

Employing the socio-anthropological approach in studying political issues and analyzing the public sphere in developing countries

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the appropriate methodological mechanisms for studying various topics and issues that concern developing countries, which respect their peculiarities and provide researchers with the means to reach useful results. Among these means is the socio-anthropological approach, which combines social and anthropological studies and seeks to delve into the research of social and human relations that have a significant impact on determining centers of power and authority within countries and outline some features of the political decision-making process therein, away from other legal and institutional aspects that are closely related to the political side.

Keywords :Political anthropology, Sociocultural anthropology, Public policy, public sphere.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political anthropology is considered one of the main branches of social anthropology, as it is concerned with studying political phenomena in their cultural and social context. It seeks to analyze forms of power, political organization, governance mechanisms, and social control within human societies of various types. The interests of this field are not limited to studying the modern state and its official institutions, but extend to include traditional and tribal societies, revealing the diversity of political systems and their cultural specificity.

Political anthropology relies on the comparative method and fieldwork, where daily political practices, informal relationships, and cultural symbols that contribute to shaping political behavior are analyzed. It also focuses on studying central concepts such as power, legitimacy, leadership, and political conflict, and their relationship with other social structures like religion, economy, and kinship, based on a holistic view that sees politics as an inseparable part of the overall social structure. The importance of political anthropology stems from its ability to provide a deeper explanation of political phenomena by transcending narrow legal and institutional interpretations, and highlighting the cultural and historical dimensions that govern political relationships. It also contributes to understanding contemporary political transformations, especially in developing societies, by analyzing the interaction between traditional and modern systems, making this field of knowledge an essential tool in contemporary social and political studies.



Thru this study, we address the socio-anthropological approach, which combines sociology and anthropology, allowing researchers in political science and public policy to understand the interactions that characterize the public sphere and define its features. The influence of various contributing parties in this sphere becomes apparent, each according to their weight, power, and ability to access and direct the decision-making process to their advantage. Hence, the importance of this approach in understanding these different systems emerges.

Therefore, we pose the following question, How can we employ the socio-anthropological approach in studying political issues related to the public sphere in developing countries? To address this issue, the following hypotheses were proposed: The socio-anthropological approach is of great importance to the researcher in political issues and public policy topics.

Research on issues related to developing countries requires a methodology that considers the uniqueness of these countries and their societies. To verify the validity of these hypotheses, the research was divided into three main axes: first, understanding the field of anthropology and its relationship with political science; second, focusing on the anthropological approach and the study of the public political sphere; and finally, addressing the specificity of research in the issues of developing countries and the importance of appropriate methodological tools.



2. The Socio-Anthropological Approach

2.1 The Origins of Anthropology

The influence of Greek political thought on the emergence of anthropology is evident. The Greek historian Herodotus is considered the first anthropologist in history, relying on travel and observing the lifestyles, customs, and traditions of peoples to highlight the differences in races and cultures among them. Additionally, Aristotle's contributions, who focused on comparative studies in political fields, collected constitutions from 158 countries to study them and highlight various forms of government, represent a significant contribution to the study of social and human systems (Awicha bouzid,2022 , p894). But anthropology had to wait until the fourteenth century AD for the actual development of this field to begin, as Europeans started a selective process of adopting Greek and Arab sciences and knowledge alongside an active movement of geographical explorations. There was also a transition from the philosophical approach to the empirical scientific method in studying various natural and social phenomena, which crystallized and integrated in the seventeenth century AD.

Thus, the Renaissance era played a role in shaping the field of anthropology at the end of the 19th century as a science that studies the development of human civilization by examining its historical timeline and comparing ways of life, organizing them according to specific developmental stages, which is considered the foundation for the emergence of anthropology.

And anthropology, which is the science of humans, also has other names: the science of human groups and their behaviors, the science of civilizations and human societies. Anthropology does not study humans as solitary beings but as social creatures living in society, belonging to it, and interacting within it. It is the science that studies primitive life and contemporary modern life and attempts to predict the future of humanity based on its development throughout the long course of human history. Fields

Thus, anthropology and sociology intersect in the field of study, but they differ fundamentally and methodologically. Sociology is more specialized in addressing social issues and starts from hypotheses that it attempts to answer and receive responses thru surveys. However, the anthropologist relies on direct and precise observation of social behaviors. Generally, anthropology branches into the following subfields (Boas, 2014, p 249).

