

The political conditions of professional intervention. Contributions, elements, and reflections on politics, the State, and Social Work

Agustín Ezequiel Zuccaro  

Graduate in Social Work

CONICET / Universidad Nacional de La Plata. La Plata, Argentina

aguszuccaro@gmail.com

Abstract


The purpose of the work is to present a category of analysis that was formulated to enable the objectives of an ongoing investigation. The idea of “political conditions” recovers a notion of politics and the State to understand one of the elements that configure the intervention process of Social Work. It will be argued that this concept allows us to analyze the exogenous and conjunctural dynamics that affect the disciplinary field within the framework of political cycles. It will be concluded that such conditions are verified in their symbolic status that is manifested in the orientation of the society project defended and promulgated by the actors of the institutionalized political system and, in its material structure, in the way public resources are distributed.

Keywords: Social Work; Intervention; Conditioning; Politics; State.

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 **Correspondence:** Agustín Ezequiel Zuccaro. CONICET / Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Avenue 7 776, B1900, La Plata, Argentina. Email: aguszuccaro@gmail.com

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Los condicionantes políticos de la intervención profesional. Aportes, elementos y reflexiones sobre la Política, el Estado y el Trabajo Social

Resumen

La finalidad del trabajo es presentar una categoría de análisis que se formuló para viabilizar los objetivos de una investigación en curso. La idea de condicionantes políticos recupera nociones vinculadas a la política y al Estado para comprender uno de los elementos que configura el proceso de intervención del Trabajo Social. Se sostendrá que este concepto permite analizar las dinámicas exógenas y coyunturales que afectan al campo disciplinar en el marco de los ciclos políticos. Se concluirá que tales condiciones se verifican en su estatuto simbólico que se manifiesta en la orientación del proyecto de sociedad que defienden y promulgan los actores del sistema político institucionalizado y, en su estructura material, en la manera que se distribuyen los recursos públicos.

Palabras clave: Trabajo Social; Intervención; Condicionantes; Política; Estado.

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Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Theoretical-conceptual reflection, 3. Conclusions, 4. Bibliographic references.



1. Introduction

This work presents a theoretical category that I have called political determinants of professional intervention. It emerges as a definitive concept that sensitized and made possible the ongoing research analysis¹ (Nun, 2008). To elaborate on it, it starts from a political perspective of Social Work, which assumes that professional intervention is politically conditioned by the governmental directions that sustain public policies. Beyond the autonomy processes that professionals have in their daily practice, it is considered that the effects of meaning inscribed in state action structure the characteristics of the forms of work in Social Work.

The concept of political determinants imposes dilemmas, challenges, and contradictions on the profession, revitalizing epistemic, theoretical, and methodological debates, as well as instrumental and ethical-political ones. Hence, it is argued that disciplinary discussions are situated in the specific dynamics where they develop (Alayón, 2007). The political nature of professional practice conditions the dialogue between intervention and the political meanings that guide state action, understanding them as constitutive elements and pieces in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of socio-occupational spaces.

The category to be presented starts with an informal consensus circulating within the professional collective, at least in Argentina. It could be summarized as follows: professional practice is different according to political cycles; depending on the government in power, the labor, and professional characteristics, the possibilities and limitations of intervention will vary. Paraphrasing Alayón (1980), the idea of political determinants could be used to answer the question: What differences exist in social policy among different governments? More specifically, what are those differences, and how do they condition the intervention processes of social work? At the same time, the concept can explore other questions: How and in what way are the ideals of ruling parties articulated with state actions? What institutional mandates are given by officials to the public bureaucracy to enable their societal project? How are political ideas instrumentalized in state public policies? This can be considered particularly novel as it proposes articulating the disciplinary practice of Social Work with the structuring statutes of state social intervention concerning the political projects that “govern” it.

