Government institutions and cultural models: learning about civil service in the recruitment of a bureaucratic elite

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Abstract

This article examines the learning process of candidates in public selection exams for tax auditors in Brazil. Articulating cognitive theories of culture with anthropological studies of the state and its institutions, the author proposes the concept of a cultural model of civil service to explicate the standardized values and behaviours related to the bureaucratic-administrative practice that these institutions seek to instil in their agents. The aim is to show how the recruitment of a bureaucratic elite involves the incorporation of social representations concerning the role of state officials and the governmental legitimacy exercised in performing their function as auditors, even before the effective entry of these candidates into government institutions. The data is taken from ethnographic research conducted between 2015 and 2017 in Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil, which included participant observation in the classes of two preparatory courses for public selection exams.
Key words: Government institutions, civil service, public selection exams, cultural models, learning.

Instituições governamentais e modelos culturais: aprendizados sobre serviço público no recrutamento de uma elite burocrática

Resumo

Este artigo examina o processo de aprendizado de candidatos aos concursos públicos para auditor fiscal no Brasil. A partir de uma articulação entre teorias cognitivas da cultura e os estudos antropológicos sobre o estado e suas instituições, propõe-se o conceito de modelo cultural de serviço público para qualificar os valores e comportamentos padronizados relacionados ao fazer burocrático-administrativo que as instituições buscam impor aos seus agentes. Pretende-se mostrar como o recrutamento de uma elite burocrática envolve a incorporação de representações sociais sobre o papel dos agentes estatais e sobre a legitimidade governamental que estes exercem na função de fiscais, antes mesmo da efetiva entrada desses sujeitos nas instituições governamentais. Os dados são derivados de uma pesquisa etnográfica, conduzida entre os anos de 2015 e 2017 no Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, em que as aulas de dois cursos preparatórios para concursos públicos foram acompanhadas através de observação participante.

Palavras-chave: Instituições governamentais, serviço público, concurso público, modelos culturais, aprendizado.

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Introduction

This article provides an ethnographic exploration of the learning process experienced by candidates for public selection exams to become tax auditors. It sets out to show how the recruitment of a Brazilian bureaucratic elite involves the incorporation of a cultural model of civil service that is disseminated among the candidates, especially in the context of preparatory courses frequented during their period of preparation for the selection processes. The incorporation of a cultural model of civil service during the recruitment phase of these civil servants demonstrates how government institutions produce social representations of both the role of their agents and the governmental legitimacy that they exercise in performing their function as state auditors, even before the effective entry of these candidates into the institutions in which they aim to work professionally.

By analysing the selection mechanisms of the Brazilian public administration, the study aligns with an anthropological approach interested in investigating the power dynamics through which the social order is continuously produced, valorising the processual nature of the phenomena involved in the functioning of the modern state (Miranda, 2005; Teixeira, Lobo & Abreu, 2019). Working from this perspective, the work also adds to anthropological studies on governance and public administration in the Brazilian context (Souza Lima & Teixeira, 2010; Castilho, Souza Lima & Teixeira, 2014).

The research focuses on the recruitment processes of the tax administration. Here I refer to the entire class of civil servants tasked with executing the administrative activities of tax inspection and collection for federal, state and municipal governments.[1] These tax auditors – *auditores fiscais* in Portuguese, with the same function also going by different names, depending on the public institution concerned, including *fiscal de renda*, *fiscal de receitas*, *fiscal de tributos*[2] and so on – comprise a bureaucratic elite of the Brazilian state consolidated since the colonial period, recognized with high salaries and a series of labour benefits not offered to other civil servants and professional sectors.

The theoretical approach that I privilege here in exploring the preparation for public selection exams comprises an intersection of two broader thematic fields of anthropology: an anthropology of the state, already briefly mentioned above, through which I seek to highlight the dynamic of state processes of training and recruitment; and an anthropology of knowledge, basically drawing from a branch of inquiry more interested in the discussion of cognition and learning, explained in more detail later. In fact, the focus on the preparation for public selection exams to some extent itself suggests this approximation, given that it foregrounds the learning of a form of *knowledge* pertaining to the *state*.

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[1]   The federal government, states and municipalities have *competência tributária* or the constitutional authorization to create forms of taxation (such as taxes and duties).

[2]   TN: Terms that can be translated as income inspector, revenue inspector and tax inspector, respectively.

The data I present here comes from an ethnographic research project conducted between 2015 and 2017 in Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil, in which I attended the classes of two preparatory courses for public selection exams for tax auditors. It is difficult to state with any certainty how many of these courses exist, but dozens exist in Rio de Janeiro alone. These courses are found throughout the whole of Brazil but show a higher presence in Rio de Janeiro and Brasília, the former and current federal capitals respectively, where there is a larger concentration of federal organizations. The courses have also disseminated through digital environments. Unlike schools, faculties and universities, the preparatory courses are not regulated by the Ministry of Education but comprise an educational structure that functions autonomously from the educational directives imposed by the Brazilian state.

Preparation for public selection exams in Brazil is increasingly segmented by career or area of interest, such as a career in tax auditing, banking, policing, courts, legal work, among other areas that delimit and correspond to a specific type of preparation. In the case of most careers, the biggest difference relates to the core of subjects that will be studied, the dynamic of preparation being fairly similar. As I remarked, my entry into this universe of preparation for professional exams took place through the courses and exams for tax administration. These selection exams occur with relative frequency given that all the Brazilian states and municipalities, as well as the federal government, can hold exams to recruit to their fiscal administrations. Among the candidates with whom I spent time during the research, it was common practice to travel to other states and municipalities to take public selection exams. This practice is so frequent among the candidates that tourist agencies exist specialized in this type of travel.

