



# For the sociological study of political phenomena: Guidelines for a research agenda

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## ABSTRACT

Three primary and interconnected aims guide the arguments developed in this article. The first, and most general, calls for a kind of truce in rigid disciplinary boundaries, for the benefit of the heuristic potentialities of reclaiming the unity of the social sciences, as conceived by Pierre Bourdieu, for the study of dynamics of struggle and political dimensions of social life. The second aim is to present frameworks and procedures deemed effective for a research agenda focused on sociological studies of political phenomena. To this end, we draw on canonical themes (institutions, representation, the state, public policies, political parties, and activist engagement) to reflect on how they can be approached within the framework of a Bourdieusian-inspired political sociology. The third aim is to propose some brief adjustments to a French analytical tradition, for better analyzing social configurations that differ from the context in which it was originally developed, particularly in terms of criteria for social hierarchy and legitimation of intervention practices.

**Keywords:** Political sociology, unity of the social sciences, Pierre Bourdieu.

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## Introduction

The composition of disciplines and their subdivisions is outlined in the either competitive or interconnecting relationships between social sciences, and between these and the history, law, philosophy, literature, journalism, economics, and even political domains (state, bureaucracy, parliament, etc.). The areas of intersection or fusion differ in scope and relevance in academic circles and hierarchies, having their boundaries – always shifting in terms of time, content, principles of legitimation, etc. – outlined in the rivalries and alliances between fairly notable exponents, placed in specific historical and disciplinary dynamics. Although we do not examine here configurations of this type of struggle, such considerations are essential to guiding the discussion developed in this article.

As is well known, various labels are used to classify the specificity of disciplinary approaches to the analysis of political phenomena, as “political sociology” or “sociology of politics,” “political anthropology” or “anthropology of politics.” Yet, rather than taking a stance on which designation is the most appropriate, here we focus on identifying the elements that inform the usefulness of the analytical model conceived by Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators in their efforts to restore the unity of the social sciences. Thereby, it would be possible to devise efficient approaches and procedures for multidimensional sociological reflection on politics.

Whether out of coherence or lack of interest, this is neither a didactic nor a bibliographical text. We do not define concepts, propose practical examples, or provide an exhaustive review of established authors and approaches aimed at offering a “map” of existing debates within one or all social sciences, nationally or internationally.<sup>1</sup> Instead, we seek support in the tradition of studies developed by researchers who have focused on relations of social domination and bases of legitimation of representatives, defining their work as *political sociology* and mainly based on the Bourdieusian analytical framework.

In Brazilian social sciences, we observe some recurring efforts to uphold this label so as to affirm disciplinary distinctions. On the one hand, sociologists have historically been authorized by the contributions and accumulated knowledge of the founding discipline of the social sciences

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<sup>1</sup> A plentiful number of compendiums on this subject are available and can be consulted.

to address all spheres or dimensions of the social world, including the “political” spheres or those of “politicians.” Thus, “political sociology” is invoked to defend the field’s precedence in its designation. Drawing on recognized authors,<sup>2</sup> the tendency is to emphasize the primacy of societal structuring and historical processes in changes of methods for interpreting political practices, contexts, and administrations.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, political scientists claim competence in investigating the order that establishes their condition of existence and field of research, conceived as autonomous and independent from others. Some among them, attracted by the social and historical expressions of their objects (though attentive to protecting their boundaries), accept “yielding” to the sociological “aspect” so that to compare “external” or “not strictly political” variables (in the strictly institutional sense). Occasionally, the argument arises that it is necessary to avoid a double mistake: the “politicism” of political science, which reduces analysis to the mobilization of “political variables,” and the “sociologism” of the “sociology of politics,” which relies too much on the weight of “social variables.”<sup>4</sup>

At the other extreme, we have the approach through an “anthropology of politics,” founded on the “reintroduction of the sociological dimension” (Palmeira & Goldman, 1996, p. 7) and on the challenge posed by anthropologists of various origins and generations<sup>5</sup> to the idea of universality of Western political institutions (scarcely questioned by sociologists and political scientists). By problematizing the “legal or typical definitions in a society that deems political activities as constituting a domain apart from others” (Palmeira & Barreira, 2006, p. 9), this agenda encourages expansion of observation to the multiple forms of social relations/sociabilities (kinship, friendships, neighborhood, religious affiliations, club affiliations, etc.) and perceptions that exist in each empirical universe. To this end, again, sociological tools are not ignored and allow for grasping how different forms of organization and social logics mutually influence each other.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As Reinhard Bendix, Seymour Lipset, Barrington Moore, Anthony Giddens, and Thomas Bottomore.

<sup>3</sup> Elisa Reis (2015, 1996) and André Botelho (2011) exemplify this effort.

<sup>4</sup> This position of Sartori (1969) was reinstated by Perissinotto (2004) and Costa *et al.* (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Like Edmund Leach, Georges Balandier, F.G. Bailey and Marc Abélès.

<sup>6</sup> See Bezerra and Grill (2017).

Therefore, it is not incorrect to claim that, broadly speaking, these biases activate sociological tools and guidelines to approach “politics,” although with dissimilar emphases and directions. However, this kind of accommodations are products of tensions over domains, without definitive outcomes, what poses obstacles that are difficult to overcome. Therefore, it is worth highlighting two sets of introductory warnings to reinforce our vigilance.

Firstly, as already mentioned, categorizations and ramifications of knowledge are provisional results of competitions that occur at distinct and interdependent levels. They acquire meaning in conjunctions and according to the development of competitions (in the Eliasian sense), which depend on the social and political composition of the fields, as well as the stage of disputes (not always strictly academic and scientific) around legitimate themes and questions. This is coupled with the recognition that such disputes produce relentless effects on the distribution of positions of social scientists, themes, privileged objects, and also institutions, in a relational and unequal hierarchy. Thus, prescriptions are designed which guide how we think, transmit, and practice our activities and collaborate in the production/reproduction of their rankings (of the academic and political positions of their spokespeople).

