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Thinking about Brazilian Public Administration beyond paradigms: The weberian critical interpretation and the renewal of historical research

Pensar a Administração Pública brasileira além dos paradigmas: A interpretação weberiana crítica e a renovação da pesquisa histórica

La Administración Pública brasileña más allá de los paradigmas: Interpretación crítica weberiana y la investigación histórica renovada

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ABSTRACT

Background: The paradigmatic approach to Public Administration, inspired by Thomas Kuhn, views the evolution of the field as a series of crises and revolutions in management practices that mark historical periods of organizational transformation within the state. This approach was adapted and disseminated in Brazil beginning in the 1990s, drawing from Weberian concepts and Brazilian historical essayism.

Objective: This article aims to discuss the potential for rethinking the Brazilian case beyond the paradigmatic approach. A critical Weberian reading, as offered by Habermas, is understood to contribute to this endeavor at the epistemological, theoretical, and empirical levels. At the epistemological level, it relates to the critique of the paradigmatic approach by the Circle of Epistemic Matrices. At the theoretical level, it relates to critical Weberianism as presented by Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta, as well as the sociology of Jessé Souza. At the empirical level, it is more compatible with contemporary historical research, such as that on the *Ancien Régime* in the Tropics, which challenges traditional historical essayism. These approaches allow for reflection on the appropriateness of the paradigmatic approach for Brazil at all these levels.

Method: Based on an exploratory review of the scientific literature, this study aims to determine if epistemological, theoretical, and empirical positions have been addressed in Public Administration research in Brazil over the past 30 years.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that the contemporary international debate on Public Administration already recognizes the inadequacy of the traditional paradigmatic approach. In Brazil, sociological debates on patrimonialism, critical Weberianism, and new historical research allow us to question the suitability of the traditional approach for Brazil. However, none of these critiques have yet been properly incorporated into the Brazilian debate.

Conclusions: There are indications that the paradigmatic approach to Brazilian Public Administration needs to be rethought.

Keywords: Public administration; bureaucracy; critical theory; sociology of domination; history of public administration.

RESUMO

Contextualização: A abordagem paradigmática da Administração Pública, inspirada em Thomas Kuhn, compreende a evolução do campo segundo um processo sucessivo de crise e revolução de práticas gerenciais, marcando períodos históricos de transformações organizacionais no Estado. Ela foi adaptada e difundida no Brasil a partir dos anos 1990, baseada em conceitos weberianos e no ensaísmo histórico brasileiro.

Objetivo: O objetivo deste artigo é discutir as possibilidades de se pensar o caso brasileiro além da abordagem paradigmática. Entende-se que a leitura weberiana crítica, como a feita por Habermas, pode contribuir para isso nos níveis epistemológico, teórico e empírico. No nível epistemológico, ela se relaciona com a crítica paradigmática feita pelo círculo das matrizes epistêmicas. No nível teórico, com o weberianismo crítico de Ramos, Tragtenberg e Prestes Motta, e com a sociologia de Jessé Souza. E, no nível empírico, ela seria mais compatível com pesquisas históricas contemporâneas, como a do Antigo Regime nos Trópicos, que questionam o ensaísmo histórico tradicional. Em todos estes níveis, essas abordagens permitem refletir sobre a adequação da abordagem paradigmática para o Brasil.

Método: A partir de uma revisão bibliográfica exploratória da produção científica, procura-se identificar se estas posições epistemológicas, teóricas e empíricas têm sido contempladas nas pesquisas de Administração Pública, no Brasil, nos últimos 30 anos.

Resultados: A análise realizada demonstra que, no debate internacional de contemporâneo de Administração Pública, já existe um reconhecimento da inadequação da abordagem paradigmática tradicional. No Brasil, o debate sociológico sobre patrimonialismo, o

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weberianismo crítico e as novas pesquisa históricas permitem questionar a sua adequação também para o Brasil. Todas estas críticas, porém, ainda não foram devidamente incorporadas ao debate brasileiro.

Conclusões: Existem indícios, portanto, de que a abordagem paradigmática de Administração Pública brasileira precisa ser repensada.

Palavras-chave: Administração pública; burocracia; teoria crítica; sociologia da dominação; história da administração pública.

RESUMEN

Contextualización: El enfoque paradigmático de la Administración Pública, basado en Thomas Kuhn, comprende la evolución del campo según un proceso sucesivo de crisis y revolución en las prácticas de gestión. Los cambios paradigmáticos también marcan periodos históricos de transformaciones estatales. Este enfoque se adaptó a Brasil a partir de la década de 1990, utilizando conceptos weberianos y el análisis histórico de la tradición ensayística brasileña.

Objetivo: Este artículo busca reflexionar sobre el caso brasileño más allá del enfoque paradigmático. Se argumenta que la lectura crítica weberiana, hecha por Habermas, puede contribuir a ello en los planos epistemológico, teórico y empírico. En el plano epistemológico, con la crítica paradigmática realizada por el Círculo de Matrices Epistémicas. En el plano teórico, con el weberianismo crítico de Ramos, Tragtenberg y Prestes Motta, y con la sociología de Jessé Souza. Y, en el plano empírico, con la investigación histórica actual en Brasil, que cuestiona la tradición del ensayo histórico brasileño. En todos estos planos, se puede examinar la idoneidad del enfoque paradigmático para Brasil.

Método: La investigación sigue una revisión exploratoria de la literatura científica, y busca identificar si estas posturas epistemológicas, teóricas y empíricas se han considerado en la investigación sobre Administración Pública en Brasil durante los últimos 30 años.

Resultados: Los resultados demuestran que la insuficiencia del enfoque paradigmático tradicional ya se reconoce en el debate internacional contemporáneo. En Brasil, el debate sociológico sobre el patrimonialismo, el weberianismo crítico y las nuevas investigaciones históricas también contribuyen a cuestionar su idoneidad. Sin embargo, todas estas críticas aún no se han incorporado adecuadamente al debate brasileño.

Conclusiones: Existen indicios que sugieren que el enfoque paradigmático de la Administración Pública brasileña debería ser reexaminado.

Palabras clave: Administración pública; burocracia; teoría crítica; sociología de la dominación; historia de la administración pública.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The paradigmatic approach, inspired by Thomas Kuhn's work, has had a significant impact on organizational discourse. However, this article discusses the possibility and necessity of conceiving of Public Administration beyond paradigms, particularly in the Brazilian context. The most influential paradigmatic approach in the international literature generally culminates in three major paradigms: Traditional Public Administration (also called Bureaucratic or Weberian), Public Management, and Public Governance. There are some variations in periodization and nomenclature, but these variations confirm these three generic models rather than challenging them.

In Brazil, other proposals have emerged, but the most widespread version of the paradigmatic approach was the adaptation made primarily by Bresser-Pereira in the mid-1990s. This version combines Weberian concepts of patrimonialism, which supposedly spans centuries, and bureaucracy as a management model to propose organizational paradigms reflecting historical moments of transformation in the Brazilian state. Thus, the paradigms of Patrimonialist, Bureaucratic, and Managerial Public Administration were established in the country.

However, over the past 30 years, much social research has discussed the appropriateness of the paradigmatic approach to the organizational field, the limits of using the concept of patrimonialism in Brazil, and the inadequacy of interpreting Weberian bureaucracy as a management model. Additionally, new historical research has emerged on the colonial and imperial periods, reexamining the traditional explanation of Portuguese domination in what would become Brazil. These developments suggest that the sustainability of the paradigmatic approach to Public Administration is currently being challenged. However, few studies indicate that these discussions have been adequately incorporated into the national debate.

The objective of this article is to address this gap. To this end, it begins with an exploratory literature review of national scientific production to identify the current state of Brazilian Public Administration research drawing on the paradigmatic discussion. This material is then analyzed in light of Brazilian research from the past 30 years to allow for reflection on the adequacy of the paradigmatic approach at the epistemological, theoretical, and empirical levels. The critical Weberian approach, particularly that of Habermas, connects these three levels.

At the epistemological level, Habermasian analysis views knowledge as an interconnected system that includes critical epistemology, theory, and empiricism. This approach was adopted in the critique of paradigms within the field of organizational studies by the Circle of Epistemic Matrices (Paula, 2015). Theoretically, Habermasian analysis connects with the Weberian debate on patrimonialism and bureaucracy. The Brazilian critical lineage of this debate aligns the positions of Jessé Souza in sociology and Guerreiro Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta in organizational research. At the empirical level, Habermas's critical Weberianism emphasizes history as a long, rational, conflict-ridden, and erratic process, rather than merely identifying historical characteristics of a bureaucratic management model as the paradigmatic approach does. This Habermasian historical reading is considered more consistent with recent historical empirical research in Brazil, such as the *Ancien Régime* in the Tropics, than the paradigmatic approach.

This article is divided into four parts, in addition to this introduction. The first part presents the theoretical framework of the paradigmatic approach in international organizational literature and its adaptations for Brazil. The second part presents the chosen research methodology of a critical literature review following a Habermasian interpretation. The third part presents analyses emphasizing the contrast between established paradigmatic research in Public Administration in Brazil and the possibilities for reevaluating it at the epistemological, theoretical, and empirical levels. The fourth part presents the final considerations.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the past 30 years, the historical and theoretical discussion of Brazilian Public Administration has been heavily influenced by the paradigmatic approach (Keinert, 1994; Bresser-Pereira, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2000; CLAD, 1999; Paula, 2005; Andion, 2012; Cavalcante & Camões, 2017; Cavalcante, 2019). This approach stems from Thomas Kuhn's (1962/1970) philosophy of science, which presented the scientific paradigm as a concept that would explain the process of scientific evolution in the early 1960s. In the second half of the 20th century, this proposal was incorporated into the international organizational debate in both Business Administration (Burrell & Morgan, 1976; Hassard, 1991) and Public Administration (Ostrom, 1973; Henry, 1975; Aucoin, 1990; Barzelay, 1992; Rainey, 1994; Hood, 1995, 1996; Behn, 1998; Lynn, 2000; Lu, 2013). It also resonated in Brazil.

Kuhn aimed to explain scientific progress, which he described as occurring through sequential phases. The first stage is the pre-science phase, when there is no dominant theoretical or practical consensus regarding a given discipline. Next is the stage of Normal Science, when a scientific community shares theories, techniques, and methods that will be repeatedly applied in research and taught in scientific training, and consensus is reached regarding the general assumptions taken as true. This shared theoretical and practical consensus constitutes a scientific paradigm.

