

## EDITORIAL

# What Is Political Sociology, When Politics Is Everywhere? An Invitation to a New Journal

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Political sociology has never been a closed shop. In 1960, amid a sense of growing global interdependencies, the Research Committee on Political Sociology was founded as a “latecomer” within the International Sociological Association (ISA Bulletin 1981:26-36). The committee had a boundary-spanning character, with seventeen founding members covering thirteen countries. Amid the ongoing Cold War, the committee included sociologists from both Western and Eastern sociology associations, and one Argentine representative.<sup>4</sup> The dominant topics during the first international meetings, which were partly sponsored by and reported to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), included “Citizen Participation”, “The Entry of New Groups into Politics”, “Problems of Political Modernization in Developing Countries”, and “The Social and Cultural Bases of Political Cleavages” (ibid.:27). Early on, political sociologists addressed the wide contexts of formal politics, studying the far-reaching conditions and deep frictions of democracy.

Also the style of early political sociology is remarkable. As the institutionalisation of the discipline suggested, political sociologists assumed a foundational role as academic but practically minded researchers. They sought to contextualize and criticize but also inform state policy and transnational institution building. The themes

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chosen for discussion emerged amid interdisciplinary exchange, mostly with political scientists, but also as a result of engagement with social movements and public debates. The student protest movement left a strong imprint on West Berlin's 1968 gathering for example, with a session notable for its *animated* discussions rather than paper presentations (ibid.:29). The uneven development of both Northern and Southern and Western and Eastern societies was also on the agenda, particularly during the 1975 meeting on *The Role of Ideology on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Co-organized with the Polish Academy of Sciences, the session was attended by participants from Bangladesh, Bulgaria and India, among others. Clearly political sociology was institutionalised as a worldly endeavour, situated in a changing global *Zeitgeist* (ISA Bulletin 1981:26-36).

A signature statement of the 1960s was that anything, public and private, is, or can be political. The expansion of the concept and related proliferation of political questions has accelerated since then. The human body, the sciences and even the weather—to name just a few examples—are today all seen as sites of political concern, things fashioned by politics, and with distinct political implications. This is due to new perspectives on what the term 'political' means, but also due to growing recognition of, and work toward, the displacement of political processes beyond the confines of state apparatuses. At the same time, many other groups—policy experts, political journalists, public intellectuals and popular influencers—have joined sociologists in extending their analytical approach toward conventional political practices.

These developments mark the ongoing challenge of political sociology: on one hand, it has become commonplace (although never without risks!) to state that *something* is political. On the other, the conceptual and empirical solidity of this claim has become increasingly challenging due to the formulation of increasingly complex concepts and research methodologies. In doing so, the notion of the political has itself become subject to political disagreement. Can political sociology keep up with the politics of the politicisation of everything, and the manifold approaches that are emerging to understand such a world? Can the field retain its capacity to bring together diverse views and issues? In the 20th century, political sociology flourished at a time when politics became more ambiguous. We think the same could and should be true for more recent times. With the *Journal of Political Sociology* (JPS) we want to therefore establish a home for the study of *the political* in all its forms.

In the next section we reflect upon the research field that we chose our journal to contribute to. In the second section we suggest *the political* as a focus for pluralistic discussion. In the third, we discuss democracy as a foundational but expanding problematic of sociological research. We close by offering an overview of the first issue.

## 1. What is Political Sociology? An Invitation to Inquiry and Debate

Starting a new journal raises the question of what this research field's main tasks, or the perhaps even trickier question of what the shared identity should be. Beginning a new journal in an established field of study is even more challenging in our case. After all, if anything can be seen as political, be it dog keeping as a retreat into private worlds, or the long-distance travel of rich Europeans as a form of neocolonial privilege, does this mean that political sociologists should study everything? Generally, we think, yes! As we debated among ourselves during the earliest discussions about the new journal, good research should make a systematic contribution to the 'state of the art' in the field of... yes, that's the problem, what field?

