Comparative Policy Studies (CPS): Agency and Structure revisited

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Introduction

Comparative Policy Studies (CPS) constitute an umbrella term denoting different comparative approaches for the study of what States do, the instruments they employ and the process and decisions taken to implement them (Lasswell, 1951; Lodge, 2007; Peters, 2018). Since the 1930s the studies concerning a distinctive arena from that of political science, sociology and psychology have emerged following an instrumental perspective for evaluating the dynamics of policymaking (Lasswell, 1951). Some authors have employed a diversity of labels to refer to this particular instrumental approach ranging from Comparative Policy Analysis, Comparative Policy Implementation and Comparative Policy Research (Holzer and Kasymova, 2012; Gupta, 2012; Hupe and Sætren, 2015). However, these approaches were based on theoretical and methodological transpositions from the logic of comparative politics (Almond, 1956; Sartori, 1970; Lijphart, 1971) which affected what Deleon and Resnick-Terry (1998) outlined as the construction of delimited ontological boundaries and comparative profile for the CPS.

Although policy analysis and the study of policy processes have more than half a century of existence, its comparative profile has been operating as a field of the political science using its comparative approach without building a proper identity. However, CPS in the last two decades became crucial due to the growing number of commercial interactions at global level, which demand a more specialised comparison of different nations’ regulatory, social, and policy statutes. This relevance not only sparks to the economic domain, but also to sectors such inter-state cooperation (for instance cross-border legal or illegal migration), global policies (for instance, environmental issues) and current issues concerning corruption in the developing world. In sum, the relevance of the field rests on the fact that governments face similar national policy problems which have a common origin and produce similar outcomes, ultimately leading to shared challenges for policy design, instrumentations, implementation and evaluation (Deleon and Resnick-Terry, 1998; Geva-May et al, 2018).

Several theoretical questions on this general field remain, however, unanswered. These questions have been raised by recent discussions (Geva-May et al, 2018; Peters, 2018; Radin and Weimer, 2018; Van de Walle and Brans, 2018; Hupe and Sætren, 2015) concerning the boundaries, focus of analysis, and the necessity for a methodological profile proper to the CPS. As mentioned, CPS as a relatively new branch of scholarship is struggling to define its ontological boundaries and assumptions (structure vs agency), methodological approach (qualitative, statistical, case studies, historical - process tracing, etc.), scientific field aims and scope (better policies, knowledge, etc.). Precisely, this article aims to shed some light on the subtle --yet ongoing-- debate concerning the boundaries of CPS and the definition of a proper
methodological profile for the field. It is important to mention that as Sartori (1970) previously expressed, the conceptual delimitation and scope of a discipline demands a clear identification of the connotative definitions regarding its object of analysis. For the political science, for instance, this process occurred in early 20th century triggered by the widespread acceptance of the political system as a theoretical innovation. This theory helped the nascent disciple to escape from parochialism ultimately contributing to the construction of the comparative method as its inherent to it (Easton, 1954; Almond, 1966; Lijphard, 1971).

In turn, the extrapolation of the logics of the comparative politics to the CPS arena caused several problems connected to the struggle to fit “macro-policy” approaches – macrostructures– into an instrumental perspective. Thus, comparisons seemed loose and unimportant in the light of the blatant macro-structural differences of the countries inspected. The demise of the comparative analysis in policy studies and the follow up enclosure in parochial case studies came as the natural consequence (Deleon and Resnick-Terry, 1998).

In the latest years however, several studies employed the comparative method to assess policy issues as a distinctive arena, the otherwise subtle debate over the ontology of CPS have now turned into a visible one (Peter, 2018; Geva et.al. 2018). In the light of these current reflections over CPS as a discipline, our aim is to contribute to it by (i) delimiting the field through the identification of the object of analysis of CPS as well as (ii) proposing a methodological profile for it. To do so, this paper is divided in the following sections.

The first section briefly recounts the emergence of the political science as a field of study. An overview to this discipline is crucial to understand the theoretical precepts that underlies the delimitation of its ontology and subsequent methodological construction. Despite we acknowledge that an in-depth revision for this short space is challenging, we overcome such limitation by focusing on major classical and current works of the field only to later shed light on to how they escaped parochialism and single case studies making the discipline comparative. The second section recounts the main characteristics of the comparative method and how it differentiated from the statistical ones (Large-N). We briefly summarise its characteristics in three elements: the maximisation of intersystem similarities, the incorporation of intersystem (macro-structural) differences as potential explanatory variables and the historical, geographic and temporal delimitation for case selection purposes.

The third and fourth sections debate the birth of CPS as an instrumental approach to understand States’ general activity and their instruments ultimately proposing an ontology based on three interlinked levels: policy ideas or choices, policy instruments and policy outputs. Based on this ontological proposition, the sixth section suggests a methodological profile for the CPS divided in three main arguments: (i) one concerning the identification of a
middle-ranged level of analysis as the focus of comparison, we called it the “venture” of comparison, (ii) the second consists on the operationalization of intersystem characteristics to be included as explanatory factors in the mist of a comparative analysis, and (iii) the third proposes the employment of process tracing analysis as a crucial method for a time-based and historical contextualisation of the policy “ventures” under study. Finally, some conclusions are also provided.

Agency and structure in the nascence of comparative politics

In the early development of the political science, authors such as Przeworski and Teune (1970), Almond (1966), Sartori (1970) and Laswell (1968) considered the comparative perspective as inherent to the nascent discipline. Almond, in particular, noticed that political science, by the late 1960s entered a consolidation phase promoted by the rapid growth of the American Political Science Association (APSA) and its thematic differentiation from courses such as state theory and philosophy, which were distributed in multiple academic departments or deemed as accessory in American universities’ faculties.

