Two faces of „relational turn“ in the social sciences

Peeter Selg, IASR, post-doctoral researcher
PS: Political Science & Politics

Formerly PS Volumes 1 (1968) - 20 (1987)

Editor(s):
Phillip Ardoin, Appalachian State University, USA
Paul Gronke, Appalachian State University, USA

Published for the American Political Science Association

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"while we do not agree on many things, we would probably all agree that one primary tie among political scientists is our emphasis on power..."

SYMPOSIUM

Political Networks

Editors’ Introduction: A Relational Political Science

Scott D. McClurg, Southern Illinois University
Joseph K. Young, Southern Illinois University

Political science is diverse in its methods, theories, and substantive interests. A quick perusal of our flagship journals reveals just how heterogeneous we are, with articles ranging from mathematical treatments of theoretical problems to...
"We contend that this unifying concept is, at its very core, relational."

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Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz „Two faces of power“ American Political Science Review 56(04) 1962: 947-952

„Two faces of ‘relational turn’“ [pending in PS: Political Science & Politics]
Introduction

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Preface, *A Chinese Encyclopedia* in which:

“animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”
Introduction

Another Chinese Encyclopedia with the list of what I have:
(a) distance,
(b) fatherhood,
(c) a reputation,
(d) a sense of humor,
Introduction

Norbert Elias on process-reduction:
Our languages are constructed in such a way that we can often only express constant movement or constant change in ways which imply that it has the character of an isolated object at rest, and then, almost as an afterthought, adding a verb which expresses the fact that the thing with this character is now changing.
Our languages are constructed in such a way that we can often only express constant movement or constant change in ways which imply that it has the character of an isolated object at rest, and then, almost as an afterthought, adding a verb which expresses the fact that the thing with this character is now changing. For example, standing by a river we see the perpetual flowing of the water. But to grasp it conceptually, and to communicate it to others, we do not think and say, “Look at the perpetual flowing of the water”; we say, “Look how fast the river is flowing.”
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Another Chinese Encyclopedia with the list of **what I have:**

(e) a hammer,

What a hammer is, is defined relationally. Qua physical object or body, a hammer does not even exist. A thing is not a hammer unless and until it is used as a hammer, which is to say, put to human uses (driving nails, building shelters, etc.) by human beings (carpenters). A *hammer is what it is by virtue of its being a constitutive element in an ensemble of relations*, and not merely by virtue of its size, shape, weight, or other physical characteristics. (*Terence Ball, Two Concepts of Coercion*, *Theory and Society*, 5 (1), 1978, p. 105, italics added)
Introduction

Another Chinese Encyclopedia with the list of what I have:

(f) an earthquake,

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 108)
Introduction

Another Chinese Encyclopedia with the list of what I have:

(a) distance,  
(b) fatherhood,  
(c) a reputation,  
(d) a sense of humor,  
(e) a hammer,  
(f) an earthquake.  

(g) a non-blowing wind.
Another Chinese Encyclopedia with the list of what I have:

(a) distance, ➔ ANGLO-AMERICAN

(b) fatherhood,

(c) a reputation,

(d) a sense of humor,

(e) a hammer,

(f) an earthquake.

(g) a non-blowing wind.
Introduction

POWER?

DEMOCRACY?

FREEDOM?

EQUALITY?

STATE?

IDENTITY?
„Relational“ and power: Anglo-American/Continental divide

Anglo-American face: „Relational aspects“; „relational dimensions“; „relational power“ (as a distinct form of power)


„Relational power“: „the ability to change outcomes or affect the behaviour of others within a given regime“ (p. 14)

“meta-power”: “the ability to change the rules of the game” (Ibid)

One may have *power over* another or others, and that sort of power is indeed relational. ... But he may have *power to* do or accomplish something all by himself, and that power is not relational at all; it may involve other people if what he has power to do is a social or political action, but it need not. *(Hanna Pitkin, Wittgenstein and Justice, 1972. p. 277)*
„Relational“ and power: Anglo-American/Continental divide

Anglo-American face: „Relational aspects“; „relational dimensions“; „relational power“ (as a distinct form of power)

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, „Decisions and Non- Decisions,“ *APSR*, 1963: „relational characteristics“ of power:

A power relationship exists when (a) there is a conflict over values or course of action between A and B; (b) B complies with A’s wishes; and (c) he does so because he is fearful that A will deprive him of a value or values which he, B, regards more highly than those which would have been achieved by noncompliance. (p. 635)
„Relational“ and power: Anglo-American/Continental divide

Anglo-American face: „Relational aspects“; „relational dimensions“; „relational power“ (as a distinct form of power)

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A ➔ B

A ⇔ B

Anglo-American understanding of the form of power relations: Power relation as causal inter-action (self-action)

„Relational“ and power: Anglo-American/Continental divide

Anglo-American face: „Relational aspects“; „relational dimensions“; „relational power“ (as a distinct form of power)

Anglo-American understanding of the form of power relations: Power relation as causal inter-action (self-action)