The shortest, though perhaps unimaginative way to pin down exactly what political sociology is, is to look at the things that clearly carry this label: textbooks, sections in professional societies, seminars, chairs, and so on. Another approach is to look at foundational texts. In the very early days, long before the Research Committee on Political Sociology. Think of Mosei Ostrogorski's (1922) *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* and Robert Michels' (1915) work *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* that constitute an early core of canonical political sociology of the state and its interest organizations, which led on to the work of Kirchheimer (1969), Neumann (1986) up until Voss and Shermann (2000). Most research and theory conducted under the heading of political societies was focused upon the state, interest organizations, social movements, and citizens' attitudes on specific topics deemed *political*.

One step deeper is to look at characteristic styles of political sociology. Most notably, and especially in the early decades of the discipline, analyses were regularly built around explicit political claims and critiques. Economic capitalism, modern democracy, and cultural individualism were aspects of social life about which the founding figures of sociology had strong opinions. The idea that different forms of progress and rationalization invite 'dilemmata', such as prosperity and exploitation related to capitalism, the equality and oligarchic tendencies of democracy, and emancipation and alienation of individualism, inspired political sociologists to develop explicitly political critiques of modern societies. A popular approach in the area of research contrasts the normative ideas of democratic politics with their often undemocratic practices. How far does representative democracy keep its normative promise of representing citizen' interests? A similar approach can also be found in contributions from and actual ongoings in the field of political communications. In his study on the structural transformation of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1989) pointed out discrepancies in public communication that arise between an Enlightenment-in-

spired idea of collective rationality and the real troubles that occur within, what others more recently phrased as the “media culture” (Kellner 2020) of late capitalism.

Another approach to characterize political sociology is to look at its favored research topics. This is where it gets tricky though. Once the claim of politicality is made, it is hard to disprove it and state that a given matter—food habits or the deep sea—are in fact unpolitical. During our discussions, when we agreed to focus on political sociology, we could not help but note that in order to identify itself as a relevant contribution, a paper must conceptualize what the frame of reference is. You cannot study a political phenomenon without stating what is political about it. This in turn means that political sociologists must endorse reflexivity, they must reflect on the fact that their chosen focus and the act of research are themselves political acts. As such, no topic should be off limits. The defining feature of the *Journal of Political Sociology* (JPS) is not a certain sector of policy making or a certain sociological tradition, but a certain process that is all-pervasive in all human life.

## 2. What is *The Political*?

There is a need for themes that facilitate focused discussion while avoiding the tendency to homogenize. The political does not imply a definite article or a proper noun, it is a placeholder for an expansive and contested concept that is itself political. We might think of such themes as boundary concepts (Gieryn 1983). While political sociology was in fact never homogenous, prevalent boundary politics—very common between sociology and political science, for instance—can wrongly claim clear boundaries that demarcate political and non-political, sociological and non-sociological questions. An excellent review by Jörn Lamla (2021) shows how the field, especially in country-specific traditions such as the German one, has been somewhat hesitant to explore the political beyond disciplinary boundaries. A contrasting approach, which we favor as a leading motif of JPS, is the admittedly strange concept of the *political*. The closer one inspects it, the less clear it becomes, and it becomes less evident how it works; its fabric is nuanced and undifferentiated, it mixes with arenas such as culture, technology and spatial orders, which in a narrow understanding may seem non-political but under closer inspection are revealed to be thoroughly shaped by political concerns themselves. Consequently, ongoing debates, some of which we review in the following, circle around the questions of where the political is to be found, where it begins and where it ends.

In our broad understanding, the political is the question of what is, and importantly what is not made subject to contestation. One helpful feature of this focus is that we start the discussion with the basics, with the aim to go far beyond this. Particu-

larly in political science, attempts have been made to theorize *the political* through a distinction between the concepts of *policy*, *politics* and *polity*. Originating from a primarily state-centered discipline most political science debates follow an understanding of the political as the order and process of general rule-setting through debates, conflicts and other procedures that allow the expression of heterogeneous interests (see Deppe 2016). From this perspective, the political has at least three dimensions: a material side in the form of its executive apparatus, a procedural component through its rules, routines and (conformist or divergent) practices, and a normative component that manifests itself in an underlying ideological dimension, which means that the pursuit of political goals ultimately serves goals external to the political sphere as it is conventionally understood.

