggles between experts over scientific legitimacy and between politicians over the localisation of authority over policy.

However, the explanatory relation between ideational and non-ideational (interest and institution) variables is all but systematic and clear. Thus Hall's analysis focuses rather on the (non-ideational) conditions of the adoption of a new paradigmatic set of economic ideas than on the effective 'persuasive power of ideas' (Hall 1989b). The diffusion of Keynesian ideas is explained by a complex configuration of causalities including many different elements, the majority of them far from ideational.

In conclusion, in Hall's perspective, ideas have no stabilised function in the explanation of the policy process and are used alternately as dependent and independent variables. Hall's multi-causal model suffers from a clearly defined model of causality linking institutions, actors, ideas and interests.

In sum, there is a clear relation within each approach between the way ideas are conceptualised and the role they have been attributed in the analysis. As a consequence of their divergent epistemological and theoretical premises, the approaches give different answers to the question of the 'power of ideas'.

In the case of the *référentiel* approach, close to the neo-Marxist point of view, this power results essentially from the theoretical conviction that ideas are closely related to social and political phenomena. Ideas have a power because they are embodied in actors defining their identity and interests and orienting their actions.

Hall's approach, clearly distinguishing ideas from interests (as well as from institutions), attributes above all to interests the role which has been assigned to beliefs and values in the former point of view. Ideas are to a certain extent independent and autonomous. The specific ideational power of ideas is to be found in their capacity to persuade.

The ACF, considering beliefs rather than interests as the central explanatory element of the policy process as well as the 'glue' of the

ACFs, seems very close to the *référentiel* approach. But, as we will see, the latest discussions on the framework indicate that things are not so clear.

The analysis of the approaches' internal coherence developed in the next sectioin will help to specify the limits and problems encountered by each approach. It will also allow us to illustrate the stakes of the opposed points of view, particularly through the analysis of the oscillation of the ACF between the two epistemological and theoretical positions.

3. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERNAL COHERENCE OF APPROACHES

The first approach to which I will address some critical points is the *référentiel* approach. As it offers, in my opinion, the most convincing conception of the 'nature' and role of ideas in political affairs among the three approaches discussed here, my criticism will be brief but will nevertheless concern an important point of the framework. I will then make some critical remarks about the policy paradigm approach, departing essentially from what I consider as being the strengths of the *référentiel* theoretical position. Finally, the ACF will be more fully discussed in so far as more recent discussions of it allow us to point out one of the central questions the discussion, namely the relationship between beliefs, values, interests and collective action.

3.1 The Question of Hegemony

The *référentiel* framework, mainly developed to account for the 'French model' of 'sectoral corporatism' (Jobert, and Muller 1987, pp. 171–206), involves in my opinion a certain bias. My suggestion is that this approach is certainly more relevant for the analysis of clearly sectoralised policies in a context of a centralised State than the other approaches. One of the major problems the *référentiel* approach is confronted with, though, is the presupposed functional 'necessity of coherence'. The analysis of 'interpolicy' problems (problems of coordination between different interdependent policies) illustrates very well, for example in the case of environmental policy, the difficulty, and sometimes even the total absence, of an effective encompassing 'coherence-building' process between the sectoral components of a society. In the same way, the ACF has shown that a policy subsystem is not necessarily coherent and can encompass a multitude of different actors among which no one is clearly preeminent.

This objection raises important questions in so far as the presupposition of a global and sectoral coherence is narrowly linked with the relevance of the concept of hegemony and, by extension, of *référentiel*. What would be, in the case of a non-hegemonic situation, the real power of the respective competing *référentiels*? Does the link between actors' beliefs and behaviours, collective identity and the definition of interests remain, in such a situation, as strong as in a hegemonic one? Are competing, non-hegemonic, sectoral *référentiels* as coherent (coherence between values, norms, algorithms and images) and powerful (that is, able to structure actors' perceptions) as a hegemonic one? Finally, how does the creation of a hierarchy within a policy sector or subsystem occur in the absence of a global *référentiel* shaping the mediation process?

These questions are especially important and relevant as such situations are certainly not exceptional. As the literature on the 'policy networks' seems to indicate, structural changes affecting the policy process precisely head towards more horizontal, decentralised and thus less hierarchical relations between the central political and administrative structures and the sectoral organisations. The question is therefore whether the concept of hegemony is still relevant in such a context. If not, what are the consequences for the use of the concept of *référentiel*?