- **Physical anthropology :**

Which studies human races and species and their characteristics, and it is the oldest type of anthropology.

- **Cultural anthropology :**

Which focuses on customs, traditions, beliefs, and rituals.

- **Social anthropology :**

It focuses on social structure and social relationships.

These are considered the oldest branches of anthropology and are regarded as the philosophical branches of anthropology, while the modern branches are represented by : Political, economic, medical, applied, and



civilizational anthropology, in addition to development, crime, and nutrition anthropology.

2.2 Anthropology and Political Science :

Political anthropology is considered one of the branches of modern anthropology, focusing on humans as political beings. It examines the common characteristics of all political systems, known for their historical and geographical diversity, and it is dedicated to describing and analyzing the political structures (institutions, processes, and ideologies) of societies considered foundational and ancient.

Since the field research in anthropology has doubled, especially in Africa and newly independent societies, political scientists have recognized the need for political anthropology. Gabriel Almond made it a necessary condition for any comparative political work, and S. N. Parkinson also emphasized that the study of political theories should be entrusted to social anthropologists.

It is important to emphasize that political anthropology is a science based on recognizing other political forms, and here we mean various aspects of political life, including institutions, practices, and ways of thinking that do not necessarily belong to the "civilized" Western European world (Christian Kohn, 2015, p 335). Political anthropology is concerned with researching different political systems thru the study of political

institutions within them, which are linked to the ideologies of diverse societies. It does not limit itself to the legal institutional framework but extends to examining the paths and developments of structures and functions. The study of political systems requires combining the study of political institutions, which are legal organizations, with the study and analysis of their various ideas regarding the fundamental political values and beliefs of their society. Montesquieu is considered one of the early founders of political anthropology, as he developed the concept of Eastern despotism, which he used to describe societies with political traditions different from European traditions. He created a list showing the diversity of societies based on their governance style, which means making the political system a suitable characteristic for distinguishing societies and civilizations.

We also mention the contribution of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the author of "The Social Contract," who acknowledged that comparative study of societies allows for a better understanding of each one and recognizes the specificity of each social system, as well as the ongoing conflict between the force of things and the ideal of legislation. Additionally, the currents of political thought of the 18th century with Marx and Engels, who highlighted the need to investigate the processes of the formation of social classes and the state in various societies, especially the political ones (Suresh , 2012 , p217).

Anthropologists have defined politics in different ways, depending on their general theoretical-analytical



interests and research questions. A typical anthropological point of departure today states that politics, or the political, must not be treated as a separate domain or field, but must be investigated as articulation between power relations, cultural processes, and historical trajectories. As one contemporary anthropologist, Steven Gregory, put it in his *Black Corona* (1998, p. 13), “For my purposes, politics refers to a diverse range of social practices through which people negotiate power relations. The practice of politics involves both the production and exercise of social relationships and the cultural construction of social meanings that support or undermine those relationships.” The work that founded and gave shape to the classic, British structural-functionalist anthropology of politics in the 1940s and 1950s, *African Political Systems* edited by Meyer Fortes and Edward Evans-Pritchard, viewed a society's political organization as those structures or relations that maintain “social order within a territorial framework, by the organized exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of use, of physical force” (Fortes, Pritchard, 1940, p. 164).

However, the decisive anthropological revolution began in the 1930s, when there was significant interest in field studies and the theoretical and methodological frameworks resulting from them to study societies, their political structures, the relationships governing these structures, and the forms of political authority in different societies.

The politics-as-politicking approach was problematic for another reason. As we have seen, its strongest rationale was the extension of the idea of the political to contexts in which something like the modern European state was either absent altogether, or at least quite distant. But the claim that there were 'societies without states' was questionable enough in the late colonial era of the 1930s, and became quite nonsensical in the era of decolonization. Now, though, even the most marginalized and stereotypically 'primitive' groups of people are used to presenting themselves as 'nations' seeking recognition from the larger state in which they find themselves living. No one is entirely free from the idea of the state, although how analytically helpful that idea actually is actu Ally more of an open question.

2.3 The socio-anthropological approach :

A new approach, socio-anthropology, has recently emerged. If it was born and initially applied to the study of work, it currently tends to encompass all social facts that it strives to highlight in their complexity.