The notion of the political sheds light on a key feature of political life: it can quickly get out of hand. After all, an important aspect of modern societies, and potentially all human life is that anything can be politicized. By politicized, we mean made the subject of the aforementioned process of expressing heterogeneous interest, be it via rule-setting, debate, conflict, coalition-building, war, diplomacy, more war, press-conferences, rallies and demonstrations, twitter meltdowns, peace-keeping missions, atomic war, strike action or other forms of class struggle, sanctions, back-room talks and public speeches, boycotts, handshakes, or simply sitting things out, and the many other forms of political expression. This general possibility of politicization means that the political does not only refer to the setting of general rules regarding a limited set of standardized problems. It means that literally anything can be made the subject of complex negotiation. We even argue that the politicization of everything has been a structural feature of modernity and, specifically, has become a strategic option in recent political struggles. To make something subject of debate shakes up assumed certainties, routines, and can often reveal embedded privileges. While politicization, which has had periods of boom throughout history, has regained prominence in recent years as a constant source of social conflict, political sociologists have lacked common arenas to discuss this multifaceted process. At JPS, we therefore want to offer to host this debate in many forms and styles.

A particular challenge for political sociology consists not only in its understanding of the relation of society and the political, but also in the discipline's related relation to the legal field. While the political exceeds the strictures of law, it is often regulated, proceduralized and constitutionalized within the framework of legal orders. In recent years, a scene of distinct constitutional sociology has emerged which has shed a light on how politics is configured and how the political plays out not only in the state but also in the legal system itself, and most notably in the transnational sphere (Teubner 2013; Thornhill 2016). In many cases, such legal politics are connected to

the rights-based dimension of constitutionalism and, in particular, human rights: They are invoked in order to articulate political claims, interests, values. However, how far they can be seen as a sound functional equivalent to politics or if they tend to distort or even undermine the initial political claims is something rightly debated (Moyn 2018; Kennedy 2002).

A particularly important, purposefully broad contribution to politicization of both understanding and practices emerged from the British disciplines of social history and cultural studies. This was based on the work of New Left thinkers, such as Edward P. Thompson (1963), Richard Hoggart (1957) and Stuart Hall (1971), among others, who set themselves the task of identifying the political essence of seemingly non-political objects. While Marx brilliantly—and against the conventional wisdom of his time (see most prominently Smith 2012)—theorized work organization as an essentially political issue, theories about the reproduction of the labor power are a less prominent feature of Marxian theorization at the same. By focusing on its cultural expression, scholars from the fields of Cultural (and soon after Feminist) Studies documented the cultural production and reproduction of labor power as a political process (Willis 1981). From this perspective, the presence of political phenomena was no longer limited to an industrial or political sphere, or subsystems of these areas. On the contrary, power relations, ideologies and what was later to be called identity politics, were arranged and reproduced through daily practices. Up until today, the attention on subjective embodiment is a critical element in the discussion on the political (McNay 2014). Cultural Studies and its unruly methodologies, which often deviate from the expectation that sociologists assume a sociological distance, were key to the political study of everyday life.

Life itself is of course a precondition of a political condition, and its very fabric can be politicized through research. Lately since Michel Foucault and many other interdisciplinary interventions, political sociologists have had to think far beyond human collectives and formal organizations. We think of gender studies, postcolonial studies and science and technology studies (STS) as the main approaches that have pushed for scholars to address the underrepresented, but constitutive substrata of official politics. In order to understand how authoritative governance is possible in the first place, sociologists arguably need to include the sociotechnical apparatus and the management of biological life (Barry 2001; Lemke 2015). STS scholars have argued that seemingly apolitical sites such as laboratories are places that make *politics by other means*, they manifest epistemic and ontological choices of political concern long before policy choices can be negotiated (as discussed by Lars Gertenbach, this issue). This dictum and its related methodologies, which has been notably elaborated in relation to public health systems (e.g., Latour 1993; Mol 1999), have long had

and somewhat obscure reputation in conventional sociology. However, the COVID-19 pandemic should have convinced even cautious readers that the technoscientific mediation of political rule implicitly prioritizes certain political voices or choices over others. The representation of legitimate interests is entwined with the representation of nature. This insight is not a token of *avant-garde* academia, but *Realpolitik*.