As a possible answer to these questions, one could suggest that it is precisely in non-hegemonic situations that the specific power of persuasion of (a new set of) ideas is likely to emerge. However, this capacity of persuasion always strongly depends on the relation such a set of ideas has with the collective fundamental values and beliefs of the group or the AC likely to adopt them. In this respect, Hall's difficulty to take seriously into account this relation between fundamental beliefs and values and new (economic) ideas constitutes one of the main criticisms one can, in my opinion, address to his approach.

3.2 Peter Hall and the Uses of Policy Paradigms

In assimilating ideas to the limited definition of 'economic theories' and developing at the same time a utilitarian and instrumentalist conception of ideas, Hall, in my opinion, only examines half of the question, while neglecting the role of values and beliefs. This is not surprising, in so far as his initial point of view, consisting in the strict distinction between the three 'I's (institutions, ideas, interests), makes the perception of this sociological process of internalisation difficult. As Bruno Jobert (1999, pp. 133–4) argues, the limits of such a point of view are never as clear as when one attempts artificially to distinguish a 'world of interests' from a 'world of ideas', the former being in reality a result of the collective identity-building process di-

rectly incorporating values, beliefs, cognitive schemes and symbols. Thus the definition of interests depends on the inseparable relation between the objective material situation and the subjective perception (founded on values, beliefs, cognitive schemes, etc.) of this objective material structure (Bourdieu 1980).

This limit of Hall's point of view is all the more prejudicial in so far as the reconciliation of these two 'worlds' of interests and of ideas would, for example, allow us to explain in a less mysterious manner the historical conjunction between 'Thatcherism' and 'monetarism'. So long as one analyses seriously the production conditions of economic theories (here Keynesianism and monetarism), one should be able to show the social foundations of such a conjunction. Thus, instead of focusing on the capacity of the Thatcherites to make a calculated strategic choice with regard to monetarist theory, a more convincing analysis would be to show how the conditions of this choice are the result of the homology of the respective structures of the belief system of the producers (the neo-liberal economists) and of the political supporters (the members of the Thatcherite fraction of the British Conservative Party) of this economic 'paradigm'. Such an analysis, rejecting 'strategic rational choice' explanations, has the advantage of avoiding the to naïve 'neoliberal conspiracy' hypothesis as well as the use of the unsatisfactory 'manipulation' rhetoric in which one no longer knows 'who manipulates who'.[8] One can see here how the concept of 'mediation' differs from that of 'manipulation'.

The problem with the notion of manipulation is that it sometimes leads to somewhat paradoxical assertions. For example, the success of the Keynesian paradigm[9] is partly explained by its ambiguous and widely interpretable character,[10] while the success of the monetarist paradigm is conversely explained by its coherent and economically plausible character. This contradictory way of conceiving the persuasiveness of ideas pleads in favour of the development of another explanatory principle: the structuring power of beliefs and values of the political and economic élite's belief systems, instead of the strategic 'goals of the ruling political parties' (Hall 1989b, p. 371).
The tension between these two opposed logic is very well illustrated in recent discussions on the ACF.

3.3 The ACF at the Crossroads Between Beliefs and Interests

There are in my opinion two major ambiguities inherent in the ACF that can explain the recent oscillations of the framework between the two opposed points of view. The first concerns the way the framework conceptualises public policies as belief systems. The second concerns the nature of the advocacy coalitions. In fact, it seems as if Sabatier does not completely believe in his theoretical choice ex-

plaining the policy process through 'beliefs' rather than through 'interests'.

Sabatier justified his conceptual choice of the 'advocacy coalition' through its explanatory strength compared with institutional-centred ones:

> Given the enormous number and range of actors involved [in a policy subsystem], it becomes necessary to find ways of aggregating them into smaller and theoretically useful sets of categories.
>
> After considering several alternatives, I have concluded that the most useful means of aggregating actors in order to understand policy changes over fairly long periods of time are by 'advocacy coalitions.'
>
> I find this strategy for aggregating actors superior to the most likely alternative – that of viewing formal institutions as the dominant actors – because in most policy subsystems there are at least fifty to a hundred organisations at various levels of government that are active over time. Developing models involving changes in the positions and interaction patterns of that many units over a period of a decade or more would be an *exceedingly* complex task. (Sabatier 1993, pp. 25–6)

In the same way, the concept of advocacy coalition is considered as a way of going beyond the methodological and theoretical problems characterising the interests-centred approaches:

> While belief system models can thus incorporate self-interest and organisational interests, they also allow actors to establish goals in quite different ways (e.g., as a result of socialisation) and are therefore more inclusive. In addition, I personally have great difficulty specifying a priori a clear and falsifiable set of interests for most actors in policy conflicts. (Sabatier 1993, p. 28)

One can observe how Sabatier oscillates in his justification between purely methodological reasons (advocacy coalition is the most useful means to aggregate actors and beliefs are more inclusive and verifiable or 'falsifiable', etc.) and more theoretical ones (the concept of beliefs makes it possible to incorporate self-interest, organisational and socialisation explanations in the same encompassing model) and this, without really establishing an explicit hierarchy between them (see also Braun in this volume). In reality, it seems as if Sabatier has chosen his theoretical tools out of methodological preoccupations.

