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## ARTICLE

# Elementary structures of public policies

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### Abstract

This article proposes an integrated approach to analyzing public policies. Considering that the historical observation of different types of public policy has shown the occurrence of common aspects in all of them, the analysis proposal assumes that these are structured and recurring relationships. It also assumes that it is possible to grasp the primary elements that make up these relationships by verifying the degree of organicity, coherence and consistency that is established between them. The "elementary structures" are examined in four dimensions: formal, substantive, material and symbolic. The concept of public policy is evolving. Likewise, the analysis of its elementary structures must reflect the changes that have taken place over time.

**Keyword:** Public policy; Social policy.

**JEL:** H11, H41.

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## Estruturas elementares das políticas públicas

### Resumo

O presente artigo propõe uma abordagem integrada para a análise de políticas públicas. Considerando que a observação histórica de diferentes tipos de políticas públicas vem mostrando a ocorrência de aspectos comuns em todas elas, a proposta de análise assume que se trata de relações estruturadas e recorrentes. Assume, também, que é possível apreender os elementos primários que compõem tais relações verificando o grau de organicidade, coerência e consistência que se estabelece entre eles. As "estruturas elementares" são examinadas em quatro dimensões: formal, substantiva, material e simbólica. O conceito de políticas públicas tem um caráter evolutivo. Do mesmo modo, a análise das suas estruturas elementares deve refletir as mudanças verificadas ao longo do tempo.

**Palavra-chave:** Política pública; Política social.

## Estructuras elementales de las políticas públicas

### Resumen

Este artículo propone un enfoque integrado para el análisis de las políticas públicas. Considerando que la observación histórica de diferentes tipos de políticas públicas ha mostrado la ocurrencia de aspectos comunes en todas ellas, la propuesta de análisis asume que se trata de relaciones estructuradas y recurrentes. También asume que es posible aprehender los elementos primarios que componen esas relaciones, verificando el grado de organicidad, coherencia y consistencia que se establece entre ellas. Las "estructuras elementales" se analizan en cuatro dimensiones: formal, sustantiva, material y simbólica. El concepto de política pública tiene un carácter evolutivo. Asimismo, el análisis de sus estructuras elementales debe reflejar los cambios que se han producido a lo largo del tiempo.

**Palabras clave:** Política pública; Política social.

## Structures élémentaires des politiques publiques

### Résumé

Cet article propose une approche intégrée de l'analyse des politiques publiques. Considérant que l'observation historique des différents types de politiques publiques a montré l'occurrence d'aspects communs dans chacun d'entre eux, la proposition d'analyse suppose qu'il s'agit de relations structurées et récurrentes. Elle suppose également qu'il est possible d'appréhender les éléments primaires qui composent ces relations en vérifiant le degré d'organicité, de cohérence et de consistance qui s'établit entre elles. Les "structures élémentaires" sont analysées selon quatre dimensions: formelle, substantielle, matérielle et symbolique. Le concept de politique publique a un caractère évolutif. De même, l'analyse de ses structures élémentaires doit refléter les changements intervenus au fil du temps.

**Mots-clés:** Politique publique; Politique sociale.

## Introduction

In this article I propose an integrated approach to analyzing public policies. This option does not stem from an absence or scarcity of models created for the same purpose. On the contrary, there is a profusion of analytical proposals in the policy field (Di Giovanni, 1998). Even so, there remains a dissatisfaction with the available models, insofar as – I believe – they do not offer an inclusive and organic view of all the aspects that make up this phenomenon.

The proposal I am presenting stems, firstly, from the effort made to historically understand and conceptualize public policies. This concept goes beyond the idea that a public policy is simply an intervention by the State in a social situation considered problematic. More than that, I think of public policy as a contemporary form of exercising power in democratic societies, resulting from a complex interaction between the state and society, understood here in a broad sense that includes social relations that also take place in the field of economics. I also believe that it is precisely in this interaction that social situations considered problematic are defined, as well as the forms, contents, means, meanings, and modalities of state intervention.