To be able to frequent the classes of the two courses that I accompanied, I was obliged to enrol myself, paying the corresponding enrolment and monthly fees. I attended approximately 450 hours of classes, including courses in law, accountancy, mathematical finance, logic reasoning and Portuguese. As well as direct observation in the classes, virtual environments and events, such as coaching lectures, specifically intended for candidates, I also interviewed diverse actors from the universe of selection exam preparation. I conducted four formal interviews with the business partners and founders of the two preparatory courses where I conducted my participant observation; two formal interviews with former coordinators of preparatory courses for a tax auditing career; and thirteen informal interviews with teachers and students, five with the former and eight with the latter. In the case of the teachers and students, however, most of the data came from conversations before and after classes and during breaks. All the interviews were in-person, though I only recorded the formal interviews with the business partners, founders and coordinators of the preparatory courses, which lasted around an hour and a half each.

Training state agents

The processes of training and recruiting state agents, though receiving relatively scant attention in the anthropological literature on the modern state and its bureaucracies, show that the learning achieved during these processes contributes to the understanding of the institutional forms of power that emerge from the state phenomenon, combining diverse themes central to the agenda of the anthropology of the state and its administrative structures, including the cultural and symbolic dimension of power, the state training processes and the production of subjectivities. In this section, therefore, I shall explore a number of works that analyse training processes and practices implemented by or on behalf of government institutions.

In her study of human rights training programs offered to employees of the Turkish state as part of the process of the country joining the European Union, Babul (2012) has shown how these programs have transformed the social imaginary of the bureaucratic domain. As an effect of the policy agenda implemented during the accession process, agents of the Turkish bureaucracy have progressively altered the perception of

the basis of their governmental legitimacy. The new ranks of state officials now recognize their bureaucratic authority as a status acquired through educational achievement rather than as a status inherited from their class or family. Thinking of themselves today as originating from the people and elevated to positions of bureaucratic power on merit, state officials are also keen to distinguish themselves from the political elites, who neither originate from the people nor, generally, have risen to power through educational achievement or meritocracy.

Pieke (2009), for his part, conducted fieldwork in educational institutions teaching and training cadres of the Chinese Communist Party, analysing the strategies and narratives used by the party to achieve legitimacy in the contemporary Chinese context, increasingly characterized by the country's opening to capitalist globalization. The author shows how individuals need to undergo an ample learning process to become a party member, involving everything from mastery of a cultural, political and ideological knowledge to incorporation of the most prosaic body techniques, such as walking, speaking, eating and drinking in a specific way shared by party members. Pieke emphasizes that one of the aspects learnt during this training process is that the individuals joining the party's ranks begin to perceive themselves as different – and, obviously, superior – to other Chinese citizens.

A fundamental landmark in this area is the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1996) on preparatory classes for admission exams (*concours*) to the grand French écoles. The author treats these treats these preparatory classes as means to access the cognitive structures that the actors apply to social life. Bourdieu calls these educational institutions an "immense cognitive machine," since it is through their structure, and the teaching effected in them, that schemas are inculcated which organise the perceptions, appreciations and actions of the agents submitted to them. The preparatory classes tend to produce a homogeneity of mental structures (schemas) in the subjects that frequent them, which creates, in the author's words, an 'esprit de corps' and a 'shared culture.' These standardized schemas of perception, appreciation and action are the embodied form of the habitus that the institutions imprint on the agents through their pedagogical action.

Various anthropological works on government institutions in Brazil reveal how training and recruitment practices affect the institutional routine of different sectors of public administration. In an ethnographic study of careers and socialization in Brazilian diplomacy, Moura (2007) calls attention to the 'esprit de corps' instilled in the candidates by the selection exams for entering the diplomatic career. Kant de Lima (2011) suggests that public selection exams for the law area cause those who pass to feel chosen and anointed to take their decisions without being accountable to other citizens, given that the preparation for the selection process requires access to a particularized knowledge unavailable in the university market.[3] Meanwhile the research of Miranda (2015) on tax auditors indicated that the candidates for the post frequented preparatory courses on which they came into contact with numerous auditors who worked as teachers and came to identify with them – an identification that was already effectively part of the selection process that would culminate with the public selection exams.

This literature presents at least two common findings on the dynamic of the state processes of training and recruiting staff for government institutions. First, it shows the importance of recognizing the effort that these institutions make to project their values and beliefs through pedagogical practices with individuals who are still only potential state officials. As a corollary, we can affirm that the ethnography of government institutions gains in explanatory power by including the institutional training and recruitment processes in its scope of analysis, since it is through these procedures that the actors involved will adhere to or tacitly accept – while others desist from – an institutional culture that will henceforth guide their bureaucratic practice.

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3 Preparation for selection exams in the legal area has also been studied by Fontainha (2011), Orban (2001) and Passos (2019).

Second, it becomes clear how the bases of governmental legitimacy that these actors come to attribute to themselves are constructed in opposition to other social groups who are conceived to lack certain predicates now identified as necessary for belonging to the state bureaucracy.

These findings persuaded me to attempt to conceptually qualify this gradual process through which the actors incorporate both a set of representations concerning state institutions and a feeling of belonging to (and deserving) state employment. Elsewhere (Maia, 2019, 2020) I have referred to this double internalization of postulates relating to civil service *bureaucratic subjection*, which involves, on one hand, an identification of the self with public careers and, on the other, a legitimation of propositions concerning the cultural model of civil servants and their enjoyment of bureaucratic power. Bureaucratic subjection involves an embodiment of the state's authority, which gradually transforms individuals, previously candidates for civil service, into state subjects.