According to Kuhn (1962/1970), Normal Science is a discipline based on a paradigm, and scientists' work consists of empirically deepening it. Eventually, however, scientific problems arise for which the explanation provided by the dominant paradigm is unsatisfactory. This marks the beginning of the stage of crises and revolutions, when key elements of the prevailing paradigm are overturned by new theories and empirical evidence offering better answers to those unresolved scientific problems. These new answers form an emerging paradigm that, if confirmed, undermines the structures of the previous paradigm, thereby advancing science.

Kuhn's proposal was adapted to organizational theory primarily through the sociological paradigms of Burrell and Morgan (1979): Radical Humanism, Radical Structuralism, Interpretivism, and Functionalism. However, it was not this work that originally contributed to the spread of the scientific paradigm in the field of Public Administration. Vincent Ostrom (1973/2008) discussed the intellectual crisis in Public Administration in the U.S., referring to the notion of scientific paradigms. However, it was Nicholas Henry's (1975) work, based on Golembiewski's (1974) four phases of Public Administration – phase 1, Analytical Policy/Administration; phase 2, Concrete Policy/Administration; phase 3, Management Science; and phase 4, Public Policy Approach – that paved the way for the paradigmatic discussion in the field. Henry's work presented paradigms in succession and was closer to Kuhn's original proposal than the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979). The latter presented sociological paradigms that coexisted, and their disputes over the possibility or impossibility of interconnection led to what became known as "paradigm wars" (Sheppard & Challenger, 2013; Paula, 2015).

In light of this, both international and national approaches to Public Administration, influenced by the idea of successive paradigms, sought to identify Kuhnian notions of scientific development within the organizational field, including the hegemonic paradigm, its crisis, and revolution. However, there was a significant difference in relation to the original Kuhnian proposal. Unlike Kuhn's proposal, Henry (1975) emphasized not the scientific discussion itself (i.e., theories, hypotheses, and empirical evidence) but rather the periods during which different disciplines dominated discussions of Public Administration (e.g., the dispute between Law, Political Science, and Business Administration in the first four paradigms and then Public Administration itself). Based on this, Henry proposed five paradigms: a) 1900–1926, the politics/administration dichotomy; b) 1927–1937, the principles of Administration; c) 1950–1970: Public Administration as Political Science; d) 1956–1970, Public Administration as Administrative Science; e) 1970 onward, Public Administration as Public Administration.

Interest in the relationship between paradigms and historical periods in Public Administration was revived in the paradigm debate that gained significant traction in the 1990s. This debate was particularly influenced by the work of Aucoin (1992), Barzelay (1992), and Hood (1995, 1996). Starting in 1990, the dominance of disciplines in the paradigmatic discussion was set aside in favor of focusing on moments of transformation in managerial practices (organizational techniques). Historical periods were then defined based on the institutionalization of certain managerial practices within the state. This type of paradigmatic approach has been influential in the organizational sphere and is still observed in Public Administration research, even in the early 2020s (Cavalcante & Camões, 2017; Cavalcante, 2019; Natalini & Di Mascio, 2021; Hammerschmid et al., 2023; Bojang, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Brown, 2021; Martinus, 2022; Bouckaert, 2022).

Following the discussions presented by Aucoin, Barzelay, and Hood, sets of managerial practices were identified that generally contrasted the Traditional Public Administration paradigm, also known as Bureaucratic Public Administration or Old Public Administration, with the Public Management paradigm. The Public Management paradigm is centered on a mix of business management premises and comprises the state reform movement known as New Public Management (NPM). NPM was directly influenced by the neoconservative, right-wing governments of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. and Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. These governments shared a commitment to a minimal state and argued that public administrative practices had been superseded by business management practices throughout the 20th century (paradigm crisis and revolution).

Therefore, it was not a matter of specific epistemological, ontological, or theoretical changes in the understanding of administration as a science. The paradigmatic transition in Public Administration was essentially a practical matter in which administration (public, obsolete, and inefficient) was superseded by management (private, innovative, and efficient). This opposition – administration versus management – culminated in what Hood (2007, p. 12) called "logomachy," a play on words that conceals, in reality, a struggle for the power to organize collective life. This struggle is primarily contested between defenders of the market and defenders of the state.

In the post-1990 debate, the paradigms of Public Administration began to function as historical markers of the assimilation of corporate management practices into the state, or the institutionalization of managerialism – the belief in the superiority of market organizational practices in any situation (Pollitt, 2016). However, the context was state reform under the rise of neoliberalism, which reinforced the pragmatic appeal of reducing the state to achieve efficiency gains in the provision of public services (Steger & Roy, 2021). Adhering to the motto "less politics, more managerialism," they chose the path that Peters and Pierre (2017, p. 15) called "the practice-driven, atheoretical road." However, the establishment of a practice-focused paradigm without proper theorization did not align with the Kuhnian approach. The original Kuhnian proposal requires a firm commitment to and acceptance of the dominant theory. According to one of the examples cited by Kuhn (1962/1970), an Aristotelian theory of motion would be entirely incompatible with a Newtonian theory of motion. The

Newtonian theory would be more complete and adequate and would thus supersede the former and be accepted by the scientific community. In the case of organizational theories, however, much of the theoretical debate remains open.

In the mid-1990s, the Public Management paradigm began to be challenged by a new paradigm based on the idea of public governance. This new paradigm was even less theoretical and more practice-driven than the previous one. Depending on the version of governance under discussion, this paradigm oscillated between reinforcing aspects of Public Management or Public Administration. The general aim was to address the political issues that were suppressed by the managerialist hegemony of the previous paradigm. This previous paradigm was considered excessively technical and overly market-oriented (Osborne, 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) as well as dominated by managerial fads (Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020).

Unlike the paradigm wars in Business Administration, Public Administration was dominated by an incessant search for new paradigms to demonstrate the superiority of the new over the old. However, according to Behn (1998), Lynn (2000), Persson and Goldkuhl (2010), Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2014), Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), Pollitt (2016), Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), Torfing et al. (2020), Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020), Osborne (2006, 2021), Nguyen, Drejer, and Marques (2024), and Dan, Lægheid, and Špaček (2024), the recent literature suggests that the post-1990 debate has three main characteristics that converge into three major paradigms: a) Traditional Public Administration, which is formal, legalistic, hierarchical, and impersonal, and obsessed with compliance with public rules, inspired theoretically by Weber, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight Waldo; b) Public Management, which is decentralized, ostensibly results-oriented, values market efficiency over the state, and is influenced by management consultancies; and c) Public Governance, which oscillates between reinforcing aspects of the Public Administration (state legitimacy) or Public Management (hollow state) paradigms, focusing on aspects of agility, flexibility, democracy, participation, and the impact of public policies on society. Table 1 presents a summary of these paradigms.

Table 1
General characteristics of the three main paradigms of Public Administration

Paradigm	Description	Sources
Traditional Public Administration Paradigm	This paradigm is excessively formal, legalistic, hierarchical, and impersonal. It is therefore marked by an obsession with complying with public rules and efficiency. It is the only paradigm for which an attempt was made to establish a more robust theoretical foundation. This foundation is primarily associated with Max Weber's work on the bureaucratic management model, Woodrow Wilson's work on the founding of the academic discipline, and Dwight Waldo's work on the administrative state in the U.S.	Barzelay (1992); Rainey (1994); Behn (1998); Lynn (2000); Denhardt and Denhardt (2015); Pollitt (2016); Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017); Ibietan (2019); Hammerschmid <i>et al.</i> (2023).
Public Management Paradigm	This paradigm is advocated as being results-oriented and decentralized. It emphasizes market efficiency over a bureaucratic, centralized, and inefficient state. The state should be reduced and transfer some of its functions to private companies. The expansion of management consulting firms influenced its development, as these firms are responsible for disseminating management practices throughout the corporate world. Therefore, the paradigm has no specific intellectual authorship.	Hood (1995, 1996); Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020); Brown (2021); Osborne (2021); Terrance and Uwizeyimana (2023); Dan, Lægheid, and Špaček (2024); Calvache, Cadavid, and Carpintero (2024).
Public Governance Paradigm	This paradigm stems from the public policy debate that sought to reclaim the political dimension neglected by the Public Management paradigm. The Public Management paradigm was viewed as excessively technical and overly focused on market-oriented managerial practices. This paradigm is even less robust from a theoretical standpoint and is scattered across myriad strands that employ imprecise – and sometimes trivialized – concepts of governance. Although it was originally supportive of the “Hollow State” paradigm, more recent variations attempt to restore the state's leading role. Consequently, it balances discussions of agility, flexibility, democracy, and participation. It moves beyond the Public Administration paradigm's obsession with rule compliance (efficacy) and the Public Management paradigm's economic fascination with cost reduction (efficiency) to focus on the actual impact of public policies on society (effectiveness).	Osborne (2006); Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2014); Torfing <i>et al.</i> (2020); Pereira and Ckagnazaroff (2021); Matías-Pereira (2023); Popęda and Hadasik (2024); Nguyen, Drejer, and Marques (2024); Raschendorfer and Figueira (2024); Fohim, Jacobs, and Sieger (2025); Petit (2025).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The specialized literature typically presents a periodization associated with each of these paradigms that is intrinsically related to the development of Public Administration in the U.S. (Durant, 2020). From this perspective, the Traditional Public Administration paradigm became institutionalized with Woodrow Wilson's influential 1887 paper and the emergence of Public Administration as an academic discipline in the U.S. at the end of the 19th century. This paradigm

lasted nearly a century, reaching its peak after Dwight Waldo's defense of the Administrative State in 1948. It came to an end in the late 1970s due to the crisis of the Welfare State in developed countries and the rise of neoliberalism.

The Public Management paradigm became institutionalized in the mid-20th century with the triumph of business schools in organizational fields, particularly in the U.S. This relegated traditional Public Administration education to an alternative approach to the emerging vision of Public Management (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). The paradigm's period of influence spanned from the early 1960s until the early 2000s. It peaked with the consolidation of neoliberalism in the post-1980 era. During this time, there was an intensification of opposition and criticism of worsening global socioeconomic inequality under neoliberalism. This constituted the brief but influential hegemony of the paradigm.