Precisely, in his 1966 annual speech to the APSA, Almond directly addressed the question on whether political science and the comparative inquiry were a valid field of study. He asked, “Are we a science? Or can we become one?” Questions that at time were have no apparent and clear cut answers as today.

For Almond, political science’s evolution since 1950s seemed promising due to the emergence of a new disciplinary paradigm defining a new focus of discipline. This core concept, the author stressed, aided political science to detach from previous “speculative” forms of pre-scientific knowledge (1966: 4) while also contributed to set its disciplinary boundaries. Concretely, the introduction of the concept “political system” –as formulated by Easton in 1953 and widely acknowledged by the end of 1964– had three main important repercussions for the redefinition of the ontological focus of the study of political science.

First, the concept’s focus on power distribution as an “authoritative allocation of values in society” facilitated the separation of the political arena from other societal phenomena. This proposal had an important impact on the –at the time– widespread notion that politics, power and the structures constituted a unitary and indivisible force. Easton broadened the scope of the political science to societal actors, political parties, interest groups, governments, among others operating under unwritten rules that might be difficult to understand if not placed in the larger canvass of the political system theory (1957, 384). This separation, as Almond stressed, established a departing point for the understanding of political activities in society, provided that since the nascent “speculative” early political science –linked to philosophy and morality–
theorists struggled to differentiate political activities from the political structures where they were operating (1966:870). The rejection of the notion that formal regulatory descriptions explained political actors’ behaviour —widespread since Aristotelean times³ and in Law Faculties— took a different direction, an empirical one, more focused on facts and relationships rather than only on the description of formal norms and regulations⁴.

The second repercussion consisted on the consideration that the actual exercise of power in an autonomous political system was linked to individuals’ (agents) characteristics, rather than only in formal legalistic entrenchments. This notion emerged as a consequence of studies conducted far from the main centre of attention of political science, mostly when some authors turned their attention to a psychological approach (Laswell, 1925; Merriam, 1924; Adorno et.al., 1950). In special, Laswell in his book *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930) introduced the notion of political agent, an individual whose behaviour demanded a new theoretical approach, a subject of psychological affections whose behaviour followed particular political decisions. Based on these theories, Laswell presented an individual’s personality as an important factor for the study of politics, for the first time, free of macrostructures (which Almond labelled as speculative: descriptions of rules, regulations, and the study of power division⁵). This particular approach placed the role of actor’s decision making, strategies and personality characteristics at the centre of potential nomothetic assertions in the nascent political science, yet also embedded in the realm of system theory.

The third implication of the introduction of the concept of “political system” resulted as the by-product of the interplay between agents, the political environment and the structures where they operated. The dynamics established between agents and their contexts along with with the separation of the political structures from its functions prompted a new division (or a new paradigm) in the political science: those of the agents versus the structures; the individuals, their “pathologies” as conceived by Laswell, and their relationship with the political units, the power divisions, and the political structures recognised either as formal or informal (Helmke and Levistky, 2004). This new logic structured a dialectic relationship between agents’ role in the political arena and its relationships with political structures. Eventually it also created a new ontology cemented on the idea that societies are systems where actors and structures

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³ Almond (1966) stressed that Aristotle in “Politics” classified power in three categories “deliberative, magistrative and judicial”, yet he failed to differentiate government from state and their functions and the political behaviour these categories might provoke.

⁴ It is important to mention that Almond granted Wilson’s (1887) some credit in differentiating the political and bureaucracy arenas concerning two different types –or stages– of political activities.

⁵ As he mentioned: “the State is simply one structure involved in this process, and power is political only when so employed. For the understanding of the formation and implementation of policy, that is, of the ways in which values are allocated, data of two sorts are needed: situational and psychological”. (Almond, 1966: 871)
interact; where patterns of generalised and permanent individuals’ behaviour merged into structures operating at a macro level –at a systemic one. As Almond put it:

“The introduction of the system concept represents a genuinely important step in the direction of science. It is a step comparable in significance to the ones taken in Enlightenment political theory over the earlier classic formulations, comparable in significance to the analytical-empirical achievements of the political process movements in American political science in the first half of the twentieth century” (Almond, 1966: 875).

In sum, the concept of “political system” aided political scientists to differentiate multiple levels of political struggle as well as detach, for the first time, the political actors from the structures which contained them. Moreover, such theory also helped to separately evaluate individuals’ roles, functions and their interplays with the political environment. In other words, this helped to “analytically differentiate the object of study from its environment” (Almond, 1966:876), in other words, the system was able to “differentiate the political life from the rest of social activity, at least for analytical purposes, and examine it as though for the moment it were a self-contained entity surrounded by, but clearly distinguishable from, the environment or setting in which it operates” (Easton, 1957: 384). Based on these claims, Easton’s (1953) proposal that every country consisted on an input-output system, represented one of the modern properly generalising –nomothetic– claims of the political science. This proposal enabled political scientists to avoid parochialism while created important functional categories different from “nations” from which it was possible to evaluate actors’ political performance, interactions and contexts (Almond 1966:66). In other words, the notion of system made the political science comparable: inputs, outputs, processes, actors, limits came into play in the assessment of the scholars’ newly discovered comparative gaze. The universalisation of the notion of system enabled this feature, countries were no longer considered particular to their normative regulations, history or ultimately political actors’ personality traits, but put together to be jointly scrutinised.