In my view, therefore, investigations into the functioning of state practices and dynamics can gain analytically by taking into account the process of bureaucratic subjection that each government institution provides to its civil servants. This implies not limiting the ethnographic study of institutions to analyses of the institutional roles performed by actors in their everyday work or the formal structures (arranged in organisational charts) that govern the relationship between these roles. This kind of analysis is incapable of explaining either the motivation of the actors to become part of the institution, or the set of representations that these actors bring with them concerning the institutional roles they should perform. As Abélès (1995) stressed, an anthropological approach to the study of institutions cannot consider them solely based on their formal structure: it must also analyse the representations that the actors manifest in their day-to-day activities, which are often at odds with the formal structure and with the official discourses of those at the top of the organisation.

In this article I wish to explore one of the two aspects of bureaucratic subjection mentioned above, namely the assimilation of a set of conceptions about civil service and, more specifically, about civil servants themselves. I set out from the idea that all bureaucratic subjection entails the internalization of cultural schemas that structure a model of the civil servant disseminated among the members of a particular institution. Here, therefore, my intention is to make evident the articulation between bureaucratic subjection and cultural models of civil service by exploring the preparation of candidates for public selection exams for entry to the fiscal administration in Brazil.

Institutions and their cultures

State processes for training and recruiting bureaucratic personnel provide a point of access for the anthropological study of power practices that reveal the cultural dimension of the state (Steinmetz, 1999): in other words, they show how diverse power mechanisms become symbolically instituted and justified for the state officials themselves and for the wider public. This includes revealing how conceptions of civil service are locally produced for each nation state, which are subject to large variations, as Abélès and Jeudy (1997) have already highlighted in reference to Europe.

Along the same lines, Bellier (1997) pointed out that the analysis of representations and cultural forms are an integral part of an anthropological approach to institutions, insofar as institutions and their agents produce culture and enable a comprehension of the culture of the society in which they are embedded. The author also emphasizes that the ethnographic study of the culture of institutions becomes relevant due to the propensity that the agents of these institutions have to think of themselves as part of singular culture. In other words, the individuals who participate in an institution frequently recognise that they share a sense

of belonging and an institutional ethos with their peers. Bellier calls this set of attitudes and behaviours an administrative culture that the institutions attempt to impose on their officials to make them amenable to their institutional proposals.

The concern with the shaping of an institutional identity has already been extensively described in the literature on government institutions in Brazil. From the 1930s, there was a widespread endeavour in the country to create institutions that represented themselves as technical bureaucratic elites, recruiting their staff through meritocratic and impersonal procedures and no longer through croneyism and patronage (Wahrlich, 1983). Some of the institutions that emerged during this period constructed their identities around these postulates, like the former Civil Service Administrative Department (DASP),[4] whose employees thought of themselves as 'experts' in civil service (Rabelo, 2013) and the now equally defunct Industrial Workers Retirement and Pension Institute (IAPI),[5] which possessed a corps of officials calling themselves the 'cardinals' of social security (Hochman, 1992). In the area of tax policy, tax auditors were already known as 'princes of the state' and 'business partners of the state,' since they collected taxes for the government and received a percentage on top of any fines levied (Miranda, 2015).

By contrast, other institutions may feel the lack of a well-defined institutional identity. Teixeira and Lobo (2018) report how the staff of the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA)[6] pointed to an identity crisis in the institution, the result of tensions and disputes related to different understandings of what research should be undertaken in support of government initiatives. In the context of public security institutions, some studies on municipal guards identified that the agents working for these organisations often expressed the sense of a lack of institutional identity, caused among other actors by the difficulty of distinguishing their role as guards from the work of the military police in maintaining public order (Mello, 2011; Rocha, 2017).

All this concern with the presence or absence of an institutional culture in the sphere of public administration reveals how the professional identities of public officials are subject to symbolic elaborations, which affirm and contest the meanings attributed to government actions and to their legitimacy, in a power dynamic that defines the institutional targets to be collectively pursued. Along these lines, reflecting on the uses of the culture concept in organisational and anthropological studies, Susan Wright (2004) calls attention to organisations as bodies capable not only of constructing a set of ideas shared among their members, but above all of authorizing certain discourses through political processes that are internally embedded in the institutions. Wright suggests that the culture concept, imagined as a political process of imposing meanings on groups, ideas and things, as well as contesting them, is an important analytic tool for the anthropological study of organisations.

As we have briefly been able to see, various themes and concepts – institutional ethos, institutional culture, administrative culture, organisational culture, habitus – have already been invoked in the quest to describe a set of values and behaviours with which institutions identify and attempt to socialize their agents. These analytic categories show the influence that government institutions possess in forming the "thinking styles" of their agents, to use the terms of Mary Douglas (1987), which sustain particular patterns of social interactions and naturalize distinct forms of classifying persons and their relations. Douglas also emphasizes that institutional stability is directly related to the capacity of organisations to impose thinking styles on their agents, insofar as the classificatory systems contained in these styles become stable, along with the institutional order from which they are derived.

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4 *Departamento Administrativo do Serviço Público.*

5 *Instituto de Aposentadorias e Pensões dos Industriários.*

6 *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada.*

It seems clear, then, that the operational dynamic of government institutions occasions a discussion on the relation between cognition, culture and learning. This is the path I explore from the next section on, incorporating a theoretical framework linked to cognitive anthropology, the branch of anthropology that has dedicated itself more systematically to the investigation of cognitive phenomena in the constitution of culture.

