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Multidimensional social conflict and institutional change

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a political economy of social conflict, institutional change and crises based on the diversity of perceived interests among social groups. The multidimensional conflict includes ideology, institutions, and politics. Social groups may be in a dominant or dominated position in one or the other dimension, and the nature of social conflict reflects the differences in positions of the various social groups in these dimensions. Political stability hinges on the existence of a dominant social bloc, i.e. a social alliance supporting the ruling political actors. The implementation of institutional change by political actors is driven by the search for support. Crisis situations correspond to the rupture of the dominant social bloc. Attempts to emerge from the crisis with the reconstitution of a dominant social bloc will have more or less chance of success depending on the possibility of finding a political strategy that can make the expectations of social groups with different perceived interests compatible. Using examples from the French and Italian economic and political situations in recent decades, we show how the proposed analytical framework can inform the study of institutional change in situations of social crisis.

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Introduction

Crises are seen as moments when the dysfunction of a system is such that radical institutional change becomes necessary. However, institutional change does not only occur in times of crisis and is not systematically radical either. Moreover, there is no a priori mechanical link between a given crisis situation and a specific type of institutional change. The analysis of institutions must therefore be able to account for the links between crisis situations and the causes that lead to the maintenance or change of institutions. For this purpose, it seems useful to use a political economy approach to institutions, in the sense that the validation of an institutional configuration is the result of the existence of an equilibrium on the political level, a situation which is in return influenced by the economic situation.

The political economy approach used in what follows is based on the contributions of Amable & Palombarini (2005, 2009, 2018) on institutions and change, which take the diversity of social expectations held by individuals and social groups as the starting point of the analysis. Any broadly defined political choice selects between expectations and demands that will be met and those that will be ignored: the notions of general interest and common good, which can possibly be mobilised in normative approaches, are not relevant when it comes to explaining why a government

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decides to follow a certain political strategy and make specific policy choices. On the other hand, these elements are important when it comes to considering the cognitive frameworks within which people's worldviews are defined. This ideological or cultural aspect must be integrated in the analysis of public policies as well as in the analysis of institutional change because political action is not limited to passively reacting to pre-existing demands but involves also shaping the representations of agents in order to influence their expectations and foster the support for their political project.

The positive analytical framework proposed here does not assume that politics is all-powerful and can decide without constraints which interests to protect nor that the distribution of social power is determined entirely in the economic sphere and that politics boils down to systematically protecting economically dominant interests. The analysis of social conflict, crises and institutional change proposed in the following starts from the partial autonomy of different fields: economic, political and institutional, the latter integrating both formal and informal institutions, and especially ideology.[1] The political economy outlined here characterises politics as a specific field, governed by the logic of the accumulation of power, which operates within a social system structured by relations of domination that politics helps to define, but which it does not entirely control. These relations of domination are partly inscribed in social institutions, which are the result of past political compromises. They are linked to the political power of different social groups, which depends on their position in the social system, and they are linked to the power relations of cultural hegemony. Each of these areas – political, institutional, productive, ideological – functions in *partial autonomy*: there is no single logic that would impose itself at all levels and guarantee the overall coherence of the social system.

This autonomy is partial, because the different dimensions of social domination evolve by conditioning each other: for example, the institutional architecture and the dominant ideological paradigm favour certain political strategies and hinder others, while at the same time politics can set itself the objective of institutional reforms and participate in the hegemonic struggle either by validating the existing paradigm or by trying to modify it. But the economy, politics, institutions and ideology evolve according to their own temporality, which implies the possibility of a discrepancy between the different power relations that characterise them. This possibility is decisive for establishing a precise typology of crises that a capitalist system can experience. If we were to consider that a single logic governs the whole system, and that therefore the power relations which are determined in the productive sphere translate identically into all the dimensions of the social structure, only two possibilities would remain: an entirely coherent model of capitalism, or a crisis which would imply a complete and sudden reconfiguration of the whole system. On the contrary, in our perspective, the social relations of domination are the result of a complex interaction, to which politics contributes by proposing projects for the formation of specific social alliances.

In this article, we first show how in its autonomy, politics integrates and tries to modify ideological and institutional factors in the attempt to construct a dominant social bloc, whose eventual existence produces the separation between politically dominant and politically dominated social groups. After explaining the political nature of social conflict in the following section, we explain the notion of social bloc in the third section. This serves as a basis for proposing different configurations of political conflict in the following section. Finally, a last section concludes briefly.

Three levels of the social structure

The political economy approach adopted here builds on that developed by Amable & Palombarini (2005, 2009, 2018). This approach analyses the institutional dynamics starting from the diversity of socio-economic interests at the individual and collective levels. Social conflict is considered to be rooted in the differences in the positions occupied by the agents in a multidimensional social structure which is not reducible to economic determinants. Three levels of analysis are distinguished: (1) the socio-economic groups, defined by the proximity of the positions that individuals occupy in the

social structure; (2) the socio-political groups, which are defined by the fact that members of a group express similar or compatible expectations regarding public policy, and legislative, or more generally political action; (3) the social blocs, which are defined as alliances between socio-political groups united around a defined political strategy.

The sociological composition of a socio-political group is generally heterogeneous. Individuals in different social positions may express similar expectations. Expectations depend on how individuals perceive their interests. This perception is derived from the way individuals construe their position in the social structure and identify possible commonalities of interests with other individuals perceived as partly similar to them. This perception is based on common socio-economic characteristics as well as ideological and cultural elements. Ideological mediation is therefore essential for understanding the structuring of socio-political groups, and individuals who belong to the same socio-economic group may find themselves in different socio-political groups. The ideological or cultural mediation is not independent from the social structure. The social position defines a space of material constraints that limit the possible definitions of perceived interests; within this space, the perception of interest does not respond to the 'free' consciousness of the agents, but is made under the influence of political and material, ideological (cultural) and institutional factors.