On the other hand, the hypothesis sustaining this writing should be explicitly stated: there is no public policy without political decisions. Such a hypothesis does not deny other dimensions of state action, such as scientific, technical, expert, social, economic, and cultural ones. However, it means that without political decisions vested with public authority, they cannot be carried out by the State. These decisions are not sustained in nothingness, in the air, and without subjectivity; quite the contrary, they are located in the meanings imprinted by governmental authority. These meanings come into play when building legitimacy, identifying problems, and outlining the

¹ The research is carried out within the framework of my doctoral thesis in Social Work.



function of action. They are senses to which actors adhere and strive to make valid about social order.

When the State conceptualizes social problems, defines its approaches, and identifies the target subjects of its actions, it does not do so theologically; instead, it is done by specific officials guided politically under a project of social order (Zuccaro, 2023; Weber, 1920 cited in Schluchter, 2008). Hence, the spaces where public policy is implemented express this, situating Social Work and its intervention with the mandate to fulfill the power decisions of institutions. In this context, however, some fissures and cracks enable the possibility of observing and challenging them, which the disciplinary literature has summarized as relative autonomy (Iamamoto, 2003), "professional resistance" (Muñoz, 2020), or "civil disobedience" (Martínez-Herrero et al., 2014). These categories aim to highlight the strategies employed by social workers with a certain degree of independence from the political situation in their socio-occupational spaces. The conceptualization intended by this work is the inverse: while the perspectives above investigate professional practice, here, the aim is to substantiate one of the elements that condition it.

In this framework, the work is structured into two sections. First, a theoretical-conceptual reflection is undertaken where the category referred to as the political determinants of professional intervention is reconstructed. To achieve this, four concepts reflect the adopted perspective: the State, politics, political parties, and meanings. In this sense, a Weberian reflection is the starting point, engaging with authors from different intellectual traditions who problematize or add elements to the development of the political-centric perspective of Social Work. Then, in the article's conclusions, a synthesis of what has been addressed is elaborated to highlight the most critical reflections. Some documentary sources that could be used to investigate and observe the presented category are also introduced.

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2. Theoretical-Conceptual Reflection

The theoretical-conceptual reflection presented here is framed within disciplinary debates that incorporate and demand theoretical development as a domain of their intellectual field concerning the elements that shape and form Social Work. It is emphasized that specific characteristics of institutionalized politics should be observed to understand better the possibilities and limitations that define the political cycles in which the profession acts and interacts. This approach is sustained by understanding that intervention occurs within the framework of state devices and governmental mechanisms that articulate different modes of public regulation, situating social and political co-determination.

The reflection sought here incorporates and brings into dialogue different concepts used as analytical tools (Becker, 2011) from a "research program connected with Weber" perspective



(Schluchter, 2008). Some previous relationships need to be established to substantiate the idea of political determinants of professional intervention, ultimately shaping the theoretical puzzle. Concepts interconnected around politics as a means to access the State, political parties as institutionalized actors to lead it, as well as their meanings and the exercise of public power to influence society. At a certain point, this aligns with what was highlighted in the introduction, which is the concept of a political perspective of the profession, from which the attempt to address the problem of reflection and discussion arises.

The interest lies in discussing political determinants rather than state ones because the State is an actor led by political parties that give meaning to its actions based on a specific worldview. This assertion brings to mind the logic of state power and the exercise of public authority, assuming that its dynamics are inseparable from the individuals who lead and inhabit it. This notion places the State based on its "faces" (Bohoslavsky & Soprano, 2010) or "faces" (O'Donnell, 2008), which, according to Schutz (2003), problematize a fact through their interpretive frameworks from which they grasp the understanding of the world in which they live.

From the Weberian perspective, it is possible to consider politics as a conflict and struggle for access to state power² (Weber, 1991). Politics is a struggle and conflict for access to government and imposing a specific form of governmental exercise; politics is a social relationship that presupposes the exercise of legitimate domination that clothes public authority. Like any human activity, ends, means, and values are articulated here. Therefore, its *raison d'être* is to put into practice and make effective the worldviews in the community being governed and to which the actors leading the State adhere (Aguilar-Villanueva, 1984; Aron, 1979). This instrumentalization takes on a typical ideal form of domination - in a normative sense - based on the strategic direction of the State.