This conceptualization depends, in turn, on the historical realization of certain requirements that make up modern democracies: it presupposes a minimum planning capacity consolidated in the state apparatus, both from a technical management point of view and from a political point of view. It also presupposes a certain republican structuring of the political order in force: the coexistence and independence of powers and the validity of citizenship rights; and finally, it presupposes some collective capacity to formulate public agendas, in other words, the full exercise of citizenship and a compatible political culture. From a historical point of view, we can say that these requirements have been in place in modern capitalist societies since the 19th century but were mainly consolidated after the Second World War.

Secondly, the idea of *political form* is important for understanding the article's subsequent developments. This expression should be understood as a specific configuration of power relations that is institutionalized, recurrent and structured, in the sense that it constitutes, in its own way, a probability of collective action. In this sense, in the political field, public policies are not a single or exclusive form, but coexist with existing forms in different societies. By way of illustration, we can point to corporatism, local mandonism, coronelism and populism as other competing or even coexisting political forms. It is therefore very important to note that public policies, in the sense we have adopted, have become increasingly present in the life of contemporary democratic societies, for reasons we will try to explain later.

Thirdly, considering that historical observation of these forms has shown common aspects in all of them (although each intervention retains its historical individuality), the analysis proposal assumes that these are structured and recurring relationships. It also assumes that it is possible to grasp the primary elements that make up these relationships – from certain points of observation chosen by the researcher – by verifying the degree of organicity, coherence and consistency that is established between them.

In other words, it is possible to capture, from different “perspectives” and successive angles, recurring configurations in all public policies, through successive abstractions that focus on their formal aspects, their material aspects, their substance, and their symbolic elements. I call these four configurations “elementary structures”.

## 1. The autonomization of public policy studies

Although studies of state intervention have spread to the most important countries of central capitalism, it should be stressed that the pioneers were American political scientists. And in that country, studies prior to the 1960s had two very clear features: firstly, they were very much influenced by the pragmatic ethos of American culture in general and its political culture in particular. During the Second World War, in this pragmatic spirit, social scientists had collaborated intensively in the war effort, through research on the countries involved in the conflict and even on the profile of American soldiers, establishing a close link between government and scientists with the aim of providing bases for solving practical problems. In the immediate post-war period, public policy studies began to develop in the United States, guided by the same objective of providing subsidies for government action.

Secondly, in the North American case there is an important linguistic and cultural peculiarity when it comes to the subject. Unlike the Latin languages, and even German, the English language makes a distinction between politics, when referring to *politics* in the sense of the phenomena of power (political representation, parties, elections, conflicts over power, among others), and *policy* (or policies) when referring to the adoption of forms of action, lines of action, which refer much more to elective behavior to solve problems, which border much more on the field of administration than the field that we – Latinos – understand as “political”. In terms of language and culture, these are two different realities, which even make it difficult for users of other languages to understand. In this respect, particularly in the United States, there is a certain prejudice against the activities understood as politics. Harold Lasswell (1951; 1956), considered to be one of the great names in American Political Science, wrote that *policy*

*studies* could help to rid studies of the connotation of militancy and corruption contained in the term *politics*. It's clear that both of these points have important theoretical consequences for the field of studies, above all reflected in a kind of minimization of the effects of politics on the universe of *policies*.

In a movement that is, if not opposite, at least different, in European countries the study of public policy has always been subordinate to the study of politics, if not ignored, without gaining any autonomy among the various disciplines of Political Science, which would only happen a few decades later (1980s). To get an idea of the differences, it's enough to mention a few symptomatic facts. The Italian editions of two classic American political science books (*Power and society*, by H. Lasswell and A. Kaplan, and *The political system*, by David Eaton) translate the expression public policy as "line of action", "line of conduct", or even "political line". Another curious but significant situation is that Norberto Bobbio's famous *Dictionary of politics*, published in 1983, does not have the entry "politiche pubbliche". The great Italian political scientist Alessandro Pizzorno (1993) also used the terms "absolute politics" and "relative politics" to refer to politics and public policy respectively. Perhaps these facts reveal some kind of reservation (or even prejudice) against the type of studies developed in the United States, particularly regarding the theoretical and methodological foundations used. In fact, it must be acknowledged that these studies have been insufficient in their results, in terms of bringing to light the complex relationships between the forms of state intervention and the complex relationships that involve different sets of interests, political structures, ideologies and, finally, the very nature of the intervening State.