Learning schemas and cultural models

To analyse the learning achieved by the candidates involved in the preparation for public selection exams for fiscal administration, I mobilize two key concepts from contemporary cognitive anthropology, the notions of *schema* and *cultural models*. The selection exam preparation process I am investigating promotes two kinds of learning: one kind that is linked to the techniques and content taught by the teachers to ensure that the students perform well in the selection exams, as I have explored elsewhere (Maia, 2021a); and another kind that revolves around the introjection of values and behaviours concerning the social position they will occupy once they pass the exam. The latter entails learning a series of propositions about civil service, henceforth described as *schemas*, which, when connected together, form a cultural model of civil service that becomes incorporated by the candidates through the socialization of the agents involved in the preparation for the exams, especially teachers and students – both groups in many cases containing people who are already civil servants.

The schema theory was appropriated from cognitive psychology by anthropologists working in the field of cognitive anthropology in order to rethink cultural phenomena. A schema can be understood as a generic version of aspects of the world resulting from successive similar experiences of subjects. When people share the same experiences, they tend to share the same cultural schemas, abstract representations of regularities of the environment in which they interact. Thus, Roy D'Andrade (1987) considers schemas as an abstract organisation of experience that is intersubjectively shared, naturalizing the information and interpretations of the world to which they refer. Schemas aim to explain not just the knowledge that people share but also how they are learnt during experience and organised in the human mind (Quinn, 2005). Our understanding of happenings in the world depends on the activation of previously incorporated schemas, based on common experiences, that are continually elaborated (D'Andrade, 1995).

It is important to emphasize that the term schema appears recurrently in much of social theory, but here acquires a much more specific meaning. One of its best-known uses is found in the works of Pierre Bourdieu. Hence, by way of example, it is worth highlighting the difference between the idea of schema used by Bourdieu (1972) to define the habitus and the theory of the schema employed in the context of cognitive anthropology, which is the definition I am using here. The central concept developed by Bourdieu to explain the relation between structures and the subjectivity of agents, without reducing one to the other, is that of habitus, which comprises a set of dispositions incorporated in practice by agents through their social relations. These *schemas* of perception and action, as the author states, end up internalizing in the subject the social structures within which they are inserted and are subsequently externalized by the same subjects, meaning that they tend to reproduce the social structures through internalized cognitive structures (schemas). So, for Bourdieu, agents act in accordance with the cognitive structures acquired in practice, that is, the schemas of perception and action incorporated in the form of a specific habitus.

Bourdieu's theoretical model includes various shares concerns with the model adopted here. It also constitutes an attempt to analyse the internalization of sociocultural knowledge, taken as flexible understandings adaptable to practical situations, which diverge from the view of social life as a phenomenon regulated by invariable rules incorporated by agents. However, as Quinn and Strauss (1997) argue, Bourdieu's use of embodied knowledge, the habitus, ignores the role of motivation and emotion as a force of reproduction, standardization, diversity and change in social life, as well as the role of deliberate teaching in the forming of schemas.

In relation to the latter aspect, Bourdieu assumes that familiarity with social practices is sufficient to explain the internalization of their regular elements. The authors, by contrast, argue that not all the regularities observed in practice are retained equally in the internalized schemas since the learner's motivation makes a difference in terms of the attention given and, consequently, whether the experience will be cognitively processed and whether he or she will adhere to the set of previously acquired knowledge. In a similar critique of the theory of cognition contained in the concept of habitus, Bloch (1985) stresses that Bourdieu postulates a learning process characterized by a single form of acquiring knowledge, which fails to explain the diverse types of knowledge possessed by subjects.[7]

While Bourdieu thinks of schemas in association with the constitution of a habitus, I shall follow various authors linked to cognitive anthropology and associate the notion of schema with the concept of *cultural models*. Setting out from a cognitive theory of culture, cultural models were conceived as schemas widely shared through experience by social groups, at varying scales, and that perform a vital role in their understanding of the world and how they behave within it (Holland & Quinn, 1987; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992). Cultural models provide a frame for experience, interpretations of it and inferences about it, as well as goals and motivations for the action of subjects (Lutz, 1987; Strauss, 1992). Differently to the notion of habitus, cultural models are a theoretical construct that attempts to specify how shared knowledge is structured through associated smaller units of understanding (the schemas), which are connected in a network through the activation proportioned by the experiences of agents in the world. To the extent that these networks of mental contents are diffused among a significant part of the population, or of a social group, and continue over time, albeit with occasional changes, we can speak of the establishment of a cultural model related to a specific sphere of social life (Feltes, 2018).

As well as being specific to a narrower or broader social group, cultural models are frequently prescriptive. According to Holland and Quinn (1987), one of the main contributions of cognitive anthropology is its elucidation of the conditions under which cultural models are imbued with a directive force, consequently acquiring an ideological potential. By ideological, I refer here to cultural models with a normative character, a prescription of how the things to which it refers should be. Although bus drivers in São Paulo may share a set of cultural schemas about surfers in Santa Catarina (predominantly white males, young and middle class, for example), they do not generally have a set of prescriptions concerning what the behaviour of these surfers should be. On the other hand, students from public schools in Rio de Janeiro do possess a set of ideas about how a teacher should behave if he or she is to be categorized as a 'good teacher' (Maia, 2017). At work, in this case, is a prescriptive cultural model incorporated by students concerning the teacher's role.

It also seems important to mention that cultural models have already been utilized to account for diverse processes of social identification. Kronenfeld (2008) emphasized that cultural models work to create in agents a feeling of belonging to groups and other social entities, like government institutions. In a study on the cognitive basis of terrorist practice, Sieck (2011) described what he defined as a Sunni Jihadist cultural model of political relations. The author argues that the recruitment of common persons to the causes of Jihadist organisations is achieved by adapting the ideas of these groups to the system of cultural references of their target public, who thereby come to frame a series of events and facts from a Jihadist perspective, with which they then also gradually develop an identification.