As much by name as by definition, it bridges sociology and anthropology. Indeed, the former aims to grasp the "complexity" of social facts by highlighting the mediations that make these facts take the form of a totality on a global scale. The second aims to explain social facts on a local scale, which allows for a direct and detailed study, the result of which is to observe in action the interdependence of what constitutes these facts.

The relationship between these two disciplines already existed before the emergence of socio-anthropology. To be honest, they date back to the birth of both disciplines, which took place against the backdrop of an open competition to be the discipline best suited to explain social facts in their entirety. Originally, the quintessential study of human races, anthropology claims to provide a comprehensive explanation of social facts, facts attributed to the human species, by emphasizing their physiological, intellectual, and moral characteristics manifested in languages, customs, and historical traditions that can be viewed as cultures (Hamel, 1997).

By trying to explain it thru culture, understood in the sense of human races dating back to a biological origin, anthropology, in order to account for the evolution of languages and traditions, in short, cultures, overlooks social life, what life in society compels, the very object of sociology. Emile Durkheim emphasizes: "It may have sometimes seemed that anthropology tended to make sociology useless." By trying to explain historical phenomena solely thru the virtue of races, it seemed to treat social facts as epiphenomena without their own life and specific action. Such tendencies were well suited to arouse the distrust of sociologists (Nadel, 1951, p 184).

3. Sociocultural anthropology and public policy

Political anthropology is concerned with analyzing the interaction between local communities and external

intervention in various forms (e.g., institutions, policies, programs, etc.). Here, the socio-anthropological approach has developed to study public sector institutions and cooperative fields in developing countries, alongside studying the interaction of this local aspect with globalization. This approach aims to study development issues in these countries.

Where the socio-anthropological approach is employed in the study of development programs as a critical and analytical tool that goes beyond the purely economic perspective, focusing on the human, cultural, and local context. Instead of viewing development as a purely technical process measured by numbers, it is seen as a complex network of social relations, power dynamics, and cultural practices.

This approach helps researchers and activists in the field of development issues to identify and address the reasons for the failure of development programs in many third-world countries, despite providing all the material and technical mechanisms for their success, which often return to the following reasons (Desardin, 2025):

- Ignoring the local context: International organisations often design their projects based on "ready-made recipes" (standard approaches) that do not take into account the cultural, historical, and social specificities of the target communities.
- Neglecting local actors: Marginalising local populations (beneficiaries) and only dealing with central or governmental elites, leading to the absence of "local ownership" of the project.

- Power imbalances: Some projects may reinforce class or tribal disparities within the community, benefiting certain groups at the expense of marginalised ones.
- Resistance to change: When the project's goals do not align with local value systems and cultural symbols, the project faces either silent or overt resistance.

Conversely, the socio-anthropological approach helps developing countries succeed in their programs and public policies through:

- Deep understanding of the local community: Conduct detailed field studies to understand living patterns, resource management methods, and social structures before designing any program.
- Activating participatory development: Involving local communities in all stages (design, implementation, and evaluation) as active "partners" rather than mere consumers of services.
- Cultural and social sustainability: Adapting the project's outputs to the local environment, ensuring the continuity of its benefits even after the funding from international organisations ends.
- Monitoring indirect impact: Tracking the social and cultural changes brought about by the project (such as changes in women's roles, migration patterns, and social solidarity) to avoid any negative side effects.

Public policies can be viewed from the perspective of this approach as the method thru which local communities identify public problems, determine solutions, and push public authorities to implement these solutions. Here, this

approach does not define public policies by making the state the center of these policies; rather, it works on expanding the field of actors involved, whether formal or informal, and at multiple levels. It does not separate the process of identifying solutions from the process of identifying problems in developing countries, which add the external factor in countries where public policies are often influenced by foreign intervention, whether thru financial aid, technical assistance, programs, development projects, expertise, etc. This leads to discrepancies in objectives and a gap between goals and outcomes. The field of public policy is considered a new area within anthropology, with the first works emerging in the early 1990s.

And then, with the beginning of the twenty-first century, works emerged that focused on using the approach to study industrialized developed countries as well as the former Soviet states, which were concerned with public policies as a form of power and the analysis of the nature of aid from industrialized countries to these states. Many researchers described this as entrenching inequality between Eastern European countries and industrialized countries. Here began the interest of the socio-anthropological approach in the interaction between local actors and foreign interventions, thus helping in the analysis of public policies and clarifying the differences between needs and practices between intervention and marginalization. This led to the expansion of studies to include many geographical areas outside Europe, starting with South Asia and Southeast Asia, and the interest in

analyzing public policies and developmental policies in these regions and the aid they received (Delville, 2017, p33).