Secondly, beyond nominalisms, practical obstacles arise in the reasoning employed to solve the challenges related to the circumscription, foundation, and affiliation of labels or specializations as belonging strictly to one of the three areas of knowledge. Usually, three pillars are established to differentiate between the boundary singularities of these endeavors: defining their particular object, announcing the theories followed, and presenting the methodological strategies used. The fragility of delimiting such specializations by the studied “object” lies in the fact that, like other objects of study in the social sciences, political phenomena are historically and socially constituted. Moreover, disciplinary labelling – inevitably discrepant, inconsistent, and fleeting – change over time and space according to the positions and oppositions between their spokespeople. Therefore, the domains, logics, and issues considered relevant are not permanent, nor is anything that, at a given time and place, is understood as “politics” or “the political.”

Often, arguments for demonstrating the significance of a particular way of dealing with political phenomena come under the aegis of renowned theoretical perspectives that guide the construction of analytical objects.

In this case, a common difficulty is claiming disciplinary exclusivity in the use of authors (who do not always share the same affiliations and distinctions) without losing coherence or being compelled to invoke the artifice of “inter-” or “multidisciplinarity.” This is compounded by attempts to circumvent boundaries by adhering to “schools” and inescapable references (“unanimities”), as if they had the same degree of importance in all contexts, without realizing that, invariably, axiomatic references stem from arbitrary arrangements, having finite extension and scope. And, after all, it is not so hard to incorporate the healthy caution regarding the limits of appropriations, which are so important for certifying analytical affiliations. Because, if taken as being trans-historical, transnational, or transcultural, they can contribute to *overlooking* the arbitrary mechanisms and unrooted uses of disciplinary junctions and their adjectivizations, especially regarding their impact on production of knowledge about the social world around us.

Furthermore, as a path possibly followed to justify and substantiate the explanatory power of the subdiscipline under the rule of one of the three areas of social sciences, there is the safeguarding of dominant methodologies and prioritization of certain techniques, commonly derived from the opposition between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Although resorting to such duality may seem effective in confirming the *dona ac talenta* of its practitioners, and even instrumental in recruiting novice researchers (available to the allure of learning statistical objectification packages, ethnographic initiation, profiling of political figures, and so on), one might consider that its power of seduction is proportional to that of sterilizing aspiring researchers.

Interweaving what has been historically compartmentalized would deserve an admonition for being an extremely pretentious (and unattainable) task of synthesizing disciplinary regimes;<sup>7</sup> and the reprimand to eclecticism is justified. This, however, does not mean rejecting the fruitful communications and contributions of social scientists with the most varied profiles and affiliations, who have advanced the understanding of the political order of the social world without succumbing to polyvalence or encyclopedic pretensions. Research in the social sciences relies on both “classical” and

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<sup>7</sup> In the sense synthesized by Heilbron as an “intellectual regime” that “demarcates areas of academic territory, allocates privileges and responsibilities of expertise, and structure claims on resources” (2004, p. 26), according to variable processes, conditions and contexts.

“contemporary” knowledge, indiscriminately established as *a common fund of knowledge* (Elias, 1997), which is recognized, transmitted, and can be handled in the broadest possible way, regardless of the relevant area or sub-area. Therefore, interests and approaches to the study of “politics” are more fruitful when they draw from accumulated lessons the notions and dimensions that can be extensively explored.

Trying to avoid offering a mere review on what terms are preferable for more appropriately qualifying a specific disciplinary framework, the path to be followed can start from the unfolding of historical configurations (*à la* Elias, Tilly, Moore Jr., Bendix ...) towards the conditioning factors of social hierarchization and legitimation (crucial in the Bourdieusian scheme), passing through the observation of interactions (following Goffman, Becker, Bailey, among others). In such research program, the instruments of empirical objectification consolidated in sociology, anthropology, political science, and history, with the necessary adjustments, are inseparable.<sup>8</sup>

At the starting line, there are the “conceptual connections between problems” (Weber, 1979, p. 83) that allow us to understand both political activities proper (historically and socially constituted) and other activities bearing political meanings and significance. Following this path, in the wake of Weber (1979, p. 80), it becomes feasible to encompass practices considered properly political, politically valid, and politically conditioned.<sup>9</sup> Besides, refined Bourdieusian analytical tools provide robust outcomes for the orchestrated apprehension of resources, strategies, relationships, and actions – even if, we insist, they need to be refined to focus on social configurations that contrast with that in which they were built. After all, this author condenses an analytical arsenal placed in the same harmony, and this gain is collective.

Rather than combining disciplines or areas that can be fairly fitted together, what matters is the construction and operationalization of sociological and historical objects in their *multidimensionality* and *interdependencies*. This is what provides a productive specialization, that is, when highly specialized

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<sup>8</sup>Therefore, there is no room for “monomaniacs of statistical distributions or discourse analysis or participant observation or free interviews [...] or in-depth interviews, [...] or ethnographic description, etc.”. These are kinds of monotheisms, a mixture of unreflective adherence to certain analytical techniques and condemnation of others due to absolute ignorance, which provide “the arrogance of ignorance with the appearance of a methodological foundation” (Bourdieu, 1989a, p. 25).

<sup>9</sup>Although there is no consensus, a significant body of discussion has taken place in this regard. Notable examples include: Braud (2006), Lagroye (1997), and Cot and Mounier (1976).

areas, professionals, and research networks consolidate in favor of a “scientific division of labor” – the basis of specialization in research fields – and not of a “real division of the reality” – the foundation of a *naïf* empiricist epistemology (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 2004, p. 46).