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7   Analysing the learning of practical and everyday tasks, the author also argued that the type of learning mobilized in social life is directly related to the nature of the knowledge being acquired. Bloch (1991) differentiates between two types of knowledge, *linguistic* and *non-linguistic*. Practical activities and tasks depend on a non-linguistic knowledge in order for them to be executed well. Their effective execution presumes that they are embodied through automatisms. Linguistic knowledge, by contrast, necessarily involves the explicit transmission of meanings and communication through a propositional language.

The notions of schema and cultural model, as elaborated in the cognitive anthropological approach, thus offer an analytic key for us to comprehend the dynamic through which cognitive structures form and function as the basis of ideas, values and behaviours manifested by agents in everyday life. This includes the apprenticeships that government institutions provide to their employees and the feeling of institutional belonging itself that the latter frequently end up expressing.

Along these lines, during the preparations for the public selections exams for the fiscal administration, by establishing a distinction between civil servants and other professional sectors of Brazilian society, the pedagogical agents also end up attributing qualities to civil servants and to the 'others' with whom they are contrasted. This set of qualities involves ideas and concepts relating to the role and prerogatives of the public worker, which, when combined, form what we can call a *cultural model of civil service*. The pedagogical agents also provide a series of indications to the students about what is right and what is inevitable in civil service, generating a prescriptive cultural model that becomes one of the implicit effects of the learning process.

To delineate this cultural model of civil service captured through the preparation for selection exams, I shall present various cultural schemas associated with the idea of the public worker and shared during the experience gained by the subjects on the preparatory courses and already mobilized by them during the period of selection exam preparation. The schemas that I describe here are not exhaustive in terms of defining the cultural models of civil service that the subjects have absorbed, only those that I was able to map on the basis of my fieldwork in preparatory courses for fiscal administration selection exams. Indeed, as Holland and Quinn (1987) warned, the sharing of cultural models does not necessarily preclude alternative cultural models and schemas referring to the same social domain as the former. In any event, what follows are some schemas widespread among the candidates preparing for the selection exams.

Schema 1: civil service as distinction and enjoyment

From this section on, I shall begin to present more directly the ethnographic data obtained from my fieldwork in preparatory courses for public selection exams in the cities of Niterói and Rio de Janeiro. During the classes I attended and in the interviews I conducted, the keenly desired acceptance in the selection exam was a frequent topic in the talk of the course teachers. It appeared in the discourse of these candidates as an achievement that would make possible their social distinction and enable their personal ambitions to be attained. On the other hand, the emphasis on the work to be performed was always limited and generally the work itself was mentioned in a negative tone, while the advantages arising from it were repeatedly lauded. Hence, it was common for teachers to describe the work routine of the future public employees as time spent responding to small formal demands, whose completion would require little effort, allowing the enjoyment of other activities, such as those associated with leisure, as can be noted in the remarks of the Administrative Law teacher on one of the courses:

> Things don't happen overnight, guys. If you want to be an auditor, you won't pass the exam by sleeping all morning and then heading to the beach in the afternoon. After, when you've passed, you can visit the beach every day. But not beforehand. Afterwards you can arrive at ten in the morning, there's none of that business of set work hours. You leave for lunch at one. At two thirty you're back. It's already getting late. Look at the traffic. Grab your bag and leave. And the workday is over, in an honest form.

As her remarks clearly express, reproducing an idea widespread among Brazilians that the civil servant 'does nothing,' the moment of preparation for the selection exams is taken as the opposite of the post-acceptance moment. The former demands a high level of dedication and effort, considered by students and teachers alike as a sacrifice. In the first class of one of the courses I frequented, the mathematics teacher immediately

forewarned the students that preparation for the selection exams would be a period of "much sacrifice and effort" but the payback would come after they passed. The teacher added that those who fail to pass the exam do so because they are 'lazy,' meaning these individuals will have to find some "small job or other."

Many began to study with such intensity that they ceased to socialize with friends or significantly reduced the frequency of their interactions, even with family members. In one of the conversations with a group of students during the break, one of them said that those starting the preparation for the selection exam still had no idea what the pace of study should be like. According to him, passing the selection exam demands "living for the selection exam." That means "being without friends" and "having no fun," dedicating oneself solely to study every day of the week. Studying at weekends was one of the main examples cited to show how self-sacrifice was needed during their preparation. "The selection exam candidates [*concurseiros*] don't have weekends," they said. The days theoretically assigned as rest days were transformed into study days.

All this effort, however, would give way to moments of enjoyment once the subjects became civil servants. In line with this perception of work as enjoyment, I often heard students and teachers make projections concerning what their lives would be like after passing the exam. In the interval to one of the classes, while I was chatting with two of my interlocutors in front of the building where the course was run, an imported car drove past, attracting attention from pedestrians on the sidewalk, including us. One of the students remarked: "Hey bro, that guy there definitely passed the exam. My time will come too."

The teachers cited even more unusual examples. The Administrative Law teacher from one of the courses told students from his class that after passing the tax auditor exam, they could travel to France spending less than a third of the salary that they would earn. Another teacher, also from the law area, who as well as being a teacher was a state judge, said that "thanks to the public selection exam" he had bought a private island, just like the TV presenter and one of the country's most famous celebrities, Luciano Huck.

I was able to accompany one student, Rodrigo, who took one of the courses that I accompanied and passed the selection exam in first place. He visited the course to pass on the news to his colleagues and teachers. He appeared at the end of the Logical Reasoning class and went over to thank the teacher for the classes. Soon a queue of classmates formed to congratulate Rodrigo for passing the exam. The teacher asked how he was feeling and said that his life would change forever. Rodrigo said that he was relieved and happy, and added that he would now be able to win all the women he wanted. The teacher laughed and agreed with the future civil servant, saying farewell to him by advising him to enjoy the new-found advantages to the full. In relation to this episode, I stress that it was not a private conversation. It occurred in the classroom with many of the class listening and responding to what was said by the teacher and by the recently-approved candidate.