Our position is close to the 'genetic structuralism' of Pierre Bourdieu (1987) in which social space is conceived as multidimensional. There are objective structures, independent of the agents' consciousness. The social world has a double objectivity, as an objective distribution of material powers and as a symbolic representation of these distributions. Within this structured space, proximities and groupings can be identified which could only become the equivalent of 'classes for themselves' after a political work of representation 'in the double sense of symbolic shaping and institution of authorised spokespersons'.[2] Representations and categories of perception have the power to shape the world because the proximities, oppositions or antagonisms to which they can lead contribute to the making of social structures and enter into the very constitution of social relations.[3] These representations then constitute objects of struggle between the groups or classes that they themselves have helped to constitute.[4] In this struggle, the different classes seek to impose the definition of the social world that best suits their interests.

This process plays a decisive role in agents' perception of their social environment, their own position within this environment and the possibilities for altering it at an individual or collective level. Social conditions imprint within individuals a set of durable dispositions that correspond to the internalisation of the constraints of their socio-economic environment and define a 'space of possibilities' for their expectations. Political identities are defined both by a hierarchy of dimensions that specify a social positioning, such as income, status, socio-professional category, age, origin, residence, etc., and by the way in which each of these dimensions is articulated to a vision of the functioning of society as a whole. Institutions and forms of organisation condition the definition of collective identities: membership of a workers' union reinforces workers' class consciousness,[5] membership of an employers' organisation facilitates the perception of shared interests,[6] the ways in which the wage relationship is codified orient workers' expectations, etc.

Members of a socio-political group can make their common expectations explicit, and organise to have more influence on the political dynamic. A group that structures itself to defend certain interests and carry certain expectations is a political actor that has the ambition to play openly in the space of public decision-making. But this is not necessarily the case for all socio-political groups. Social actors may be organised in associations, parties, trade unions, or they may simply share the same type of expectations or demands for the transformation or the preservation of the social organisation and productive structure according to their perceived interests.

To each socio-political group is associated a certain power of influence on the political decisions taken by the political actors, which corresponds to the capacity to generate political support for these actors. Support includes, but is in no way limited to, voting, as it concerns more generally all actions likely to stabilise or reinforce the action of the political actors concerned: financial support, technical expertise, ideological influence, media presence, use of force …

A wide enough socio-political base implies the capacity for political actors to gather different social groups in a bloc. A social bloc is defined as a set of social groups aggregated by a political strategy. The formation of a bloc, i.e. a de facto social alliance between groups with heterogeneous expectations, is therefore the product of a selective political mediation. It is not necessary that all the expectations of the social groups belonging to the bloc be met. Some of these demands and expectations may be contradictory with others deemed more important, while the satisfaction of others may be superfluous to gain political support. Thus, a social bloc implies not only a separation between the groups that participate in it and those that are excluded, but also an internal articulation between the central and constitutive groups of the bloc and the integrated groups in a peripheral position, which can be expelled from it, and replaced by others, according to the perception of the political situation by the main actors.[7]

A social bloc supporting a winning strategy of power conquest is a *dominant social bloc* (DSB). A stable DSB exists when a certain political mediation wins in the political competition on the basis of the policies and institutional change it implements. The existence of a dominant social bloc is a necessary condition for the regulation of social conflict. This corresponds both to the viability of a political strategy capable of reproducing the support necessary to impose itself in the political space, and to the relative stability of the frontier that separates the politically dominant groups, included in the bloc and whose expectations will be at least partially taken into account in the definition of public policies, from the politically dominated groups, whose expectations will be neglected.

This definition of (dominant) social blocs is not identical to that found in earlier contributions to the French *théorie de la regulation*. Lipietz (1988, p. 3), acknowledging a Gramscian influence, defined a social bloc as 'a stable system of relations of domination, alliances and concessions between different social groups (dominant and subordinate)'. A bloc becomes hegemonic[8] when 'it has its arrangements recognised as being in the interests of the nation as a whole'; consequently, Lipietz considered that 'in a hegemonic bloc, *the fraction of the nation whose interests are not taken into account at all must be in a very small minority*' (p.3, *emphasis* added). He thus distinguishes a '*bloc des possédants*'[9] (owners' bloc), which includes industrialists, shopkeepers, peasants and savers, for the period covering the Third Republic (1870–1940). However, at least one social class, the working class, left out of this bloc did not seem to be such a demographic minority. Lipietz considered for the post-World War II period a 'developmentalist bloc' whose composition he did not specify.[10]

Three dimensions of political action

The three levels distinguished previously are important to identify three dimensions of political action: ideology concerns the transition from *socio-economic* groups to *socio-political* groups; public policies affect mediation between the expectations expressed by socio-political groups; institutional change transforms the socio-economic structure. Each dimension may be, *on an abstract level*, considered as independent, but the actual actions in each area, ideology, politics and institutional change, are connected to one another. Each domain is then partially autonomous because, although the action in each dimension responds to its own logic or evolutionary principles, these themselves change under the influence of the other domains. This partial autonomy does not correspond to the relative autonomy attributed to the state by an important part of Marxist theory, which maintains the hypothesis of a functional dependence of public action in relation to the class and long-term interest of capital. Our political economy, on the other hand, is compatible with Bob Jessop's 'strategic-relational' approach, which in studying the relationship between politics and economics mobilises the concept of 'structural coupling' to analyse 'how two institutionally separate and self-referential systems can be articulated'.[11] Jessop's structural coupling applies to autonomous structures that share at least part of the same social space and have four characteristics: (1) they follow their own dynamics and are 'neither hierarchically controlled nor functionally subordinated

to other structures'; (2) they are neither autarkic nor self-sufficient but depend on inputs from their environment for their own operation; (3) they experience changes in their environment as perturbations or disturbances affecting their own operation; (4) they react to changes in their environment according to their own rules to reduce the complexity of that environment, with environmental influences always mediated by the system's own procedures. In this theorisation, 'the development of a given autonomous structure is conditioned by its relations with other structures but follows its own logic'.[12] It is from a similar perspective that we characterise an autonomy of the political that prevents the dynamics of complex superstructures, as Gramsci calls them, from being directly deduced from the configuration of the economic and productive structure.