## Canonical themes and unity of the social sciences

There are good reasons to recognize the interdependence between “politics” and other domains of social space and operating principles, as well as the *multi-positionality* of the agents involved in political disputes.<sup>10</sup> And, as the grounds to claims of monopolies regarding sociological interrogations of political phenomena and to claims of peculiarity “of politics” or “of the political” *vis-à-vis* other social phenomena are fragile, everything suggests that social scientists who aspire to explaining political roles, institutions, and behaviors share the same epistemological regime,<sup>11</sup> which is conferred by the amassed gains originating from all areas of knowledge within the social sciences. This is the path we follow. And, although there is no doubt about the magnitude of the edifice erected by Bourdieu and his team, we can reaffirm it as the main way to “restore, in scientific analysis, the unity of practices, almost always apprehended in a dispersed and separate manner by different sciences” (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 24).

As we know, some themes and problems in the social sciences are “multidisciplinary” and multifaceted. The notions of *institutions* and *representations*, with resonances in explanations about *the state*, *public policies*, *organizations*, and *political engagements* are paradigmatic. Whether as concepts or political topics, they represent traditional focuses and shared objects (of dispute). Therefore, we propose to take them as axes for demonstrating the mutual ground for cultivating the problematics that social sciences should jointly, thus confirming the analytical strength of reconciling levels of analysis, theoretical influences, and common instruments of objectification.

<sup>10</sup> We developed the argument in previous productions (Grill & Reis, 2016; Reis & Grill, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> In Passeron’s (1995) terms, regardless of adopted scales and periodizations, they share the same “phenomenality”: the course of the history of societies, from which they construct their objects; they face the same obstacles (such as the impossibility of consolidating paradigms and nomologies); and they operate in institutionalized disciplines via cross-exchanges of languages/ techniques for describing particular historical configurations.

## Institutions and representations

The concept of *institution* has become one of the most crucial and controversial in the social sciences. In Weberian propositions, it is characterized as a type of association marked by continuity in the pursuit of certain ends, with an administrative framework, rationally established, and in which the validity of orders is predominantly impersonal.<sup>12</sup> In Durkheimian tradition, by contrast, it constitutes the very object of sociology. Endowed with certain characteristics such as coerciveness and externality to individuals, *institutions* acquire such an elastic significance that they encompass any collective phenomenon (from superstitions to constitutions).<sup>13</sup>

Both definitions lead us to think about forms of organization, practices, and classifications that are established as transcendent to the beings that constitute and reproduce them. That is, they endure as “realities” stabilized over time, propagate in space, and impose themselves through beliefs and meanings that confer existence (evidence) and validity (legitimacy) upon them. Therefore, they apply to the State, to social categories (economic, religious, political, professional, age-related, national, regional, gender, ideological...), to *total institutions*,<sup>14</sup> among others.

Consequently, *institutions* classified as political encompass the entire state configuration (the so-called executive or governmental, bureaucratic or administrative, parliamentary or legislative, judicial, military, and police powers and their instances of action) and the collective enterprises (parties, unions, interest groups, social movements, etc.) constituted in political competitions. But also a range of socially established *modes of classification*. In other words, the notion encompasses both political institutions proper (objectified in buildings, documents, laws, monuments, acronyms, and so on) and other politically related institutions (social categories that are established, naturalized, and incorporated through socialization processes).

The attention to the encounter between reified (made things) and embodied (made bodies) histories, recommended by Bourdieu (1989b) and his team, resonated among French social scientists, who collaborated

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<sup>12</sup> The notion of *institution* is included in the fundamental sociological concepts systematized by Weber (1987).

<sup>13</sup> Fauconnet and Mauss (2001) outlined this perspective in broad strokes.

<sup>14</sup> In the sense established by Goffman (1999).



in refining a vast research program on *political institutions*,<sup>15</sup> approached in their dual aspect (Gaïti, 2006): because they are the result of the most varied practical and symbolic investments of agents committed to inventing, interpreting, reforming, and subverting them; and because of their capacity to produce or redirect practices, behaviors, choices, preferences, worldviews, and identities (Dulong, 2021). In this light, endeavors to build a social *history of institutions* that does not neglect the history of those who invest in them and who are invested in them are fundamental (Muel-Dreyfus, 1983).<sup>16</sup> To this end, identifying the dispositions and social properties of agents is a sociologically relevant concern that has complex developments.<sup>17</sup>

The existence of “realities” instituted in the form of *bureaucratic organizations* (in the Weberian sense) and *classification schemes* (in the Durkheimian sense) depends on the competitive work of agents in and for *representative positions*. Marx and Engels (1993, p. 45) warned that, at a certain stage of the division of labor, characters emerge who “really represent something without representing anything real.” Far from signifying a judgement on the artificiality of representational work, this reflection urges us to investigate the active role of “men of flesh and blood” who occupy these positions (Marx & Engels, 1993, p. 37) and to socially characterize them. Furthermore, it points to the performativity of the representation of reality that they provide, which, in a certain way, aligns with Weberian propositions about the specialists responsible for the gestation/management of discourses, values, artifacts, and their conferred meanings in social and power relations (Weber, 1987).

Bourdieu’s guidelines further refined the notions of *representation* and *representative*, and broadened the range of inquiries into: the roles of spokespeople; objects of dispute; trump cards used; structural and strategic relationships with those represented and with the organizations on whose

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<sup>15</sup> Some important collections should be mentioned for reference: Lagroye and Lacroix (1992) and Lagroye and Offerlé (2011).

<sup>16</sup> For an interpretation of this reasoning and a masterful research that operationalizes it, see Boltanski (1982).