But it is undeniable that, even discounting the differences in approaches, the strong interference of national political cultures and even the differences in dominant intellectual styles, the field of study of public policy has shown a formidable expansion, progressively gaining, from the 1960s to the present day, its autonomy as a discipline within Political Science.<sup>1</sup> Today, although there are some caveats regarding the lack of integrated approaches, there is a reasonable body of knowledge ranging from the construction of typologies, conceptual innovations, the identification of structures, the establishment of cycles and the identification of normative aspects. The existence of such a body of knowledge makes public policy studies a solid base of historical, technical, and scientific information that can provide strong support for government interventions, generating a *sui generis* dialectic in

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<sup>1</sup> Cristina Montalvão Sarmiento, in her article "Public policies and national cultures", offers one of the most complete analyses of the evolution of public policy studies in the last half century, with special emphasis on the development of the discipline in the United States, England, France, and Germany, relating theoretical production to national cultures and the political macro-conjunctures experienced in each of these countries.

which knowledge, by informing the plurality of actors involved, becomes part of the reality it seeks to understand.

What I have tried to demonstrate in these initial considerations is that the concept of public policy is an evolving concept, in that the reality to which it refers exists in a constant process of historical transformations in the relationship between State and society, and that this same relationship is permeated by mediations of a varied nature, but which are increasingly linked to the democratization processes of contemporary societies (Di Giovanni & Nogueira, 2015).

## 2. Public policy: history and theory

The expression “public policies” has definitely entered the contemporary vocabulary. Its constant presence in the press, on public agendas, in public and non-governmental documents, in political pronouncements, and on the agendas of social movements reveals an overwhelming presence of the theme in the daily life of democratic countries. In my opinion, this importance is due to at least four key historical factors.

### a) A macroeconomic factor

After the Second World War, the realization that the free play of market forces had not led to peace, prosperity and well-being became widespread throughout most of the capitalist world. This was one of the reasons why there was a major change in the economic policies adopted by capitalist states, which until then had been based, to a greater or lesser extent, on the precepts of economic liberalism. The adoption of Keynesian policies, centred on the idea of full employment, meant that these national states began to expand the volume of their interventions and their regulatory character, both in economic aspects, such as the production of goods and services, and in the social aspects of collective life, such as the institutionalization of social protection systems. These policies continued for several decades, and the period came to be known as the “thirty glorious years”. In fact, these policies were only called into question in the 1980s, when the canons of the neoliberal creed became widespread and accepted.

## b) A geopolitical factor

From then on, the presence of neoliberal ideas in economic and social policies became practically dominant, and this was closely related to the end of the bipolarization between the capitalist and socialist blocs. In the second post-war period, there was a strong geopolitical tension between the socialist and capitalist worlds. European capitalist societies experienced this polarization particularly dramatically. In almost all of them, the period revealed a very strong presence of communist, socialist, or labour-inspired political parties, which from the dominant point of view represented a dangerous internal political divide, aggravated by the virtuality of an alternative mode of social organization in the socialist bloc. This led to the need to establish new principles and new pacts in relations between capital and labor. The supply of services in the social area, even though it took on different forms in each particular situation, was expanded, and the growing presence of the state in this field of activity laid the foundations for the constitution of modern social protection systems, the most conspicuous cases of which were the European Welfare States.