Following Bourdieu (1997), one can say that the correspondence between social structures and mental structures has a political function. The categories of perception of the world, the classification schemes, tend to represent the existing structures as 'natural', and contribute thereby to frame the competition among agents, and to define the pattern of solidarities and antagonisms. The political struggle which in the ideological and cultural sphere tries to make a certain conception of the world prevail, and therefore a certain modality of translation of positionings in the economic and productive structure into social expectations, the struggle '*for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world*',[13] takes place within a system of power relations which in turn is conditioned by the existing institutional architecture.

Hegemony corresponds, as Lipietz (1988) mentioned it, to the predominance of a 'societal paradigm' (p.4), that is, a 'mode of structuring legitimately defensible identities within the universe of Political Discourses and Representations'. A telling example is given by Lipietz when he mentions the departure of the Communist party from the French government in 1947 and the consequences it had on the political equilibrium, a rightward shift of the government policies and, after 1958, a domination of what Amable *et al.* (2012) called the right social bloc. Lipietz notes that this political change, detrimental to the political left was not accompanied, at least not right away, by the same retreat of post-World War II ideas in the administration and civil society characterised by an Intellectual (left-wing intelligentsia) and institutional (trade unions) influence of the left surpassing its political weight. One may update this type of consideration and notice that the accession of left governments to power after 1981 have led to policies that belonged for the most part and increasingly so to a broad neoliberal paradigm.[14]

Political actors, of course, engage in ideological struggles, the outcome of which, however, is largely beyond their control. Political domination, on the other hand, is determined in the political arena by the competition between different propositions of political mediation regarding the existing social expectations, the possible constitution of a dominant bloc and the definition of the boundary it implies between politically dominant and dominated groups. Political actors have the strategic capacity to form compromises. This leads to choose among the existing social expectations and demands those that will be at least partly satisfied and those that will be ignored. However, one should not see political mediation as simply looking for a balance between pre-existing, given, demands. These demands are not exogenous to political mediation, which plays a role in the elaboration of a common vision of a possible and desirable future to which bearers of different but possibly compatible expectations and demands can adhere.

By directly linking the existence of a dominant bloc to its coherence with a context of consolidated hegemony, Lipietz (1988) considers that there are only two forms of struggle: the one within the societal paradigm, which concerns 'disputes over the fairness or even the reality of the distribution of mutual benefits supposedly guaranteed by the hegemonic bloc within the regime of accumulation'; and the one against the hegemonic paradigm, which would imply a different regime of accumulation and a different social bloc. In our view, the absence of violence is not a sign of a renunciation of one's expectations, nor does it signify a membership, albeit distant, in the dominant social bloc and thus a support for the corresponding political strategy. On the other hand, hegemony is manifested in the form that the expectations of social groups and their social or political expression will take.

Thus, contrary to Lipietz, we consider that the existence of a dominant social bloc does not imply mutual benefits for all social actors; some groups may well perceive themselves as dominated while inscribing their expectations in the hegemonic social paradigm and fundamentally sharing the 'worldview' of the dominant social groups, and may seek in political representation a way to modify their position. Social hegemony and the institutional architecture structure the political space by helping to define the expectations present, by disqualifying certain expectations as illegitimate or contrary to moral values, and by delimiting the field of conceivable public policies; for all that, they do not strictly determine the profile of the dominant social bloc, which, even in a given hegemonic and institutional context, remains at stake in a political struggle arbitrated by the capacity to generate support.

The setting of public policies is not directly functional to the protection of interests that could be qualified as dominant by the simple analysis of the productive sphere. The specific logic that characterises political action is that of the accumulation of power. However, the dominant position occupied by certain groups in the economic and productive organisation gives them a particularly high level of political power. Our position is close to that of the neo-pluralists such as R.A. Dahl.[15]

Public action does not systematically respond to economically dominant interests. But the holders of capital have a political power far greater than their sociological weight, so they have a high probability of conditioning public policies. Such an approach does not, by assumption, exclude public action against economically dominant interests for reasons related to the search for political support. Moreover, the economically dominant may constitute different socio-political groups, some belonging to the dominant social bloc, others not (finance vs. industry; export vs. domestic demand, etc.). Not only can economic dominants occupy different positions vis-à-vis the dominant social bloc, but economic dominants occupying similar socio-economic positions can express different political expectations if there is no ideological unity in the socio-economic group concerned. Also, following the path opened by the French *théorie de la regulation*,[16] neorealist political economy considers that the functioning of an institution or social organisation is not reducible to the interests or compromises which were at its origins.

A social bloc is aggregated by a political initiative that selects the expectations that will be at least partly met by the implementation of public policy and regulatory action according to the support given by the social groups that express them. This choice of expectations and therefore of social groups establishes a hierarchy based on the political weight of the groups, which cannot be reduced to demographic or electoral weight. Some social groups 'carry more weight' for reasons that depend on the institutional environment, including that of political institutions, or on the historical context. A central group for a given social bloc is a group whose main expectations can be met as a basis for a public policy proposition that will aggregate other, more peripheral social groups around the central groups. A social bloc is therefore not homogeneous but structured according to the political weight of the social groups that make it up.