Not everybody is on board with such interdisciplinary interventions. By contrast, the assertion that something is political can be desirable from one standpoint, and problematic from another. With a critical look at both the dominant legacies of twentieth century sociology and more recent advances in the discipline, it is clear that political sociology is full of internal and external frictions. Those frictions do not necessarily amount to conflict, but they do create confusion and a need for fruitful debate about what political sociology is, or ought to be. We argue, this debate is urgent and should not start with the idea that the political merely is what happens within the political system, and during the negotiations about general-rule setting.

### 3. What is a Democratic Order?

Conceptual openness does not necessarily mean eclecticism. A common focus of both long-standing and new approaches to political sociology are the questions of democracy. Like the term *politics*, the concept of democracy is connected to several reference frames. Again, we can start with *political sociology 101*. A state-centered understanding of the term democracy draws on the legitimation of governmental authority through a mechanism for gaining public assent. An electoral understanding refers to the mechanism of having a vote between competing options or candidates as means to produce an outcome. In addition, an emancipatory understanding aims—in its most general sense—at assuring basic social rights and the empowerment for affected people to take public decisions collectively. However, as Jacques Rancière argued, the term democracy can as much mean the limitation and enclosure of this same emancipatory and representative approach (Rancière 2006).

Adding further nuance, Claus Offe (2019:331) proposes an idea of liberal democracy that consists of four elements—stateness, the rule of law, political competition and accountability in the sense of elites being held responsible for what they do and do. As scholars such as T.H. Marshall (1950) have long highlighted, the state and the democratic political order have been historically evolving in a sequence of rights being granted to its citizens. Similarly, Habermas (1989) emphasized the necessity of basic bourgeois entitlements, such as free speech, freedom of the press, and basic education in the public sphere, as a framework, which allows modern society to identify and arrange its issues and problems according to their sense of relevance

and solubility (Seeliger and Sevignani 2022). However, the enlightenment ideas that underpin liberal democracy—for example the idea of the *citizen as the author of his own laws*—often fail due to conditions that are rarely achieved in political reality, let alone that they are guaranteed for all groups. Not only the feasibility but also the idealistic premises of communication and knowledge transfer are deeply connected with and have been subjected to European colonization and appropriation (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Regardless of whether one looks at the process, its conditions or its consequences, political communication and the plurality of affected publics is at core of, but perhaps also one of the weakest points of liberal democracy. For political sociologists, this means not only the challenge of criticizing exclusion, but also the need for self-critical reflection on liberal ideas of inclusion.

To be sure, political sociologists were never naïve about the conditions of democracy. With regard to a more narrow view, Seymour Martin Lipset (1960:28), a dominant figure in the Research Committee on Political Sociology in its early years, scrutinized and integrated economic development and the attempted political legitimation of capitalist democracies. Inscribed into the logic of modernity is the general idea of constantly improving living conditions (Nachtwey 2018). In order to satisfy the subjective needs of this ideology, the economy has to increase its output in order for its benefits to be distributed among citizens; a balance is sought between legitimation and accumulation (Borchert and Lessenich 2016). At the same time, this political system needs to somehow produce a majority (or sufficiently big minority) of assenting voters or nonvoters. Consequently, economic growth and relative political responsiveness are the two main preconditions for the political legitimation of democratic capitalism. The implied tensions inherent in such a system are an important field of study for political sociologists.

Recently, critical approaches have pointed out even more preconditions of democracy, especially when discussing the limitations of growth and nation-states. Even more tension fields come into play, when considering the male liberal subject, population and border controls, or the disposal of so-called natural and human resources (e.g., Fraser 2021). All of these conditions, which we hope authors will highlight in their contributions, mean that capitalist democracies are (de-)stabilized not only through economic accumulation and governmental legitimation, but also through technology, media, law, lifestyles, and more. Depending on the focus, various repertoires of political sociology offer a specific corridor into the discussion on the political. Those include public problems, sovereignty and deliberation as some of the classic approaches, but more recently also the politics of “new associations” and “governmentality” (Latour 2007). An additional discussion, which we explicitly encourage, relates to political ecology. As the impact of energy infrastructure on democracy



demonstrates in many ways (Mitchell 2009; Haas et al. 2022), environmental policy is more than a sector of government practice. Providing “cheap energy”, “cheap food”, and “cheap nature” goes hand in hand with the externalisation of associated burdens to people and places beyond Western nation states (Moore 2015; Lessenich 2019). A metabolic politics of human-Earth ecology is a dimension of political practice which is not easy to decode, given its complex interrelations with the environment, but one that has become a subject of seemingly existential importance.