It is also important to say that most of the candidates who frequented the courses I accompanied had only a vague idea of the activities that they would perform in their day-to-day work as future auditors. They were, however, very attuned to the labour benefits that a tax auditor enjoys, such as the amount of salaries, bonuses and additional pay-outs, the workload, and the flexibility to establish their own work schedule, among other benefits. Conversations between students often revolved around this theme. In the break of one of the classes, when I would go with the course students to a nearby café, one of them brought his class colleagues up-to-date about the selection exams that were now open, as was the custom, and listed the advantages and disadvantages of each. He mentioned a selection exam for the Military Justice, saying that "the salary isn't bad" – somewhere between ten and twelve thousand reais a month – and that a woman he knew who worked for the entity was able to spend various days off work at home.

During the classes, the teachers also constantly alerted students to the advantages of certain posts. After calling the class's attention to the federal agency selection exams in his class, the Mathematical Finance teacher stated that the best exam for someone who wants an 'easy life' is the

ANCINE[8] exam: "ANCINE is perfect. You pocket the money and do nothing. It's perfect. You'll only go there to watch movies for the rest of your life, you scoundrel. [laughing]" Another teacher, when someone complained about the dedication need to pass the exam, would say by way of motivation: "Think about the pay cheque! Think about the pay cheque!"

These ethnographic examples show how the access to material and symbolic goods and a way of life associated with the elites is a schema linked to the cultural model of civil service propagated by the teachers and internalized by the students during their preparation for the fiscal administration selection exams.

Schema 2: knowledge of practice is learnt in practice

A second type of schema that connects with the idea of a civil servant concerns the knowledge of practice, in contrast to exam knowledge. At the start of their preparation for public selection exams, the students have no doubt about the importance of learning the course content for the exams they are set to face. However, this apprenticeship is combined with another, which concerns the provisional and ephemeral nature of the knowledge to be tested in the exams. After the exams are over, the knowledge learnt will have no use in the subsequent life of the civil servant, if and when they pass.

In one of the first classes that I accompanied, after the Tax Law teacher had explained the legislation that would be studied during the course, a student asked whether he would discuss a specific decree during the class. The teacher told her no since the decree in question would not feature in the exam. The student persisted, saying that the decree concerned questions that tax auditors deal with in day-to-day work. The teacher then advised: "just because he sees this in practice, does it have to appear in the exam? That's not how it works!"

This type of warning calls attention to the difference between the knowledge tested in the exams and the knowledge needed to perform bureaucratic functions, as Miranda (2015) has already observed in the discourse of Federal Revenue tax auditors. This issue was also emphasized in an interview with the pedagogical director of one of the preparatory courses:

> Not all the program content is focused especially on the post. So, in reality, the Revenue auditor does not need to know twenty-five subjects. It's not needed to perform his job. Obviously, there are courses that he may need. Accountancy, Tax Law… But he definitely doesn't need all of them and not in so much depth in some of them.

Before starting to teach some of the content from their courses, some teachers would tell the class that the material would be useless in the day-to-day exercise of the professional activity they were seeking to enter. Explaining the so-called personalist theory of accountancy, for example, the course teacher said:

> And today in Brazil, does the personalist theory or the patrimonialism theory hold good? The patrimonialism. But can the former appear on the exam. Sure. So you have to know it. Will you use this when you're there at the Federal Revenue, working as an auditor or a technician? Will you use this bullshit there? No, but you need to know it to be able to get there. Unfortunately you will need to know it.

As I discussed earlier, while part of the knowledge acquired on the preparatory courses is characterized as practical knowledge for the exams, it is no more than theoretical knowledge, entirely lacking in practical utility after the selection process. Along these lines, the Information Technology teacher for one of the courses told the class: "IT for exams is this here. There are lots of people teaching students how to mess with the computer. I teach them how to pass the exam."

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8   The National Film Agency (ANCINE) is a federal regulatory agency, whose objective is to promote, regulate and supervise the national cinematographic and videophonographic industry.

One of the reasons why most of the content learnt becomes momentaneous is the fact that this mode of knowledge acquisition involves a medium and long-term process of forgetting. This was pointed out by various students who frequented the courses I accompanied. Some had already studied various contents for previous exams they took, but added that, after they interrupted their studies, almost everything was quickly forgotten. The teachers also emphasize that studying should be continuous: if not, even in a short while, remembering the taught material will prove impossible. During the Coaching Day event, an auditor from Rio de Janeiro gave his views on this aspect of the knowledge tested in the exam:

> Knowledge for the exam, folks, is a flash memory. Many people may say that it's long-term, but it isn't. Flash memory in IT is rotary memory, it's not the HD. You're not storing long-term memory. Lots of things are flash memory, in two or three weeks you won't remember a thing. That's what happened with me. I thought I would never forget so many of the things that I studied so hard, I was going to be the best Tax Law auditor in the world. After a month I was rereading the Tax Law book. Because you forget.

During the preparatory process, the provisional naturalization of this knowledge is incorporated by the apprentices. The majority of the teachers and students do not question the content taught, save for complaining about the amount of material, especially the students, but never about its usefulness for the public posts and jobs they will perform if they pass the exams. However, some business partners and directors of preparatory courses did declare in interview that it would be better were the knowledge tested in the exam actually useful for the candidate's future work. At the same time, though, they expressed resignation since they considered this idea infeasible, given that it would depend on ranking the scores of the potential approved candidates:

> They should only test for what the job concerned demands. Yes, but would the selection panel be able to select by only testing for what the job demands? I don't know the answer. I myself don't have the answer. If the panel only tested those concepts that the job demands, would it be able to separate the guys and create a list of one by one, would it manage to create tiebreak criteria, create a list of approved candidates to submit to the organisation concerned? (Preparatory course business partner).