The comparative method of comparative politics

The passage from the political scientists’ country based gaze to the comparative one demanded a new inspection of political events which, in many cases, could not be repeated for further scrutiny. Instead, the new ontology concerning the idea of political systems aided researchers to search for similar political phenomena in different locations. The individualising gaze turned comparative, yet for that to happen, two steps were still required: (i) a fundamental
differentiation from the Large-N statistical method, and (ii) the specification of which cases – political systems– were comparable.

On the first point, authors such as Collier and Gerring (2009), Mahoney (2007) and Caramani (2017) stressed that the comparative method should be considered a step between case study analysis and the experimental method given the short number of cases under consideration (usually N>2). This makes the comparative analysis neither close to single case studies nor enough for parametric ones. Following this premise Lijphard (1971) defined the comparative method as similar, in its logic, to the statistical method with the only difference concerning the sizes of the cases in comparison. Therefore, and following Sartori (1970), who claimed that differentiating meant categorising, the comparative analysis was labelled as distinctive from usual statistical analysis. Important to mention at this point is that Pzeworkski and Teune in their book The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry (1970) also highlighted that comparative analysis was divided in two: most similar comparative designs and most different ones. The authors recognised only to the former as “proper” comparative analysis, whereas claimed that the later was close to statistical analysis. It is remarkable that Pzeworkski and Teune’s claim was consistent with prior methodological studies such as those of Egga (1954: 748) who stressed that rightful comparative analysis undoubtedly referred to “most similar design” –or “controlled comparative”–; similarly, Mill’s (1961) claimed that such method allowed concomitant variation analysis through the inspection of common political environments in order to identify a common explanatory factor. In addition, Lijphard (1971: 685) also stated that the “real” comparative method was the Small-N analysis which extensively focused on the “testing” of potential theoretical claims and relationships following the same logic as the statistical methods but where “cases are selected in such a way as to maximise the variance of the control variables”.

The second point, in turn, came as the consequence of the differentiation of the comparative method from that of the statistical one. Comparing then, as Collier (2009), Przeworski and Teune (1970) and Lijphard (1971) stressed, entailed a new set of methodological considerations with a proper methodological identity. Since the 1970s, multiple authors have extensively worked –time and again– in summarising the main characteristics that make comparative politics the ultimate political science method. Following classics such as Sartori (1970) and Almond and Powell (1966), and the recent works from Caramani (2017) and

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6 The authors also suggest a potential solution for this limitation based on the division of multiple levels: federal or national, regional or local, which might allow scholars to put them together and later compare their characteristics. However, the number of cases or units of analysis - are not as large enough for the employment of the statistical method (Chilcote, 2018).

7 Moreover, for Lapalombara (1968) comparative politics tend to “focus on the characteristics of the systems, large subsystems and partial systems”.
Chilcote (2018), we consider these characteristics three: (i) the maximisation of intersystem characteristics, (ii) the inclusion of intersystem differences as explanatory variables and (iii) the case selection analysis based on related or similar spatiotemporal characteristics. We briefly summarise each of them.

The first responds to the logic that, to make cases comparable, the more characteristics considered “controlled for” the abler a researcher would be to isolate the factor—or element—of comparison (Sartori, 1970, Caramani, 2017). This statement is linked to the idea of “concomitant variation” as proposed by Mills where comparisons consider common systemic characteristics as control factors—“controlled for”—allowing the maximum similarity possible between two systems isolating the variables of interest as a consequence (Sartori, 1970; Przeworski and Teune, 1970). In this scheme, the researcher seeks to identify two similar cases either in terms of history, common geographical influence, or based on the dependent variable, ultimately holding common factors irrelevant for the identification of the explanatory variables underlying the differences between “common systems” (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: Caramani, 2017).

The second point, in turn, considers that actual differences between similar systems should be regarded as independent variables. In the context of maximising common systemic characteristics, in comparative politics, potential differences are considered as explanatory factors. Following the close association between comparative analysis and systemic theory, any within system variation tend to be explained in the light of grander systemic differences thus channelling macro systemic elements to have effects at the agency level, this is to “individuals, groups, communities… or institutions”. These interactions occur in multiple layers: societies, nations, cultures, etc. and structure important relationships to take on board while comparing. As Przeworski and Teune (1970:12) stressed: “behaviour of any element, such as individuals, depends not only upon this interaction with other individuals but also upon his interaction with institutions such as the church or the state”.

The third and final point concerns to the factors—or variables—considered during case selection. To conduce an effective comparative analysis, both independent and dependent variables should share common geographical, historical and temporal criteria. These elements aid researchers to avoid hypothetical overarching statements and connects the generalising power of the comparative analysis to contextual factors: common systems with shared—or averaged—characteristics of a population that, if permanent and stable, constitute patterns of behaviour. Thus, some nomothetic claims (the external validity derived from comparative claims) can be attributed to the similarities found in the compared systems which happen to be located in a particular space and time. As Pzeworski and Teune, mentioned, attention to
spatiotemporal claims are crucial for the establishment of law-like propositions linked to certain levels of generality, in other words, "nomothetic statements are possible in the social science if and only if spatiotemporal parameters are treated as residua of variables potentially contributing to the explanation" (1970: 24).

In sum, the comparative method has been –and still is– connected to the evolution of the political science as a discipline of study. Its construction demanded elements such as:

(i) the identification of an ontological outlook (systemic theory) which set in the separation between the political structures and their functions. This was followed by the inclusion of agents as active players in the political arena,

(ii) the creation of new methodological approach (the comparative method) through a differentiation from a Large-N statistical analysis yet following its logic, and

(iii) the construction of a proper methodological profile based on: the maximisation of intersystem characteristics (concomitant variation), the inclusion of intersystem characteristics as independent explanatory factors (or variables) and the historical and temporal claims for case selection. This last characteristic might enable certain degree of nomothetic claims.

