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# The Legitimacy of Power as an Object of Political Science

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(Coehn, Antonin, Bernard Lacroix, and Philippe Riutort. 2009. *Nouveau manuel de Science Politique*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte)

One of the main challenges to be met by Political Science manuals is to attain some balance between the presentation of numerous schools and subject-matters on the one hand, and reasonable analytical thoroughness on the other. Frequently, this issue is not dealt with successfully, which results in disconnections and excessive simplification, typical of this sort of publication. This edition of *Nouveau manuel de Science Politique* manages to escape from the aforesaid difficulty. This collective piece of work brings together 74 authors in 786 pages and 12 chapters, and has the merit of introducing fundamental reflections paving the way towards a deeper comprehension of political phenomena on the basis of empirical studies not restricted to France, but including Europe as a whole, China, India, the Middle East and Africa. The text also contributes to further reflection upon the epistemological status of Political Science and the conditions for discussion of various socio-political *phenomena*.

The book is constructed by concatenating topics on the basis of general discussions as revealed by empirical research situated in its historicity, having the complex legitimization of the various forms of political power as the theoretical horizon. This successful approach outdoes even classical French Political Science and Sociology manuals published and republished over the last three decades, such as Leca and Grawitz (1985), Lagroye (1997) and Braud (2006).

Treating the political *phenomenon* as the object of Political Science is what allowed for the autonomy of Political Science as an academic discipline in France. As stated by Leca and Grawitz (1985) and Lagroye (1997), the use of sociology's methods and afterwards of historical studies and ethnography was fundamental to the emergence of a research agenda about politics differentiated from traditional legal studies.

According to the organizers of the Manual, Antoin Coehn, Bernard Lacroix and Philippe Riutort, historical methods have been used in the study of the genesis of political processes since the 1980s. This trend consolidated in the 1990s and 2000s, giving rise to studies that tended to devise a socio-history of political processes.<sup>1</sup> Such a perspective allows for the renewal of the research agenda introducing such research objects as militancy, demonstrations and political scandals, for instance. This perspective also favours a better de-linkage of Political Science from the legitimization of political power itself.

## Political Science and Political Power

The various sorts of bureaucratic rules, constitutional texts, government systems and other institutional frameworks that “gave shape” to the Western State emerged as a consequence of long-running processes of legitimization of certain social groups' political power. According to Max Weber's sociology of domination, it is critical to regard the social structures that allowed for the legitimacy of certain practices in the exercise of power as a specialized social sphere. The differentiation of politics in western societies motivated the construction of a worldview about the State, as well as the emergence of political thinkers — “spirits of State” in Bourdieu's (1996) acceptance.

One of the objects of the strand of historical sociology<sup>2</sup> focused on the comparison of revolutionary processes that redounded in reconfigurations of the centralization of political power by different actors is the analysis of these long processes and their variants. This approach highlights the specificity of the dynamics of State formation — breaking away from ideas that see political development as the emulation of certain so-called universals — and relates the courses of action taken by political actors to national worldviews and the emergence of institutional forms.

Equally, a number of studies focusing on the history and social origins of Western European political leaders and intellectual elites in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have contributed to a social history of institutional formats by stressing the actions taken by intellectuals and the consequences of the professionalization of political activity. Among those that compare European societies, we would like to name the outstanding works by Charle (2001) and Charle (1987) on intellectuals and the various types of bureaucratic elites in France. Focusing on French ruling groups, the research papers gathered in the compilation

organized by Offerlé (1999) — which deals with the emergence of the professionals of politics — show the links between social characteristics and trajectories and the build-up of political resources that shape the political profession.

Such research papers are not only concerned with who makes up the ruling groups and what positions they occupy in the political sphere, but also with trying to demonstrate how political processes, battles for power that pit opposing mobilizations of social resources against one another, are critical to the ongoing redefinition of the meaning of institutions. In other words, institutional formats are not separate from political elites' strategies to hold power, and neither do they appear as an *epiphenomenon* of the economic sphere.

While proposing to assess the conditions of validation of knowledge produced by political scientists, Lacroix (1985), Lagroye (1997) and Lagroye (2003) point out the need for an epistemological rupture from “political analysis” and postulate the study of institutions as social *phenomena*. According to these authors, the separation of the political dimension of structures from their underlying social interactions produces a lack of social and historical dimensions in studies that claim to pertain to Political Science. Similarly, one may state that the issue of “ideas that travel without their social and historical context” (Bourdieu 2002) is at the basis of the so-called universal values that formed the agenda of topics and authors worthy of being legitimately studied and diffused by Political Science.

The genesis of assumptions permeating categories used to analyse institutions, present in the various political theories, will not be examined here owing to the limits of this review.<sup>3</sup> What matters here is that these assumptions fed into analytical schemes that, upon being (de)historicized, had repercussions in the formatting of the institutional tax models of the European tradition in several countries. Such is the case particularly with constitutional texts that strengthened jurists' language and positions of power in the western world. These devices, for instance, contributed to legitimizing groups and political players that built institutions in European and African colonies.