> It would be excellent if the candidate were required to know only what is needed for the job, since it would be an advantage for the candidate and for the State, which would have a guy with a lot of knowledge exclusively about those matters inherent to his job. It wouldn't be bad. The problem is the selection process. The problem is whether you can manage to make an exam differentiating these guys. What ends up happening is that you oblige the candidate to study much more than he would need to perform the job. (Pedagogical director of a preparatory course)

This recognition that the content of the exams is not necessarily linked to the knowledge needed for civil service and that it will be disposable once the candidate transforms into a civil servant highlights the fact that the selection processes do not necessarily select the candidates best prepared for the future bureaucratic tasks. Making this point, one of the pedagogical agents most critical of the selection process for public selection exams with whom I talked considered that the knowledge demanded ends up favouring a certain type of candidate:

> A study was once undertaken that showed the following: the selection process contains various flaws that mean people can answer questions relating to Law, including Criminal Law, Tax Law and Civil Law, but when it comes to making a decision using the knowledge in day-to-day situations, they fail to show the same brilliance. That's what we say: the difference between competence and content. If I am concerned about what year Brazil was discovered, I'm going to select a certain type of candidate. Not that he's stupid; that's not the problem. But he has a certain kind of preparation focused more on memorization. He might even be an excellent problem solver if he were trained to reason rather than memorize. While the fellow who does have a good decision-making capacity may be put off by having to learn an absurd mass of information. He wants the information to be useful. Rather than worrying about retaining all the content of a Barsa [encyclopaedia], he only wants to know about something that has a concrete application.

The choice of a certain type of candidate obviously implies the valorisation of one model of employee for civil service. In this sense, the experience of subjects as apprentices on the preparatory courses is an updated version of the traditional model of a generalist and theoretical employee prevalent when the current model of the public selection exam was conceived in the 1930s (Maia, 2021b). The selection method promoted during this period of the early twentieth century ended up transforming into the model adopted for all public selection exams in the country, based on objective theoretical tests that combined general and specific knowledge. This model favoured the entry of generalist civil servants, although selected to occupy bureaucratic functions perceived as technical.

Learning that the exam knowledge is ephemeral and provisional already creates a disposition in the subjects to consider that the real activities performed in the context of civil service will be discovered and learnt only after they enter the institutions for which they have been approved. In other words, the idea that you learn about the work in practice is already one of the things learnt for the exam. The preparation for the public selection exams legitimizes this cultural schema that knowledge is learnt in practice.

Schema 3: opposition to and rejection of 'politics'

Another lesson acquired during the preparation for public selection exams is the aversion towards the political class. In the two preparatory courses that I frequented, it was common for teachers during the classes to make remarks and formulate discourses, associated or not with the topics of the class, that opposed civil servants to politicians, the latter being associated with dishonesty, vested interests and corruption.

Soon after the municipal elections of 2016, the Constitutional Law teacher on one of the courses that I accompanied used the class discussion on social rights as an opportunity to evaluate current government projects and the result of the elections:

> Now Temer is already relaxing some laws with Constitutional Amendment 241. We have to be very careful with these amendments because we know that politicians are complicated creatures. And in fact, what these politicians worry about is being re-elected, or getting elected to a better post. Someone campaigning for mayor of São Paulo is already hoping to become President of the Republic. Because normally they become São Paulo mayor first. Hence the guys are actually pursuing their own interests. They have to do something for us, because otherwise they're not elected. But it's just a little. It's just enough for the people to swallow the thievery [*ladroagem*].

One of the students responded, saying that João Dória, at the time recently elected mayor of São Paulo, was already a wealthy man and had no reason to steal as the mayor. The teacher replied that she was not criticizing Dória specifically: her point was that this practice is traditional among politicians in Brazil.

The Logical Reasoning teacher was one of the most hard-hitting in his remarks against politicians. "Our rulers adore a lazy people. A lazy people are an easily manipulated people," he said in one of his very first lessons. When setting exercises for the class to solve, it was common for him to use questions with statements that referred to politicians, always framed negatively. One of them, concerning the logic of propositions, said: "No politician is honest." In another, which involved calculating the amount of tax to be paid by a trader, he said to the class: "You work five months of the year just to pay tax. And the money goes into whose pocket? Cabral, Temer, Renan, those lot...[9] While Brazilians fail to wake up, it will stay just the same. This scenario of robbery [*roubalheira*] hasn't changed one bit."

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9   A reference to the politicians Sérgio Cabral (former governor of Rio de Janeiro state, in prison at the time for corruption and money laundering), Michel Temer (at the time, President of the Republic) and Renan Calheiros (then a senator).

In the discourse of the teachers, the public selection exam, by contrast, was a mechanism that acted as a counterbalance to all the misdeeds in the political sphere. Civil servants, approved through exams and identified with a technical knowhow, were an antagonistic force to this supposed realm of disorder imposed by the political class. During the Coaching Day event, one of the speakers called the audience's attention to this virtuous element of the public selection exams:

> The public selection exam will be your means to make a living. It will be the path to your dreams. But it is a form, our way, of being correct. If you feel outraged, if you look at the government and see everything that goes on as corruption, it is your way of being a force of good. Enter and do the right thing.