The politics from the perspective proposed here falls within this canonical tradition. It refers to the will to exercise public authority and distribute resources of various kinds. This form of access to "control" the strategic directions of the State and the public takes shape in democratic regimes in the form of electoral disputes based on groupings in political parties or electoral coalitions. The aim is not only to access the Presidency of a country but also to control the various state and institutional portfolios, control public resources to distribute them according to a specific vision of society, and, based on its distribution, to order and lead it.

Indeed, one could object to this conception, a narrow view of politics. This category conceptualizes the institutional and formal forms that society presents when acting and interacting in politics. For example, it would overlook the underground forms of political action,

² This conception finds relationships with various theoretical positions: from Aristóteles (1988) who conceives it as the forms of government and the exercise of state power, to the Marxism of Lefort (1988), who affirms that the constitutive principles of politics are the processing of conflict and the construction/exercise of power (Rinesi, 2015).

the microscopic ones, and the alternatives that, even without the intention of accessing state power, influence—or at least desire to do so—the distribution of public resources through different tactics and strategies. Considering the limitations of the case, it is argued that this vision is precise enough to situate politics according to the actors in the political field, who once in government and vested with the public authority that enables them in that social situation, direct the State: they move it and justify that movement; they make it appear in action and speech.

For example, according to the research being conducted, it was noted that when a minister or even the president spoke, they did not do so in their name, nor the name of their party, and sometimes not even in the name of the government. Each statement they made was in the name of the State, attempting to explain and justify decisions, budget allocations, resolutions, and programs, among other actions. Additionally, it was identified that in this "official discourse," there were arguments that signified the actions of the State. The political actors determine that the problem of resource distribution is poverty or inequality, and, in such a line, the State's intervention should be an increase in the tax burden on the concentrated economy sector or the reeducation of people experiencing poverty.

In summary, politics is understood as how space is ordered to contest the regulation of public affairs and the common good, and the action is guided by various meanings from which one acts and interacts in social reality. Here, different processes of identification and subjectivation come together to unfold in a historically structured situation. In other words, politics will be referenced as the instrument and pathway through which different social actors seek to conquer power and exert influence in the governed community. This leads us to another category to describe: political actors and the political parties.

Political parties are associative spaces where their leaders can influence a particular society as they transmit and represent specific values based on the power with which they are consecrated (Sidicaro, 2022). However, political-party spaces are also networks of socialization (Sawicki, 2011), which condition a particular form of political subjectivation, leading to the deployment of a set of cognitive, interpretative, effective, and practical tools based on a type of society (Bonvillani, 2012).

Political parties and their members comprise the subset of collective actors seeking to access government through democratic representation (O'Donnell, 1989). Democratic representation is discussed in terms of its empirical, concrete, and normative content. In its material constitution - and not ideal, what it should be - it is considered a procedure of election, selection, and delegation of public power that legitimately establishes the relationship of domination between rulers and ruled. For these reasons, it is considered that their objective is access to the State from which they seek to impose a societal project through the distribution of various resources. The State is configured as the most perfect ambition of institutionalized politics.

Regarding party structures, political parties are characterized by being united by a historically situated and particular worldview that sets them apart from others. The formulation of political subjectivation implies a causal attribution, which operates between the ideal type and concrete action (Aronson, 2016), recovering the justification of social action to explain its significant configuration.

The causal attribution refers to worldviews, which Weber defines as “a coherent set of values” (Kalberg, 2011, p. 209) that are legitimate due to the belief of their adherents and are sustained by the regularity of ends/values that shape the actions of a particular collective actor. Worldviews are the symbolic configuration that amalgamates the diverse meanings of action and gives it causal coherence.

Hence, state actions permanently have politically configured objectives, goals, and purposes. They have their elemental structure needs and interests outlined about an ideal horizon. The "why" of that exercise could have different meanings and significances that could be distinct depending on who achieves and executes it. Thus, in their normative status, political determinants have an orientation toward societal projects and respond to the interests of governmental subjects.