Political power relations shape the institutions that influence the economic dynamics. But these dynamics influence in return the agents' social positions and modify accordingly the power relations. Political power relations are not a mere reflection of economic power because the political realm is partly autonomous from the economic structure.

Three dimensions of domination

One may distinguish at least three dimensions of domination: as mentioned before, we consider that the evolutions within each of these three dimensions are linked but follow a specific temporality and logic. The first dimension is political domination. Social groups are defined as politically dominant when they belong to the dominant social bloc; this means that their expectations and the demands they deem important are at least partly satisfied, which leads to their support for the dominant political actors. Social groups excluded from the DSB are defined as politically dominated; their expectations do not influence significantly the definition of public policy or institutional design. The

second dimension is that of (formal) institutions, which are the expression of past compromises. A group whose perceived interests are favoured by the existing institutions, which may reflect their past influence on policy decisions or simply be the outcome of history, is said to be dominant in this area, and dominated if institutions have detrimental consequences for the group's perceived interest. Finally, a group whose expectations are in line with the mainstream ideology, which defines the accepted worldview,[17] the domain of what is sensible, acceptable, possible, will be defined as conforming to the dominant paradigm, whereas it will be defined as carrying a dominated worldview when the dominant ideology considers the group's expectations as illegitimate, impossible to satisfy, unrealistic, outdated or morally wrong.

On this point, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between our analytical grid and Gramsci's concept of hegemony.[18] Our analysis differentiates between groups that structure their expectations according to the dominant paradigm, and whose expectations will therefore be considered legitimate and realistic, and groups that refer to a minority paradigm. In Gramscian language, we will then find on the side of the dominant paradigm groups that exercise through cultural hegemony a capacity of direction, as well as groups on which this capacity is exercised. Thus, in the extreme hypothesis of complete cultural hegemony, all groups will conform their expectations to the dominant paradigm: since no group refers to an alternative paradigm, there will be no ideological conflict, which does not imply an absence of ideological domination in the Gramscian sense. The opposite hypothesis is that of a contestation of the dominant paradigm: in this case there will be groups that conform to it and groups with expectations structured by a different worldview. We will classify these groups respectively on the side of the dominant paradigm and the dominated paradigm. If this conflict is characterised by particularly balanced power relations, we will be in the presence of what Gramsci calls a crisis of hegemony.[19]

Our analytical grid thus differs from Gramsci's without contradicting it; on the contrary, Gramsci's political strategy can be interpreted from our analytical framework. For Gramsci, it is indeed essential to engage in a hegemonic struggle by working to ensure that the popular classes who adhere to the dominant worldview (and which are, in his language, 'hegemonised') adopt another worldview; a strategy that would correspond, in our analytical grid, to the passage from column P (dominant paradigm) in Tables 1 and 2 to column p (alternative paradigm). This shift is the outcome of an ideological struggle that aims to overturn the hegemonic power relations.

The combinations of the three dimensions give the possible configurations documented in Tables 1 et 2. Table 1 considers the groups that are included in the DSB, and are therefore politically dominant. These groups may be advantaged (I) or penalised (i) by the institutional architecture; and they can refer to the dominant paradigm (P) or to a dominated paradigm (p) in the cultural and ideological dimension depending on whether their expectations and demands are taken to be sensible, realistic, and legitimate, or not.

To illustrate the different positions of the socio-political groups, we will give examples taken from the analysis of the French and sometimes Italian socio-economic and political dynamics.[20] The groups in cell 1 are on the side of dominance in all three dimensions (political, institutional and ideological): they are obviously destined to occupy a central position in the DSB. This is the case, for the 'dirigiste' France of the 1960s,[21] of the groups linked to the high administration, or, for Italy, the groups linked to the financial sector and rentiers holding public debt since the mid-1980s (with the exception of the two Conte-led governments between 2018 and 2021), and the management and owners of large companies between the 1950s and the 1970s. Occupying a privileged position

Table 1. A typology of socio-political groups in the DSB.

	P	*p*
I	1. Dominant and self-confident groups	2. Contested conservative dominant groups
i	3. Reforming dominant groups	4. Contested and marginal dominant groups

A capital letter signals dominance in one dimension: I for institutions, *P* for ideological paradigm.

Table 2. A typology of socio-political groups outside of the DSB.

	P	*p*
I	5. Groups in a position of strength but who do not accept the current political compromise	6. Conservative declining classes
i	7. Rising classes	8. Dominated and marginalised groups

A capital letter signals dominance in one dimension: I for institutions, *P* for ideological paradigm.

in all dimensions of domination is not contradictory with expectations concerning possible institutional reforms that would further strengthen the group's position.

The situation is different for groups included in the DSB and globally advantaged by the compromises inscribed in the institutions, but which refer to a dominated ideological paradigm (cell 2). The privileged position of these groups is then likely to be challenged. This is the case, in France, of the bourgeoisie linked to the agricultural sector, which has traditionally been part of the right-wing bloc and benefited from the Common Agricultural Policy, a position weakened by a neoliberal hegemony that values risk, innovation and competition and delegitimises any form of protectionism.[22] For Italy, social groups benefitting from public transfers in Southern Italy also belonged to this cell until the 1970s.[23] As a result, these groups will be seen as traditionalist and conservative in their opposition to the changes driven by the dominant ideology. Going back further in time, one may also consider that the social groups that were in favour of keeping the colonies were in such a situation as the opposition to colonisation and the independence movements soared after the second world war.

A very different position is that of groups that are included in the DSB and ideologically dominant, but do not recognise themselves in the existing institutional architecture (cell 3). These groups are the driving force behind what can be called dominants' reformism. The active participation of these groups to the DSB in the political exchange between support and public policies (political domination) and the fact that they are able to legitimise their expectations on institutional changes as corresponding to the general interest (ideological domination) give them a decisive role in the evolution of a capitalist organisation. In France, the groups linked to financialisation (investment bankers, traders …) have occupied this position before the financial reforms of the 1980s, before gradually moving to cell 1. In Italy, the employees and managers of small and medium-sized firms were in this cell until the 1990s.