These elements came as the consequence of the active methodological and theoretical reflection on the discipline.

To this extent, it is worth questioning what the evolution of the political science, its ontology and methodological profile have to do with policy studies? The answer is twofold and also constitutes the argument of this paper. First, that policy studies have not yet agreed a common ontological view of its field and, in consequence, struggle to identify what is comparable or not within the confines of its own discipline. This is a crucial step since –as shown in the case of the political science– the discovery of systemic theory as their focus of analysis equalised otherwise different countries: all of them suddenly share common units: inputs, outputs, actors. All of them are potentially comparable. Second, the lack of a common reference point has provoked confusions in the employment of the comparative method leading to a failed extrapolation of the comparative logic of comparative politics to the arena of the policy studies.

The following section explores these limitations in detail.
The birth of Comparative Policy Studies (CPS)

Parallel to the birth and evolution of the comparative method in the political arena, in 1951 Harold Lasswell published *The Policy Orientation*. In his book the author defined the notion of policy studies as a distinctive subfield from the political science (Deleon, 1998), psychological science or social sciences in general (1951: 86). Lasswell’s work considered CPS as (i) fundamentally concerned with the exploration on how policies were born and placed in the public agenda, and (ii) the decision making process underlying the choice of certain instruments over others. As Turnbull’s (2008) stressed, Lasswell’s definition combined social science premises —mainly the discussion of agency and structure— with a practical, problem-solving approach (Turnbull, 2008: 74).

The author’s efforts to position policy studies at the core of a research agenda saw a brief period of abundance in the academic arena. Deleon (1998:10), for instance, mentioned that in the early 1970s, many efforts concerning comparative policy studies went in hand with the publication of several comparative books and studies such as those of Alexander Smith, *The Comparative Policy Process*, and the recognition of the APSA as a relevant area for the cross-national examination of public policymaking (1998:10).

The demise, however, came almost immediately. The initial interest raised by Lasswell’s claims and subsequent other authors’ publications provoked a rapid loss of interest in CPS. Deleon and Resnick-Terry, (1998), Geva (2000) and Castles (1994) blamed to the theoretical perspective adopted by most of the scholars whom considered comparing as strenuously difficult given the blatant differences between policy systems as well as to the extrapolation of comparative political science techniques to an area lacking a proper ontological profile.

This extrapolation process restricted the dearth of discretion for comparing policymaking processes ultimately leaving no room for middle-ranged approaches. Given that comparative politics logic demands a focus on political systems, when applied to the CPS subfield it suffers from a level problem. Most of the comparisons made under this logic operated at the macro level causing—as Lasswell mentioned— a problem concerning the policy outputs which were either too broad to understand or too big to operationalise in concrete policy interventions. It

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8 Lasswell mentioned: “…the word policy is commonly used to designate the most important choices made either in organised or in private life. We speak of government policy, business policy, or my own policy regarding investments and other matters. Hence policy is free of the many undesirable connotations clustered about the word political, which is often believed to imply partisanship or corruption” (1951:89).

9 As the patterns of structures that are somehow continuous in time which also present similar characteristics allowing the concepts to travel and replace the units of analysis (nations, regions, or multiple subsystems) by systemic features which can be also incorporated, as Pzeworski and Teune (1970) mentioned, in the form on independent variables.
is no surprise, therefore, as Deleon and Resnick-Terry (1998) claimed, that the widespread notion of policy non compatibility gained space in the policy academy community.

An example of this failed extrapolation as Deleon and Resnick-Terry (1998) outlined is the quest for a health care system in the US. The author mentioned that governmental efforts to construct a health system during the Clinton era lead to search for structural structural (macro) systems models that might fit the US and also that they might eventually have an impact on the effective delivery of healthcare. This excessive focus on “mega policy” characteristics instead of middle ranged institutional options, or strategic elements, lead to the administration to search for whole-sale reforms rather than specific institutional elements and practices (Thorpe, 1997).

Additionally, in relation to the cases assessed (Canada, UK, Australia), many officials considered them as similar provided their Anglo speaking tradition, degree of development and wealth, while missing the central comparison point: on whether their health systems share common middle-ranged characteristics, transferable institutional entrenchments and elements. This represents –as Deleon and Resnick-Terry claimed– an example of a “bad” extrapolation of comparative logics to a clearly CPS arena: instead of focusing on the political process leading to the construction of health institutions, officials relied on mega-policy characteristics. This situation limited the potential search for robust institutional designs.

The particular emphasis on macro-structures revealed the necessity for, as in political science occurred, a common paradigm applicable to all units of comparison. This task, however, imply a degree of theoretical and ontological debate that demanded answers to questions such as “How policy systems recognise and implement a policy? What generalised conditions underlie policymaking?” (Deleon and Resnick-Terry, 1998: 12) and others concerning the comparability, the instruments and boundaries of the discipline which are still pending. As Deleon and Resnick-Terry (1998: 12) stressed:

“Certainly there was no call for a universal policy regime and, hence, little clarion for comparative policy analysis. The result, not surprisingly, was that most policy scholars simply backed away from proposing a theoretic approach”

While political science succeeded in making different countries comparable under the idea of political system, as defined by Easton (1954), the subfield of policy studies struggled to view nations as comparable due to their “macro structural” focus and the failed to deduce explanations from broader and grander systemic characteristics. Cleary, delimiting the focus –ontology– of policy studies is still a pending task. In the following section we debate some direct and indirect proposals concerning the centre –the focus– of attention of CPS.
Debating CPS ontology

The definition of the theoretical boundaries of CPS starts by the identification of its ontological dimension. Some decades ago, Castles (1981) proposed to stop extrapolating the theoretical discussions of comparative politics into the policy studies arena. Instead, he proposed that CPS ontology should rely on a single theoretical framework that unifies structure-agency controversies making it the centre of analysis of CPS. This proposal, however, faced the limitation of empirical quantification which currently underpin much of policy studies preventing the conformation of such a synthesis. For him, the CPS in general, should focus more on policy outcomes as the description of varying patterns of policy. In this context, he rejected the notion of a battle between those authors who approach concerning policy studies from rival explanatory claims of either structure or agency since neither of them requires exclusivity.