The Public Governance paradigm became institutionalized primarily after 1990 through the dissemination of documents on networked public policies and in support of the advancement of e-government from multilateral international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Bertucci, 2018; Spence, 2021; Matías-Pereira, 2023). This international action reflected recognition of and pressure from a more socioeconomically unequal world. The historical origins of this paradigm date back to the onset of the neoliberal state crisis in the 1990s, which is still ongoing. Figure 1 summarizes these transitions and the characteristics of these paradigms.

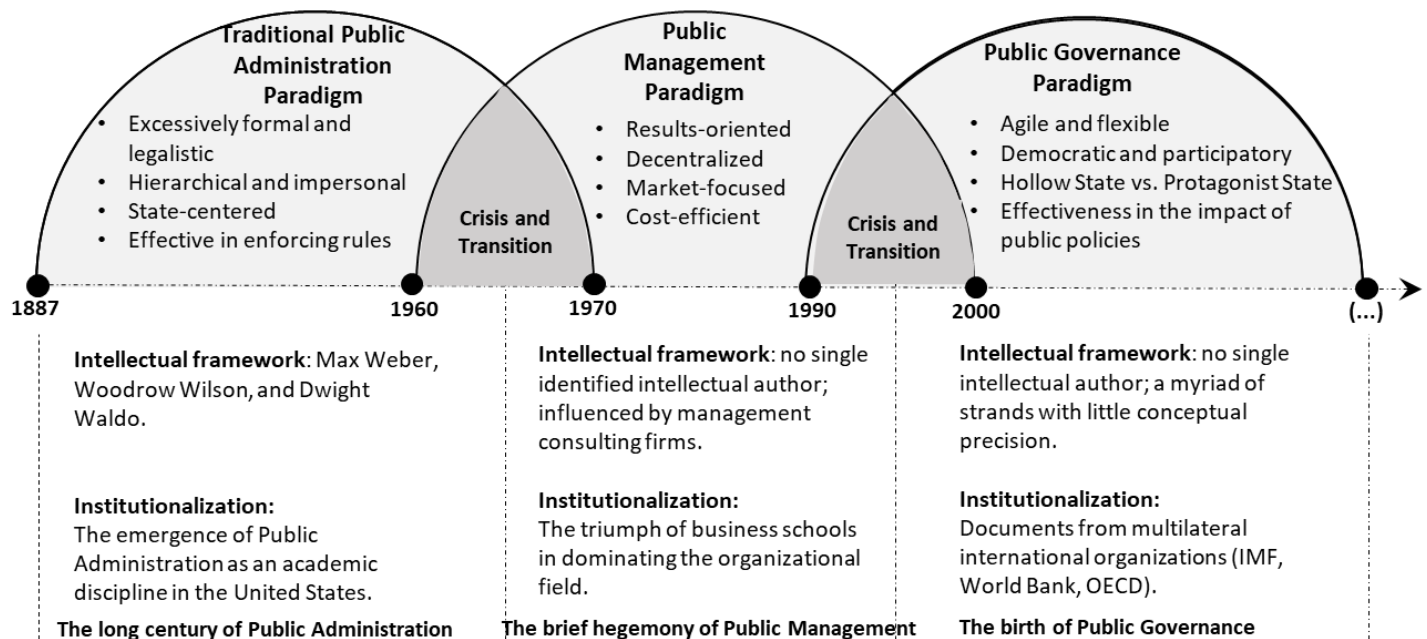


Figure1 – Paradigmatic evolution of Public Administration according to the international debate

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Henry (1975), Aucoin (1992), Rainey (1994), Barzelay (1992), Hood (1995, 1996), Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), Pollitt (2016), Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), Torfing et al. (2020), Osborne (2006, 2021), Pereira and Ckagnazaroff (2021), Matías-Pereira (2023), Popęda and Hadasik (2024), Dan, Lægreid, and Špaček (2024), and Fohim, Jacobs, and Sieger (2025).

Thus, while paradigmatic approaches in the field of Business Administration culminated in so-called “paradigm wars,” hindering progress (Paula, 2015), the field of Public Administration fragmented into a variety of proposals for possible paradigms. These proposals are caught in a debate about whether to overcome or reinforce one of the three major paradigms. Generally, these new paradigms are associated with one of the three broader paradigms. The most notable ones are the Neo-Weberian State and New Public Service proposals (which attempt to recover part of the Traditional Public Administration paradigm's legacy) (Rivera & Knox, 2023; Hajer & Chen, 2024); the Entrepreneurial or Reinventing Government and Public Value Management paradigms (usually associated with the Public Management paradigm) (Spicer, 2004; Zyzak, Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek & Jensen, 2024); and the Digital Age Governance and Collaborative Governance proposals (some of the various offshoots of the Public Governance discussion) (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Pollitt, 2016). Despite these criticisms, the same successive paradigmatic logic has been adopted in the Brazilian debate, as discussed below.

2.1 Paradigmatic approach to Public Administration in Brazil

The paradigmatic approach to Public Administration has been largely reinterpreted in Brazil, retaining the Kuhnian logic of the evolution of a paradigm's hegemony, its crisis, and its eventual replacement. As in the international experience, the consensus identified to shape a paradigm focused, first, on identifying the disciplines that predominated in the debate, and, subsequently, on managerial characteristics that would determine management models for a given historical period. Within the first group are works influenced by Henry (1975), the most significant of which is that of Keinert (1994), who

defined, for Brazil, the paradigms of Public Administration as Legal Science (from 1900 to 1929), Public Administration as Administrative Science (from 1930 to 1979), Public Administration as Political Science (from 1965 to 1979), and the emerging paradigm of Public Administration as Public Administration (from 1989 onward). This approach has been replicated primarily in research closer to the discussion of public policy, as seen in that of Farah (2011), Andion (2012), and Duarte and Zouain (2022).

Within the second group lies the influential work of Bresser-Pereira (1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2000, 2008, 2017), which was directly influenced by Barzelay's (1992) paradigmatic interpretation and became the principal work linked to the dissemination of historical paradigms of Public Administration at the national level. The influence of his approach was bolstered by the political and technical clout exercised by its author during his presidency of the Latin American Center for Development Administration (CLAD, 1999), a multilateral international organization supported by the United Nations (UN), and as Minister of Planning in the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, between 1995 and 1998. Bresser-Pereira became one of the most cited authors in the field of Public Administration in the country, and this approach is directly related to the influential paradigmatic debates of the 1990s by Aucoin (1992), Barzelay (1992), and Hood (1995, 1996). Consequently, this is the approach that will be analyzed in this study.

In the paradigmatic version developed by Bresser-Pereira and by the CLAD, the logic of evolution according to a process of crisis, revolution, and overcoming was maintained, as in the international experience. The main change in the Brazilian case, however, was the influence of Weber, given that two of his concepts – patrimonialism and bureaucracy – were adopted to define the first two paradigms, while the third, managerialism, is defined as an opposition or confrontation with those. Thus, the Brazilian experience was divided into three paradigms.

The first paradigm is that of Patrimonialist Public Administration (from 1500 to 1930), dominated by 430 years of appropriation of public assets by government elites, who used public resources as if they were their private property (patrimonialism). The second is that of Bureaucratic Public Administration (from 1930 to 1995), which emerged in opposition to the patrimonialist paradigm and stemmed from the conservative modernization process of the Vargas government, adopting a Weberian management model (a hierarchical, impersonal, formalistic, and legalistic bureaucracy). Bureaucratic excesses, however, would lead to inefficiency and its exhaustion during the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s. The third is that of Managerial Public Administration (from 1995 onward), with the adoption of private-sector management techniques in the public sector, institutionalizing managerialism in the Brazilian federal government starting in 1995, primarily through the Master Plan for the Reform of the State Apparatus (PDRAE), spearheaded by Bresser-Pereira while he served as Minister of Planning in the federal government. This evolution became known in the national literature as the “three historical forms of administration” (Costin, 2010, p. 31).

As has been the case in the international context, the national approach sought to establish historical milestones in the paradigm shift. To this end, the works of Bresser-Pereira and the CLAD did not focus solely on Weber, but drew on a unique combination of two recognized Brazilian historiographies. The first was the liberal historical-sociological interpretation, with a legal emphasis, carried out primarily by Raymundo Faoro (1958/2021) and, complementarily, by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1936). The second was the interpretation of the economic significance of colonization, an eclectic analysis combining Prado Jr. (1942/2004), Gorender (1978), Furtado (1959/2007), Cardoso (1980), and Novais (1979/1989), and which is known as the interpretation of the Old Colonial System. Common to both is the fact that they are currently understood as part of the so-called essayistic historiography of Brazil, which focuses more on conceptual reflection to interpret an era than on the empirical historical verification of the interpretations it presents.

2.2 Epistemology, theory, and empiricism: Critical weberianism as the guiding thread of paradigmatic criticism in Brazil

Bresser-Pereira's paradigmatic reading, though influenced by Weber, does not rely on a critical interpretation of this author, as carried out by the Frankfurt School. Frankfurtian analyses, such as those by Adorno (2009), Marcuse (1964/2015), and Habermas (1981/2012a, 1981/2012b), rigorously examined Weber's historical work, interpreting patrimonialism, the process of rationalization, and the formation of bureaucracies within the scope of the sociology of domination, highlighting bureaucracy as a form of power and control. In the readings of Bresser-Pereira (1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2000, 2008, 2017) and the CLAD (1999), in turn, Weber is understood as interpreted by the American sociological tradition of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton (Cohen, Hazelrigg & Pope, 1975). In this reading, Weber would have simply defended – erroneously – the superior efficiency of the hierarchical, impersonal, and legalistic management model, the bureaucratic management model that would become known as the Weberian model (Suzuki & Hur, 2020). These different interpretations of Weber are, therefore, the starting point for reflecting on the appropriateness of this paradigmatic Brazilian approach in Public Administration.

One of the main intellectual frameworks of critical Weberianism is provided by Habermas's interpretation of Weber (Habermas, 1963/2013; 1968/2011; 1981/2012a; 1981/2012b). In addition to positioning Weber as a critical historian, Habermas discusses his proposal for communicative rationality in dialogue with Weber's substantive or value-based rationality, and thus challenges the more restricted scientific positivist rationality, whose empirical emphasis ends up

distancing philosophical reflection from science or prioritizing the power of the method – of scientific practice – over theoretical reflection.