## c) A political factor

The period between the Second World War and the present day, although it has seen some setbacks, was a time of consolidation for Western democracies. Objectively, the fields of political representation were broadened, with union and party participation, the right to vote, participation in social movements and new forms of voluntary association. These changes have produced a new conception of the state in society. For many segments of society, a truly democratic State is seen not only as one that includes classic mechanisms of representation (the right to vote and be voted for; equal participation of classes, categories, and interests), but also one that shows a strong capacity to respond (responsiveness) to society's demands (Cotta, 1989). This argument, taken together with the previous observations, shows that the growing presence of public policies in everyday life is not simply due to the expansion of state action, but also to the demands placed on it by society. The next point completes the explanation.

## d) A cultural and sociological factor

Maurizio Ferrera, in his book *Modelli di solidarietà*, recounts two emblematic situations for understanding the phenomena we are trying to describe. In 1908, the English government allocated a pension of five shillings to elderly people. It was a program that today we would call a cash transfer. Every week, the elderly went to the post office to collect their

benefit. Many of them couldn't understand it as a state action. They thought it was the result of the personal generosity of the postal agent, to whom they gave back baskets of apples, eggs, ducks, or geese. In Italy, in 1993, the government tried to withdraw part of the benefits for medicines to which the elderly were entitled. There was a real national uproar, with trade unions joining forces, marches, protests and, finally, the stoning of some union leaders by the angry elderly, who were considered "slack" in negotiating with the government.

What has happened in the 85 years that separate one episode from the other? If we agree with Eric Hobsbawm (1995), we must accept that the 20th century was the century of social rights. During this period, the rights of citizenship were fully consolidated; at the same time, these rights came to be perceived and understood by society as something that legitimately belongs to someone.

We can not forget that, particularly after the Second World War, extremely impactful processes took place in Western societies: a significant demographic transformation, an expressive process of urbanization, a strong expansion and major technological transformations in the field of communications, redefinitions and expansion of educational systems, increasing secularization of collective life and, above all, a real revolution in the way of life, which many authors have described as the constitution of the "mass consumption society".

A situation has probably arisen on a socio-cultural level that has been described by Daniel Bell (1976) as a "revolution of expectations", in which the various social groups, institutions or even individuals, invested in the role of social actors, progressively more aware of their needs and shortcomings, start to act politically, in ways that are sometimes more and sometimes less organized, based on the idea of a right/demand binomial, which always presupposes state action.

Among other things, the factors described above have contributed to the state's interventions being shaped by this plurality of actors, of different origins and natures and with specific interests (congruent or contradictory). Over time, in this context of interactions, standards and demands for specific technical knowledge of intervention have developed, at the same time as relations between the State and this cast have become institutionalized, creating guidelines for political conduct, rules and standards that have modified traditional decision-making processes, giving rise to this new, contemporary, more shared form of exercising power.

These historical considerations help to broaden the empiricist view of public policy, which has been dominant in the available analytical models. The introduction of a perspective that considers this historicity is also important for understanding not only the nature of the



phenomenon studied and its concept, but also opens the possibility of advancing theorizing in our field of study.