Following Castles’ claim (1981), instead of engaging with structural and agency theoretical discussions, we propose that the first task for defining CPS boundaries concerns the identification of its unit(s) of analysis. Namely, its ontological dimension and then its epistemological approach. To do so, we conducted a broad literature review covering the last 20 years (including other important publications) of scholarly publications specifically debating the object—or ontology—of policy sciences. For this task we employ the labels “policy studies”, “comparative public policy” and “comparative public administration” terminologies, as we mentioned initially, as neighbouring and interchangeable terms.

Among the most interesting contributions to the current ontological debate of the policy studies is the text of Lodge (2007) who identified some public policy trends in the comparative perspective arena: habitat (or the larger socio-economic context), responsive government (ways in which government respond to external pressures) and institutions. The author considered that the first two addressed how external sources shaped government policies, whereas the latter highlighted the importance of internal factors. The author claimed that the ultimate foci of analysis of the CPS concerned to the State’s activity, “what the State do”, and the instruments it employed in doing so. Under this label the author classified the CPS (CPP and CPA) literature in a fourfold path (NATO: Nodality, Authority, Treasure and Organization) based on the type of instrument different governments employed to deliver public policies. However, he also admitted that this typology might fall short to address other areas of interests concerning CPS such as ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature which cut across a number of different types of activities and policy instruments, ranging from cross-national expenditure patterns, the organization of particular forms of relationships in the economy to the impact of legal instruments on the wider system of law.
Following Lodge claims, other authors such as Schmitt (2012), in turn, mentioned that the foci of study of CPS relied on policy outcomes, namely, the immediate consequences of a policy decision. The author stressed that the analysis of the implementation and effectiveness achieved by a certain policy concerns to the study of policy sciences. Another group of authors, Vedung (2017) and Weimer and Vining (2017), put special attention to policy outputs, on whether policy ideas and instruments were successful or not, or under what circumstances they can be conceived as so. More recently, Radin and Weimer (2018) also identified broader objects of comparison, such as policy processes, policy-relevance, policy ideas, policy transfer and extrapolation each of them containing particularities to the policy studies arena. These claims, however, rather than conveying in a unitary centre of analysis, blurred the subfield’s borders of the policy science arena, making it a competing, troublesome and debatable area.

In addition, this fragmentation, concerning the multiple foci of analysis of CPS, illustrates the potential benefits of a more integrated approach that gives central attention to a more careful conceptualisation of the research subject paying special attention to a middle level analysis (Schmitt, 2012). This middle level, as Landé (1983, 444) once proposed for clientelism studies, escapes from the “macro level perspective” which examines entire political systems (structures) and also from the “micro level” concerning with the specific behaviour of individuals. Instead, a middle level analysis puts attention to intersystem interactions with a special interest in instrumental variables linking policy ideas, instruments and outcomes. We propose that this might represent a potential starting point to set the boundaries of the policy studies arena. Moreover, following Laswell’s claims, we place the object of research of CPS as also interacting –yet not central– with the political arena: more concerned with the agenda setting, choice and delivery of public policies. In addition, as Lodge (2007) stressed, we conceived CPS as fundamental to define what the State does, and how and which instruments they employed in performing their tasks.

Despite this proposal, which has been also briefed before (Lodge, 2007; Castles, 1994 and recently Peters, 2018), a problem still persists: policy studies papers tend to assume that some structures, issues and instruments are natural units of comparison with no further discussion on the ontology of the discipline.

Castles (1994) has already highlighted the problems that these assumptions have generated in their searching for the construction of the subfield boundaries and the proposition of valid nomothetic claims. For instance, in his work concerning the measurement of policy effectiveness based on public expenditure regimes in Australia, Finland, Singapore and Scandinavia, he stated that several controversies emerged when researchers attempted to explain policy outputs based on a single measure: expenditure rates. In his work he
demonstrated that “bad” methodological extrapolations from comparative politics lead to force comparisons based on “macro characteristics” confounding the actual object of interest: why these countries diverged in their expenditure processes. The reliance on macro-structures, he mentioned, tend to hide an in-depth scrutiny of the process underlying the choice of expenditure rates in these countries as the crucial variable for identifying success. He also explained how Australia and Finlad seemed laggards using an exclusively public expenditure benchmark, ultimately claiming that if more attention were paid to specific –middle level– policy instruments, we might have noticed that expenditures –which in many countries are public– were counted as private, even though they were organised by the State. Henceforth, this lack of attention led researchers to oversaw that different countries varied markedly in their use of the redistributive instruments available to them.

Based on his study, Castles' proposed (1994) that since policy goals could be achieved through a variety of means, any approach that rests exclusively on one variable attempt to explain a policy output is liable to underestimate or again, oversee, reality. This means, as Lodge (2007) and Peters (2018) have also outlined, that the foci of CPS should then be on the policy tools, instruments, the strategies employed, the policy styles behind them and their interactions in the complex delivery of policy goals. This is what we refer as our middle level analysis: a level in which our researchers' gaze can notice the the cogs and wheels moving a policy (or their choice) and also the elements making them them operative in actual –real– governmental daily activities.