In contrast to narrow positivism, Habermasian philosophy treats theory and practice (*praxis*) as inseparable elements (Habermas, 1963/2013) and, therefore, does not consider epistemology, theory, and empiricism to be separate elements of knowledge (Habermas, 1968/2011). Given this, a critique of the paradigmatic approach grounded in Habermas's critical Weberianism becomes a critique that necessarily connects these three levels – epistemological, theoretical, and empirical. From this perspective, a paradigm founded on only one of these elements would thus represent a fragmented view of knowledge. Moreover, Habermas (1963/2013, 1968/2011) argues that scientific reason cannot be fragmented, not even subjectively, since it also involves a value-laden reflection associated with it, one that is ethically and politically oriented, as Weber discusses, since all knowledge stems from subjective values from which it cannot be disentangled. Therefore, all knowledge (critical, empirical, analytical) reflects the interests of those who engage in the process of knowing the world. Based on these integrated forms of knowledge, it is then possible to reflect on the paradigmatic approach.

Thus, at the epistemological level, drawing on the Habermasian approach, the strict paradigmatic positivism that separates epistemological criticism from theoretical positions – or these from empirical preferences – is challenged in order to construct paradigms on that basis (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Similarly, the definition of Public Administration paradigms based solely on management practices (*praxis*) separated from theory is questioned. At the theoretical level, in turn, Weber's traditional theory is questioned as a mere defender of a bureaucratic management model, given that Weber "sought to view modernization" in a broad theoretical sense, "as the result of a universal-historical process of rationalization," permeated by contradictions and disputes between different modes of domination (patriarchal, patrimonial, feudal, bureaucratic) (Habermas (1981/2012a, p.265). At the empirical level, it is questioned that, although theorized in a universal-historical manner, it is a phenomenon that, when observed concretely, possesses particularities in time and space. Thus, studying bureaucracy would not merely involve identifying, at a specific point in history, the emergence of a management model advocated by Weber, but rather understanding a complex historical phenomenon of rational domination, the result of a long and conflict-ridden process of bureaucratization that led to the instrumentalization of reason at the expense of its substantive or evaluative aspects. Therefore, to think about bureaucracy in light of critical Weberianism is to discuss the rationality of the bureaucratic phenomenon (epistemology), its explanation as a social phenomenon (theory), and its historical verification (empiricism).

Therefore, through Habermasian analysis, it is understood that there is an interpretation that connects epistemological criticism, the critical Weberian theory of the sociology of domination, and empirical historical research, forming an integrated whole of discussion that allows for questioning the interpretive limits of the paradigmatic approach in Public Administration. In the specific Brazilian case, there are important works of social research that draw directly on critical Weberianism, or that approach it. Through these works, it is possible to reflect on the sustainability of the Brazilian paradigmatic approach in epistemological, theoretical, and empirical terms.

2.2.1 Epistemological level

Since its emergence, the paradigmatic approach has been widely debated within the broader context of epistemological discussion (Renzi, 2009; Fuller, 2021; Bentley, 2024). Its suitability for the administrative field has also been questioned in the context of Business Administration and Organizational Studies (Paula, 2015). More than forty years ago, Guerreiro Ramos (1981, p.118) criticized the lack of theoretical consensus and autonomy in the administrative field, which, according to him, condemned Administration "to remain pre-analytical (...) on the periphery of the social sciences." This state of pre-analysis, therefore, would be closer to the pre-science phase than to Normal Science within the Kuhnian perspective, which would make it difficult to defend the existence of successive paradigms in the field. In fact, this was Thomas Kuhn's own position regarding all the social sciences. As Marcum (2005, p. 21) points out in his biography of the philosopher, Kuhn resented the "inappropriate application of the notion of paradigm by members of disciplines outside the physical sciences, especially sociologists, who used it to claim scientific status for their discipline." Despite this, the paradigmatic approach became quite influential outside the natural sciences, particularly in Law (Habermas, 1996; Delgado, Pimenta & Nunes, 2019), Sociology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and Business Administration (Hassard & Cox, 2013). The same occurred in the field of Public Administration, even though there was no single established theoretical framework that was dominant, homogeneous, and consensually shared, as required by the original Kuhnian proposal (Raadschelders, 2019; Cronin, Stouten & Van Knippenberg, 2021; Phan, 2021; Hattke & Vogel, 2023). However, the theoretical fragility of Public Administration pointed out by Guerreiro Ramos (1981, 1981/2022) continues to be identified in international research (Willmott, 2025; Griep, 2026).

In the recent international debate on Public Administration, this perception that the Kuhnian paradigmatic approach is inadequate has gained traction, as noted by Denhardt and Denhardt (2007; 2015), Margetts and Dunleavy (2013), Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2014), Torfing et al. (2020), and Wallis (2023), who indicate that there is insufficient homogeneity to stipulate a historical and sequential paradigmatic evolution in the field. Torfing et al. (p. 9) go so far as to acknowledge that paradigms "do not apply in the social sciences," but that if they are used for didactic purposes, their use would not

involve a sequence of supersession. According to Torfing et al. (pp. 1–3), there could be, at most, a coexistence, such as “coexisting governance paradigms,” while acknowledging, however, that “the predominant governance paradigm will not be able to eliminate the other competing governance paradigms.”

These relaxations in the use of the concept of paradigm, far removed from the original Kuhnian epistemological debate, have led to positions such as those of Margetts and Dunleavy (2013, p. 2), who suggest that it might be better to speak of a “quasi-paradigm.” In some cases, the same authors involved in the paradigmatic debate suggest that the use of paradigms should be rethought. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), for example, revisited the New Public Service proposal and argued that neither it nor New Public Management could be considered dominant paradigms, preferring the term “perspective,” as they did in their original book (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007, pp. 28–29), and as Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2014) also do. Therefore, the international debate has already begun to rethink the traditional use of the paradigmatic approach. Even widely cited national works, such as Secchi (2009), already indicated a replacement of the term “paradigm” with “organizational models.”

At the epistemological level, Habermas (1968/2011), in dialogue with critical Weberianism – as an heir to the “Weberian thesis of Western rationalization” (Mata, 2020, p. 253) – asserts that the pursuit of scientific knowledge is guided by the satisfaction of specific interests, which are inescapably tied to human subjectivity. As Weber (1922/2001, p. 153) had already argued, this occurs because “the empirically given” is “constantly guided by value ideas,” by premises and assumptions that guide the judgment of empirical verification. These premises and interests, however, have over time been associated with different ways of viewing science. Consequently, the natural or empirical-analytical sciences have been associated with technical interest, the humanistic or hermeneutic (interpretive) sciences with practical interest (*praxis*), and critical reflection on the sciences themselves with emancipatory interest. However, these three interests (technical, practical, and emancipatory) are not separable according to Habermas (1968/2011); it was strict positivism, which permeates the paradigmatic view, that privileged the technical over the others. Therefore, in the paradigmatic approach to Public Administration, the type of managerial technique became the primary criterion for defining administrative evolution, in which private business technique would surpass public governmental technique, in an interpretation influenced by NPM.

In Brazil, drawing on this Habermasian proposal, Paula (2015) developed the Circle of Epistemic Matrices in the mid-2010s, contrasting it with the traditional paradigmatic approach to the organizational field. The author analyzes how the paradigmatic view brought to Management and Organizational Studies by Burrell and Morgan (1979) stems from fundamental dichotomies in sociology that separate the interests behind scientific knowledge. These dichotomies create rigid oppositions regarding human nature (Determinism versus Voluntarism), ontology (Realism versus Nominalism), epistemology (Positivism versus Antipositivism), and methodology (Nomothetic Theory versus Idiographic Theory). Based on these views, Burrell and Morgan identified opposing relationships in understanding and researching the social world. They contrasted an objective approach with a subjective one and a view of society marked by either order/integration or conflict/coercion. The result was fragmented and disjointed paradigms, which became references to knowledge separated by methodological and theoretical issues grounded in an epistemology that divides knowledge into opposing ways of understanding social phenomena. Therefore, Kuhn’s (1962/1970) paradigms, when adapted to the organizational field, reproduced a divisionist view of knowledge.

Inspired by Habermas, Paula’s proposal (2015, pp. 132–133) envisions research as an “integrated whole of knowledge production.” This approach is based on two theses: cognitive incompleteness and epistemic reconstructions. According to the former, no single, isolated approach can exhaust the possibilities of understanding the world. According to the latter, epistemological foundations are not static; they are continuously reconstructed, reinterpreted, and renewed in a process of “excavating” new themes, theories, methods, and perspectives. These two theses form the basis of a new theory of knowledge development specific to the social sciences that moves beyond development based on crises and revolutions, as proposed by Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970). The proposal is the Circle of Epistemic Matrices, which integrates epistemology, analysis, and empiricism into a dynamic whole. The Circle consists of three matrices: analytical, hermeneutic, and critical. Rather than a definitive resolution between competing paradigms in organizational studies, there are new epistemologies, theories, and methods that dynamically contrast and complement each other, creating hybrid, boundary-pushing approaches that advance our understanding of the social world.

2.2.2 Theoretical level

In Brazil, a distinct organizational lineage of critical Weberianism already existed at the theoretical level. This lineage drew on the works of Guerreiro Ramos (1946/2006; 1952; 1960; 1981; 1981/2022), Prestes Motta (1986; 1981/2000), and Tragtenberg (1974; 1980/2005). However, it was disregarded during the development of the Brazilian paradigmatic approach. In sociology, rather than in the organizational debate, Jessé Souza (2006, 2019, 2022, 2024) represents a contemporary revival of this theoretical trajectory.