Thus, the socio-anthropological approach attempted to open the black box when discussing policies and how they are made, as well as by utilizing ethnography to study the various interactions in policy-making, especially with the interventions of the World Bank in developing countries. This also coincided with the emergence of the term governance, focusing on local actors and their interactions with each other and various external influences.

In addition, it is an approach that has redirected attention to the field from which public policies originate, which is society, after years of focus being on the state.

Thoenig defined public policy as the rehabilitation of common problems in society, represented by public authorities in whole or in part, and the same applies to the response, whether in whole or in part, regarding the stages involved in addressing them (Rourks,1997,p276).

And here comes the return to focusing on society as the basic unit of analysis for public policies after the attention had been directed toward public authority as the foundation for studying and analyzing public policies, and the focus on the network of public policy-making and the role of various contributing actors from different social groups according to the state and society, in addition to external actors, especially for developing countries, which are linked to developed countries that assist them in

various forms and also intervene in the process of public policy-making within them. But for developing countries, in the opinion of many researchers, the state remains the foundation for public policies, and the interaction between other societal actors remains weak. The state is the one that defines problems and solutions and implements them on a society that has weak participation. Here, they describe public policies in developing countries as state policies rather than public policies.

In general, adopting the socio-anthropological approach involves focusing on the study of public policies, which usually starts from the top. Thus, we are faced with two different paths that lead to different results due to the varying levels of analysis. At the higher level, the practices of participating actors are more prominent, while this is less so at the intermediate levels and even less at the lower levels. The change and scope affecting public policies at the decision-making level narrow and diminish in impact at the lower levels.

The socio-anthropological approach relies on induction, where the researcher verifies hypotheses thru fieldwork and investigations. The analysis begins with broad questions that allow for field investigations, gradually outlining and clarifying the research problem. Field investigations often lead to the gradual discovery of new questions that were not known to the researcher at the outset of the work.

One of the most important features of the socio-anthropological approach is the focus on the issue of



power and power relations, and the refusal to preemptively accept the centrality of the state, the political sphere, and official power structures. This has subsequently led to the development of analysis thru the concept of networks. The goal is not to deny the state and its weight entirely, but to downplay its role in order to understand who truly governs.

Therefore, there are three fundamental differences between the analysis of public policies by political scientists and sociologists using the sociological approach (to public activity), which Dr. Saleh Belhaj defines in three main points (Belhaj,2017 , 134):

- **First** : It concerns the construction of research topics and how to define these topics in terms of their approach and the extent of their elaboration.
- **Secondly** : It concerns the preference of sociologists for the inductive method, which starts from the field to build a problem and establish theoretical contributions.
- **Thirdly** : It concerns the results and is especially related to the status and centrality of the political figure in contemporary democratic societies. Sociologists do not accept this centrality and do not necessarily place it at the core of their work, while public policy analysts consider the centrality of the political figure to be at the heart of the topics they study, It is a matter of utmost importance, and they cannot overlook it.

4.Sociocultural anthropology as a methodological tool for studying local issues in developing countries

The socio-anthropological approach to building public policy topics as a public activity has expanded its focus on the institutional aspect, as well as public and private local actors, and the contribution of civil society in the public sphere across various fields such as economics, employment, environment, health, education, culture, and others. This approach is concerned with society and the interactions that occur between its various segments, the complexities of these interactions, which are quite intricate but are built collectively and communally. Public activity (public policies) is considered in this context, where the state is merely one of the other parties involved and participates with them (Delville, 2017, p 46) .

Here, the role of this approach is to observe the interactions in society among various actors and to study the interactions and relationships between different groups, noting their diverse interests and values, their level of power and influence, as well as the extent to which public policies affect economic, social, and political systems. The approach reveals itself as it addresses three fundamental issues.

The issue of compatibility and harmony between public activity, in which several actors and

systems (social, economic, political, etc.) participate, and this thru different levels of intervention, forming an intersecting system that represents the relationship between external parties to the state, decision-makers, and local area governors. Therefore, this approach focuses on studying the interaction between all these differences and their impact on public choices.

The issue of governance, which on one hand focuses on rationality and the introduction of new public management, where the state acts as a manager replacing the state as the protector of the law on the other hand (Rourke, 1997, P354).