Based on these reflections we propose a taxonomy of potential comparable units in CPS. Table 01 contains six divisions of analysis based on previous proposed classification and competing claims. We divided them in four dimensions each –we consider– contains the other. The table have the following sections: the level of analysis which facilitates the differentiation between each level (1 to 6), the unit of analysis (object of study), the scope (a brief operationalization of the unit of analysis) and, finally, its relevance.

Based this table we argue that the ontological boundaries of CPS should be located, then, in levels 3, 4 and 5. Although levels 1, 2 and 6 are not direct objects our concern, they are relevant for a complete understanding of the design, formulation, implementation, progress, bureaucrats’ characteristics correlated with the success or failure of the units central for CPS represented in levels 3, 4 and 5. Therefore, the ontological dimension of CPS is formed by policy ideas and decisions, policy instruments and policy outcomes, whereas socio-political structures and national-subnational institutions as well as individual bureaucratic traits are contextual factors from neighbouring disciplines such as comparative politics, economics, psychology, among others. This scheme does not conceive these disciplines as autonomous
and closed areas but suggests interactions and complementation among them. In other words, the object of analysis of CPS concerns a middle level analysis as a space of interplay between the macro and the micro, between the agency and the structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Unit of analysis</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Socio-political structures</td>
<td>National – international structures: the political system, the political economy, ethnicity or class sectors, etc.</td>
<td>Context variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>National and sub-national institutions</td>
<td>Public organizations, private organizations, bureaucratic systems, social groups (stakeholders).</td>
<td>Context variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Policy ideas and policy decisions</td>
<td>Bureaucratic agency; bureaucratic ideology; bureaucratic decisions (increasing or decreasing taxes, increasing expenditures, privatizing public companies, signing free trade agreements, etc.).</td>
<td>Key variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Policy instruments</td>
<td>Managerial practices; managerial tools (plans, strategies, delivery units, balanced scorecards, etc.); administrative procedures; different types of regulation (command and control, incentives, communication, nudge).</td>
<td>Key variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Policy outcomes</td>
<td>In general, the level of fulfillment of policy objectives.</td>
<td>Key variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Individual traits</td>
<td>Bureaucrats characteristics such as education, age, personality traits, experience.</td>
<td>Agency (individual) variable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration

The idea of interplay and complementation reinforces Lodge’s claim (2007) that any search for the essence of CPS (or CPP and CPA) needs to move across different academic disciplines, ranging from social policy, political science, sociology, law and economics. Such claim neither contradicts nor denies the interactions between disciplines and ontological boundaries of CPS and, unlike Van de Walle and Brans (2018), we do not believe that the distinctions between neighbouring disciplines such as comparative politics, or others as
frequently highlighted concerning CPP and CPS, are simply artificial. Admitting that the former focuses on substantive policies and policy processes, whereas the latter focuses on institutions and state capacities is important to define the complementarities between these two branches of scholarship while still not blending them.

This same logic applies to case of the comparative politics. Peters (2018) stressed that the separation of these subfields of scholarship has weakened both CPS and comparative politics. For instance, in the literature concerning policy transfer and policy diffusion, scholars tend to focus on the characteristics of policies that can facilitate successful diffusion rather than the characteristics of political systems that can aid potential extrapolations. We share Peters’ concern that contexts and structures matter for analysing public policies in comparative (and not comparative) perspectives, yet that excessively focusing on them fails to translate systemic variables as explanatory ones.

In addition, it also is important to mention that we do not deny the interplays between the policy “big picture” or the focus on individuals (agents) to address potential CPS analysis. On the contrary, as explained by Radin and Weimer (2018), the usefulness of CPS actually depends on careful consideration of the context in which the studied policy operates while also revising policy discourses and political culture affecting policy outcomes (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2014; Schmidt, 2008; Trousset, et al, 2015; Weare et al, 2014; Wilder, 2017). However, they should be translated into an instrumental category to explore what Laswell in the 1930s and later other authors (Jreisat 2012, Howlett et.al. 2009) have outlined: the undeniable nature of the instrumental approach of the policy sciences and that –this is our claim– similar to the idea of political system, what is comparable in CPS concerns the policy instruments employed to obtain governmental defined goals. Comparison on what governments “do” involves the exploration of their decisions, the instruments they employ, the ideas sustaining them, the moments and circumstances of choice, the design of the type of intervention in front of a policy problem, the strategies jointly incorporated to delivery the policy and the outputs obtained. Again, we claim that this degree of analysis level is located at the middle-level, ranging between levels 3,4 and 5.

These affirmation, however, is not an assertion that comparative politics and CPS (CPP or CPA) share the same ontologies. We propose a more systemic understanding of how variables considered at different levels of abstraction come together to affect the policy process and policy outcomes (Wilder, 2017). The analytical scheme presented in table 01 allows us to understand the concerns of comparative politics scholarship while also highlighting the importance of delimiting the ontological dimension of CPS. Again, these fields of scholarship are complementary.
Following the definition of what is comparable in CPS analysis comes the question on how to compare and make robust nomothetic inferences. Recent studies (Fontaine et al, 2018; Bersch, 2016) have conducted comparative studies leaving behind old macro-policy structural focus (type of government, types of capitalism, regime type, etc.) and rather paid attention to the policy ideas, discourses underlying decision making processes (the policies actually chosen). Fontaine et al (2018), for instance, compared resource nationalism in Peru and Bolivia by focusing on the ideas and policy decisions that triggered in Bolivia while not in Peru major changes in policy instruments and regulation concerning governmental control over natural resources. The authors employed institutional path dependencies as crucial variables to explain in part the different institutional trajectories, but only because their analysis focused on middle level units, it was possible to avoid the filtration of macro-structural (broad) infrastructural features in the conclusions of the study. The middle level focus helped the authors to identify the causal mechanism underlying the Bolivian case (while preventing the Peruvian one) change from market driven to state driven oil policies: policy ideas which during electoral processes materialised into concrete policy instruments. In the Bolivian case, Evo Morales invented the claim for a nationalist approach to oil production ultimately transforming the policy instruments that implemented them; in the case of Peru, in turn, Ollanta Humala was stopped by existing institutions and actors who impeded him transforming the policy instruments of concern.