All of this highlights the urgent task of political sociology to uncover the forceful conditions and precarious consequences of capitalist democracies as well as autocracies. To be sure, this also involves a reflexive dimension. Especially, when moving the concept of politicization to the center of political sociology, the construction of research methodologies, and the discipline’s logic of inquiry require immediate application to the question of what constitutes *the political*. The traditional blind spots concern a spatial focus on Europe or the US, a temporal focus on linear phases of modernization, a population focus on powerful groups, and many more aspects, all of which often coincide with a focus on nation states. The standard logic of inquiry is often based on setting a population of cases together within a preconceived time-frame, within which these cases shall then be studied. Even political theory-building can be said to have contributed to the blind spots of modern politics by obscuring seemingly apolitical questions. A historian of ideas has recently argued, for example, that concepts of nature underlie almost all political theories even when they do not explicitly address the environment (Charbonnier 2021). Political sociology should therefore reflect on its own intellectual history, to uncover both its conceptual innovations but also its politically revealing absences. Having set out this broad orientation, we invite social scientists from all fields to discuss the conditions, values, practices, consequences, and ideas of both democratic and undemocratic orders, and natural and social orders, in the pages of the JPS. Most importantly, we invite you to disagree with us, in the spirit of ongoing generative dissensus.

#### **4. The First Issue**

Given the many identities of political sociology and the unlimited amount of research subjects, researchers can have a hard time keeping up with the growing knowledge and amount of questions about the politics of contemporary societies. We argue that political sociology needs to maintain and constantly re-establish its capacity to assemble various discussions of politics, at least within the confines of sociology departments, but hopefully much beyond.

Against this background, neither this nor future issues of JPS can possibly provide a complete or even fundamental picture of the current state of research. In fact, this totalizing ambition would run counter to the idea of political sociology as a dynamic and polymorphous field. The beauty of a new journal is that it is an opportunity to launch, update, and develop multiple lines of thought simultaneously. We therefore invite authors to respond to each other, to contribute knowledge or viewpoints that they feel are missing, and to write in a manner that aspires to not only achieve excellence and innovation, but also collective experimentation and reflection.

We have gathered authors and topics which we think are highly able to help to launch a journal that is true to the boundary-crossing spirit of political sociology. The contributions to this first issue are all in one way or another addressed to the unclear state of the art as to what constitutes the political and its boundaries. In several ways, these contributions combine old and new insights and classical and interdisciplinary literature, and they engage with how socio-economic, environmental, cultural and academic politics are related to processes of global change.

In his text *Doubling down on double standards: The politics of solidarity in the externalization society*, Stephan Lessenich addresses a bias of methodological nationalism within classical writings on the welfare state. Deriving its assumptions from the model of the European nation state of the 19th century, classical sociology develops a conception of solidarity that is based on the exclusion of non-citizens living outside of these European national containers. This friction is reflected in *Realpolitik*, and even daily attitudes. The maintenance of internal solidarity among citizens within this welfare state comes at the costs of indifference towards the causally-linked suffering that takes place on an international scale. The externalization society, as Lessenich calls it, is tied to a strictly national institutionalization of solidarity. This bias requires (political) sociology to employ historical approaches that allow them to reconstruct the preconditions, concomitants, and consequences of the welfare state at the level of a world society. In response to his findings, Lessenich calls for a corrected narrative of solidarity that is threefold: cooperative, performative and transformative.