### 3. Elementary structures

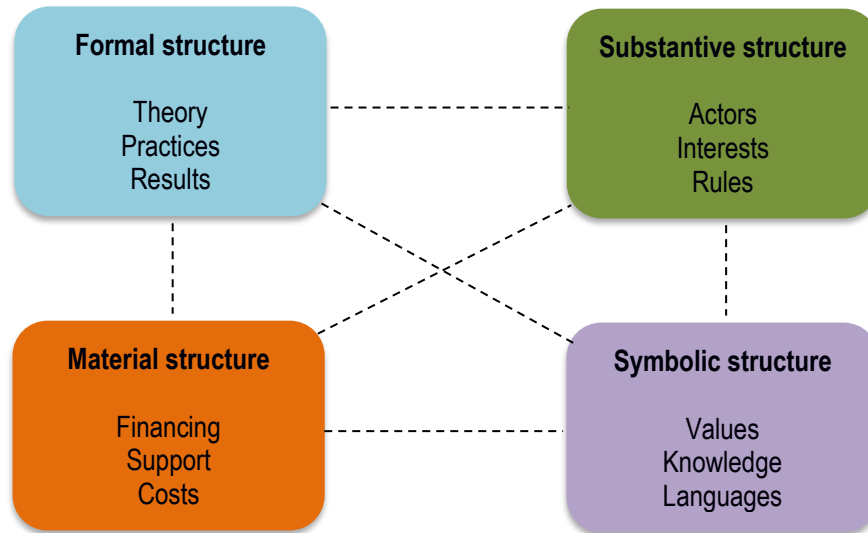
According to the Weberian tradition, the process of theorizing in the cultural sciences takes place in a double *démarche*: on the one hand, the construction of conceptual types and, on the other, the construction of historical types. In fact, what is suggested is a constant movement of reason that transits uninterruptedly between historical observation and theoretical construction. The historical observation of public policies makes it possible to identify invariant elements in all of them, even though each of them has occurred in a singular and unique way. The main question in this case is how to identify these elements. Of course, these elements are given to the researcher's observation. For example, every public policy is based on a "theory", i.e. a set of assertions of various origins (rational or not) that support the intervention practices, in search of a certain result. Historical observation shows that theory, practices, and results are primary elements that are present in all public policies, although empirically theory, practices and results have their own unique historical concreteness. But more important than identifying the invariant elements is establishing a relationship between them that is truly indissoluble and organic, so that they constitute structured, discrete totalities, which I call here, analytically, "elementary structures".

Obviously, this perspective involves a certain amount of subjectivity. The elementary structures are basically the result of a combination of subjective interpretations by the observer who, depending on their own values, selects the objective aspects of reality that they are going to observe, asking about their coherence, organicity and the probability of them forming a structure. In this case, I thought I had identified four elementary structures (which does not mean that the possibilities of identification are exhausted) from four different angles of observation, each involving three "elements":

- a) formal structure, comprising "theory", practices, and results;
- b) substantive structure, comprising actors, interests, and rules;
- c) material structure, comprising funding, support, and costs;
- d) symbolic structure, comprising values, knowledge, and languages.

It is important to note that the analysis of policies, through this proposal, is not only done by juxtaposing the information relating to each of the structures, but also by the relationships of mutual interference that take place between them, so that elements of each quadrant can interact with elements of the other three (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Diagram of the four basic structures of public policy.**



### 3.1. Formal structure

The above example refers to what I have called the formal structure of a public policy. It immediately captures the external aspects and elements of the public intervention, insofar as it establishes the inseparable relationships between a “theory”, a set of practices and a set of results. From the point of view of public policy analysis, however, the exploration of such a structure does not exhaust all the components involved in the intervention, although it reveals the result of a complex process of interactions that produce a specific configuration. Analyzing form is an important step towards understanding reality (in the Weberian sense). The “theory” can condense a large amount of information about the technical, political, cultural, and ideological contents of both the intervention and the social situation in which it seeks to intervene. The practices, in turn, reveal the practical nature of the policy; in other words, which and how many measures and tools have been selected *vis-à-vis* the third structural element, which are the results, whether they are desired or actually achieved.

The component elements of formal structures – even when understood in other ways – have served as the basis for public policy evaluation processes, insofar as they enable analyses of formal consistency and qualitative and quantitative examinations, which is why they form the basis of almost all the typologies available in the field.