The worldviews of parties that come to governmental leadership transform into state meanings. It is argued that State interventions are configured based on the meanings that political leadership imparts to mark the strategic guidelines of action and produce specific processes of sociability about a social project. Meaning gives cohesion and sense to state action as it emerges as a proposal in constructing an order. This order is composed of an ideal type that guides and articulates the entire chain of meanings from which actions unfold. In other words, meanings structure the causal attribution as an element that cohesively links the ideal type of society pursued and the action taken to achieve it. These are all the cognitive, mental, and emotional tools that come into play through political socialization within the framework of forming the worldview. The worldview, as a set of values and ends, shapes the meanings of state action about the political group that directs it.

For example, during the government of Cambiemos in Argentina, from 2015 to 2019, one of the most massive conditional cash transfer programs was transformed. The transformation was in the change of the counter-performance: previously, beneficiaries were required to form self-management work cooperatives, but with the arrival of the new government, they were required to start training to seek employment in registered companies. The meaning underlying this change is different: in the first case, it is about cooperation and self-management, while in the second case, it is about individualism and capacity building. In this sense, it could be said that its ideological orientation defines public policy or state action (Alayón, 1980). Therefore, meanings refer to the conventions of the political project, where the implicit and explicit characteristics in

its justification and characterization presuppose an intention to modify the cultural and social patterns of the people involved: it seeks to change living conditions, whether from the social structure or through the behaviors of the individuals to whom the resources are destined.

Meaning serves to reaffirm the collective in the world (Schutz, 2015). At the same time, in this reaffirmation, the world is transformed by affirming its current contents, longing for some characteristic of the past, and subverting future order. Notably, the characteristic of this way of signifying in terms of its power effects is that the stance that gives meaning to state action is carried out by those speaking on its behalf about normative and performative ideals (Weber, 2002, 2006).

Meaning is the spirit of action, referring to the beliefs that justify an order (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2002). The "spirit" of state action is the set of legitimized elements that structure the sense of power effects, directing and engaging the actors involved in making it work, using their available means, and pursuing ends and values that shape the ideal parameters of such action.

Lastly, but no less critical, the meanings of the State's social action condition the characterizations and treatments of social issues³. They are positions taken regarding the hierarchy of problems the state processes and prioritizes. Consequently, they become challenges for government officials to produce discourse on the issues affecting society and take a stance on them. From here stems the importance of Social Work, primarily because the meanings of the State operate as political conditions.

In an external or exogenous sense to the profession, political determinants influence the institutional and labor statutes of Social Work based on the interests and projects of the political groups leading the State in the form of government. The meanings that constitute the State permeate the public sense acquired by the profession, which is neither static nor unchangeable and, in this regard, is closely related to political cycles. As Vilas (1979) argues, the professional characteristics of Social Work largely stem from external conditions rather than internal characteristics.

The political perspective proposed here understands that political logic often conditions professional practice. As a primacy, this logic is inscribed in the specific substrate of State reason, namely, the exercise of institutionalized power. It is one of the foundational statutes governing institutions and public policies, artifacts that structure the socio-occupational field of Social Work.

³ An example of this can be consulted in Zuccaro (2023). There, work was carried out, from a multilevel analysis, on the public construction of the "locus" of the social issue in the Ministries of Social Development in the Argentine Republic and in the Province of Buenos Aires, identifying "poverty" in the first and, in the second, the "conurbanization of social problems".

For example, the research identified that the definition of criteria (tax-related, scientific, epistemic, technical, economic, etc.) is determined by political authority, regardless of whether power relations influence their decision in society. This statement serves to understand that understanding the social intervention of the State requires not only investigating what happens in its implementation schemes but also the motivations, that is, the meanings that guided it in its formulation. Primarily because these meanings that structure political cycles translate into institutional and official mandates. This becomes more visible at times when professionals work in socio-occupational spaces that have direct connections, without other hierarchical mediation, than political frameworks and officials. However, these meanings also reach other institutions whose direction is of a “career” nature: they do so, at least in the form of programs, budgets, and general objectives.

It is considered that the political meanings that guide state action - with their institutional and governmental articulations - are transformed into mandates that condition the intervention of Social Work. Therefore, their investigation becomes a crucial element to analyze within the disciplinary field, given that their performance is inscribed in the State, and the State is deeply linked to the strategic leadership that stems from politics, the political, and its actors.