Such a choice would not have been so problematic if all the theoretical inferences of it had been drawn. Unfortunately, this is, in my opinion, not the case for at least three reasons.

1. *There is a logical contradiction between the basic principle of the concept of belief system and the theory of the policy process*. Following theoretical argument that belief systems structure the perception of social reality, Wayne Parsons argues (1997, p. 201) that Sabatier is not clear concerning the status of the 'external events' and the 'stable

parameters' supposed to explain major policy changes. Does he speak of *objective* effects directly affecting the infrastructural components of the problem a subsystem is dealing with, or does he speak of *perceived* effects mediated by the different belief systems of the various coalitions? By explaining major policy changes through the intervention   of 'non-cognitive external events', the ACF tends to forget one of its basic principles: that external events do not have an immediate, unequivocal and intrinsic objective meaning for the actors. The sense of such events is also the result of cognitive and normative constructions and interpretations structured by the belief systems.

2. *There is a gap between the weakness of the 'anthropological' foundation of the 'model of the individual' and the central importance this model plays in the framework*. The theoretical foundations of the belief system concept are only mentioned and never seriously discussed. The choice of the concept has been theoretically justified by the reference to social psychology and to the vague notion of 'socialisation'. It is therefore probable that the framework's capacity to formulate accurate assertions on the more or less stable or changing nature of the deep or policy cores would be greatly improved by a better knowledge of where the belief systems come from, as well as of how they are socially constructed, diffused and incorporated by the actors (i.e. the process of socialisation). In this view, and in order to avoid resorting to the psycho-sociological 'black box' justification, I think that the ACF, focusing on the policy élite's belief systems, should logically integrate in the future the knowledge produced for example by the sociology of the élite's socialisation process (cf. for example, Bourdieu 1989; Mendras and Suleiman 1995). In fact, analysing how élites are educated and recruited will certainly allow us to understand better how exactly policy cores emerge and change, not only as a result of non cognitive events.

3. *There is an important ambiguity concerning the epistemological status of the concept of 'advocacy coalition'.* It seems that it merges two opposed conceptualisations which can be summarised as in Table 3.2:

Table 3.2 The Two Epistemological Models of the Advocacy Coalition Approach

Conceptual shift	ACF I (Sabatier and Jenkins 1993)	ACF II (following Schlager's (1995) propositions)
Dimensions of the concept	Advocacy coalition as an analytical tool	Advocacy coalition as corporate bodies or networks

Nature of the coalition	Abstract and theoretical analytical category	Effective coalition as corporate body or network
Theoretical status of the concept	Descriptive and analytical abstract theoretical tool constructed by the analyst in order to apprehend a complex empirical reality	Objective and empirically realised corporate body or network facing the traditional dilemma of collective action
Number and types of actors	All actors theoretically likely to intervene at one moment or another in the policy process	All actors effectively acting in the framework of an empirically realised network
Theory of action	Belief systems	Rational action theory, collective action
Criteria and nature of belonging to the coalition	Theoretical criteria: depends on the homology of the actors belief systems' structures inducing a proximity of the members' deep and policy cores. Belonging is flexible and open	Empirical criteria: depends on the effective mobilisation in a collective action oriented toward a precisely defined policy goal. Membership is constraining and controlled in order to avoid free-riding
Degree and nature of the coalitions' coherence and common actions or strategies	Coherence depends on the size of the coalition and of the similarity of the belief systems structure. Common actions as a result of this opportunity structure rather than of explicit co-ordination	Coherence depends on the similarity of the belief systems. Common actions depend on the capacity for collective action's ability to avoid free-riding

The first interpretation (ACF I) predominates in the majority of the successive collective evaluations and assessments of the framework until the middle of the 1990s (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

The second interpretation (ACF II) is the one on which the debate, initiated by Edella Schlager (1995) and focusing on the conditions of the emergence of collective action within the advocacy coalitions, is founded. A particularly clear expression of this second interpretation can be found in the 'hypothesis D' proposed by Edella Schlager (1995, p. 264):

> Coalitions are more likely to persist if (1) the major beneficiaries that a coalition produces are clearly identified and are members of the coalition, (2) the benefits received by coalition members are related to the costs that such members bear in maintaining the coalition, and (3) coalition members monitor each others' actions to ensure compliance with agreed upon strategies, resource contributions, and cooperative and supportive activities.