<sup>17</sup> Among the specific appropriations for studies of “political institutions,” we can cite the work of Dulong (2021), which combines these guidelines with other fundamental analytical orientations for understanding the logics and dynamics of political action in France. In Brazil, discussions on the possibilities of operationalizing the idea of *institution* in research on military personnel and businesspeople can be found in Seidl and Barreiros (2024), and on legal professionals, in Engelmann (2017).

behalf they speak; performative capacities to bring into existence groups, categories, and social problems; and so on.<sup>18</sup>

To further support the analytical approaches raised so far, we will next resume some topics on how the general model's guidelines allow us to explain transversal issues in the social sciences, particularly regarding canonical "political themes." For each topic (to be read as unfolding of one another and not as particular units), brief suggestions for adapting the characteristics to "non-Western" configurations are offered.

## State and social sciences

In a book published after his death, Bourdieu (2009) asserts that it is necessary to conceive of the State as an *institution* that manages, with immeasurable effectiveness, to impose and inculcate social frameworks of perception and classification. For, among its monopolized powers, there is that of *production* and *reproduction* of the symbolic order, or what Durkheim called *logical conformism*, which affects its own scholars and analysts. Therefore, a crucial question is how to "think the State" without "assuming a state thinking" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 91) if, in its origin and perpetuation lies the work of jurists, philosophers, political scientists, rulers, bureaucrats... These "thinkers" and "practitioners" possess the operative means of fabricating/transmitting theories (rationalizations) about its existence and indispensable character for certain ends. However, they lack the capacity to perceive the historical and social foundations of their own interest in the "institution" and the explanations they profess.

The *exercise of radical doubt* regarding established representations of the state is indispensable for attempting to overcome the epistemological obstacles that arise. Lacroix (1985) convincingly arms us, firstly, against the limitations derived from generic and universalizing definitions, which go hand in hand with the representation of the state as a cohesive, isolated, and homogeneous formation. A socio-history of the multiple trajectories of nation-states reveals the peculiarities of state accommodations and how much they are impacted by unstable configurations of internal forces and

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<sup>18</sup> The course taught by Bourdieu at the Collège de France, especially in the early years (1981-1982), systematizes in general terms the scheme for analyzing institutions, representations, and spokespeople. See in his posthumous book (Bourdieu, 2015).

with other nations. Secondly, the author warns us against the reifying tendencies of conceiving of it as an entity that acts in unison and is guided by essentialized/essentializing functions (such as promoting: social integration; life or property guarantees; the common good; the reproduction of the dominant class; social justice; economic development, etc.). Thus, it is reasonable to conceive of it, inseparably, as an administrative organization, a representative body, and a producer of representations (about social life in general, about the state itself and politics) especially liable to being absorbed in stance-taking and in decisions making on its behalf, which involve conflicts, alliances and negotiations, group interests and all sorts of transactions with both practical and symbolic impacts.

Since the notion of state is not self-explanatory, we need, at least, clarify its broader meaning, which refers to the *historical trajectories* of the constitution of *nation-states* (with their borders, languages, governments, populations, etc.), and its stricter meaning, which designates the *bureaucratic field*, in Bourdieusian terms. In doing this, we should not disregard the interdependencies between the more general *state formation* and the structuring of the copious *social fields*, including the *state* and *scientific fields*. This has significant implications for the way we think our research objects, beginning with the “state” itself. Therefore, as a primary assumption, we have that the unique conditions for the delineation of nation-states coincide with the particular conditions for the delineation of other social domains, such as the political and cultural ones.

Bourdieu and his disciples anchor the idea of *political field* in processes of objectification of a specialized space, populated by “professionals” who represent social groups/categories. Representatives and the represented become linked thanks to the *symbolic effectiveness* of *social technologies* of *delegation* and the existence of structural homologies between positions in the microcosm of politics and in the broader social space.<sup>19</sup> Often used metaphorically, the *field* corresponds to the historical process of establishing a diversified social order, encompassing the consolidation of legitimized and legitimizing practices, including criteria spontaneously applied to assess levels of individual politicization and prescribe roles to *legitimate representatives*.

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<sup>19</sup> It is no coincidence that the main text formulating the concept produced by Bourdieu (1989c) is titled *Political representation*, followed by the subtitle: *Elements for a theory of the political field*. The assumption that the political game fundamentally operates under the logic of representation is incorporated by the author in the title of his article.

That is, with the institutionalization of representative democracy and democratic devices (available for uninterrupted inventions, reinterpretations, and appropriations), in certain central configurations (such as the French one) it is possible to observe the naturalization of such requirements to the point of functioning as a basis for judgments and behaviors that symbolically institute the boundaries of politics. Therefore, they become widely incorporated and translated parameters for (moral) assessments of activities considered to be properly “political” (Lagroye, 2017).

These aspects, however, do not apply to all national configurations. Contexts with different historical and social foundations for the construction/perception of institutions and those within the established order, even if involving extensive and constant importation of Western models, cannot be apprehended by means of those dominant precepts.

The importation of institutions (bureaucracy, parliament, parties, judiciary, etc.) and guiding principles for legitimate political practices (voting, activism, intellectual interventions, etc.) has, in certain contexts, led to *effects of hybridization* with autochthonous codes, creating typical arrangements in the way Western politics is conceived outside its original context (Badie & Hermet, 1993). The question is how to analyze these dynamics without falling into the trap of comparing them to canonized archetypes, whether to detect “flaws,” “absences,” “incompleteness,” or “deficiencies,” or to claim their “uniqueness,” “extraordinary nature,” “inventiveness,” etc.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it seems fruitful to examine such dynamics from the perspective of their singularity, trying to avoid the traps of analogical and normative thinking, though without disregarding the flows of asymmetrical exchanges and transactions at the inter-/ transnational level. These aspects should be considered not only in studies focusing on the practices, domains, and representations of “politics” and its “professionals,” since they equally apply to other social domains, including the scientific one and, under its umbrella, to sociology and other disciplines.