„Relational“ and power: Anglo-American/Continental divide

Anglo-American face: „Relational aspects“; „relational dimensions“; „relational power“ (as a distinct form of power)

Continental understanding of the form of power relations:
Power relation as constitutive trans-action
unless we are looking at it from a great height and from a very great distance, power is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively, and those who do not have it and are subject to it.
unless we are looking at it from a great height and from a very great distance, power is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively, and those who do not have it and are subject to it. Power must, I think, be analyzed as something that circulates, or rather as something that functions only when it is part of a chain. It is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated.
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While episodic, one-dimensional conceptions of agency and power may tell us something about the nature of power relations between an already constituted A and B, it can tell us nothing about the constitutive nature of the relational field in which A and B presently are nor how this privileges and handicaps them respectively, in relation to those resources that are constituted as powerful. (Stewart Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 1989, pp 208-209)
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„power passes through the individuals it has constituted“; „constitutive nature of the relational field“

The idea of constitutive relations: relevant language-game(s):

**Immanuel Kant**: constitutive/regulative principles.

**John Searle (and others)**: constitutive rules and regulative rules.

**Alexander Wendt (and others, e. g. Petri Ylikoski)** causal and constitutive relations/theorizing.
The idea of constitutive relations

Causal relations:
- an antecedent condition X generates an effect Y.
- X is temporally prior to and thus exists independently of Y.
- Smoking causes cancer (cancer doesn’t need to cause smoking; smoking is not smoking due to its relation to cancer).

Constitutive relations:
- X is what it is in virtue of its relation to Y.
- X presupposes Y, and as such there is no temporal disjunction.
- Power is power in virtue of its relation to individuals and individuals are individuals in virtue of their relation to power and to each other.
The idea of constitutive relations

Two ways of viewing relations and entities: relationalist and substantialist:

1) **Substantialist**: relations regulate/affect pregiven entities (self-action, interaction).

2) **Relationalist**: relations constitute entities (transaction).

Substantialism

John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 1949

1) Self-action
2) Inter-action
3) Trans-action
Substantialism & self-action

“things [are] acting under their own powers” (Dewey and Bentley, p. 108),
Substances move independently of all other substances.
Ancient and modern atomism; liberalism in political theory, methodological individualism and holism in the social sciences.
Self-action & Methodological individualism

Methodological individualism: a reductive thesis:

Statements about social phenomena are deducible from statements about individuals

- Individualist perspectives in social psychology, sociology (exchange theory), economics (neoclassical economics), rational choice theory.
Self-action & Methodological holism

Methodological holism: a reverse reductive thesis: „Not individual persons, but groups, nations, cultures, and other reified substances do all of the acting in social life and account for its dynamism. ... Processes as well as structures thus appear as self-acting entities in many concrete instances of social inquiry.“ (Emirbayer, Manifesto for a relational sociology, 1997, p. 285).

(Neo)functionalists, systems theorists, structuralists, various historical-comparative analysts.
Inter-action & substantialism

**Inter-action:** "thing [as] balanced against thing in causal interconnection" (Dewey and Bentley op cit, p. 108).

**Variable-centered approaches and inter-action:**
1) fixed entities with variable attributes
3) "these attributes have only one causal meaning at a time;
4) ... this causal meaning does not depend on other attributes, on the past sequence of attributes, or on the context of other entities." (Ibid, p. 181)
Trans-action and relationalism

„systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’” (Dewey and Bentley, op cit, 108)

„the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. The latter, seen as a dynamic, unfolding process, becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than the constituent elements themselves.“ (Emirbayer, op cit, 287)
Self-action and relationalism

Relational ontology: one cannot posit discrete, pregiven units as starting points of social/political analysis

- Usual (self-actional) units: individuals, societies, classes, groups, states etc.

- The characters of those units is constituted within various shifting transactional contexts ("relational settings").

- In view of their functional interdependence the units and their relation to their transactional context "can be considered separately, but not as being separate." (Elias, op cit, 84)
Inter-action and relationalism

Inter-actionalist variable-based analysis:

- detaches elements (things with variable attributes) from their spatiotemporal transactional contexts;
- Analyzes elements separately from their mutually constitutive relations with other elements.
- Tries to achieve “control for third variables” ignoring „the ontological embeddedness or locatedness of entities within actual situational contexts“ (Emirbayer, op. cit., 289)
Trans-actions as processes

Relationalist perspective „sees relations between terms or units as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances.“ (Emirbayer, op. cit. 89)

Different imageries and concepts:
„Game models“; „figurations“ (Elias), „Discourse“ (post-structuralists); „field/habitus“ (Bourdieu) etc

Basic intuition: the „unit“ of social/political analysis should be viewed as a „complex joint activity, in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa).“ (Emirbayer, op. cit., 89)
Relationalism: relations as constitutive

Substantialism vs relationalism
Self-/Inter-action vs trans-action
Unfolding processes vs static things
Variable attributes vs embeddedness in contexts
Etc.