Formal categories born in the Western European historical context,<sup>4</sup> such as “Parliament”, “Political Parties”, “Democracy”, “State” became universally accepted also in the production of native legal doctrines and political theories, hybridizing political practices in the “new contexts”. The path taken towards the construction of a science of institutions has often been at odds with the quest for the social dimension of institutional *phenomena*, or with studying institutional forms as social *phenomena*. Consequently, the production of such scientific knowledge often consisted of an agenda of topics closely related to the dissemination of models.

In France, this trend was attenuated by the separation of political studies from public law, while leaning towards sociology and incorporating historical and ethnographic methods. This trend of studies coexists with the science of politics geared to government

agenda issues and to personnel training for the political power sphere, increasingly related to economic science.<sup>5</sup>

## A Science of the Various Forms of Political Power

In this manual organized by Coehn, Bernard Lacroix and Phillippe Riutort, the dialogue with Sociology and the proposed historicization of the questions addressed is present since the introductory chapter, where the authors ask, “What is politics?”, starting off from Weber’s analysis about professional politicians and the formation of the modern State. In the second text, they examine “What is Political Science?”, discussing the discipline’s slow autonomy process in Europe and the USA, its internationalization through incentives created by UNESCO in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the conditions for the validation of scientific knowledge on the political world.

The two first chapters deal with a classical topic regarding the formation of the Western State. The first, “Genesis of political groupings”, analyses the format of the modern State starting off from the feudal political organization. The second, “Historical figures of the parliamentary State” addresses the formation of the representative system, the emergence of universal suffrage and the professionalization of parliamentary politics in Western Europe.

Chapter three, “The differentiation of the forms of power”, comparatively analyses the various configurations of democratic power in Europe, as well as Fascism, Nazism and Sovietism, basically explaining these *phenomena* through elite competition and the formation of fields of power in various European countries. This section is complemented with texts on power configuration in China, India and the Arab world.

The first three chapters distinctly show a dialogue with historical studies, particularly the influence exerted by Norbert Elias’s social history.<sup>6</sup>

The fourth chapter, “The field of power”, discusses the diversification of competition between elites and the respective forms of power resulting thereof. Such an approach favours the analysis of new objects that coexist with related modes of political power in the representative system, as well as forms of government, such as the police force, the Judiciary, the armed forces, which are analysed with respect to their specific constitution and legitimization. Similarly, the configuration of economic power, which is highlighted, is discussed on the basis of actions taken by interest groups in order to determine public policies.

In the fifth chapter, “Bureaucratic domination”, the focus lies in the analysis of the high-level civil service and the relations between administrative elites that wield power on behalf of the bureaucracy and public action, policies and modes of government.

The sixth chapter, titled “The political field”, discusses a classic issue studied by Weber concerning the differentiation of the political sphere and the recruitment of professional politicians. The approach chosen proposes an analytical scheme integrating the study of such recruitment and the modes of hierarchy within political groups, given the conditions that allow for the emergence of institutional formats, using the notion of political field.

Chapters four, five and six go back to issues already studied by Weber on bureaucracy and the rationalization of political domination, but also incorporate new issues studied by Pierre Bourdieu. The notions of “field of power”<sup>7</sup> and “political field” as analytic resources introduce a broader comprehension of the domain where elites compete and the influence exerted on the shaping of institutional formats. Such methodology allows for the joint study of the power strategies of political agents, the relations of meaning attributed to political activity (political culture) and institutional effects within the space where groups compete.

Chapter seven, “The electoral phenomenon”, discusses the emergence of electoral mechanisms and the construction of political representation, analysing various variables affecting the formulation of legal regulations and the mobilization of voters. It also includes the methodologies to “explain the vote”, electoral processes and the universalization of suffrage. It is worth highlighting a specific section concerning “electoral mobilization” that studies the creation and the background of professional electoral campaigns as important factors for the legitimization of political groups.

The eighth chapter deals with the “Party enterprise”; it studies political parties and the social conditions that generate leaderships. The authors regard political parties as “enterprises” intrinsically devoted to the production and projection of political leaders, relating competition among party leaders to the objective state that validates certain mobilizable resources and excludes others. Thus they attempt to overcome classic approaches and typologies that study political parties with greater focus on organization and the resources derived thereof, or on the system of competition between parties and the effects that such interaction has on the political party system, seen as autonomous regarding the social conditions of its emergence.

The ninth chapter deals with “Mobilizations”, and contributes to further explaining an issue thoroughly discussed in recent studies of the 1990s and 2000s in France on the basis of social-historic methods. It includes political phenomena not directly related to instituted power, political parties or the representative system, such as strikes, student movements and multi-sector demonstrations, which may generate dynamics of “crisis” or “political scandal”. One of the main explanations for these *phenomena* can be found in Charles Tilly’s studies about action and mobilization repertoires in specific contexts of interaction among players involved in political confrontations.<sup>8</sup>

The tenth chapter, on the “Symbolic formalization of politics”, analyses the *mise en scène* of political power to legitimize its exercise. It emphasises the importance of literature, of the learned and committed intellectuals who produce “political ideas”. It also presents ways to comprehend the media *phenomenon* and media practices as regards the production of the collective meaning of politics.