Politics importantly also takes place in popular culture. In his paper, Douglas Kellner revisits a central concept in cultural studies and critical media studies, the idea of transcoding, which he introduced several decades ago (Kellner and Ryan 1988). Here he proposes it as a tool for political sociology. In an analysis of the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), originally based on a novel by Margaret Atwood, he shows how the analysis of media productions is key to understanding the social and political history of an era. In this case, the production and reception of a televi-

sion series is a testament to a highly polarized political culture in the United States. Rather than viewing popular media as the context of political systems, they are instead understood as political texts or even political processes in their own right, forms of media predestined for political sociological critique. Kellner shows how this approach can draw on a broad body of literature that emerged from the Frankfurt School, and structuralist and poststructuralist theories that trace the translation between formal politics and popular forms of political expression. Put simply, political sociologists need to develop media-savvy methodologies.

In addition, the first issue initiates a discussion of the distinctively political definition of *the natural environment*. Lars Gertenbach discusses this issue as one of the most important legacies Bruno Latour left to political sociology and other fields after his death on October 9, 2022. Latour's work, Gertenbach argues, was centrally concerned with political questions and should be recognized as an ongoing reflection on modernist bifurcations such as the division made between human politics vs. natural facts. Looking at his early work on science and technology, but especially his later interventions that endorsed a planetary scale of analysis and a focus on soil, the formation of political collectives from natural and social elements is taken as a fundament of Latour's work. The resulting perspectives, which go well beyond actor-network theory, show how a relational approach can actually get by without necessarily implying a holistic ontology, as is often suggested in talk of political systems. Political sociologists, Gertenbach argues, should engage with Latour as a political thinker and be political ecologists themselves.

One of the classic ecological aspects of modern politics—protests by farmers and rural populations—is discussed in a new light by Noelle Aarts and Cees Leeuwis, who launch our political commentary section. In the Netherlands, the national government has recently confronted farmers, especially livestock farmers, with agricultural reforms to reduce nitrogen emissions, which farmers and farmer organizations widely interpret as an unjust and divisive act of blame allocation. The authors agree with parts of the protesters' argument: that responsibility for climate change and biodiversity loss has been unfairly shifted onto farmers. At the same time, the country's highly export- and market-oriented food system remains untouched, despite the fact that, in part through direct government incentives, it has brought farmers into dependence on efficiency- and growth-oriented practices in the first place. Aarts and Leeuwis argue that farmers should not be overburdened by top-down policies, technological innovations or even environmentally motivated devaluation, but should be supported by ambitious institutional innovations, for example, real pricing systems or responsible shareholding. However, if the national government is unable to also address the role of banks, supermarkets, consumers, and others

in the context, the authors argue that local collaboration involving citizens, scientists, and, most importantly, collectively binding coordination between farmers and grocers can go a long way.

All contributions also discuss the political, sometimes problematic, role of scientific institutions in general and of social scientists in particular. Some of the key power-related and intellectual implications of the spatial ordering of the world system are elaborated in an interview with Raewyn Connell. Her work on Southern Theory has highlighted the inherent bias of the sociology of the Global North, which is still the hegemonic form of knowledge production in the field. In conversation with Paul-Irene Villa and Martin Seeliger, who engaged her in a discussion of current politics and the development of political sociology, Connell draws on her extensive work on gender relations, masculinities, and other presuppositions of the political process. She particularly emphasizes the implications for the conduct of sociological research. We hope to continue to discuss these implications as well as the thorny issues around solidarity, media culture and ecological relations with future authors in JPS. We specifically extend this invitation to those who have not seen their perspectives or research topics reflected in the first issue.

Before we launch the journal, we would like to thank all those who have helped to set it up: Timur Ergen, Annette Hübschle, Azer Kılıç and Ines Wagner gave constitutive feedback in the formation of the journal. Ulf Bohmann, Jenni Brichzin, Willem Halffman, Timon Beyes, and Leopold Ringel were important conversational partners in framing our project. In the section of political sociology of the German Sociological Association, we benefitted from the ideas and encouragement of Jörn Lamla, Minh Nguyen, Holger Strassheim, Alejandro Esguerra, Tobias Werron, Isabel Kusche, Jan-Peter Voss, and many more. We specifically thank the organizers and participants of the political sociology conference in Bielefeld, 2022. For feedback on this editorial, we are grateful to Thomas Turnbull and Ulf Bohmann.

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commitment to the journal is essential. We look forward to plenty of studies and debates that discuss the political of contemporary societies.

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