Almost everywhere, the genesis of the social sciences is inextricably linked to political power, as they produce knowledge that is useful to the command of emerging nation-states. Indeed, in some central countries, they have managed not only to become institutionalized as a university discipline, but also to achieve professional recognition and relative independence from “mundane”

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<sup>20</sup> See arguments in Dobry (1996) and Coradini and Reis (2012).

measures of evaluation (qualification/detraction). The problem is that this does not apply to all national traditions (Heilbron, 2009, pp. 306-307).

As we know, Bourdieu never renounced his belief that sociological knowledge is even more effective the closer it is to the operational logic of a restricted scientific *subfield*, endowed with the greatest possible autonomy. The issue is how to follow this guidance when there is persistent interference of temporal powers and a vulnerable objectification of the criteria for hierarchizing scientific work, achieving, simultaneously, viable conditions for relative independence and a system of penalties/rewards imposed on those who are “out of order.”

In addition to some resilience, it is necessary to reflect on the conditions under which social science is practiced as part of the construction of objects of study, as well as on the contexts that condition such practices, thus seeking to awaken the beneficial concern of problematizing the direct application of a foreign analytical model (yet without abandoning its use as an effective instrument) as well as the constraints of the disciplinary traditions to which we belong (though without ceasing to belong to them).

## Public policies and social problems

Among the conditions for the affirmation of the state as an “idea” and as a “thing” (Lacroix, 1985), there are the progressive seizing of the monopoly of violence (according to Weberian finding), fiscal centralization and the issuance of currency (an Elisian extension), and the monopolization of knowledge through school transmission and the control of mechanisms for gathering and recording information, statistic data, etc. (a Bourdieusian addition). According to Bourdieu (1996), this is where its *metacapital* resides, distributed across a *metafield* formed by agents (individuals and institutions) who serve the State, and whose (self) recognitions and positions depend on it. They form what would be a *bureaucratic field* or the field of public function, which does not hold up solely on a belief or ethics grounded in its competence and dignity. Its agents have an interest (both material and symbolic) in investing in and acting upon the universal idea of the state.

Thus, one of the principles that traverse “the field of public function and guides major ‘political choices’” emerges precisely from the tendency of

civil servants to “affirm and defend their existence by defending the existence of these organizations and working to fulfill these functions” (Bourdieu & Christin, 1990, p. 66). This leads us to consider the structuring of the state’s administrative personnel: how they are organized hierarchically, what are the backbones of their authority, priorities, and perceptions. These aspects are essential to understanding both deliberations and adoption of public policies. Added to this is the importance of, on the one hand, grasping “the state of social representations, whether implicit or objectified in laws or regulations, which demand certain services to be considered irreplaceable”; and, on the other hand, paying attention to imperfect conditions “or flaws in competition and market logic,” which can interfere with how a population or groups perceive the “legitimate needs” for distribution of public resources (p. 66).

In the social sciences, currently, some of the mostly used Bourdieusian perspectives – opposed to the legalistic and technocratic views of the recurrent *standard* of analysis of decision-making – for analyzing public issues have at their core precisely the representations about social issues, their consequences and solutions. To understand these latter, it is necessary, on the one hand, to examine perceptions about the “problems” addressed and the recommended prescriptions, within a framework of conformities between various agents and their positions. On the other hand, it is necessary to determine the role played by a series of intermediaries, spokespeople for interest groups, intellectuals, *experts*, social movements’ leaders, and state actors, as well as the ruling elites.

For the sociological treatment of social problems targeted by state intervention, Lenoir (1996) suggests identifying the pre-constructed categories (established collective representations) upon which they are built, in order to examine them as a product of objective social transformations of the broader social space, which guarantee their existence as evidence and, particularly, as a “problem.” Tensions, social interactions, and sensitive transmissions (re)create their meanings, grant them recognition, and provide them with legitimacy. And the work of politically and culturally well-positioned intermediaries, responsible for detecting and interpreting them, plays a leading role in their gradual institutionalization within the workings of the State.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Closely observed in the excellent studies conducted by Neveu (2015), Duval (2020) and Dubois (2020).

Thus, a set of analytical procedures is required to understand the “cradle” of state policies (and even their conditions of effectiveness), which are not limited to admitting that social problems do not exist by spontaneous generation. Firstly, it is necessary to accept that they depend on the intervention, whether coordinated or not, of a multiplicity of (individual or collective) agents and arenas, which are connected as operating *reticular forces* (Elias, 1999), and provide convenient strategic advantages. Therefore, we can scrutinize: networks of alliances; chains of rivalries; personal, social, professional, partisan, ideological bases, etc.; and the repertoires of intervention mobilized. Thereby, we can reconstruct the trajectories of public problems statement (affirmed in the public arenas and within the scope of the government) and the means deployed by mobilized enterprises and entrepreneurs. The same procedures apply to understanding how certain social groups or categories respond to public interference and, thus, participate in the collective work of creating, refining, and disseminating social issues.

Therefore, another epistemological stance of a *political sociology* driven by a Bourdieusian approach is the one that admits the need to objectify the objectification of categories for classifying the social world: professions, sex, race, ethnicity, regions, etc. This means considering them not only as the result of historical and social confrontations, but also as assets sought by agents with the most diverse interests (including disinterest) in redefining them. As struggle’s motives, these taxonomies foment debates among politicians, activists, academics, and intellectuals, many of whom are involved in militant or technical endeavors concerning public policies. Thus, it is important to keep some vigilance so as not to perceive them as given and pre-existing, bowing to a substantialist or essentialist perspective. And, if wishing to take them as the very object of investigation, this means precisely deconstructing their senses of self-evidence so that to reconstruct the processes of their institutionalization.