The last possibility is that of groups that participate in the DSB but are penalised by the institutional arrangements and whose expectations are ideologically disqualified (cell 4). These groups are destined to be progressively marginalised in the DSB, and eventually excluded. This is, for example, the trajectory followed by the working class, which in the early 1980s until the late 1990s in France were an integral part of a left-wing bloc which was sometimes dominant, and from which they were gradually expelled.[24] In Italy, the employees of large industrial firms and the public administration belonged to this cell during the first Prodi government (1996–8), as well as the social groups from the South benefitting from public transfers during the 1980s and the two Conte governments (2018–21).

A DSB, which is an alliance between different groups aggregated through political mediation, may include groups occupying different boxes in Table 1. But the characterisation of a DSB varies according to which groups occupy the central position. A DSB structured around dominant and self-confident groups (cell 1) will propel a relatively stable political trajectory, with possible reformist action aimed at increasing the coherence of the political and institutional system and reinforcing existing relations of domination. A DSB centred on contested conservative dominant groups (cell 2) is destined to face increasing contestation, as its action will be perceived as entirely oriented by special interests and as detrimental to the general interest. The viability of such a DSB is highly uncertain, and linked to its ability to change the ideological power relations.

Reforms aiming at a profound change in the institutional architecture will be at the forefront of political action if the core of the DSB is occupied by the reforming dominant groups (cell 3). Such

institutional changes are likely to penalise groups that are integrated in a marginal position in the politically dominant alliance and to favour groups that are excluded from it, and thus endogenously modify the composition of the DSB. The viability of the DSB is linked to the ability to win the social conflicts that institutional changes will open up.

The case of a DSB that would have as its pillar groups dominated both on the institutional dimension and on the dimension of ideology (cell 4) appears logically exceptional. If we force the issue, and consider that the workers occupied the central position in the left-wing bloc of the time, we could consider Mitterrand's victory in 1981 as an example of this case. However, we can see the difficulty of stabilising a dominant alliance of this type, which would not be able to modify the institutions in the direction corresponding to the interests of the groups that structure it without being strongly challenged (ideological weakness). On the other hand, bowing to the dominant ideology, especially in the field of 'legitimate' institutional change, necessarily means changing the core of the DSB, which therefore changes its composition and nature.

Configurations of the political conflict

Table 2 considers groups that are excluded from the DSB, and thus dominated in the political dimension. These groups may however be in a position of strength (I) or weakness (i) in the institutional dimension, and may express expectations that the dominant ideology considers legitimate and realistic (P), or that the dominant ideology disqualifies as illegitimate and/or unrealistic (p).

Cell 5 is occupied by groups that are on the side of dominance both in terms of ideology and institutions, but do not participate in the DSB. This situation of exclusion from the DSB is obviously not the norm for groups that are in a position of strength, but may correspond to the position of a fraction of the dominant groups that refuse to compromise with groups that have different expectations. They are, in a way, extremist fractions of the dominant groups. In the recent period, this would correspond to groups that were in favour of a neoliberal transformation of the French socio-economic model when a left coalition started to implement such reforms (the financial sector in the 1980s, privatisations in the 1990s …) but who considered that a more drastic course should be taken (self-employed, finance professionals …).[25] In Italy, the social groups linked to the financial sector and financial rent were in this cell during the two Conte governments (2018–21).

Groups in cell 6 are excluded from the DSB and ideologically dominated; but their interests are protected by existing institutions. The position of these groups is weakened by the fact that the dominant ideology favours institutional reform. This cell thus corresponds to conservative classes in decline. In the recent period, part of the conservative middle classes that belonged to the right social bloc stayed outside of the bloc bourgeois that Macron aggregated in 2017.[26] Further back in time, one may think of the European settlers in the colonies shortly before independence (e.g. the '*pieds-noirs*' in Algeria at the end of the 1950s).

The opposite position (cell 7) is occupied by classes excluded from the DSB and penalised by the institutional architecture, but whose worldview fits into the dominant ideology. This allows them to present their expectations on public policies and institutional reforms as corresponding to the general interest. This is obviously an advantageous position that makes their integration into the DSB likely in the long run. Most French social groups favourable to a neoliberal transformation during the 1980s (self-employed, executives …)[27] could be classified in this category. In Italy, the social groups linked to finance and rent at the beginning of the 1980s, and the owners and employees and SMEs between 2011 and 2018, were in this cell.

The last situation (cell 8) is that of groups dominated in all dimensions of social conflict: excluded from the DSB, disadvantaged by institutionalised compromises and ideologically dominated, these groups are destined to be sacrificed by public policies. In France, the *Gilets Jaunes* movement that marked part of Macron's first presidential term offers a good example of social reaction by groups that found themselves completely outside the mechanisms of political exchange.[28] In Italy, the employees of large industrial firms and civil servants were in this cell from the mid-1980s on

except when there were left governments; the social groups from the South benefitting from public transfers slipped in this cell between 2011 and 2018.

We can analyse the political relations between the groups occupying different cells in Tables 1 and 2, indicating what kind of conflict they have and also what is the possible space for political mediation between their expectations. Table 3 presents the political strategies that aim at either an enlargement or a modification of the DSB. These strategies are obviously essential in the case of a DSB that is socially in a minority position, or is plagued by contradictions that could eventually lead to its crisis. A crisis is defined as the rupture of a dominant social bloc, which corresponds to the vanishing of a political equilibrium. Such situations call for a change of policy orientation which may entail institutional change.