As analyzed by Andrews (2000, pp. 248–249), Paes de Paula (2007, pp. 185–186), and Souza and Ornelas (2015, pp. 452–458), Guerreiro Ramos’s work aligns with the Frankfurt School’s analysis, particularly that of Jürgen Habermas. However, Andrews (2000) points out that Ramos does not fully adhere to Habermasian communicative reason but aligns

with Habermas on other issues, such as the critique of the relationship between knowledge and interests and the concern with the predominance of instrumental reason in society (p. 249). Within this theoretical framework, Ramos (1946/2006; 1952; 1960) revisits the discussion of bureaucracy as power and the critique of instrumental rationality identified by Weber and Habermas. He also advocates for Public Administration as a means of promoting socioeconomic development and national power. For Ramos, overcoming Brazilian social inequalities – which involves the racial issue – brings the discussion of bureaucracy's role into “a project of racial democracy” (Mascaro, 2024, p. 76). This is his primary intellectual concern and the central axis of his political engagement (Barbosa, 2006; Maia, 2012; Campos, 2015; Cavalcanti & Alcadipani, 2015; Lynch, 2015). As Azevedo and Albernaz (2006, 2010) note, Ramos links his critical view of the racial issue to a political and social project. In this project, public bureaucracy is not merely a managerial model; it is a form of power that can be mobilized to address deep-rooted issues such as inequality, inherited racism from the era of slavery, and underdevelopment.

Ramos (1960, p. 18) analyzes “national power” based on Weber's sociology of domination. According to this theory, power is “the opportunity that an individual or group has to impose their will in collective action, even against the resistance of others participating in it.” This definition of power directly aligns with Weber's (1921/1999, pp. 188–191) concept of domination, which is the “possibility of imposing one's will on the behavior of others,” whereby “a manifest will ('command') of the 'dominator' or 'dominators' seeks to influence the actions of others.” According to Ramos, this domination can be rational and democratically legitimized when directed toward social development. In this case, “the fundamental objectives of national power must constitute themselves as the supreme normative authority capable of guiding the country's emancipatory process” (p. 39). Those who hold national power – those who control a country's regulatory, supervisory, and productive infrastructure – must therefore direct their capacity for intervention in the economy and society toward promoting egalitarian social development. This is not an applicable management model but rather a development project that remains unfinished and unimplemented in Brazilian society.

Maurício Tragtenberg (1966, 1997, 2005, 1974/2006) also draws on Weber's work as a critical analysis of the historical process of the rationalization of power. As Paula (2008, p.956) argues, “Tragtenberg was a discerning student of Weber” with whom he shared “concerns,” particularly “regarding the problems of the rationalization, secularization, and bureaucratization of social structures.” According to Paula (2008, p.957), what interested him is “that Weber identifies bureaucracy as a type of power and organization and as a system in which the division of labor is rationally established.” He stated it directly: “for Weber, bureaucracy is a type of power” (Tragtenberg, 1974/2006, p.139). This power associates the rational political domination of the state with the rational economic domination of industry. Weber made this connection by linking the discussion of bureaucratic power, which Hegel had previously addressed in relation to Aristotle, Hobbes, and Montesquieu, with the discussion of the optimism of Enlightenment reason, which Kant had initiated. In this sense, as Schechter (2010, p. 24) discusses, “Weber's sociology records the shift from Enlightenment-inspired Kantian reason to modernist rationalization.” In this shift, the state ceases to be the “idealized Rational State” of Hegel's political philosophy to become the state instrumentalized by the “rational-legal domination that permeates industrial society” (Schechter, 2010, p. 24).

At this point, Tragtenberg (1974, p. 116) revisits Weberian historical pessimism. For Weber, “history is not the process of triumphant reason.” The optimism of triumphant reason, in turn, lies behind the Kuhnian view of sequential scientific progress as a series of paradigms, an idea inherited from the most restricted form of positivism, as discussed by Habermas (1963/2013, 1968/2011). Thus, Tragtenberg's point brings Weber's historical critique of rational-bureaucratic domination into conflict with his interpretation as a proponent of a bureaucratic management model. According to Tragtenberg (1974/2006, p. 28), Weber was not interested in implementing management techniques or searching for a management model. Rather, he sought to understand the “effects of permanence” of bureaucracy – that is, bureaucracy as a form of power that perpetuates itself as “an instrument of the ruling classes.”

Fernando Prestes Motta (1986, p. 43) discusses the Hegel-Weber relationship regarding bureaucracy. He notes that “the state in Hegel is seen as the representative of the universal interests of all citizens” and “private corporations are seen as representatives of the particular interests present in civil society.” Weber demonstrated that both the state and private enterprises undergo a process of bureaucratic domination mediated by managerial organizational techniques. The traditional paradigmatic approach usually attributes bureaucratization solely to the state, which is also a mistake. The process of bureaucratization is characteristic of modern society. According to Prestes Motta (1986, p. 46), it goes far beyond a list of formal command characteristics and implies “a new type of personality, a new pattern of behavior,” guided by the logic of intense productivity in a “closed and highly competitive world.” It becomes a bureaucratic ethic. Prestes Motta (1986, p. 70) states that “this ethic implies certain ‘virtues,’ which include precision, continuity, uniformity, subordination, and rationality. These ‘virtues’ are necessary for the progress of capitalism and the maintenance of bureaucratic power.” They are not limited to the state or reduced to a public management model adopted by a country in a given era. Rather, they are the result of a broader, more widespread historical and social process in the modern world.

Prestes Motta (1986, p. 68) revisits the discussion of bureaucracy within Weber's analytical framework of historical forms of domination (traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal). From an organizational perspective, domination is expressed as organization. In this case, it is emphasized that “bureaucracy may constitute a group or a social class, but it

is also a form of power structured through bureaucratic organizations” (Bresser-Pereira & Motta, 2004, p. xiii). This entire bureaucratic apparatus extends to all modern organizations. Thus, bureaucracy is not merely a formalistic mode of organizing the state but rather an expression of modern rational control of one social group over another. It is a domination that operates through administration. Therefore, for Prestes Motta (1986, p. 49), what matters is understanding that “administration,” in this sense, “acts as a system of power” and not merely as a collection of managerial techniques. Thus, Motta views bureaucracy as an expression of rational domination that expands socially, similar to Foucault’s disciplinary power, emphasizing control and surveillance.

At the same time, Jessé Souza (2006, 2019, 2022, 2024) marks a return to the critical Weberian tradition of the sociology of domination by integrating the work of Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu. He criticizes what he calls “conservative culturalism,” the view that attributes a permanent inferiority to Brazilian society. This inferiorization reflects an alleged inability to overcome “scientific racism” – theories that use racialized arguments to explain cultural differences between societies, such as the U.S. and Brazil. These theories ultimately position non-white people in a subaltern position. Souza identifies a misinterpretation of patrimonialism in Weber as the root of Brazilian scientific racism. This misinterpretation obscured Weber’s discussion of power and domination. From this perspective, patrimonialism is reduced to inherently corrupt Portuguese behavior that is internalized through miscegenation and insurmountable in Brazil. In Souza’s opinion, four authors contributed to this understanding of patrimonialism: Gilberto Freyre, Darcy Ribeiro, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Raymundo Faoro.

According to Souza, Gilberto Freyre was a pioneer in defending cultural continuity between Portugal and Brazil, as well as the emotional character of the Brazilian people. Darcy Ribeiro was one of his followers. Although Sérgio Buarque de Holanda had argued against Freyre’s interpretation, he drew on his ideas and added two notions: a) the perception of a generic Brazilian without class distinctions, which is purely negative and embodied in the notion of the “cordial man,” and b) the extension of this notion into a patrimonial state, a development pursued with greater intensity by Raymundo Faoro. Souza states that these notions helped construct Brazilian conservative liberalism. According to this ideology, the Brazilian state is the institutionalization of the “cordial man,” and the public sector is inherently disorganized, corrupt, nepotistic, and patrimonialist. It exists solely to prevent the flourishing of economic liberalism in the country. However, Souza (2019, p. 200) states that, “for Max Weber, the inventor of the concept,” in his original discussion, “patrimonialism is inseparable from premodern conditions.” Therefore, for Souza (2024, p. 93), the notion of corruption only materialized after the emergence of the Modern State with the French Revolution; “before that, it was unthinkable that public goods – which would belong to everyone – could exist and be stolen by private individuals.” Making patrimonialism a condition of the organization of the Modern State in Brazil for centuries would be an anachronism and a misinterpretation.

2.2.3 Empirical level

Significant progress has been made in the field of historical research regarding the appropriateness of standard frameworks for understanding organizational development over time (Cummings & Bridgman, 2011; Barros, 2022; Egholm, Heller & Rowlinson, 2025; Cummings et al., 2026). Several contemporary researchers have called for a renewal of historical organizational research. One of the most debated points in critical Weberianism, for example, is the use of Weberian concepts in historical explanations. As Mata (2020, p. 258) points out, “Weber recognizes the inevitability of the historian’s recourse” to “certain heuristic fictions, that is, concepts.” However, this does not mean that Weberian historical readings use concepts without empirical support to confirm them; rather, conceptualization is necessary to aid in understanding historical sources. Along these lines, Habermas (1981/2012a, p.354) highlights that “Weber,” in his social research on bureaucratization, “investigates the process of disenchantment (...) from a concrete historical vantage point,” that is, one verifiable through specific historical evidence and sources. Ramos (1946/2006, p.268), like Habermas, regards Weber as a critical historian whom he considers to have made “the most successful attempt to establish a sociological science of history.” In this vein, one of the most debated Weberian concepts and one most frequently tested against empirical evidence is that of patrimonialism as a historical category (Regatieri, 2021), which, in the case of the paradigmatic approach, is used to justify 430 years of the same management model.

Based on his Weberian historical analysis, Ramos (1946/2006, p. 274) concludes that “the patrimonial structure is pre-bureaucratic and, for this reason, incompatible with rational – that is, modern – economics, law, and fiscal policy.” This position aligns with that of Jessé Souza (2019, 2022, 2024), who criticizes the use of a concept that Weber himself considered premodern to explain Brazil’s historical development without interruption from the 16th to the 20th century, as Faoro (1958/2021) did. Schwartzman (1988/2021, p. 781) notes that it is “curious” that “despite his extensive use of history, Faoro had a wholly ahistorical view of the phenomenon he studied,” since “the country transformed, new technologies emerged, the world changed, yet the bureaucratic class remained unchanged.” Therefore, it is in historical research, and not merely in sociological debate, that patrimonialism encounters its greatest obstacle. The essayistic tradition of history in Brazil, to which the traditional Weberianism of Buarque de Holanda and Faoro is indebted, has been challenged by the renewal of historical research in the country.