Finally, one must consider circumstances characterized by low autonomy of policy-making spheres, the lack of continuity of professionals, and in institutional support for formulation/implementation of public policies. The historical economic and cultural dependence, in some societies, can be observed in the prevalence of exogenous “imported” and “adapted” frame of references. This translates into the fragile rooting of universal principles,

overlapping logics, and discontinuities in the “invention of problems and their respective ‘solutions,’ which emerge according to the state of power relations in social and political domination” (Coradini, 1994, p. 492).

The suggested starting point, then, is to undertake the dual task of envisioning how social problems assert themselves as official political problems, and institutional political actions affect other social domains. Furthermore, inspired by Coradini’s (1994) propositions, we raise questions about how structuring political, social, and cultural amalgamations shape precariously institutionalized domains, permeated by the same legitimate problematics and managed by agents authorized by similar resource structures (social origins and prestige, relationship networks, political-administrative positions, militant identifications, among others).<sup>22</sup>

## Parties and elections

Under the same set of coordinates, another canonical theme to be explored is that of collective action generally, and of political parties in particular. Along with the affirmation of the modern Western democratic state, parties have positioned themselves at the center of political life, crystallizing as the quintessential form of organization and expression of collective interests. However, the representations incumbent upon this central “actor” of the representative democracy update routinized issues and pre-constructed objects. Consequently, they feed the normative (shared by academics and journalists) and legalistic approaches that reify them as moral personalities, endowed with will and reality, a unified existence, and functions pre-defined as universal (Offerlé, 1987).

The various typologies of political parties offered – whose formulations are based either on their links to social cleavages or on organizational structures – have branched out into oppositions between externalist and internalist approaches (Offerlé, 1987; Sawicki, 2013). In the first approach, exogenous factors determine the formation, constitution, and the course of organizations. The emphasis falls on external conditioning factors that act on internal dynamics, encompassing everything from institutional data

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<sup>22</sup> We follow this path to understand the social and cultural bases for the affirmation of Brazilian parliamentarians with relatively long-lasting political careers; see Grill and Reis (2016).



(number of parties; competing party programs; methods of scrutiny, etc.) to more societal factors (alignments with social groups or categories; funders; social *background* of their leaders, candidates, activists, campaign workers, and voters, etc.), including correlations/intersections with domains of militant activism that surround them.<sup>23</sup>

In the second approach, the most immediately visible internal characteristics matter: formal structure (organizational chart) and legal structure (statute/constitution); labels (“acronym,” “party,” “alliance,” “federation,” “movement,” “league,” “front,” “force,” etc.); and ideological signs (sometimes re-emphasized in the names, such as “labor,” “liberal,” “nationalist,” “socialist,” “communist,” etc.). Less emphasis is placed on structural aspects, such as the resources made available to organizations; the division of political work according to profiles and positions in the internal hierarchy; the endogenous criteria for affirmation and advancement that affect political careers; the disputes over indicators of political excellence;<sup>24</sup> and so on (Offerlé, 2009).

More than the convergence between these two approaches, *political sociology* seeks to encompass the logics and mechanisms that govern configurations (relations of competition, exchange, and approximations) formed by collective organizations (positioned according to their resources) and their agents (leaders, employees, and militants, equally positioned according to their assets). In addition, it pays attention to the chains of interdependencies that extend from spheres specialized in political and electoral mobilization towards the “profane ones” (voters).<sup>25</sup>

Studies dedicated to investigating the relationships between political professionals and voters (or between *politically active* and *passive individuals*, in Weber’s terms) should not ignore the impact of economic and social determinants on the hierarchization/distinction between specialists and

<sup>23</sup> Along these lines, Sawicki (1997), by operationalizing the notions of *trajectory* and *network*, comparatively examined the historically consolidated relationships between the French Socialist Party and other sectors and organizations in three departments of that country.

<sup>24</sup> As in the work by Collovald (1985) in systematizing and operationalizing a set of relevant indicators for understanding the logics of recruitment within the Socialist Party of France, at the time of the party organization’s arrival at the presidency of the Republic in that country.

<sup>25</sup> In Brazil, analyses of political professionals based on Bourdieu’s analytical framework were carried out in the pioneering work of Sergio Miceli (1981), in the continued research developed by Coradini (2001), and in the studies of Canêdo (2024), Bordignon (2017), Grill (2013), and Barreira (1998).

on the conditions of appropriation of *legitimate political issues* among laypeople. As Bourdieu frequently did in other domains, we again observe that characterizing agents according to the means they possess, renew, and apply to intervention in the political sphere (either as entrepreneurs responsible for the political offer or as consumers of symbolic and material goods offered) is central to the sociological analysis of politics in general, and of electoral behavior particularly. Through this means it is possible to identify the dispositions and positions of those involved, what allows, for example, to challenge the assumptions that voting constitutes an individual “choice” (autonomous, rational, sovereign...), universalized by the “democratic creed.”

Researchers that work on electoral selection processes through Bourdieusian approaches<sup>26</sup> propose constructing the political space as a *marketplace for exchanges*, in which products (speeches, ideologies, public policy programs, services, personal biographies, etc.) are traded and made available to consumers (voters) by individual entrepreneurs (professional politicians) and collectives (parties). The analogy with economic language is clear, continuing the Weberian and, to a certain extent, Schumpeterian tradition. Notions such as *investment*, *interest*, and *retribution* are used, but not indicating essentially pragmatic, utilitarian, and instrumental practices or ends undertaken by individuals capable of making decisions based on fixed content and somewhat able to control their results. Let's see.