Table 3 presents the 16 possible configurations of political conflict, and their consequences for the viability of the DSB and institutional dynamics. This does not mean that all 16 configurations have an equal chance of being realised, nor that they are equally stable. For example, it cannot be excluded that economically dominant groups are politically dominated, but this situation is logically rarer than the opposite configuration. Similarly, some configurations of social conflict imply that the DSB is strong and viable, others that it is fragile and contested. It should also be stressed that the 16 configurations have not the same effects on the stability of the institutional architecture.

- 1/ Let us assume that the central position of the DSB is occupied by Dominant and self-confident groups (column 1), i.e. groups that are dominant on the political and the institutional dimension, and whose expectations are consistent with the dominant ideological paradigm.

1-5 + The expansion towards groups institutionally dominant and whose expectations conform to the dominant worldview but who do not accept political compromise with classes with different

Table 3. Political conflict and perspectives for the DSB.

Core of the DSB Opposition to DSB	1.Dominant and self-confident groups	2.Contested conservative dominant groups	3.Reforming dominant groups	4. Contested and marginal dominant groups
5. Groups in a position of strength but who do not accept political compromise	Enlargement of DSB at the cost of ideological extremism and expulsion of peripheral groups	Strong and difficult to counter contestation of the politically dominant compromise. Very likely political shift (DSB change)	Possible enlargement of DSB if institutional reforms slow down	Uncertain viability of a DSB strongly contested on its legitimacy, and that of its proposed institutional reforms
6. Conservative declining classes	Ideological conflict, search for a DSB enlargement through ideological revision	Possibility of uniting all these classes in a conservative bloc through mediation based on a backward-looking ideology	Reformism of the dominant, conservatism of the dominated	Conflict between ideologically dominated and institutionally divided classes. Common destiny outside the DSB
7. Rising classes	Possible institutional compromise for marginally modified DSB	Conflict on all dimensions. Strong challenge to institutional architecture, likely destabilisation of the DSB.	Possible expansion of the DSB as a result of institutional reforms	Conflict between different sources of legitimacy (political vs. ideological) to support institutional changes in opposite directions.
8. Dominated and marginalised groups	Open conflict, repression of social protest	Institutional changes demanded by the dominated groups and refused by the dominant. No mediation possible. Likely violent repression of social protest	Open conflict, repression of social protest but possible punctual support of a fraction of the dominated for certain reforms	Conflict between ideologically and institutionally dominated classes separated by identity criteria.

expectations, could be achieved by expelling peripherally integrated groups from the DSB. As a result, the DSB would evolve towards a stronger sociological and ideological coherence. In French political history, an example of this can be found in the situation of the neoliberal groups that stayed in the right social bloc in spite of the implementation of neoliberal reforms in some areas by the left coalitions in power during the 1980s or 1990s.

1-6 + The enlargement towards Conservative declining classes, which are in a position of ideological weakness, could be done by a partial revision of the ideology carried by the DSB. A good example of this type of strategy is President Sarkozy's attempt in the 2007 election campaign to broaden the right-wing bloc towards a fraction of the National Front's electoral base. A strategy of this type carries the risk of distancing from the social bloc classes or fractions of classes that refuse this aggiornamento. In the example of Sarkozy, his winning strategy implied a significant vote of classes traditionally linked to the right-wing bloc for Bayrou, the 'centrist' candidate.

1-7 + The integration into a DSB centred on Dominant and self-confident groups of classes that demand institutional reform and whose expectations are considered legitimate in the dominant ideology (Rising classes) implies identifying changes that can satisfy them without upsetting an institutional architecture that is to the advantage of politically dominant groups. The gradual integration of groups linked to finance into the left-wing bloc between the 1980s and the 2000s offers an example of this type. This example also shows that the broadening of the DSB towards the rising classes through institutional reforms can imply the gradual expulsion from the DSB of classes that occupied a peripheral position (the workers, in the example). This is linked to the timing of neoliberal reforms implemented by left coalitions, which affected in priority areas not at the top of the institutional hierarchy of the most important social groups in the left bloc.

1-8 + On the other hand, it is impossible to imagine the expansion of a DSB centred on Dominant and self-confident groups to Dominated and marginalised groups, i.e. to groups dominated on all dimensions (political, institutional and ideological). The mediation space between the groups occupying the two boxes is empty, implying a conflict that is intended to remain open. For example, no attempt was made under the Sarkozy presidency to find compromises with the part of the working classes with immigration background living in the *banlieues* (urban periphery). On the contrary, the objective was to enlarge the political support in the direction of social groups hostile to immigration.[29]

- 2/ Let us now consider a DSB in which the Contested conservative declining groups, i.e. groups protected by the institutional architecture but in a situation of ideological weakness, would be in a central position (column 2).

2-5 + Faced with opposition from Groups in a position of strength but who do not accept political compromise, the DSB would be weakened. Such a situation signals that the dominant political compromise is out of step with the social balance of power. It is therefore a precarious situation, which heralds a likely political change. It is likely, however, that the groups that occupied the central position in the old DSB will not be absent from the new one, but will find a place in a peripheral position. This situation could be found in the end of the 1960s, where the social bloc supporting the Gaullist power was contested by social groups who aimed at a more rapid pace of modernisation of the socio-economic model along neoliberal lines, whereas part of the right bloc included more traditionalist social groups (farmers, shopkeepers …) which were not so enthusiastic about these changes.[30]

2-6 + The situation of a DSB centred on Contested conservative dominant groups and confronted with the opposition of groups in turn protected by the institutional architecture but dominated in terms of ideology (Conservative declining classes) is different. All of these groups could indeed be united by an ideological and cultural struggle that would point to the 'dangers' of the dominant ideology without challenging the institutional dynamic. In the 2022 presidential campaign, Zemmour tried, but failed, to unite classes integrated into the bourgeois bloc, the right-wing bloc

or those who refer to the *Rassemblement National*, through a strategy that proposed a strong continuity in neoliberal political action, but that engaged in an ideological and cultural struggle against any form of thought that proposed itself as 'modern' or 'progressive'. If this strategy had succeeded, it would have produced a reversal of hegemony, with the defeat of neoliberal 'modernism', which was arguably hegemonic at least until Macron's victory in 2017, but in the continuity of the neoliberal trajectory.