Relations as constitutive vs relations as causal

NB! This is Continental understanding.
Methodological relationalism: constitutive/causal explanations

Both social and natural sciences do both.
“Causal theories ask ‘why?’ and to some extent ‘how?’
Constitutive theories ask ‘how-possible?’ and ‘what?’" (Wendt op cit, p. 78)

The role of „how-possible?“, „what?“ questions:
1) „Why?“ questions presume answers to „how-possible?“ and „what?“ questions.
2) „Rather than asking how or why a temporally prior X produced an independently existing Y, how-possible and what-questions are requests for explications of the structures that constitute X or Y in the first place“ (Ibid, 83)
3) „The ‘independent/dependent variable’ talk that informs causal theorizing therefore makes no sense in constitutive theorizing“ (Ibid, 85)
Methodological relationalism: constitutive/causal explanations

Research strategies:
„Much of the work done in social science by interpretivists, critical theorists, and postmodernists deals primarily with constitutive questions, which creates misunderstanding when it is judged by the standards of causal questions.“
„Given the role that ideas play in constituting social kinds, answering constitutive questions will require interpretive methods.“ (Ibid)
Methodological relationalism: constitutive/causal explanations

Research strategies:
Non-zero sum choice between causal and constitutive explanations.

- On the one hand: Natural structures are just as amenable to constitutive theorizing as social ones.
- On the other: ideas and social structures can have causal effects → the relevance of causal theorizing is not limited to natural sciences.
- constitutive theories must be judged against empirical evidence just like causal ones.
Methodological relationalism: constitutive/causal explanations

Research strategies:
The role of constitutive theorizing:
1) Not descriptive but explanatory:
   - Double helix model of DNA – an explanation, though not a causal explanation.
   - Economic models are often explanations-what rather than explanations-why
2) Constitutive theories are important ends in themselves (whether or not in conjunction with causal theories)
3) Constitutive explanations are theories: they involve inference from observables to broader patterns (inductive or abductive).
Methodological relationalism: constitutive/causal explanations

Research strategies:

The role of constitutive theorizing:

4) Constitutive explanations imply hypothesis.
5) Main concern: the process of how social phenomena are (continuously) put together rather than how a preconstituted entity affects another preconstituted entity (the relation between independent and dependent variables).

6) „Mankind's natural changefulness as a social constant“ (Norbert Elias): synchronic, comparative-static, diachronic analysis of change (Colin Hay).
Methodological relationalism/substantialism: their continuity

Relationalist camp:
Ethnographic/interpretive traditions („thick description“), critical discourse analysis, structuration theory (Anthony Giddens), strategic-relational approach (Bob Jessop), process-oriented historical sociology (Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Tilly), Michel Foucault’s school’s studies on disciplinary and biopower (governmentality); semiotics (both post-Saussurean and post-Peircean), (some versions of) social network analysis, ANT.

Substantialist camp:
rationalism, behaviourism, functionalism, structuralism, most of social network analysis.
Methodological relationalism/substantialism: their continuity

While the distinction between relationalism and substantialism involves ontological commitments on the part of the researcher, these should not be commitments of the dogmatic variety.
Methodological relationalism/substantialism: their continuity

While the distinction between relationalism and substantialism involves ontological commitments on the part of the researcher, these should not be commitments of the dogmatic variety. Social scientists should never be so bold as to claim they know what reality is... Few political scientists are purely substantialists or relationalists, rather they incorporate substantialist and relationalist assumptions to varying degrees. (Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, „Relations before states: substance, process and the study of world politics“ European Journal of International Relations, 1999 (5), p. 292)
Methodological relationalism/substantialism: their continuity

Continuum:

constitutive process tracing (interpretive methodologies)

variable centered/causal process reduction (statistical analyses)
Methodological relationalism/substantialism: their continuity

Continuum:

constitutive process tracing (interpretive methodologies) ← CONTINENTAL

variable centered/causal process reduction (statistical analyses) ← ANGLO-AMERICAN
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we are looking at it from a great height and from a very great distance (Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 2003, pp 29–30)
Example: The case of Yemeni qat chews as public sphere activities

**Background:** Yemen cannot be considered democratic in formal terms:
- The president is not selected through contested elections, and there has been no alternation in the executive since 1978.
- Parties exist, but the elections are not fair.
- Etc

**Wedeen’s argument:**
- Though Yemen is not formally a democracy, there are different sites of enactment of democracy, and a strong democracy needs them all.
- **Democracy entails:** widespread, inclusive mobilization of critical, practical discourses in which people articulate and think through their moral and material demands in public.
Example: The case of Yemeni qat chews as public sphere activities

Wedeen’s argument:

The political functions of qat chews:

- they are a forum for negotiating power relationships between elites and constituencies;
- during some qat chews, actual policy decisions get made;
- people make use of qat chews to share information about political events and to discuss their significance publicly.
DEMOCRACY

CHARLES TILLY

www.cambridge.org/9780521877718
FIGURE 2-1. Trajectory of French National Regimes, 1600–2006