At the empirical level, the renewal of Brazilian historical research on the colonial and imperial periods emphasizes empirical evidence for historical interpretation. This approach aligns more closely with critical Weberianism, which challenges Faoro's (1958/2021) six-century patrimonialism, than with traditional Weberianism grounded in historical essayism. One of the main recent approaches in historical research, the *Ancien Régime* in the Tropics (ART), criticizes historical essayism as its initial point of divergence (Sampaio, 2020; Mello, 2022; Fragoso & Bicalho, 2022). The ART approach directly challenges the essayist tradition and interpretations associated with the economic dimension of colonization, which are linked to that tradition. These works underpin Bresser-Pereira's (1996) patrimonialist paradigm.

The ART emerged shortly after the publication of Bresser-Pereira's and the CLAD's works in the 1990s. It became established in the early 2000s. Since then, the historical interpretation of the colonial era has been the subject of intense debate (Fragoso, Bicalho & Gouvêa, 2001; Fragoso & Gouvêa, 2009, 2010, 2014; Sampaio, 2020; Fragoso & Bicalho, 2022; Fragoso, 2024). The ART offers a transatlantic perspective on historical research, influenced by Portuguese historian António Manuel Hespanha and new Portuguese historical studies on colonial Brazil (Cabral, 2022). As a methodological distinction, the ART proposes a historical interpretation grounded in the intensive use of documentary sources, such as letters, official communications, notarial records, and historical statistical data. Therefore, its research method differs from the essayistic approach that prioritizes conceptual reflection on social phenomena, as practiced by Freyre (1933/2003), Holanda (1936/1996), and Faoro (1958/2021).

Although it is not an essentially Weberian historical perspective, the way in which the ART approaches the discussion of history – highlighting the complexity of social phenomena and their active networks of relationships – aligns more closely with a critical Weberian interpretation of history than with the traditional Weberian interpretation of Brazilian historical essays. The ART openly diverges from the latter. As Jasmin (2021, p. 789) points out, Faoro (1958/2021) is associated with a simplistic interpretation of Weber that is responsible for “identifying patrimonialism and the State” at a generic level and placing “in the State, and not in society, the main cause of the country's ills.” This view shaped the interpretation of a Weberian bureaucratic model that emerged to confront patrimonialism, but which became inefficient and wasteful, as argued in the paradigmatic approach. Critical Weberianism, in turn, is closer to the strand that Jasmin (2021, p. 790) calls “societal,” in which “the relations between the bureaucratic class and political elites would be far more complex,” as in the historical reading provided by the ART. Fragoso and Bicalho (2022) mention this need to complexify historical analysis in their assessment of the evolution of the ART, even citing the work of Bourdieu – another sociologist associated with critical Weberianism – and Weber himself.

However, when Bresser-Pereira (1996) wrote his proposal, the prevailing interpretation of the colonial period was not the ART, but rather an economic understanding of colonization. This understanding drew on an eclectic combination of interpretations, ranging from Caio Prado Jr. (1942/2004) to Celso Furtado (1959/2007) and was synthesized in the work of Fernando Novais (1989). Novais built on previous interpretations by proposing a model of colonization driven by the primitive accumulation of capital via mercantilism to facilitate the mercantile-capitalist transition in the old European regimes. Bresser-Pereira (1996) combined this view of colonization driven by the accumulation of capital with corrupt state patrimonialism. Thus, he proposed the historical evolution of an administratively disorganized state that was averse to industrial leadership in the country. Following Buarque de Holanda's (1936/1996, p. 33) essayistic line of thought, this would explain “our anarchy, our inability to achieve solid organization.”

However, the ART rejects both essayism and the interpretation of the economic meaning of colonization. The ART does not reject these ideas through reflection using sociological categories, but rather through empirical research. According to the ART, colonization is explained by the attempt to reproduce an archaic mode of social organization within the colonial territory. This mode of organization reflects a late Portuguese modernity (Sampaio, 2020; Fragoso & Bicalho, 2022; Fragoso, 2024). This argument is similar to Jessé Souza's (2006) critical Weberian interpretation, which views Brazil's social development as peripheral modernity.

Therefore, the purpose of colonization would be to recreate the European Portuguese Old Regime in the colony. This regime naturalized inequalities (Fragoso, 2024) and was sustained by a combination of pre-capitalist strategies of domination, such as slavery, religious obedience, and the institution of graces, favors, and gifts. This aligns with Weber's discussion of the sociology of domination. This approach prioritizes social domination as a complex phenomenon and would lead “to the revival of a concept that, though ancient, had been set aside: that of empire” (Sampaio, 2020, p. 10). An empire is the rational domination of a state that expands to other peoples. In the Portuguese case, this expansion relied on private and public action according to a differentiated organizational effort combining various strategies of rational domination and multiple administrative arrangements. In this case, patrimonialism would be just one element of domination and must be reevaluated in light of historical documentation. As Souza (2024, p. 93) points out, the privileges arising from the appropriation of public offices were not viewed as corruption at the time: “One cannot speak of corruption in the modern sense prior to the French Revolution and the invention of the idea of popular sovereignty,” such that “such appropriation was not interpreted by contemporaries as immoral but rather as a consequence of the position of authority in royal and municipal offices” (Fragoso, 2024, p. 139). As Fragoso and historical documentation demonstrate, this was a complex society that took both inequality and privileges for granted.

Figure 2 summarizes these connections, which can be traced through critical Weberianism, especially Habermasianism, at three levels: epistemological, theoretical, and empirical. These connections point to possible critiques of the paradigmatic approach within the field of Public Administration.

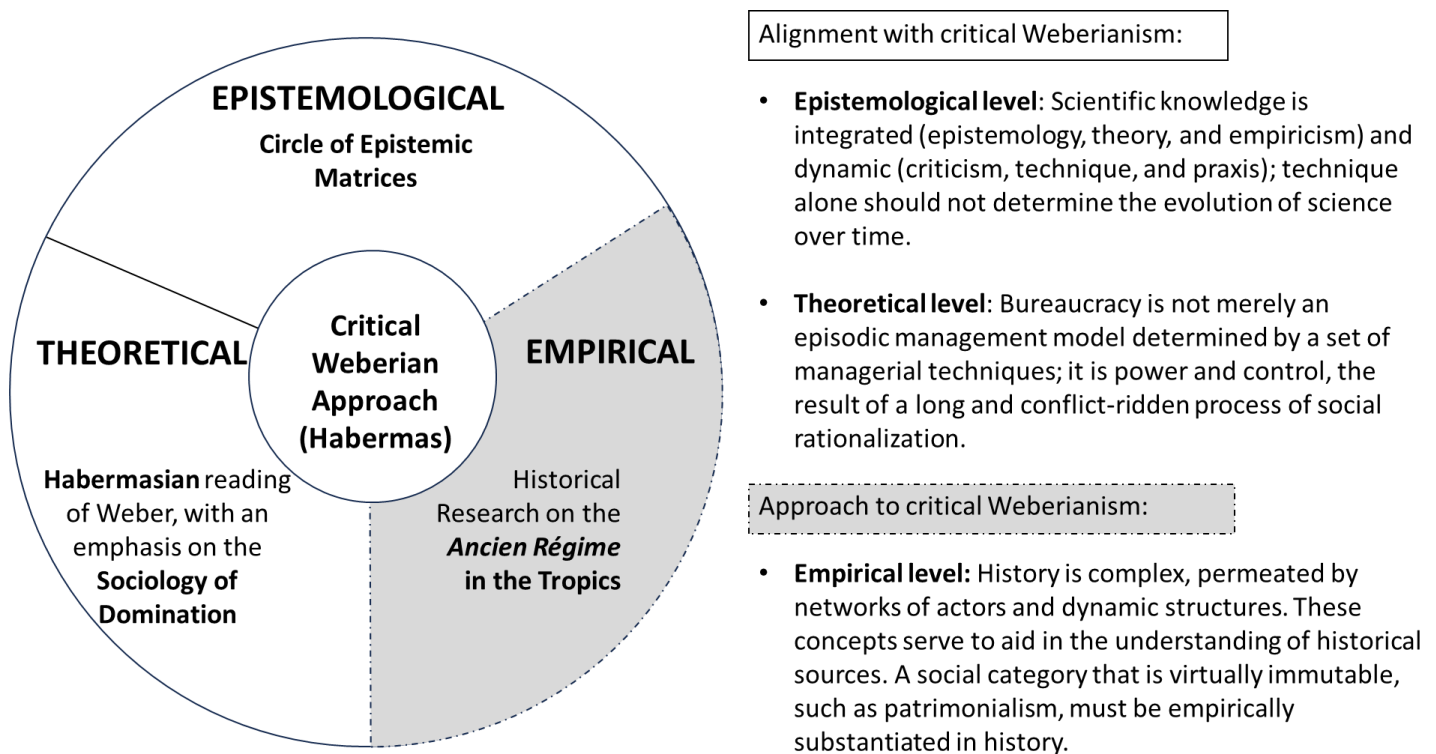


Figure 2. Integrated critique (epistemological, theoretical, and empirical) of the paradigmatic approach to Public Administration in Brazil
Source: Prepared by the authors based on Habermas (1963/2013; 1968/2011, 1981/2012a, 1981/2012b), Ramos (1946/2006; 1952; 1960; 1981; 1981/2022), Tragtenberg (1966, 1997, 2005, 1974/2006), Motta (1986, 1981/2000), and Paula (2015).

3 METHODOLOGY

This theoretical essay reflects on a topic that is still under development within the scope of Public Administration in Brazil: the specific debate on paradigms in this field. As Creswell (2014, p. 52) notes, when “a problem or issue needs to be explored,” the preliminary step is to discuss “variables that cannot be easily measured,” which usually directs the method of analysis toward “qualitative research.” Although the usual approach to analyzing scientific output in a given field relies on quantitative bibliometric metrics (Pinheiro, 2021) whose protocols are widely established in organizational discussions (Donthu et al., 2021), an exploratory literature review of national scientific output related to this topic was conducted. This method is appropriate for the exploratory nature of the discussion and is more consistent with the Habermasian theoretical lens that guides the discussion of critical Weberianism (Cottrell, 2023). Methodologically, it situates the discussion within what Creswell (2014, p. 33) calls “interpretive frameworks” of a “transformative” and critical approach.