Different from Fountaine’s et.al. work, Steffen (2005) analysed the grander structural differences of health systems in United Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy. The article focused on comparing in two groups UK and Germany vs France and Italy two distinctive models of public health provision (Bismarkian vs Beveridgian). Despite her efforts, the author failed to identify a causal mechanism –or the factor underling a concomitant variation– between these countries and the dependent variable concerning the response to the emergence of AIDS epidemics. The overall framework and loose case selection lead to the author to conclude that, in her analysis, there are four distinctive (a similar number of countries) patterns of response to AIDS epidemic. The excessive focus on macro structural factors (the democratic political system, the welfare state policies and good governance) failed to manifestly extrapolate the grander infrastructure characteristics into the dynamics and intricacies concerning the response to the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, in the conclusions of the study the author assigned to the countries' political systems the divergent patterns of AIDS infection management she found out. The lack of attention to middle ground variables (strategies, instruments, and outputs) made the comparison particularly tedious given that focus in only the systems where a policy operates made it difficult to identify common patterns of comparison between sometimes radically different health structures (Germany vs UK, for
instance). Eventually, the conclusions that different political systems lead to different results seemed obvious and counterproductive, yet still helpful to illustrate the perils and treacherous path of the nascent efforts concerning CPS.

In sum, this section has presented our proposal to set the basis for an ontological discussion concerning the focus of study of the political studies. The following section, in turn, briefs a potential methodological profile for CPS.

**A methodological profile for CPS**

Comparative public policy should be associated to a particular logic of doing research, namely a commitment to the systematic investigation across states, domains and time, rather than a particular method in terms of research strategies and instruments. As a consequence, Small-N, qualitative studies have a role to play in advancing our understanding of policy studies (Lodge, 2007). Based on our revision on the profile of the comparative politics in the field of political science, we claim that a best fit method to ensure robust explanations concerning the the levels (3,4 and 5) on either the emergence of political ideas, their transformation into instruments and impact on the policy outputs, is the maximisation of contextual intersystem characteristics. This methodological pathway was identified before by Pzeworski and Teune (1970) as the “proper” comparative method. For the case of CPS, however, as we have outlined before, our focus is on what the States do and with which instruments they do so, thus, it is crucial to illustrate what elements of the cases under comparison will be subject to scrutiny.

The comparison process should, therefore, start by shortlisting a venture, what Barzelay (2018) and Harper et.al. (2009) called a policy effort, that mobilise state resources to actively address (or ignore) a certain policy issue. This process, as we stressed, previously demanded controlling for potential macro-structural variables (welfare systems, major institutional arrangements, broader power divisions) that might affect a particular process under study. For illustration purposes we placed policy ideas, instruments and their respective outputs in a triad (see figure 01). We do acknowledge that this organisation (policy ideas-instruments-outputs) might vary depending upon the case of analysis and the multiple agencies operating at the same time which can influence each other results (Maciel, 2014). Similarly, it can be affected by the emergence of policy ideas in one sector which might promote the decline of a policy venture in other. For instance, malnutrition reduction policies in Peru and Bolivia has been similarly impacted by the particular instruments designed by their Ministries of Health and also

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10 Although we also acknowledge the potential limitations.
impacted by the provision of conditional cash transfers organised by the Ministries of Social Inclusion (in Peru) and Education (in Bolivia) (Gillespie et al., 2013; Huicho, 2005). In relation to the policy ideas, for instance, policies concerning the promotion of equality rights for women in the Ministry for Women and Vulnerable Populations of Peru consists on two sub-directions competing for a policy approach to address the backwardness of Peru’s women in the market and society: one concerning a feminist approach centred in the expansion of rights of women linked to reproductive rights; other, in turn, that emphasised the role of family and policies considering them the centre of rights protection (Fiestas et al. 2012; Martina, 2010). In consequence, case selection remains central to circumscribe the political, societal or economical context where the process—venture—of our concern might be operating. It is important to notice that in a maximum similarities design—amid the context of CPS analysis—ventures constitute the nucleus of our scrutiny. In any case, the selection of those cases’ common characteristics should be maximised. This task, however, is not straightforward, it involves a considerable degree of theoretical ability to clinically detach the venture from the political or societal context in which it is established, or—in any case—to zoom into the focus of the comparison: ideas formation, policy and instrument choice, instrument constitution and fit, implementation processes and strategies or the role of the policy outputs obtained. Any element located between the 3rd, 4th and 5th level of table 01.

Figure 01. illustration of a unit of comparison concerning CPS’s ontology
Another important element for the structuration of a valid and robust comparative analysis concerns the inclusion of contextual variables as potential explanatory elements. In comparative politics, as Pzoworski and Teune (1970) expressed, potential intersystem differences between cases are included in the comparison as independent variables – explanatory factors. In contrast, given our focus of analysis in CPS as ventures, this process might lead to erroneous comparisons.