The question is therefore, to determine if the two interpretations are logically coherent in relation the other elements constituting the framework, namely with the conceptualisation of the nature and the role of ideas. My argument is that this is not the case.

In his first justification for the choice of the advocacy coalition concept, Sabatier insists on the fact that, the number of (individual and collective) actors active in a policy subsystem often being high (from 50 to 100), the best way to manage empirical data is to treat them using this concept. He thus clearly admits that the advocacy coalition is an abstract construction allowing the analyst to classify the various actors in order to produce a better and systematic understanding of the complex reality. The problem emerges therefore when he adds the idea that the advocacy coalitions 'show a non-trivial degree of co-coordinated activity over time'. What exactly does this mean? For Schlager (1995, p. 245 and ff.), the meaning of this sentence is clear: advocacy coalitions are corporate groups acting collectively and as such have to solve the classical dilemma of collective action (Olson 1965).

My argument is that, if this latter shift in interpretation is partially legitimated by the ambiguity of the initial definition of the concept by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (Sabatier 1986; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), it weakens the internal coherence of the ACF. Such an interpretation is in contradiction with the initial explanation of the coherence of coalitions in terms of belief systems. For Edella Schlager, co-coordinate collective action (and not belief systems) is the 'glue' of the coalitions. In saying this, she departs from a totally different theoretical premise postulating that individuals act strategically in an essentially ontologically self-interested manner. It is not the place here to discuss this point of view (but see Braun in this vol-

ume). I only want to point out to what extent such a premise is po-
tentially in contradiction with the belief system explanation. In fact, it
postulates that all the belief systems of all the actors involved in all
the policy subsystems have in common the tendency to behave in a
self-interested manner (which is a condition for the existence of the
free-rider's dilemma). The problem is, however, that such a presup-
position is inconsistent with the central features of the belief system
concept that presupposes the existence of different socialisation pro-
cesses producing various belief system structures which should ex-
plain the emergence of enduring coalitions within a policy subsys-
tem.

There is a second argument pleading for the relative incompatibil-
ity between the initial conception of the ACF and Schlager's proposi-
tions: the shift she introduces from an *existence in theory* to an *exist-
ence in reality* of the AC raises the problem of the plausibility of the
effective existence of such a kind of corporate body in reality. Thus
the empirical question is 'to' what extent it is possible to encounter a
situation in which 50 to 100 actors located in different institutions at
every level of government, as well as in different newspapers, uni-
versities, research centres, think-tanks, non-governmental organisa-
tions, etc., willingly coordinate their actions following an accurately
predefined goal and know exactly (in order to avoid free-riding)
what the other actors are doing at the same time as they themselves
contribute to the 'common cause'. How is it possible seriously to im-
agine the emergence of a voluntary coordination within such a het-
erogeneous 'group' while presupposing that all individuals or actors
are prompted by selfish interests as well as knowing that there are
no institutional structures shaping and organising the whole pro-
cess?

Thirdly, it is important to remark that Schlager's use of the con-
cept implies that the criteria of the definition of belonging to an ad-
vocacy coalition are radically changed and could lead to a certain
confusion. One no longer knows exactly which one is dominant: to
have a similar belief system or to be involved in a collective and co-
ordinated action?

Fourthly, accepting Schlager's interpretation, clearly the method-
ology of the inquiry used until now (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier
1993b, pp. 237–56) to analyse the internal structure of a subsystem
should   be
radically changed. It can no longer be founded on the analysis of oral
communications or written sources in order to capture the proximity
between the belief systems of the actors, but must instead focus on
the analysis of the effective interactions and collective concerted ac-
tions within concrete networks of actors.

Finally and above all, does Schlager's interpretation not run the
same risk as Hall's approach, in setting aside one of the potentially

major analytical contributions of the ACF? Such a use of the advocacy coalition concept can no longer explain why and how a great number of different actors belonging to various institutions and professional sectors act objectively in a similar and apparently voluntary manner to pursue the same goals without needing explicitly and systematically to coordinate their actions.

As the comparison of the different approaches as well as the assessment of their internal coherence has shown, the radical opposition
between the respective logic of the two points of view makes the emergence of intermediary positions very difficult. The anthropological premises of the neo-Marxist position are in strong contradiction with the implicit rational choice premises of the 'technocratic' one. Nevertheless, I will try in the conclusion to make some suggestions for possible paths to an eventual reconciliation of these opposed approaches on policy ideas.