This method was chosen to provide greater support for theoretical reflection on the possibilities of conceiving of Public Administration beyond paradigms in Brazil. The aim is to identify, on a preliminary basis, whether epistemological, theoretical, and empirical positions related to – or similar to – critical Weberianism have been addressed in national research over the past 30 years. This research period begins with the paradigmatic proposal by Bresser-Pereira (1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2000, 2008, 2017) and the CLAD (1999).

As shown in Figure 3, the literature review was conducted based on an initial delineation of the scholarly literature corpus in Public Administration, Public Management, and Public Governance across three databases: a) the Scientific Periodicals Electronic Library (SPELL®), a system for indexing, searching, and freely accessing scientific output, particularly in the fields of Public Administration, Business Administration, Accounting, and Tourism; b) the Scientific Electronic Library Online - Brazil (SciELO-Brasil), a virtual library of Brazilian scientific journals in electronic format; and c) the electronic proceedings of the events of the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Administration (ANPAD). Scientific articles were consulted in all databases with no start date restriction and an end date of 2026, limited to Brazil. The following terms were searched for in Portuguese and English in the titles, keywords, abstracts, or body text: “public administration,” “public management,” and “public governance.” This initial search yielded thousands of articles, and the sample was narrowed to identify works that specifically addressed these terms as organizational paradigms of Public Administration. From this general body of documents, articles were selected that discussed these terms as manifestations

of Public Administration paradigms rather than mere generic expressions to some degree. The result was 161 articles in the SciELO-Brasil database, 70 in the SPELL database, and 34 in the ANPAD proceedings.

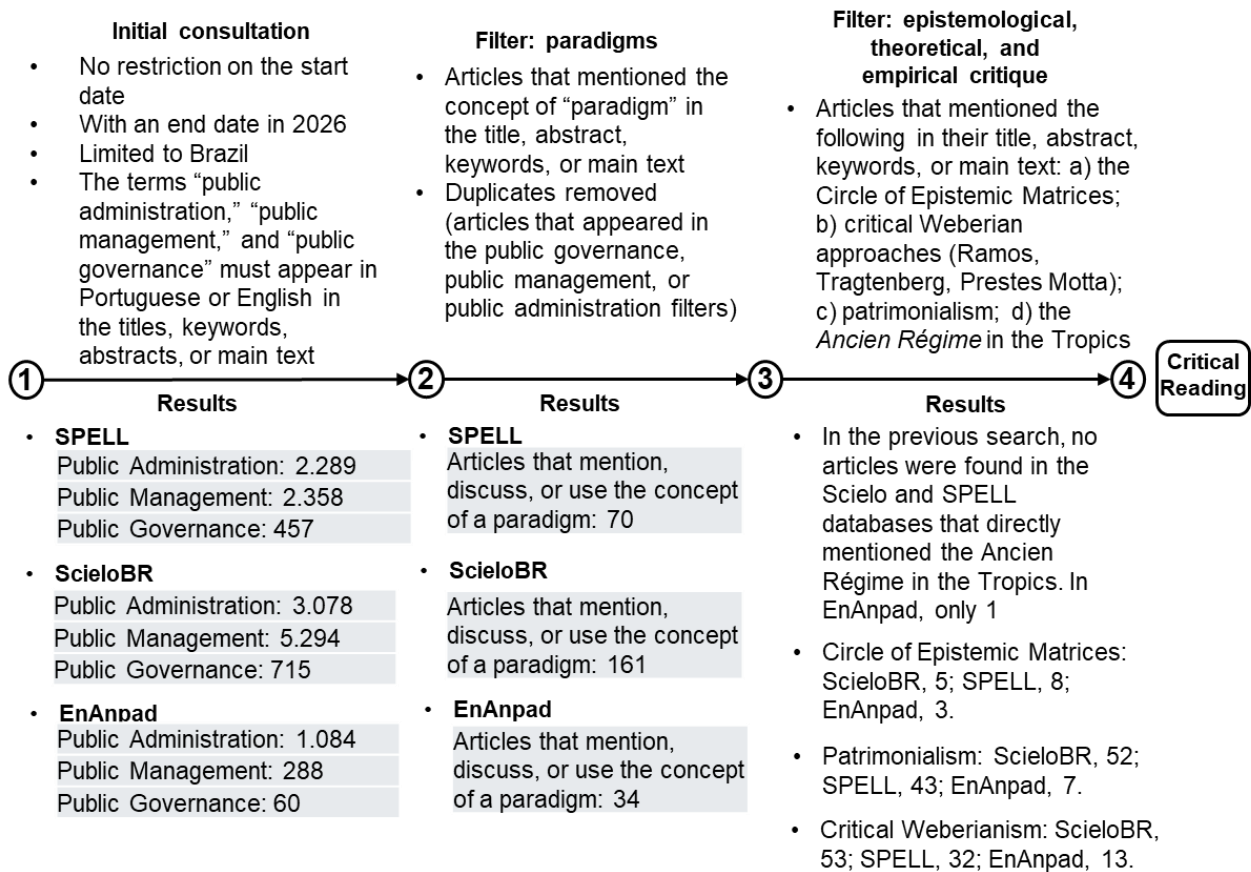


Figure 3. Stages of the literature review

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Subsequently, as shown in Figure 3, articles related to Brazilian research in Public Administration, Public Management, or Public Governance were filtered to include those addressing any of these approaches related to critical Weberianism, as discussed in the theoretical framework of this essay, that is, those related to the Circle Of Epistemic Matrices, the critical organizational Weberianism of Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta, and the *Ancien Régime* in the Tropics (ART). Thus, works dealing only with general theoretical discussions, sociology, or organizational theory were excluded, as were those not addressing the Brazilian context. Regarding the Circle of Epistemic Matrices, the same four articles were found in the SciELO-Brasil and SPELL databases, plus one additional article in the ANPAD proceedings. Regarding the critical Weberian theoretical approach, 53 articles were found in SciELO-Brasil, 32 in SPELL, and 13 in the ANPAD proceedings. Regarding the ART, no articles directly related to the organizational discussion of Public Administration, Public Management, or Public Governance were found in the SciELO-Brasil and SPELL databases; only one was found in the ANPAD proceedings. For the purposes of analysis, it was therefore decided to conduct a dual comparison. First, articles addressing the Weberian concept most directly affected by empirical research on the ART were searched for. This concept is patrimonialism incorporated into the paradigmatic approach. Second, a search on the ART was conducted that was not limited to the context of Public Administration, Public Management, or Public Governance. This was done in order to gain a general understanding of the scientific literature on the subject. As a result, 84 articles on the ART were found in SciELO-Brasil, and 52 articles on patrimonialism were found in SciELO-Brasil, 43 in SPELL, and seven in the ANPAD proceedings. These data are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the bibliographic search

Results of the bibliographic search					
	Paradigmatic Approach	Epistemological Level	Theoretical Level		Empirical Level
Databases	Paradigms of Public Administration, Public Management, or Public Governance	Epistemic Matrices Applied to Public Administration Research	Patrimonialism in Public Administration and the Brazilian State	Critical Weberian Approach to Public Administration	The <i>Ancien Régime</i> in the Tropics
SciELO	161	4	52	53	84
SPELL	70	4	43	32	0
ANPAD	34	1	7	13	1

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from SciELO-Brasil, SPELL, and ANPAD proceedings.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

4.1 The epistemological suitability of the paradigmatic approach to Public Administration

The research conducted revealed that the paradigmatic approach to Public Administration is well-established and well-consolidated in Brazil, with hundreds of published articles employing it. However, of the analyzed articles, most merely apply the approach without further questioning it, and few include a discussion of its appropriateness. The articles that did so have become references in the field and rank among the most-cited articles in the country. Examples include those by Paula (2005) and Secchi (2009), which have received 1,023 and 1,400 citations, respectively, on Google Scholar as of early 2026, as well as Andion (2012), which has received 283 citations. Nevertheless, these articles tend to propose new paradigms or interpretations of existing ones. These works emphasize differences in premises, the political context of state action, public policy, and the impact of technological changes rather than the simple adoption of private management techniques in the public sector.

As analyzed in the theoretical framework, the international literature shows signs of distancing itself from the original Kuhnian proposal by increasingly incorporating the terms “quasi-paradigm” (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013, p. 2) and “perspective” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007, pp. 28–29) to describe different organizational structures in Public Administration. The term “quasi-paradigm” was not found in the Brazilian literature analyzed; however, the applications of paradigms suggest a notion closer to a management model or perspective than to a scientific paradigm in Kuhnian terms, grounded in theoretical and practical scientific consensus.

Furthermore, the exploratory literature review indicates that Paula’s (2015) Circle of Epistemic Matrices is beginning to influence national Public Administration research. For example, Oliveira (2021) and Silva and Batista-dos-Santos (2022) have already applied this approach. This indicates the beginning of a discussion that may lead to new epistemological ways of thinking about research in the field in the country beyond the traditional paradigmatic approach. This approach allows one to develop studies that move away from the relentless search for new paradigms and recover a more integrated understanding of Public Administration. This understanding is less instrumentalized and less focused on the succession of managerial techniques. Instead, it is more oriented toward analyzing public bureaucracies as power and control and as infrastructure for national development. These bureaucracies are situated within the context of political disputes and have their own technical developments, not merely being imported from the private sector. In this regard, the critical Weberian reading by Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta can be helpful.

4.2 Paradigmatic Weberianism and the critical theoretical revival of the sociology of domination

In the debate on paradigms, the need for theoretical consensus is a sensitive point (Renzi, 2009; Paula, 2015; Fuller, 2021; Bentley, 2024). The literature review indicates that the critical Weberian approach represented by Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta is well-established in Brazil. The dozens of articles identified in the SciELO-Brasil, SPELL, and ANPAD databases confirm that the volume of works on this approach is similar to that of works on patrimonialism. However, its contribution to the organizational debate is broader, given the influence of these authors on Business Administration and Organizational Studies discussions. A search for Guerreiro Ramos in the SciELO-Brasil and SPELL databases, for example, yields 97 and 110 articles, respectively, for the same period and without restriction to the discussion of Public Administration. This suggests that, at least, this approach could have been considered an alternative paradigm in contention with the traditional paradigmatic reading, as proposed by Burell and Morgan (1979). However, this did not occur. This is probably because the authors’ view of bureaucracy as a process of rationalization and a form of power and control clashes with the view of bureaucracy as a management model. This points to a different approach to analyzing the history of Brazilian Public Administration.