Based on these assumptions, it is considered that the discipline is not exempt from political dynamics. Since its professional insertion is carried out in the State, it is possible to consider that the logic inscribed there conditions its practice. By situating ourselves in politics, we observe not the State in the abstract but the State in motion: the political actors who lead the State and the meanings with which they signify social action that politically conditions the practice of Social Work. This logic is broadly referred to as political determinants of professional intervention. This category, while not disregarding the contributions of Marxist theory and its foundations for understanding the profession in the capitalist system, recovers the idea of the primacy of the political from Alcira Argumedo (1993), which understands that it is politics that directs the economy (Carballeda, 2010). In a Weberian sense, this primacy of the political understanding is that the dynamics of production, expansion, and accumulation have at their base the decisions of the groups that lead the social process (Weber, 2012). From here, the State, through its political leadership, does not express interests of ideally grouped classes or linearly execute dominant economic interests (Arias, 2013).

The conditions worth highlighting are those where the professional operates. Although they are linked to economic processes, they express more connections to the political processes that define policies and address the living conditions of wage earners. Political determinants allow us to assess that, even within the logic of the same global system, the conditions of the population we work with will be different, the issues we address will be distinct, and even the demands that reach us and inaugurate the intervention will be diverse.

Political cycles, therefore, condition our profession circumstantially according to budget allocations, program design, policies and actions, regulations, resolutions, and decrees, but also to the official mandates made by ministers and directors according to their subordinate workers. These individuals are responsible for the political direction of state instruments and institutions and, in that orientation, demand that workers use all means to move the State towards that horizon.

These determinants are symbolic and material. Symbolic in the sense of the general orientation of the societal project towards which the actors in the political field guide state practice. Material, because they are verified in the financial and organizational resources allocated through political decisions. Thus, politics defines what and with whom the state action will intervene. Therefore, our profession's practice is always conditioned by an "official mandate." Such a mandate defines the social intervention of the State and, consequently, that of the workers participating in its process (Olejarczyk & Demoy, 2017). The actions of the State are inscribed in the ideas that must guide and direct society by politicizing policies and politically conditioning Social Work.

Political determinants illuminate the inseparable and inexorable linkage between politics and Social Work. This linkage expresses a specific configuration of institutional elements that condition professional practice and is manifested in the various symbolic and material measures taken within the framework of politics, where the thematic objects of State intervention are defined. The political apparatus concretizes public policy, and if this assertion is true, it conditions the rest of the relationships established there (Zamanillo-Peral & Martín-Estalayo, 2011).

For example, it would not mean the same for professional intervention if the notion of justice pursued by public policy is built on equality of positions or equality of opportunities - following the differentiation proposed by Dubet (2011) - since the former would identify problems in social structure, while the latter in the possibilities and abilities of the individual to justify assistance through fiscal surplus redistribution. In this sense, the unequal distribution of produced wealth is the core problem in the context of increasing poverty. At the same time, the latter would focus on opportunities to participate in that distribution. Based on these points, the performative aspect of intervention is intertwined, where, for instance, in a context of rising unemployment, the former would consider the global context of formal job retraction and think about formalizing various forms of work developed in diverse economic conceptions - such as popular, social, and solidarity economy - while the latter would focus on "employability" conditions and, as a counterpoint to social program recipients, would prioritize training in affective, practical, and cognitive skills for individuals to compete in the formal job market.

This passage delves into the tangible implications of political determinants within the professional field. It is noted that these examples, presented in broad strokes, attempt to make the category palpable. It was mentioned that it would be different for the disciplinary field, not only in terms of the ethical-political dimension but also in terms of management and assistance activities. Ultimately, suppose political determinants express the co-construction of the social issue - in terms of selecting and addressing its manifestations expressed as social problems - and the direction of public policy. In that case, we are situating them within the argumentative framework of the profession. This assertion follows the idea expressed by Rozas-Pagaza (2010) that “the social issue and social policies constitute the argumentative basis of training and professional intervention and constitute an unavoidable reference point for understanding the profession about reality” (p. 43).