### 3.2. Substantive structure

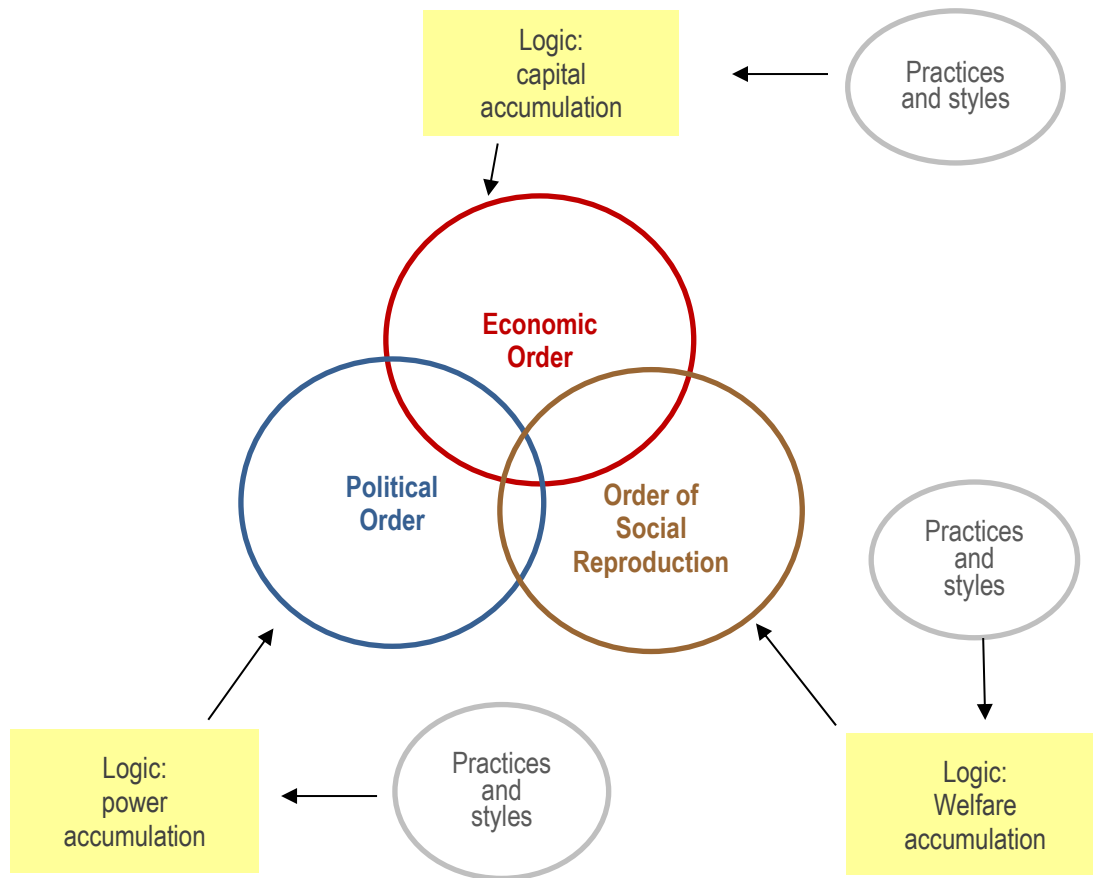
Public policies are social activities which, in this sociological sense, take the form of social actions that require some degree of standardization and institutionalization. In other words, social agents, actors, in this context, base their actions on behavioral guidelines with implicit or explicit objectives; and, to a greater or lesser extent, with some rationality, which we call "interests" here. At the same time, they move within a social space that is institutionalized by behavioral guidelines resulting from a set of rules.

Therefore, actors are all the people, groups or institutions that directly or indirectly participate in the formulation, implementation, and results of a policy. For example, in health policies: patients (organized or not), doctors, nurses, paramedics, politicians, experts, the press, industries, unions, insurance companies, regulatory agencies, government representatives, public bureaucracies, among others.

In turn, interests are the practical objectives (implicit or explicit) of each of the actors or groups of actors. For example: the objective of patients is to obtain better quality of care; that of industrialists is to make a profit; that of trade unions is to guarantee the rights of their members. As interests are not diffuse, they can be grouped, for the purposes of analysis, into certain orders, according to the logics underlying the actors' actions. In this case, I have grouped them into three orders: economic interests (business, corporate, individual), political interests (of political and techno-bureaucratic agents) and social reproduction interests (with specific needs or demands). As shown in Figure 2, each order has its own logic. Therefore, the substantive structure is organized by three distinct logics of action of the actors, each predominant in the respective order of interests:

- 1) the logic of capital accumulation;
- 2) the logic of political power accumulation; and
- 3) the logic of welfare resources accumulation.