In contrast to the ongoing reflection on Weberian categories in the sociological debate (Mata, 2018; Souza, 2019, 2022, 2024; Jasmin, 2021; Regatieri, 2021; Dantas, 2022; Mascaro, 2024), there is no systematic presentation of critical Weberianism for interpreting Public Administration in Brazil. Various works seek to apply theoretical elements primarily from Ramos and Tragtenberg, who developed their own theories and concepts, such as the “parenthetical man” and “administrative harmonization.”

However, the work of Jessé Souza (2006, 2019, 2024, 2024), which aligns with the tradition of critical Weberian interpretation, has not yet emerged as a critical organizational theory in the reviewed literature. Nevertheless, his critique questions the foundations of the paradigmatic view more forcefully by pointing out the fallacies of the Brazilian adaptation of patrimonialism. This adaptation is central to Bresser-Pereira’s first paradigm of Public Administration and the framework upon which the bureaucratic and managerialist paradigms are based.

4.3 Traditional paradigmatic essays and the empirical renewal of historical research

If there is a blind spot in the Brazilian paradigmatic approach, it would be historical research related to the patrimonialism period. The survey indicates the consolidation of the ART with over 80 articles related to historical research grounded in or influenced by this perspective. However, none of these articles have been published in Public Administration

journals, and as of January 2026, there was not a single article related to this perspective in SPELL. The ANPAD database only had one study from 2025. Although the ART is recognized as rigorous and influential research in recent historiography, it is practically nonexistent in the field of Public Administration. This field continues to promote the periodization and historical analysis contained in the traditional paradigmatic approach.

Regarding patrimonialism, national Public Administration research typically accepts the patrimonialist paradigm and applies the concept unquestioningly. This occurs in virtually the entire analyzed corpus of the more than 50 articles identified in SciELO-Brasil and the four dozen in SPELL. Couto et al. (2023) are the main exception; in the ANPAD database, only one article from 2025 directly challenges this approach. Therefore, the vast majority adopt patrimonialism as synonymous with a form of corruption inherited from Portugal that is ingrained in the state and has permeated the country for centuries – a traditional interpretation in Brazilian historical essays (Holanda, 1936/1996; Faoro, 1958/2021). However, in sociological debate, the discussion on patrimonialism has never been so homogeneous, much less aimed at establishing a 430-year-old organizational paradigm. There is a long history of reflections on the limits and possibilities of applying Weberian patrimonialism in Brazil. This topic has been discussed by Mata (2018), Souza (2019), Jasmin (2021), Regatieri (2021), Dantas (2022), and Mascaro (2024). Jessé Souza (2006, 2019, 2022, 2024) has primarily reignited this debate over the past 15 years. It is a debate that is still largely absent from Brazilian organizational literature.

This discussion brought forth by the ART allows us to see that, contrary to the paradigmatic approach, slavery would play a prominent role in the organization of social life in Brazil, alongside patrimonialism. It is important for organizational research in Public Administration to incorporate this analysis. Furthermore, the ART proposes that domination is the result of a complex set of actions and not merely a reflection of corrupt Portuguese culture. This rationality combines the efforts of the state and private entities, such as slaveholders, large landowners, and the church, to dominate. It is not merely patrimonialist state action that has persisted for centuries. Therefore, this renewal of historical research, together with the social domination line of thought that views bureaucracy formation as a means of exercising power, challenges the sustainability of the current paradigmatic approach to Public Administration in Brazil and could be addressed in future research in the field.

4.4 Thinking about Public Administration beyond paradigms: Challenges and possibilities

In summary, the exploratory literature review within the scope of Public Administration indicates that paradigmatic reflection is well-established and that paradigms, especially patrimonialism, are usually taken as given. Additionally, epistemological works of reference are still associated with the search for new paradigms that succeed one another over time. Nevertheless, the Circle of Epistemic Matrices is beginning to be utilized, and the interpretation of paradigms seems closer to a notion of perspective and management model than to the original Kuhnian sense. However, critical Weberianism is not systematized within this debate. While much research is being conducted, it is anchored in the specific contributions of concepts primarily developed by Ramos and Tragtenberg. These authors are recognized for having their own theoretical framework, which is not as much the case with Prestes Motta. The major gap, however, lies in historical research. While Public Administration continues to treat 430 years of patrimonialism as historical fact, ART research complicates this view. A debate between these two fields is necessary.

This scenario opens up possibilities for rethinking Public Administration beyond existing paradigms. First, we could incorporate the advances made in historical research over the last 30 years into the Public Administration debate, especially those regarding the colonial period. The empirical contributions of the ART render the idea of a 430-year-old, unchanging, homogeneous management model based on ahistorical patrimonialism and a concept of corruption unilaterally determined by the state unsustainable. Furthermore, the ART itself points to important areas that future historical research in Public Administration could explore in greater depth: a) the impact of Indigenous and African slavery on Brazil's administrative organization; b) the rational-legal elements that foreshadowed a rational bureaucracy prior to 1930; c) the updating of the concept of patrimonialism in light of discussions on the institutions of gifts, grace, and favors (the economy of favors); d) the administrative influences of the Portuguese overseas empire on the organization of the Brazilian state beyond the category of cultural patrimonialism.

From a theoretical perspective, the discussion of critical Weberianism in Brazilian Public Administration must be systematized. As Jessé Souza (2019, p. 12) argues, for Weber, "the question of power is the central issue in every society." Thus, the discussion of Public Administration based on bureaucracy as a form of power needs to be revisited in a more structured manner, considering the analysis by Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta. Further research could present this Weberian approach, focusing on bureaucracy as a coordinated power of intervention in society to address deep-seated social inequalities under a legitimate and democratic process of rational-legal domination. From a critical Weberian perspective, research could investigate the role of bureaucracy in addressing crises such as the health crisis caused by the pandemic, safeguarding democratic institutions following the rise of far-right authoritarianism, and combating socioeconomic inequalities that intensified after the 2008 economic crisis.

In the epistemological scenario, the main focus would be to initiate a discussion about the adequacy of the paradigmatic approach. This discussion would entail rethinking the relevant contributions of this approach and identifying

elements that could be updated or modified. The epistemological discussion is profound and requires further debate. The lack of specific epistemological works on Public Administration in Brazil hinders further exploration of the subject. In this regard, the Circle of Epistemic Matrices is an important contribution, yet it remains largely unincorporated into discussions of Public Administration.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The paradigmatic approach is highly influential and well-established in organizational discourse. According to the theoretical analysis presented in this essay, its proposal to adapt Thomas Kuhn's original discussion links it to historical moments of transition in management techniques. Thus, it moved away from the original Kuhnian discussion, diminishing its organizational theoretical influence and shifting toward an emphasis on managerial practice (the practice-driven, atheoretical approach). Consequently, three major organizational paradigms emerged, succeeding one another over time: Traditional Public Administration, Public Management, and Public Governance.

Bresser-Pereira adapted this perspective into a paradigmatic proposal for the evolution of Public Administration in Brazil through an intellectually eclectic framework. The proposal centered on traditional Weberianism, influenced by the American sociological interpretation of Weber, and combined Brazilian historical interpretations of the essayist tradition and the economic significance of colonization. This combination conceived the organizational paradigms of Patrimonialist, Bureaucratic, and Managerial Public Administration. Traditional Weberianism permeates the most influential paradigmatic proposal in Brazil's Public Administration debate through its central use of the concepts of patrimonialism, linked to corruption, and bureaucracy, portrayed merely as a list of impersonal, legal, and hierarchical organizational characteristics.

However, critical Weberianism, particularly in its Habermasian interpretation, is an approach linked to the Frankfurt School. This approach seeks to revisit Weber as a sociologist and a critical historian of the rationalization process. Weber helped structure the sociology of domination, which is a sociological approach that understands bureaucracy as a form of power, not merely as a list of organizational characteristics. This theoretical essay argues that critical Weberianism allows us to reconsider this paradigmatic approach to Public Administration. In dialogue with Weber, Habermas highlights the impossibility of treating knowledge as separate from subjective epistemological premises. This isolation of technical discussions from theoretical ones criticizes the strict positivism underlying the paradigmatic evolution. Knowledge is an integrated whole comprising epistemology, theory, and empiricism.

In Brazil, works associated with critical Weberianism epistemologically discuss organizational scientific production (the Circle of Epistemic Matrices) and debate theories of bureaucracy as a form of power (Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta). These approaches offer an alternative to traditional Weberianism within the paradigmatic approach at its epistemological and theoretical levels. Furthermore, historical research movements such as the *Ancien Régime* in the Tropics directly question the essayistic tradition and the interpretation of the economic meaning of colonization, which underpin the Brazilian paradigmatic proposal. These movements complicate historical interpretation by emphasizing empirical evidence. These historical research approaches are closer to critical Weberianism than to traditional Weberianism.

Since the advent of the paradigmatic approach in the country, national research has advanced epistemological, theoretical, and empirical discussions following or approaching critical Weberianism. However, this discussion has not yet been properly incorporated into Public Administration research, despite its presence in contemporary Weberian sociological debates and the renewal of historical research in Brazil. An exploratory literature review of national scientific output suggests incorporating these approaches into the discussion of Public Administration in Brazil.

This work contributes to the reflection on the possibility of conceiving of Brazilian Public Administration beyond paradigms, particularly in the following ways: a) pointing to the path opened by the *Ancien Régime* in the Tropics for rethinking a form of patrimonialism capable of underpinning a management model that has endured in Brazil for 430 years with almost no change; b) indicating that the theoretical path of critical Weberianism charted by Ramos, Tragtenberg, and Prestes Motta is well-established in Brazil and strongly connected to the contemporary critical Weberian debate led by Jessé Souza, which has not yet been fully incorporated into Public Administration research; c) indicating that epistemological alternatives, such as the Circle of Epistemic Matrices, have already discussed the limits and possibilities of paradigmatic approaches to Administration in general and Organizational Studies, but these alternatives have not yet been fully incorporated into the national debate on Public Administration, suggesting the need to strengthen epistemological reflection in the field.

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