2-7 + The conflict between a DSB centred on Contested conservative dominant groups and the opposition of the Rising classes would be on all dimensions of social domination (political, institutional, ideological). The position of strength in terms of ideology of the rising classes would imply serious difficulties for the viability of the DSB, which would appear to be institutionally conservative to defend particular interests against the general interest. Such a conflict took place in the 1950s where the '*poujadiste*' movement gathered a traditional middle class (mostly shopkeepers) opposed to the technocratic elite that wanted to modernise the economic and social structures of the French socio-economic model.[31]

2-8 + The conflict between a DSB of this type and Dominated and marginalised groups would be different. The groups excluded from the dominant alliance would demand institutional and policy changes that the DSB would not be ready to concede. The specificity of such a conflict is that it would take place in a situation of hegemony crisis: neither the politically dominant nor the politically dominated classes would be able to legitimise their position as corresponding to the general interest (all of them would be in a position of ideological weakness). The conflict could not be resolved ideologically by the domination of one position over the other, and the chances of violent repression of social protest would be very high. The crisis of 1968 in France could be characterised in this way, opposing the most conservative social groups of the right bloc, which were in a defensive position (see the opposition between groups 2 and 5 above) to the bulk of the working class, which were excluded from the politically dominant bloc.[32]

- 3/ Reforming dominant groups are in a strong position in the ideological dimension and demand institutional change. In recent French history, a clear example of a DSB centred on these groups is the bourgeois bloc aggregated in 2017 by Macron's action, in which the central position was occupied by socio-liberals waiting for a 'modernisation' of French capitalism.

3-5 + The conflict with Groups in a position of strength but who do not accept political compromise excluded from the DSB corresponds, in the example of the bourgeois bloc, to the tensions between the reformist aspiration of the politically dominant groups and the attachment to certain specificities of French capitalism of some large industrial groups who saw some advantages in the old socio-political compromises and the policies that derived from it (e.g. manufacturing industry business groups opposed to service industries in the 1990s and 2000s). The mediation between these divergent interests can be done on the rhythm of the reforms. A timing that would allow to preserve at least temporarily the aspects of the existing institutional architecture to which the established groups aspiring to power are attached, could lead to their integration into the politically dominant alliance by enlarging the DSB.

3-6 + Conservative declining classes are the groups that have the most to lose from the action of a DSB structured around Reforming dominant groups. The latter want to change the institutions that protect the interests of the former. The ideological power relations, which see the Reforming dominant groups in a favourable position, will allow them to present the reforms as corresponding to the common good, or even as necessary changes, while the resistance of the class conservatives, who are excluded from the DSB, will be disqualified as the defence of partisan interests. This pattern of dominant reformism versus dominated conservatism characterises much of the French political dynamic of the last 40 years,[33] with, for example, trade unions that opposed neoliberal reforms being ideologically challenged and accused of defending privileged positions (the insider/outsider representation of social conflict).

3-7 + The opposition between a DSB built around Reforming dominant groups and the Rising classes is exactly the opposite of the previous one. Ideologically dominant classes waiting for institutional changes can stay outside a 'modernising' DSB if they feel that reforms are moving too slowly, notably because of compromises made by the Reforming dominant groups with other classes integrated in the DSB in a peripheral position. The integration of the Rising classes into the dominant alliance is therefore a likely effect of the reforms they expect. This might be the case with the enlargement of the bloc bourgeois made by Macron during his first presidency, which resulted in the integration of groups formerly belonging to the traditional right bloc. This implied an orientation to the right of the policies implemented, which may have alienated part of the groups originally included in the bloc bourgeois that came from the traditional left bloc. These groups expected a social-liberal orientation of the policies that was never taken because the objective of Macron was to extend the bloc bourgeois on the right.

3-8 + The margins of mediation between the reforming dominant groups at the heart of the DSB and the dominated and marginalised groups are almost non-existent, making legal and police repression of social protest very likely. This is what happened with the *Gilets jaunes* movement at the beginning of Macron's presidency. However, the politically dominant groups are also in a position of ideological strength; this allows them to present the DSB's reforming action institutionally as advantageous to certain dominated groups. For example, neoliberal reforms have been accompanied by the promise of social advancement for the unemployed and non-permanent workers (the so-called outsiders in neoliberal rhetoric). Thus, the occasional support of a fraction of Dominated and marginalised groups for specific reforms cannot be completely ruled out.

- 4/ The last case is that of a DSB centred on classes whose expectations are incompatible with the dominant ideological paradigm and penalised by the existing institutional architecture. As we have indicated, such a DSB is necessarily fragile and hardly sustainable. In the French dynamic, we can consider as an example the left bloc that allowed Mitterrand's victory in 1981, in which the workers and more generally the working classes occupied the central position, and which was made at the time of the neoliberal ideological revolution.

4-5 + The viability of such a DSB is highly unlikely if the main opposition comes from the Groups in a position of strength but who do not accept political compromise, which dominate the ideological and institutional dimensions. The very legitimacy of the DSB and its proposed reforms will be strongly contested. The strong position of the opposition groups will make it unlikely that they will seek a compromise with the politically dominant groups: their objective will be to reverse the political balance of power. This corresponds to the situation where the political right won in the 1986 presidential election, sanctioning the victory of the groups in cell 5 over those in cell 4.