**Figure 2. Diagram of the three orders of interests and differential logics.**



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Rules refer to laws, norms, formal or customary conventions, moral and ethical standards, customs, languages, crystallized practices, which create behavioral guidelines for each group and for all actors. For example, the use of peaceful means to make claims, the use of legal means to bid for contracts with suppliers, fiscal responsibility laws, ownership rights, transplant queues, means testing, among others.

It is also important to point out that there is always the likelihood of overlapping interests, as well as the emergence of contradictions between them. This almost always represents the occurrence of alliances and oppositions that may or may not take place in the space of rules and may or may not also take place in the space of legality or legitimacy. If we consider this last aspect, we can say that in the course of the history of these collective actions, styles and practices of action have been defined that make it possible for there to be some predictability and clear recognition of a large part of the interests and their logic.

The conception of this structure can foster an integrative movement at the conceptual level. I think it is linked to classic concepts such as policy community, policy network, decision-making processes, agenda-setting, professionalism, volunteerism, free riders, policy partizans, among many others.

### 3.3. Material structure

For ease of understanding, we can say that while the substantive structure refers to the social and political aspects of a *policy*, the material structure refers – in a broad sense – to the economic aspects. In this sense, the elements that make it up concern its feasibility and material sustainability: funding, costs, and support.

The volume, conditions, and rules of funding reveal, on the one hand, the nature and modalities of the link between the *policy* and the economic environment, and, on the other, its situation and position in the relationship between the state and the market. In the first case, it is possible to verify the position of a policy, not just as an intervention or an outcome, but also as a practice that takes place within the economy itself, in order to overcome the naive view that separates or opposes the field of politics to the field of economics. Secondly, the forms of financing reveal the current conception or conceptions of public policy in the relationship between the state and the market, in the sense that they express current ideologies, successful positions in redistributive battles, as well as the positioning of *policy* on the public agenda and in the macroeconomic environment.

The cost element is primarily related to the conditions for making the intervention viable. Budgets can be both a source of viability and a constraint on implementation. Secondly, costs reveal the management systems and technical capacity installed in the state apparatus and act as markers of the effectiveness of the rules established in the substantive structure.

The third element – supports – is crucial in the material structure. There is no public policy that ends, as a closed totality. Thus, the material supports of a *policy* can be defined within itself, or even externally, in other related policies. I would cite the example of education policies, which, going beyond the purely educational and pedagogical field, start to require external supports, such as a school building policy, the publishing of textbooks and para-textbooks, the incorporation of technologies and so on.

I believe that in public policy analysis these aspects of the material structure have been constantly neglected, which seems to limit the scope of such analysis. I believe that most methodologies have revealed a certain “politicism”, in that they do not consider other angles such as the sociological, economic, and cultural, which make it possible to incorporate public policies as crucial phenomena in the political economy of contemporary capitalism.

### 3.4. Symbolic structure

The study by Cristina Montalvão Sarmiento (2003) raised the possibility of including another dimension in the proposed methodology for analyzing policies. This author drew attention to the relationship between national cultures and scientific production in the area, demonstrating the links between this production and the social and political situations experienced by various European countries. This argument revealed that the field of policies is a universe populated by values, not only in the sense of ideological interference in the production of scientific knowledge about them, but also in its own empirical realization. In other words, policies are value-oriented social realities. On the other hand, and at the same time, they are guided by rational knowledge (know-how) developed in the practice of more than half a century of interventions of this kind. In other words, there is a collection – inherited from the 20th century – of intervention tools and knowledge that play an important role as a rational counterpoint in this complex universe.

When we consider the specificity of particular public policies, it is clear that this diversity is affirmed in formal, substantive and material differences, but above all it is affirmed in specific languages, which are their own (and appropriate) universes of communication that establish the links between the various types of actors in a given policy arena. The elements of the symbolic structure are in fact much more than a neutral cultural expression of this social activity. They also reveal – from an analytical point of view – the degrees of particularism/universalism and isolation/integration of political arenas, as well as the levels of rationalization and technification, traditionalism and ideological interference that occur in these same arenas.

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