4. CONCLUSION

The central questions remaining are the following: are these two epistemological and theoretical positions – neo-Marxist and technocratic   –
irreconcilable ? Is there a theoretical or methodological interest for policy research to try to reconcile them? The attempt to amend the ACF has in any case clearly illustrated the difficulties of such a challenge. However, the respective limits of the different approaches observed through the assessment of their internal coherence plead for a reassessment and a possible reconciliation.

In my opinion, such a reconciliation between the 'technocratic' and Gramscian points of view should at the minimum integrate Hall's suggestion concerning the persuasiveness of ideas into an encompassing approach that establishes the relationships between the different dimensions of beliefs, values and 'social representations or images'. Such a process implies in my opinion the following conditions.

Firstly, there is a need to distinguish, within the general notion of 'ideas', between the dimension of technical and scientific knowledge or theories and that of embedded collective beliefs, values, identities and 'social representations'. As we have seen, such a distinction allows us to widen the scope of the conception of the nature and the role of ideas and, in the same way, to account for the diversity and the plurality of the ideational dimensions of social reality. This first condition is intimately linked with the second one.

Secondly, I propose the abandonment of the usual distinction between the three 'I's (interests, ideas and institutions) which forces us

to adopt a rational choice perspective. This distinction does not allow us to take into account the real scope of the cognitive and normative role of ideas in the policy process, limiting it to its more technical and paradoxically (for ideational approaches) less ideological aspects. Moreover, it also prevents us from considering the interdependence of these two ideational aspects in the course of political life.

Thirdly, one should complete this conceptualisation of the role of ideas in terms of beliefs, values and 'social representations' by an analysis of the production process of the stocks or repertoires of new (sets of) ideas, as well as by an analysis of the conditions of their 'persuasiveness' and diffusion. This notion of persuasiveness has to be understood in a double sense. On the one hand, it indicates a power resulting from its internal logical coherence, as well as the explanatory capacity of a (new) set of ideas facing a puzzling situation. On the other hand, it indicates the capacity for this (new) set of ideas to be in coherence with the beliefs, values and social representations of the social group. The outcome of this process of persuasion is the transformation of knowledge and ideas into social norms and values through the development of the mediation process (in the sense of Jobert and Muller). The hypothesis is that this capacity of persuasion increases in non-hegemonic situations.

Thus, in conforming to these conditions, a theoretical proposition would bring several advantages. While maintaining the Gramscian point of view on ideas, it would allow us to integrate the second dimension of ideas as technical and scientific knowledge, considering them as available political remedies variously convincing and to which the different actors can decide to have recourse or not in the framework of the political process, depending on the configuration of the mediation process. We are here close to Hall's point of view, but nevertheless on the other side of the persistent epistemological rift between rational choice perspectives and neo-Marxist ones.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dietmar Braun, Olivier Giraud and Sonja Wälti for relevant and helpful comments.
2. The sectoral *référentiel* constitutes the dominant collective definition of a sectoral activity or a profession. It is a social construction that corresponds to the perception of the dominant group in the sector and that defines its limits, its internal organisation as well as the collective identity of the actors involved in the sector.
3. The global *référentiel* is the general representation and societal project of a society organising the hierarchy between different values and norms in the society and shaping and forming into a hierarchy the different competing sectoral representations.
4. There are three different types of mediators whose presence depends on the type of the actual organisation of the sector. The mediators can be mainly professionals (representatives of social/professional groups), administrative élites or political élites.

5. The absence of the dimension of the 'image' can be explained by the fact that ACF does not conceive of the policy subsystem in the same hegemonic way as the *référentiel* approach conceives of policy sectors.
6. These parameters are the following: attributes of the problem area, structure of the distribution of natural resources, fundamental sociocultural values and social structures, constitutional rules.
7. These events consist above all in changes in socioeconomic conditions, in public opinion, in governing coalitions or in impacts resulting from changes in other sub-systems.
8. Cf. the somehow problematic and confusing statement induced by the circular relation between actors (social groups) and ideas (paradigms): paradigms shape the perception of the individuals that are however also able to manipulate paradigms, using them as political 'weapons'.
9. Hall does not specify to the detriment of which other paradigm this success has been achieved.
10. It seems that Hall takes some liberties with the conceptual Kuhnian orthodoxy: paradigms are reputed to be incommensurable and are in no case ambiguous sets of ideas susceptible to heterogeneous interpretations.