Examining political determinants regarding social issues and public policy confines them to the reference that these processes stem from the meanings that structure and unite the political parties that lead the State. These meanings guide the construction of social problems, the direction of state actions, and the institutional characteristics, elements built by government decisions that can transform the socio-occupational spaces of Social Work.

It would be different if a state-processed issue held the rank of a ministry or a secretariat, or, more specifically, it would represent different possibilities or limitations depending on the department it falls under. For example, professional intervention will not have the same scope if issues of gender-based violence or sexual diversity are determined politically as an area within the health portfolio or in a ministry dedicated exclusively to their treatment or if the same department is a ministry, secretariat, or department. These decisions modify not only budgetary schemes but also the functions of public institutions. For these reasons, politics is considered one of the ontological foundations of professional practice, as it is the institutionalized instrument for accessing State leadership. This assertion suggests a relationship between the “led” State and Social Work, closely linked to the course of political ideas.

3. Conclusions

The perspective underpinning this work proposed suspending the universal vision of politics to reconstruct its specificity and, from there, connect it with Social Work. “Political conditioning of professional intervention” refers to material and symbolic elements that structure the disciplinary field according to governmental periods. This article attempted to provide a foundation for its articulation with the disciplinary field to situate a debate that calls for further exploration as a domain of its intellectual status.

While the ideas presented should not be considered definitive and are open to modifications, it is possible to consider that the political logic that permeates the State, from its access configurations to the constitution of the exercise of power and domination, is an element

to be studied by Social Work. This assertion finds its roots in the argumentative and formative status of the profession linked to social issues and public policies.

Studying these elements within social work is conducive to strengthening and recognizing different ethical-political projects within the projects of power inscribed in society and institutionally translated into politics. This can make it possible to reconstruct the identified positions in the discipline and place them with the macroscopic social processes that occur in the reality of which it is a part, arguing that this will enrich the public debate in the context of strengthening the democratic process.

On the other hand, the concept arises as a way to make viable some questions and issues that emerged within the framework of a research project that places the journey in two dimensions: 1) how governmental structures access power since its analysis allows the reconstruction of the specific configurations of the social constituted by cleavages, conflicts, and legitimacies that are synthesized in political representativeness and its translation by the political system; 2) the ideas, worldviews, and values that will later be translated into state action, incorporating a notion of justice -in how society redistributes or not the fiscal surplus and its resources in general-, social issues -in the conceptualization and state processing of a set of social problems that should be addressed to achieve the common good- and a mode of state intervention -that sustains the normative and performative characteristics inscribed in state operations-.

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For a research program that considers these aspects, it is possible to place its inquiry in the analysis of the wording of public policy, financing methods, and the discourses that officials make, as well as talk to social workers. In this framework, relationships between the conditioning factors and the elasticity that exists (or not) in specific intervention processes could be found. In addition to the methodological records of interviews and observation, strategies for collecting data from secondary sources may be relevant. In this sense, discourse analysis presents itself as a tool that can be used to reconstruct the enunciative continuities made by actors to address the significant configuration of the social world and the strategic statements they use according to the valuation and projection they make of the context (Zuccaro, 2024). For this purpose, it may be interesting to reconstruct, in addition to public statements, party documents and intellectual programs to which political parties adhere, as well as analyze regulations, resolutions, laws, the distribution of public resources, and the tasks assigned to each institution during a political cycle. The mentioned documentary sources are, by way of example, since each investigation is particular and must be carried out with data that can be accessed and better enable the approach of the research program.

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Authors’ Contribution statement

Agustín Ezequiel Zuccaro: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, resource acquisition, research, methodology, project administration, resources, validation, visualization, writing (original draft), writing (review of the draft and revision/correction).

Conflicts of interest

The author unequivocally states that there is no conflict of interest in the writing or publishing of this article, reinforcing the integrity and impartiality of the research.

Ethical statement

The author does not have any type of ethical implication to be stated in writing and publishing this article.

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