Political space and the space of polities: Doing politics across nations☆

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ABSTRACT

What makes political life in the United States so different from political life in France, Hungary or Argentina? This paper considers why societies "do politics" differently. We draw on Pierre Bourdieu's criticism of substantialist thinking in sociology and on his conceptualization of the social space to propose a new way of relating methodological to theoretical claims in comparative political sociology. We do this by exploring and constructing a "space of polities" based on data from the 2004 World Values Survey, using relational statistical techniques (*e.g.*, geometric data analysis). The main insight is that any single form of political action (*e.g.*, joining a voluntary association, or a demonstration, or a boycott) only takes its meaning in the context of its objective relationship to other forms of political action and non-action that have currency in each particular society. We explore the diversity of polity types that actually exist and discuss how they emerge from similar configurations in countries' spaces of political practices. We suggest that the reason for such clustering lies in similar political–historical trajectories. We conclude by arguing for a comparative approach that is sensitive to differences in overall systems of relationships.

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1. Introduction

There are three main ways of conceiving social "groupness" in sociology: groups can be defined by actual patterns of social interaction between individuals, by patterns of similarity and difference in shared individual characteristics (*e.g.* gender, age), or by patterns of similarity and difference in behavior (people who "do" or "don't do" certain kinds of things, *e.g.* church-goers or non-voters). In the first instance, the driving metaphor is that of a social network of interconnectedness; the second model proposes an *a priori*, theoretical reading of groupness; the third constructs groupness on the basis of shared observable behavior (see Bourdieu, 1984; De Nooy, 2003; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010; Goldberg, 2011: 1399). For instance, we can imagine membership in groups of musical listeners as an *actual* group of people who discuss or listen to music or go to concerts together, as a pre-existing, *theoretical* group whose characteristics we think are relevant for the differentiation of musical styles and marketing (*e.g.* African Americans); or as an *analytical* group constructed on the basis of a whole range of

music-related practices and tastes (*e.g.* jazz fans). All individual practices – cultural, political, economic – in fact can be apprehended in these three fundamental ways.

In this article, we explore the consequences of the third approach for analyzing how people "do politics" across nations. We treat politics as a "space" of practices, grouping people on the basis of their observed behavior on a range of political activities. We represent a nation's space of political practices as an emergent system of *empirical* relations of distance and proximity. We ask: which types of political activities hang together empirically? For instance, are people who sign petitions also likely to participate in boycotts? The answer, it turns out, varies across nations. Countries differ not only in the relative prominence of different types of political activities (*e.g.* the Swedes are more likely to be joiners than the Spanish), but also in the relationships that these activities have with each other (*e.g.*, in Sweden, joining an association does not necessarily mean participating actively in it; in the US, it frequently does).

Comparing nations "space to space" – rather than "practice to practice" – offers a way of understanding cross-national differences in political activity that is more attentive to the cultural experience of politics in different social contexts. In short, this approach is attuned to the empirical *meaning* of politics as expressed in people's *strategies of action* (or inaction) (Swidler, 1986). Taken together and understood in a relational sense, a patterned field of political "skills, habits, and styles" (ibid., 275) forms what we may call a political *culture*.

Our goal is thus to acknowledge *both* the fundamental diversity of political activities *within* nations and the stable patterning of this diversity *across* nations. Using cross-national data on political practices, we elicit an inductive conceptualization of the systematic ways in which nations may differ or resemble one another, "space to space": countries that load together in the cross-national analysis should look broadly similar in the within-country analyses while retaining specific features that are the product of their specific historical trajectories and culture. At the cross-national level, we find that countries differ mainly in terms of the volume and temporal structure of the political activities that take place on their soil. But how can we explain these patterns theoretically? Relying on the work of Jepperson (1993, 2002) and Jepperson and Meyer (1991), we show that the underlying structure of difference and similarity across nations reflects, in part, historically evolved variations in the extension, organization and meaning of community and authority across countries, or the institutional shape of the national "polity" (Parsons, 1963). More specifically, we relate individual civic orientations as expressed in various types of political behaviors to national differences in political integration, in the location of political sovereignty (in the state *versus* society), and in dominant modes of interest representation (associational *versus* corporate). As Jepperson (1993, 1) puts it, "differing types of modern nation-states produce distinctive kinds of public behavior and talk."

2. From substantialism to relationalism

Pierre Bourdieu famously opposed what he called "substantialism", or "nominal relativism" – that is, the tendency to give ontological priority to things (parties, associations, organizations, etc.) – to his own "relationalism." Substantialism typically proceeds by defining or describing the properties (historical, organizational, cultural, etc.) of things prior to their being in interaction or in relation to other entities (Desmond, 2014; Emirbayer, 1997; Martin, 2003). A strictly substantialist reading on political mobilization would, for instance, emphasize the rise of grievances, the organizational strategies of individual movements, the 'identity' or the emotional engagement of their members, as inherent qualities and *sui generis* explanations for outcomes.

But just like psychological processes are insufficient to explain individual behavior (Durkheim, 1997), internal processes hardly account for why social movements do what they do. So analysts have introduced a range of relational considerations – to public authorities, powerful patrons, public opinion, other social movements, or indeed the whole "political opportunity structure" – to understand what drives the "dynamics of contention." (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001) Such relations, however, are generally conceptualized in interactive terms rather than in structural ones (*i.e.* in terms of actual connection rather than relations of behavioral distance and proximity). Thus, their focus tends to be on processes of diffusion and mutual influence between movements, on the circulation of repertoires as they are being publicly performed (*e.g.* Tilly, 2008), or on state-movements relations.

Although concrete networks of relations are often at play in politics (*e.g.* see Mische, 2007), the fact is that individuals and groups may position themselves in relation to one another without having a personal connection – workers vis-à-vis their abstract bosses ("shareholders", "capitalists"), women and men as categories vis-à-vis one another, or Catholics *versus* Protestants. More prosaïcally, the people who claim to like "anything but heavy metal" (Bryson, 1996) do not simply state a negative relation to the acoustic properties of this particular music style: their "dislike" may express, fundamentally, a distant relation to heavy metal listeners and their underlying social properties (in this case a lower class/lower education background), which are pervasively intertwined with people's understanding and appreciation of the music. Likewise, we can assume that those people who state in the World Values Survey that they "would never sign a petition" do not express a personal relationship to the abstract object "petition," but rather a relation of distance to the (perceived) social properties of the people who sign petitions. In other words, political position-takings, like all likes and dislikes, act as symbolic markers of membership in categories of people, rather than as expressions of purely individual, disembedded political preferences (Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005). In another telling illustration, Eliasoph (1998) finds that voluntary association members in the United States make sure to articulate their public concerns in a very private way, explicitly eschewing the language of