The instrumental reasoning takes the economic logic as the sole and universal basis for the economics of politics. Ultimately, political entrepreneurs would only aim at captivating clienteles, while voters would be available for benefits in view of opportunities to negotiate their support or votes. However, the choices and desired returns need to be understood as being forged in the exchanges established within chains of relationships, meanings, and commitments. This means recognizing, on the one hand, the existence of *structural homologies* between companies, representatives, activists, campaign workers, and voters, who are socially situated according to amount and structures of capital, and, on the other hand, the underlying logics and foundational mechanisms of political representation and politics itself, as, for example, attitudes that disclaim interests and justify behaviors in the name of causes, values, ideologies, beliefs, and altruistic abnegation.

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<sup>26</sup> With particular emphasis on Gaxie (1993) and Offerlé (1987), who systematized an interpretation model that was taken up by many disciples.

Again, the heuristic potential of the scheme should not be an alibi for confused transplants. Parties, votes, and relationships between professionals and laypeople change meanings over time and space. Furthermore, in other national traditions, political activities may predominantly occur through organizations that only superficially coincide with the Western types of parties and their derivative explanations. As dominant models, these latter are regularly taken as evaluative parameters without due consideration for discrepant occurrences, whose explanation disregard or deem as residual the stronger elements of their arrangements and adjustments.

Importation of exogenous conceptual, normative, legal-institutional, and social frameworks by those interested in *non-Western dynamics* (Badie & Hermet, 1993) can lead to the neglect of original factors. Firstly, there are differentiated and decisive collective electoral mobilization undertakings, constituted in the form of intra-party or inter-party groupings, which are organized based on *dyadic* (personal) vertical and horizontal alliances that are unstable and dependent on reciprocity relations.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, there are plentiful modes of social stratification of politicians and voters, in which personal honor/esteem, notability (individual reputations), personal political resources, relationship networks, and personified cultural investments/recognition, among others, override both institutionalized forms of *political capital* (which accompany the strengthening of parties in other historical realities) and belonging to class segments (in the economic market and in social relations of production).<sup>28</sup> Thirdly, meanings attributed to politics and voting are based on a multiplicity of logics that defeat both expectations of electoral behavior guided by “rational choices” and those that project *effects of homologies* (possible correspondences between positions in the space of representation and in the broader social space of classes and class segments).

Thus, in studies on elections (municipal or state), legislative powers (city councils, state legislative assemblies, or the national congress), and “activism” in its various forms, it is imperative to understand how political roles, as well as the rules and competencies required of their specialists, are shaped according to the dynamics of social order, thereby revealing how principles

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<sup>27</sup> As clearly demonstrated by Bailey (1969), Mayer (1977) and Landé (1977) in studies on non-Western contexts.

<sup>28</sup> See Davis' (1977) review of studies on the “Mediterranean world” linking modes of social stratification and political representation.

of social hierarchy and principles of political hierarchy intersect each other or are organically incorporated. Coradini (2017) warned that, under such conditions, relations with politics and the ways of discursively expressing it can be, on the one hand, more ambivalent and, on the other hand, defined according to norms in force in specific dynamics of interactions (electoral processes, bureaucracies, militant organizations, etc.). Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition of “political order” (as in the construction of representative governments in the West), we certainly cannot deny the importance of a reference matrix in which political attributions, personal relationships and the activation of personified attributes are juxtaposed as key resources for struggle. Furthermore, the greater indifferentiation between spheres of action, as well as their plastic or polymorphic character, makes the pathways of transitivity between professionalized political life and other domains of activity (unions, student movements, religious, cultural, popular movements) much more dependent on *multi-positionality*, *multi-dispositionality*, and *multi-notability*.<sup>29</sup>

## Entrepreneurs of causes

Another promising alternative is to analyze political organizations as *interest groups* that are also capable of influencing public decisions and representations as well as interfering in the formulation of legitimate problematics. Collective articulations of this kind are distinct from those found in state sectors, political parties, social movements, and academic domains, while maintaining cooperation with these spheres and adopting similar *modus operandi*. They are *entrepreneurs in/of representation* with multidimensional characteristics, whose repertoires of intervention are not restricted to the classic forms of collective action (Offerlé, 1998). Therefore, they offer opportunities to capture permanent political work carried out by specialists who mobilize their own personal credentials, as well as identitarian and organizational bases constituted in the course of affirming categories and social problems. By means of such engagement they give visibility to certain groups, while taking on the role of their spokespeople.

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<sup>29</sup> As we have discussed in other texts (Grill & Reis, 2016; Reis & Grill, 2023).

Intervening in different arenas of confrontation, agents involved in these struggles, with varying degrees and sources of authority, mobilize around certain causes. By means of practical and symbolic investments, they collaborate in the formulation of social issues that are debated, publicized, and legitimized as relevant matters. As both games and players are not impervious to changes, there are redefinitions of practices and meanings regarding “politics” or the “political game”, which, evidently, entail reallocation of places of intervention and agents authorized to take politically legitimate positions. Nowadays, there is a profusion of issues that challenge spokespeople (individuals, personalities, companies, etc.) from many social domains, at multiple levels and scales (local, regional, national, inter- or transnational).<sup>30</sup>

This reflection, then, converges with investigations into “lasting participation in collective action aimed at defending or promoting a cause” (Sawicki & Siméant, 2011, p. 201). A *political sociology* of militant engagements then comes into play, which draws on the same precepts as the agenda applied to the study of *institutions, representations*, the State, parties, and public policies. Within this framework, we can also devise a multi-layered research program, in which we notably connect three sets of questions. In the first one, we place *activisms* in historical, social, and political moments, since these inform the *problems* and *legitimate repertoires* of intervention. This demands attention to the course of broader social mutations that give rise to or recompose social categories capable of demanding redress for material and value-based deficiencies, expulsions, imbalances, interdictions, etc., configuring confluences between established contexts of action and the practical and symbolic investments made by interpellated agents.