For instance, back to the example of malnutrition comparison in Peru and Bolivia, the eventual inclusion of macro structural features such as regime typologies to explain how this venture (curbing malnourishment) worked might fall short to produce consistent explanations on how type of regime is connected with the selection of the instruments, their implementation and eventual interaction with the subjects of the policy outputs. In other words, the inclusion of macro-structures as independent variables drives us to the starting point of non-differentiation between comparative politics and CPS.

However, there is a way out, by operationalising macro-structures (ie. regime types, democratic typologies, power divisions, etc.) into middle ranged subcomponents (Landé, 1983) and later employing them for our venture of study might potentially aid our research. Such is the case of Bersch’s (2016) comparison between Argentina and Brazil concerning the use of powering strategies (whole-sale reforms in Argentina) versus problem solving ones (incremental, in Brazil) in fighting corruption in health services public procurement processes. The author effectively translates structural factors such as the nature of civil service, contracting regimes, type of reforms into middle-ranged elements (circumstantial interplays between decision makers and electoral rules, parallel autonomous bureaucracies triggered by the absence of civil service, captured contracting regimes by interest groups, etc.) that interplay with the venture of comparison of her article: endemic corruption in contracting and pharmaceutical cartels. In other words, rather than including them as row structure variables the author explores their interplay in the conformation of the policy ideas, instruments and delivery, yet with the focus on her specific venture of concern. Additionally, the author combines the comparative analysis with process tracing in order to make a longitudinal inspection of both cases while identifying different stages in which they differ and how they impact the outputs of the ventures under comparison. Eventually she concludes that a problem solving approach to reduce corruption, as she demonstrates in the Brazilian case, proves more effective in making reforms endurable while increasing learning in public bureaucrats.

Following the work of Bersch (2016), we propose that if intersystem characteristics were to be added to a CPS analysis, they should reflect the undergoing level of comparison. This means
that macro-structural variables added to middle-level settings struggle to produce effective explanations, on the contrary, as Bersch showed, when they are considered contextual or operationalised into subcomponents, they interact with the central venture of interest potentially contributing to obtain better comparative statements.

Finally, our last proposal is that the analysis of CPS main object of comparison demands an in-depth understanding of the processes underlying the formation of the policy ideas, instruments or outputs. This is, the comprehension of those variables position and interplay in our venture of analysis is a crucial step –as we propose in figure 1– to understand either: (1) the transition from ideas to decision making processes and eventual selection of policy instruments, or (2) the transition from policy instruments to the strategies to implement them ultimately linking the them to the outputs obtained by the policy in question. This assessment demands a complex employment of mixed research methods, yet, in CPS we propose that process tracing might serve to uncover potential causal mechanisms underling either (1) or (2) transitions and even analysing other issues of concern within them.

Following Falleti (2006; 2016) and Bengtsson et.al. (2017) claims, we suggest that process tracing can be employed by integrating theoretical assertions to the analysis of a particular venture reconstructed through the identification of necessary and sufficient conditions leading to the occurrence of our dependent variable under scrutiny. Important, however, for the CPS object of study is that process tracing literature integrates the variable time into our analysis (Falleti, 2006: 240). Given that a venture (the emergence of a policy idea, an instrument or the achievement of a policy output) represents a timeline or a sequence of events “unfolding social actions over time”, it is fundamental to compare them by paying attention to which element, factor, or particular arrangement (order) of events have produced the outcomes we intent to explain.

In addition, the process tracing method permits us a great deal of theoretical control. As Kay and Baker (2015) have outlined, to circumscribe and properly define the venture under analysis, an important deal of theoretical control is required, this implies: the identification of theoretical boundaries, the connotative elements employed for the definition of the policy ideas, instruments (their typologies) and outputs. The theoretical element is key for the circumscription and focus of a CPS since it separates the wheat (our element of concern) from the chaff (structural interlinked variables).
Conclusions

This document sets out to contribute to the current ongoing debate concerning the policy studies field delimitation and methodological profile. The rise and demise of CPS studies, as stated along the text, obeyed to the lack of a common reference points which explicitly delimits the object of concern of the still evolving discipline. In the light of this need, we propose that the boundaries concerning the foci of the discipline are located between the policy ideas, choices, instruments and outputs that States employ to address a policy problem. This proposal consists on a middle-ranged level of analysis that reconciles – while makes operative– macro-structural (macro-policy) systemic characteristics and agency based ones. Through this method we attempt to shed some light on the delimitation of CPS from other neighbouring disciplines as well as establishing the basis for the discussion on the field scope of analysis. We consider this step as important provided the multiple extrapolations of the comparative logics coming from political science to CPS, a situation that generated confusions concerning what to compare or, more specifically, what is the level and scope of comparison researchers have to pay attention to.

In addition, we also propose a methodological profile that revises comparative politics elements applied to CPS. The paper, therefore, suggests three main considerations when conducting comparisons in the field of policy studies:

(i) that the venture of analysis should be cautiously identified. This implies maximising intersystem characteristics between the cases chosen for comparison aiming to isolate the potential venture subject of scrutiny

(ii) the second consideration consists on the operationalization of intersystem characteristics previous to their inclusion as explanatory variables. This is, that row macro-structural variables confound the actual level of comparison if not polished –or transformed– into middle-level variables.

(iii) Finally, the third consideration involves the active employment of process tracing analysis to identify causal relationships located in a timeline of events consistent with the idea of the policy effort – or venture– under study.

Finally, it is important that further debates concerning the unit, scope, level of analysis of CPS as well as its methodological profile are necessary for the aggregative construction of disciplinary knowledge.
References


