Reclaiming the Social: Relationalism in Anglophone International Studies

Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, American University (ptjack@american.edu)
Daniel H. Nexon, Georgetown University (dhn2@georgetown.edu)

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In a recent article, McCourt (2016) identifies a broad mode of theorizing in Anglophone international studies that he calls "practice-relational constructivism." Practice theory and relationalism, he contends, constitute the next generation of international-relations constructivist scholarship. In his reckoning, the initial broad social-theoretic impulses of constructivism were attenuated or supplanted through a tighter engagement with mainstream American international-relations theory; practice and relational theories carry the torch for that broader agenda. International-relations scholars turned to both approaches in order to better address constructivist claims about agent-structure co-constitution, the role of social facts in world politics, and how to theorize power.

McCourt correctly identifies aspects of the genealogy of how practice and relational theories developed in the field. We agree that much of the interesting innovation in constructivist theorizing nowadays comes from people drawing explicitly on those two approaches. However, while McCourt's "practice-relational theory" is social-constructionist in orientation, not all practice-theoretic and relational scholarship fits comfortably under the rubric of constructivism. In particular, the social-constructionist emphasis on culture and meaning is not universal across such scholarship, and many participants view their approaches as distinctive (see Adler and Pouliot 2011; Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Bueger and Gadinger 2015; Jackson and Nexon 1999; Nexon 2009, chap. 2).

In this essay, we start from the proposition that practice-turn and relational theories can be thought of as part of a larger family of *relational social theory*. This larger family intersects with international-relations constructivism, but we should treat it—as a whole—as orthogonal to *any* of the so-called "paradigms" in Anglophone international studies, and as cutting across those "paradigms." Relational social theory is in this sense "bigger" than Anglophone international studies and any of the debates within it, and is best grasped by distinguishing it from other broad families of social theory, such as individualism and structuralism. Rather than starting with "mainstream" international-relations ways of dividing up the field and trying to locate relationalism in that division—which is in effect what McCourt suggests that we do—we should invert that order.

Doing so has at least two benefits. First, it allows us to identify relationalism *as a whole*, rather than as a subordinate gesture that takes place within other schools of thought. We can therefore isolate the key commitments of a broadly relational sensibility—one that might be otherwise obscured by the particular and domain-specific conceptual vocabularies within which international-relations scholarship often works. In the Anglophone "mainstream" we typically

divide scholarship according to functional areas—such as security, economy, and culture—and by substantive wagers about what kinds of causal factors provide the most explanatory leverage. Thus, some clusters of scholars default to seeing military capabilities as driving world politics, others economic interests, others norms and values, and so on. Relational claims and arguments can appear in *any* of these domains, precisely because relationalism is not a *particular theory* about international affairs but a family of theories united by a broad sensibility that emphasizes concrete connections and ties rather than individual characteristics of entities or the general categories to which those entities belong. So we need to start there, rather than where most of "maps" of Anglophone international-relations scholarship start (Jackson and Nexon 2013).

Second, thinking from relationalism as the starting-point allows us to better appreciate how differences between and among relationally-inclined scholars form a complex tapestry of debates *internal to* relationalism broadly understood. A common commitment to relationalist wagers sets up the possibility of what Andrew Abbott (2001) calls "fractalization," in which distinctions between relational and non-relational ways of approaching scholarship are less fixed categorical demarcations and more floating conceptual devices. These recur over time and at different levels of resolution. Disagreements between relationalists—despite their use of language that suggests that only one side of the disagreement is "truly" relational—are better seen as disputes that only make sense because all sides share a broadly relational sensibility. We go wrong if we insist on a determinate and detailed common core of a relational sensibility; what we should focus on are structured disagreements that produce finer and finer-grained scholarly distinctions.

We proceed as follows. We first discuss the broadly shared wagers among relationalist approaches. We then sketch the major clusters of relational theorizing that gathered momentum in Anglophone international studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many of these were in explicit dialogue with constructivism—they took either the form of efforts to reform constructivism or of (sometimes hostile) alternatives. But others, most notably in the importation of social-network analysis, were almost completely indifferent to it.

Next, we lay out two debates and differences that cross these clusters. The first, *position versus process*, is the most specific to relational approaches, although it replicates aspects of enduring debates about, for example, the relative importance of cultural and social phenomena. This dispute occupies a central place within relationalism in Anglophone international studies. In its present form, it concerns an issue unavoidably central to *any* flavor of relationalism: whether relations are best conceptually and operationally approached as relatively static *ties* or as relatively dynamic *performances*. The second debate, concerning methodological disagreements, is not specific to relationalism. It simply reproduces disputes that occur across the social sciences. Attention to this debate underscores how relationalism describes a family of theories, not a methodology; highlighting relations in one's explanation does not obligate one to any particular methodology, or to any particular way of way of making and evaluating scholarly claims about international affairs.