The last two chapters analyse themes and issues related to recent political conjunctures of the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter eleven deals with “European construction”, discussing the construction of transnational power spheres in Europe. It discusses the symbolic discourse that lends meaning to the various institutional and societal dimensions in the construction of the European Union. It also reviews contributions from various academic disciplines to understanding such issues. One of the main lines of analysis is the discussion of legitimization processes of “Europe” with regard to the diverse meanings attributed by member countries’ “endogenous dynamics” to supra-national institutions.

Lastly, the twelfth chapter, “International Relations”, extends the questions pertaining to the European empirical universe to the discussion both of more classic approaches of relations between states and to “transnational relations”. Thus, they propose the analysis of international political power networks and spheres and their complex interaction with national political power networks and institutions. This discussion is grounded in empirical research about the various dimensions of “European construction”, but at the time is able to make an important contribution to the renewal of Political Science analytical schemes on international relations.

The last part of the book consists of a lexicon of definitions used along the text, plus 2,000 bibliographic references mainly of European, North American and South American authors.

## Brazilian Political Science: An Agenda of Renewal?

As far as the teaching of Political Science in Brazil is concerned, the *Nouveau manuel de Science Politique* may contribute to greater dialogue between the various strands of the study of political *phenomena*. A significant part of the studies carried out by different schools within Brazilian Political Science were constructed on the basis of an epistemological premise that privileged autonomous explanatory variables in relation to the societal bases of the phenomena studied. Such approach was evident when Political Science was consolidated as an academic discipline in Brazil under the leadership of a predominantly American-educated generation, according to Forjaz (1997) and Canedo (2009). This contributed from the 1970s to a research agenda in which there predominated an interest in understanding the internal functioning of institutions and the study of the



behaviour of the various political actors understood as relatively autonomous units of analysis in relation to societal dynamics.

Greater integration between Social Science as a whole and Political Science will surely generate an extremely fruitful dialogue. Under the influence of socio-history and political sociology, Brazilian publications in the 1990s and 2000s have contributed in proposing fundamental issues in order to understand the configuration of the Brazilian political space. Some outstanding studies and papers re-elaborate on traditional issues of Brazilian politics, on the basis of data generated over the last ten years.

For instance, with the support of data on the functioning of Congress, electoral processes and recruitment of political leaders during the 1990s and 2000s, such research demonstrates the importance of clientelism and patronage in the definition of political representation in contemporary Brazil. Among several works based on ethnographies and broad data bases on the political leaders' compared trajectories, the noteworthy books by Bezerra (1999), Coradini (2001) and Grill (2008) demonstrate the reconversion of social and family resources for the construction of leaderships and its relationship with the *phenomena* of patronage and clientelism.

Such social phenomena are intrinsically related to the mechanisms of representative institutions. In the studied contexts, these societal phenomena structure the mechanisms of political representation and condition the uses of the rules and institutional frameworks by political actors.

Another set of studies that bring together socio-history and sociology attempt to analyse the various social resources that legitimize ruling groups and the emergence and growing complexity of political power modes external to the representative system, such as bureaucratic, economic and legal power, for instance. Besides numerous articles that study these issues, there are a number of noteworthy books published since the 1990s that use the notions of political field and field of power to understand the rearrangement of the sphere where elites traditionally geared towards political power compete, such as economists (Loureiro 1997) and jurists (Engelmann 2006). Similarly, the compilations edited by Almeida et al (2004), Heinz (2006), Seidl (2008), Perissinotto and Codato (2008) and Coradini (2008) present empiric research and theoretical and methodological discussions on different types of Brazilian ruling groups, the reordering of the "knowledge of State" and the growing complexity of political power forms.

Also noteworthy are the studies that analyse participation in politics by examining the relation between the agents' social disposition and forms of political engagement. Among these, the dossier on new militant practices organized by Tomizaki (2009) is outstanding.

Greater integration between Political Science and other Social Sciences will certainly contribute to the renewal of the research agenda and bring themes studied by History,



Sociology and Anthropology back into focus. This may also be a way to reinforce the autonomy of Brazilian Political Science as a discipline, widening the scope of questions and interests to be studied, particularly with regard to political power.

Translated by Leandro Moura.

## Notes

- 1 For greater detail on the socio-history of politics as a discipline, see Buton and Mariot (2009).
- 2 For an overview of references on historical sociology, see Badie (1992), Tilly (1985) and Bendix (1996).
- 3 For greater detail, see Lardinois (2000), Bourdieu and Christin (2000) and Anheim (2000).
- 4 A thorough analysis about the import of institutions and the methodology for a sociology on the import of political models and peripheral hybridization dynamics can be found in Badie and Hermet (1990).
- 5 For an analysis of the relation between Political Science education and the formation of political elites in France, see Garrigou (2001).
- 6 In Garrigou and Lacroix (2001) one finds a good example of the use of notions developed by Elias for the historical interpretation of processes of legitimization of political power forms.
- 7 For greater detail on the notion of “field of power”, see Bourdieu (1989) and Bourdieu (1996).
- 8 For a discussion on analytical assumptions concerning “political action repertoires”, see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2009).

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