In the second set of questions, we consider how these circumstances contribute to the success of certain groups, organizations, or movements in representing interests, in a broad sense, since they are linked to objectively existing differentiations in the social space. In any case, it is necessary to consider the *strength* of the mobilizing social categories and mobilized problems, significantly indicated by the institutional positions held and the relationships woven with agents and sectors of the state, parliament, parties, etc. It is also important to examine the degree of institutionalization of militant organizations focused on demands, by identifying: *opportunities*

<sup>30</sup> We continued along these lines in Reis e Grill (2023).

for professionalization of militants and the accumulated collective means of intervention (headquarters and subsidies for the recognition enjoyed by the name or acronym); causes on behalf of which they speak, examining how legitimate they are in the public sphere, that is, among politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and citizens – in short, in what has come to be called “public opinion”; and the *repertoires of action* and *modes of intervention* they have established and can set in motion.<sup>31</sup>

In the third set, related to the previous one, we focus on dispositions, socialization processes, educational and professional investments, reciprocations (not necessarily material), identitarian constructions or building of belonging, and established relationship networks. Ultimately, we have a heterogeneity of social profiles, action fields, and career construction, which can be combined with intervention modalities that respond to: more circumstantial or episodic challenges to collective mobilization; continuous and demanding investments in militant causes and organizations;<sup>32</sup> engaged social practices (such as “cultural” ones), fraught with “ethical” judgments and typical of an *ethos*,<sup>33</sup> to taking a stand on issues considered legitimate and urgent.

These types are neither mutually exclusive nor unique, but rather both products and producers of the structuring politicization of social domains and their interconnections.<sup>34</sup> Thus, consideration is given to the porous boundaries between domains and how they affect the ephemeral nature of both the groups and the causes they defend, as well as the very hierarchical organization of the unequally occupied positions.

## Final considerations

To avoid arbitrary disjunctions that hinder the understanding of the many, yet inevitable, amalgamations that shape the adaptable social configurations, this article presents some insights drawn from the analytical framework that supports the *relational*, *dispositional*, and *constructivist*

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<sup>31</sup> A concept of great influence among researchers of *collective action*, coined by Charles Tilly and extensively reworked over time; it was expanded and refined by Michel Offerlé (1998).

<sup>32</sup> See the studies and reflections of Gaxie (1977); Sawicki (1997); and Sainteny (1995).

<sup>33</sup> In the religious sense found by Berlivet and Sawicki (1994).

<sup>34</sup> These guidelines were developed in Reis (2015).

analysis of political phenomena, made possible by the contributions of numerous researchers across generations who have delved into canonical themes, setting the milestones of a *political sociology*. During the process of institutionalizing political science in France (since the early 1970s), some young social scientists embraced Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual tools and, without disregarding the findings of Durkheim and Elias (for example), advocated the centrality of sociological problems for understanding political phenomena. So, they began to apply and develop it in the study of the state, public policies, parties, elections, associationalism, etc.<sup>35</sup>

In Brazil, contact with this framework and its interpreters, fostered by opportunities for academic exchange of professors and students from both countries, brought about important shifts in focus, especially in defining research agendas consistent with elite studies within the framework of a *political sociology*. We note that, not coincidentally, this is related to the diversification (social, institutional, regional) of users of the analytical model under discussion since the 2000s, what entailed the pluralization of prioritized empirical fields and in non-standardized ways of dealing with canonical political themes. These trends were accompanied by demanding epistemological premises that could be perceived as violations of the respect for disciplinary boundaries.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the cornerstones of the research developed are: mapping and correlating socially conditioned agents, invested as spokespeople for social categories or struggles, for managing consolidated intervention repertoires; and identifying the circumstances (marked by high levels of pliancy and multidimensionality) of emergence, reproduction, and signification of social problems. Two research strands unfold. On the one hand, we have works that examine the political domains (state, parliamentary, partisan, interest groups, etc.) or the cultural domains (academic, religious, media, *think tanks*, etc.) as arenas of power relations and competitions between experts in manipulating symbolic goods, who acquire the position of authorized and competent representatives in handling representations about the social world. On the other hand, some studies focus on the dynamics of constructing groups, causes, or social problems, aiming to identify the investments undertaken by agents (interpreters, intermediaries, spokespeople) operating in various

<sup>35</sup> This process was reconstructed in Grill and Reis (2025).

<sup>36</sup> As shown in Grill and Kings (2025).

domains of social life. These agents, drawing on their respective resources of authority, are responsible for *performative discourses* that contribute to producing the “reality” of these collectivities (their appearance of evidence and their recognition).

Not by chance, analytical approaches aimed at understanding specialized domains in the production of representation (in the double sense) converge. That is to say, it is imperative to combine the investigation of processes that create categories of struggle with the relational analysis of the social attributes of the agents responsible for their objectification, location these latter in light of the morphological transformations of society and the structuring of the space of power.

The enormous challenges in operationalizing a *political sociology* of this kind do not arise, therefore, solely from the ability to combine disparate (sub)disciplinary traditions. The cost beared by users of this analytical approach is the requirement to propose dimensions of analysis relevant to the objects of study but that have been reserved for areas of knowledge that are disconnected by disputes between disciplines and by the tendency towards hyper-specialization among researchers. Therefore, apparently, one of the unavoidable tasks of sociological objectification work, wrote down in the sections of this article, is to advocate for disciplinary dialogue in favor of research in *political sociology*.



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