On the other hand, replacing the concept of governance with the concept of governance, which eliminates the traditional classical division between the state, society, and the private sector.

The issue of the legitimacy of politics and the new aspects of the legitimacy of the system and authority, and the contribution of public policies in determining this legitimacy, as authority finds its legitimacy in what public policies do and in the effectiveness of these public policies. Public policy studies in developing countries differ from those in developed countries in that they explore a different field characterized by weak institutions and authoritarian political systems. These are also countries undergoing transformations and changes, such as democratic

transitions and political and economic openings, which may be faltering but are present. All of this makes the field of study different from that in Western democratic countries. Additionally, it places public policy researchers in urgent need of drawing on various disciplines such as history, geography, and sociology, as well as a pressing need to use comparison as tools to help analysts understand the field in which public policies are drawn in developing countries.

The use of the socio-anthropological approach enables understanding the relationship between the state and other social groups that represent different interests, clarifying the state's ability and role in delineating the boundaries of each group, as well as the role of each group in achieving public activity (public practice).

Among the examples that illustrate the importance of incorporating the socio-anthropological approach in public policies, we find housing and village construction projects in many developing countries, which adopted modern housing styles for rural local communities. Ultimately, the residents abandoned these houses because they did not fit their daily lifestyle, nor did they accommodate their animals or extended families.

In contrast, water management programs in many desert regions have proven to be significantly successful when they abandoned centralised engineering designs and integrated the traditional knowledge of local populations (such as "foggara" systems or ancient wells) into water management.

Thus, the importance of this approach in studying public policies becomes evident, as it is urgently needed. It differs from many other disciplines and remains in dire need of Western methodological tools for its study due to its novelty and the nature of the topics associated with the weak legal and institutional aspect in developing countries. Consequently, it attempts to provide the positives and results that researchers need in the subjects of these countries. This makes the field of public policy not an independent discipline in developing countries, which are undergoing significant political, economic, and social transformations that require explanation.

5.Limits of the approach:

Like other approaches and methods used in scientific research, the socio-anthropological approach has limitations that restrict or diminish the value of its results, known as methodological and epistemological issues. These limitations can be summarised precisely in the following points:

- **Difficulty of generalisation:** This approach heavily relies on in-depth case studies and participant observation, which makes its results tied to a specific geographical and cultural context, thus making it difficult to generalise to broader communities.
- **Subjectivity and bias:** Since the researcher is the primary tool of the research, their beliefs and cultural background may

influence, to some extent, the way they collect, analyse, and even understand and interpret the data, especially if they come from a different community.

- Duration and cost: This approach requires long-term field presence and continuous observation, making it costly in terms of time and effort, and unsuitable for urgent research.
- Absence of quantitative measurement: It primarily relies on qualitative methods, making it incapable of providing accurate statistics or numerical measurements of phenomena unless combined with quantitative tools.
- Urban complexity: This approach originally emerged to study small or traditional communities, and it faces shortcomings and methodological challenges when attempting to apply it to complex contemporary societies and the new phenomena associated with them.

6.Conclusion :

In conclusion, political anthropology asserts that understanding political phenomena in developing countries cannot remain confined to traditional legal or institutional approaches, but rather requires a comprehensive reading of the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which power and political relations are shaped. It reveals how formal political practices intertwine with informal structures, such as kinship networks, tribal loyalties, religious symbols, and collective memory, to produce unique patterns of governance, legitimacy, and political participation. Political anthropology also highlights the limitations of ready-made Western models when applied to the societies of developing countries without considering their local



particularities.

Thru its methodological tools, primarily fieldwork and participant observation, political anthropology provides an accurate approach to pivotal issues such as state-building, political development, conflict management, social movements, and the relationship between the state and local society. This approach contributes to explaining the reasons behind the failure of some development policies or the failure of political reform projects, due to their neglect of cultural systems and invisible power patterns that govern social reality. This approach also helps in understanding the dynamics of political change from the bottom up, and the role of local actors in reproducing or resisting power.

Therefore, integrating political anthropology into the study of issues in developing countries opens new horizons for scientific research and decision-making by providing a deeper and more realistic contextual understanding. This knowledge not only contributes to the development of comparative political theory but also helps policymakers and developmental organizations design more effective and just interventions, based on a true understanding of local communities, thereby enhancing the prospects for stability and achieving more inclusive and sustainable development.

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