One of the students from the course, Roberto, was also an employee at Caixa Econômica Federal, a state-owned financial services company. About to turn forty, he said he had once been a union activist – hence, his class colleagues nicknamed him 'black bloc.' During a conversation in the interval between classes, we were talking about politics and the 2016 municipal elections when a classmate, Gabriel, interrupted us, telling Roberto: "You'd better get used to it because this black bloc life will be over when you become a tax auditor!" It was a humorous way for Gabriel to say that politics should not be part of the everyday concerns of a future civil servant of the state elite.

It is important to stress that the tax auditor's union of the Federal Revenue is intensely active politically, establishing frequent relations with the elected leaders, as Miranda (2015) was able to observe during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, making it one of Brazil's most important unions. The fact that they establish these relations, however, does not signify any alteration in their depiction of themselves as independent and autonomous technical workers and their depiction of the political class, supposedly interested in obtaining personal advantages of no benefit to the general population.

It is worth noting that this construction of the bureaucrat, combined with the rejection of politics and its representatives, is also a mark left by the institutionalization of the public selection exam in Brazil, strongly present in the discourses of its proponents in the 1930s when the intention was to oppose the technical to the political. Civil servants were technical agents who would exclude the political sphere (and the political class in general) from their connections, identifying politicians with a socially negative set of categories, such as 'corruption,' 'robbery' and 'thievery.' Thus, the understanding of politics, seen through the prism of the elected leaders in the system of representative democracy, and the role of the civil servant in reference to the former, is another of the cultural schemas that the students construct in their socialization with classmates and pedagogical agents on the preparatory courses.

The rejection of politics manifested in this context is not an obstacle to the desire to become part of the state, therefore, but is taken rather as a value that should guide the future actions of the civil servants. The heightened anti-political inclination experienced by the subjects marks a cultural model of the civil servant forged in the context of this process of preparation for the selection exams.

Final considerations

Over the course of this work, my attempt has been to show, firstly, how the state's training and recruitment processes are units of analysis that analytically add to the agenda of research already consolidated in the ethnographic study of government institutions. These processes offer an insight into how selection exam candidates learn a code of behaviour that the institutions seek to impose on their officials. The preparation for civil service exams in Brazil, especially those for the fiscal administration, show how the imposition of behavioural models related to the exercise of public posts is a process that begins before the civil servants effectively start work in the government institutions to which they will be linked.

The learning that the students acquire during the preparatory courses for public selection exams is not limited to the contents and techniques taught for them to score well in the selection exams. It also involves a process of bureaucratic subjection, that is, a deep identification of the students – an identification that differs from the initial interest that led them to begin preparing for the selection exam – with the public career and an embodiment of the values and ideas promoted by the government institutions themselves. In the case of the selection exams for tax auditing, the preparation takes some years, generally on in-person courses and, increasingly, through distance learning. One of my closest interlocutors during the research, for example, had been studying for the elite selection exams for public administration, such as those for tax auditing, for twelve years. Over a long period, therefore, the subjects who begin preparing for the fiscal administration exams learn a series of cultural schemas from their teachers and classmates about what civil service – and consequently the civil servant – is and should be.

This set of schemas ends up constituting a cultural model of civil service that subjects come to share while still on the selection exam preparation courses. The concepts of schema and cultural models, taken from the contemporary debate in the field of cognitive anthropology, provides us with an analytic key to characterise the cognitive structures and the feeling of institutional belonging developed by the agents during the process of bureaucratic subjection. It seems to me that the relationship between government institutions and cultural models of civil service is imposed insofar as the search for standardized values and behaviours related to bureaucratic-administrative practice, as the ethnographic studies on government institutions demonstrate, is part of the construction of the institutional order that characterizes public bodies and entities.

In this sense, revealing the cultural models of civil service promoted by and for government institutions contributes to what Gupta and Sharma (2006) define as a key task for studies of state bureaucracies, namely to show the means through which the state represents itself as a coherent and singular entity. What is particularly distinctive in the case of this study on preparation for tax auditor exams in Brazil is the fact that this representation of the state is constructed in the context of educational institutions (preparatory courses) that formally have no connection to the public administration, although many of the agents involved in them do have, as either teachers or students who are already civil servants in some capacity.

The cultural model of civil service constructed during the preparation for public selection exams for the fiscal administration incorporates three cultural schemas – that is, abstract representations of the social environment, which are shared among the students preparing for the exams. The public jobs are seen as opportunities for upward social mobility based on merit and for enjoying the benefits associated with this mobility, such that the attractiveness of the job increases in proportion to how little effort the performance of the associated bureaucratic tasks requires and how many opportunities for spending time enjoying other activities (*civil service as distinction and enjoyment*) the post offers. The knowledge needed to pass the exams is recognized as ephemeral, possessing merely a pragmatic value of serving for the competition stage of the selective process. Once over, the students learn that they will learn what tasks they need to do as civil servants only when they arrive at their workplace to perform their activities (*knowledge of practice is learnt in practice*). Finally, I have shown how the candidates for civil service are socialized in a conception of politics, which is limited to the class of politicians and their actions in the legislative and executive spheres, associated in turn with a series of negative categories, such as corruption and the pursuit of personal interests. Civil servants, on the other hand, responsible for the performance of bureaucratic functions taken as technical, are seen as the antithesis of politicians insofar as their professional activities are for the common good, supposedly not the case of political agents (*opposition to and rejection of politics*).

This cultural model of civil service – whose component schemas are intended to be taken as partial, not exclusive – show the specificity of the process of bureaucratic subjection experienced by fiscal administrators in Brazil. Through the incorporation of values and the codes of conduct that these imply, the subjects gradually construct a representation of themselves and, simultaneously, form the bases for the legitimization of the governmental power they will eventually exert.

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