4-6 + The conflict between a DSB built around classes in a position of ideological and institutional weakness and an opposition based on conservative declining classes is a sign of a deep political crisis. In such a case, the structuring of the political system is completely out of step with the dominant ideological paradigm. The DSB will not succeed in legitimising the reforms it is promoting as corresponding to the general interest; but conservative opposition to these reforms will in turn be perceived as linked to the defence of particular interests. Such a configuration makes it likely that new political projects will emerge, more in sync with the ideological configuration. Thus, at the beginning of the 1980s, the agricultural petty bourgeoisie was in opposition to a left-wing bloc in which the working class occupied a central position: but all of these groups found themselves marginalised in the social blocs that dominated the French political scene in the following decades.

4-7 + The difficulties of a DSB focused on ideologically and institutionally dominated classes will be even greater in the face of opposition from the rising classes. The rising classes, even if they are outside the DSB, are in a position of ideological strength. They can therefore take advantage of this to contrast the action of the politically dominant alliance and to propose institutional reforms designed to destabilise it. It is quite likely that the result of such a conflict will be the complete

redefinition of the politically dominant social alliance. A clear example of this type of configuration can be found in the French dynamic of the 1980s and 1990s, during the two terms of Mitterrand. Classes that did not recognise themselves in the traditional blocs, notably because of the weight of the popular classes within them, pushed through processes of privatisation and commercial and financial liberalisation that corresponded to their interests. These reforms, which relied to a large extent on the legitimacy of the European construction, had the effect of destabilising the traditional social blocs. Thus, the centrality of the working classes in the traditional left bloc and the economic reforms they expected were strongly challenged by opposition groups that dominated them institutionally and ideologically. As a result, the working classes were first marginalised and eventually expelled from the left bloc.

4-8 + A political conflict centred on the opposition between ideologically and institutionally dominated classes is, as in case 4-6, a sign of a deep mismatch between political institutions and social power relations. It is quite likely that in such a context of crisis, new political projects will emerge and assert themselves, leading to the emergence of a new DSB. However, it is not impossible to imagine a DSB based on a cleavage that would separate the working classes, for example on identity criteria (ethnic origin, religion etc.). This would be the case in France if the far right managed to form a politically dominant social alliance centred on the 'native French' fraction of the working classes.

Conclusion

In this article we have proposed a political economy approach of crises based on the diversity of interests among social groups. The conflict between these interests is articulated in different dimensions: ideology, (formal) institutions, and politics. Each of these dimensions corresponds to a relatively autonomous sphere, which has its own logic of functioning. The power of the different social groups, i.e. their capacity to promote a balance favourable to them in each sphere, depends on the position they occupy in the economic and productive system. However, considering a social conflict that is structured on different and relatively autonomous dimensions, prevents public action from being directly deduced from economic power relations. Political strategies select the expectations to be protected, and thus aim at the formation of a dominant social bloc, but two points must be underlined. Firstly, the viability of each strategy depends on an institutional and ideological context that is itself the result of a conflictual process. Secondly, the type of conflict and the possibilities of a possible compromise between politically dominant and politically dominated groups depend on the power relations embedded in the institutional architecture and in the dominant ideology, i.e. in the vision of the legitimate role of the state and in the definition of the general interest. Thus, social dynamics are the result of the interaction between spheres that each respond to an autonomous logic, and within which specific conflicts are played out. As we have shown in this article, this approach makes it possible to develop a rich and precise theoretical framework to explain institutional change and crises of various kinds that can characterise social evolution.

Notes

1. We adopt a broad definition of the term 'ideology' which includes agents' representations of reality.
2. Lebaron (2000:, p. 63).
3. Wacquant & Vakaloulis (1996: 73).
4. Bourdieu (1985).
5. See Buttel and Flinn (1979) for instance.
6. See Traxler *et al.* (2001) for instance.
7. For an empirical characterisation of a social bloc built from the expression of individual policy preferences, see Amable (2021).

8. This is different from the Gramscian concept of "historical bloc" which is not a coalition of social groups but, to put it simply and taking up Marxian terms, the unity of the superstructure and the infrastructure. For discussions of the various interpretations of the historical bloc in the literature, see Douet (2018) ch.5.
9. Lipietz (1988:, p. 7).
10. In other works, Lipietz mentioned an alliance between labour and a fraction of capital.
11. Jessop (1990, p. 358).
12. Jessop (1990:, p. 359).
13. Bourdieu (1997:, p. 220).
14. Amable (2017).
15. Dahl points out, for instance, that: 'ownership and control contribute to the creation of great differences among citizens in wealth, income, status, skills, information, control over information and propaganda, access to political leaders and, on the average, predictable life chances, not only for mature adults but also for the unborn, infants, and children. After all due qualifications have been made, differences like these help in turn to generate significant inequalities among citizens in their capacities and opportunities for participating as political equals in governing the state'. (Dahl 1985, p. 55).
16. Aglietta (1979), Boyer (1990).
17. This implies that there is neither a unique worldview that would be the equivalent of a common culture nor a non-differentiated plurality of representations of the social environment, but a hierarchy of cultural and ideological representations.
18. The concept of hegemony is used in Gramsci (1975), in particular in the study of *Risorgimento*.
19. See Cospito (2016).
20. Mostly taken from Amable (2003, 2017), Amable and Palombarini (2018), Amable *et al.* (2012), and Palombarini (2001, 2003).
21. See Gauron (1983).
22. See Amable (2017).
23. See Palombarini (2003).
24. Amable and Palombarini (2018).
25. See Amable (2017).
26. Amable and Palombarini (2018).
27. Amable (2017).
28. See Blavier (2021).
29. Which was a relative success (Mayer 2007).
30. See Gauron (1983).
31. Kuisel (1981), Tristram (2014).
32. Vigna (2007).
33. Amable (2017).

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