A caveat before we begin. In what follows, we focus narrowly on Anglophone scholarly debates about international affairs. We mostly leave it to readers to assess the extent that our discussions resonates with, or deviates from, the other contributions.

What is Relationalism?

At the most general level, "relationalism" refers to a class or family of social theories comparable to and distinguishable from "holism" and "individualism." In his well-known typology, Alexander Wendt (1999, 26) categorizes international-relations theories along two dimensions: individualism-holism and materialism-idealism. The latter refers to the degree that theorists view material forces as "brute facts" with causal effects independent of the meanings attached to them, or instead as themselves constituted and produced by ideas. He defines the individualism-holism continuum in terms of agent-level reductionism: actor-centric theories lodge explanations at the level of agents and accord little independent weight to emergent properties of social order. Holism, in contrast, "implies a top-down conception of social life.... [that] works downward from irreducible social structures."

Relationalism offers a third way, one situated between actor-centric and structural-holistic approaches. Rather than seeking to enumerate a list of the attributes of agents and entities—or a holistic catalog of structures and forces—relational approaches to world politics aim to specify *processes* and *mechanisms* that, among other things, give rise to *both* actors and the environments in which they find themselves (Jackson and Nexon 1999; Emirbayer 1997; Nexon 2010). Note that these commitments imply no specific position on the materialist-idealist continuum; as Wendt points out, much international-relations scholarship combines individualism with a focus on ideas or combines holism with a focus on material factors. But there is no necessary reason for this, as "individualist materialism" and "holist idealism" make just as much theoretical sense. The same, we argue, holds for relationalism, which is neither definitively materialist nor definitively ideational.

Similarly, relationalism is methodologically neutral. One relational account might seek to test hypotheses about patterns of connection between actors—such as those about the effects of similar positions in trade and other networks on conflict (Maoz et al. 2006). Another might seek to produce case-specific accounts of how identity-claims transform strategic situations (Jackson 2006; Goddard 2006). Such approaches are equally relational. They adhere to the basic principle that the form and content of the transactions and connections among social sites should be at the center of explanation and analysis.

Major Variants of Relational Theory

There are a number of major strands of relationalism in contemporary Anglophone international-relations scholarship. The first draws from social-network analysis, which is itself a major site of relational work across the social sciences. The second falls utilizes practice-theoretic scholarship. Much, but not all, of this research draws heavily from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who identified himself as a relational social theorist (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 179). The third adopts a pragmatist approach. Elements of relational analysis also exist in some variants of discourse analysis, especially that concerned with how configurations of meaning produce conditions of possibility for agency and action (Bially Mattern 2004), Actor-Network Theory, which is gaining steam in the study of world politics, also falls within the broad camp (Nexon and Pouliot 2013).

Here we focus on the first three approaches, which have the longest pedigree in the field as self-consciously relational frameworks. We should stress that relational modes of theorizing predate the rise of all these approaches. This should not come as a surprise. As relationalism constitutes a major branch of social theory, with tendrils that extend into process philosophy, we can find its traces in a wide variety of scholarship that does not adopt the "relationalist" label.

Social-Network Approaches

Social-network theory "takes as its fundamental unit of analysis the relationship between actors" (Erikson 2013, 221). It "addresses the association among nodes rather than the attributes of particular nodes" and is "grounded in three principles: nodes and their behaviors are mutually dependent, not autonomous; ties between nodes can be channels of transmission of both material… and non-material products; and persistent patterns of association create structures that define, enable, or restrict the behavior of nodes" (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 562).

As this suggests, the fundamental unit of analysis is the social tie: a connection between two or more social sites. In network analysis, this connections make take many different forms, including affective relationships, material transactions, legal contracts, or joint affiliation with an association (Wasserman and Faust 1994, 18–19). They may be durable or fleeting, strong or weak, symmetric or asymmetric, or friendly or hostile (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 563). The nature and arrangement of these ties produces networks, which is how social-network analysis measures and maps social structure (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Wellman 1983).

Erikson (2013) sees network analysis as divided between relationalists and formalists. This disagreement hinges on the degree that scholars believe in abstracting away from the meanings embedded in, and the dynamic character of, social transactions. Most quantitative network analysis, by its nature, adopts a formalist approach. But other scholars, as Erickson (2013, 228) writes, "object to the duality of tie and content, which is consistent with Simmelian formalism that understands forms as a priori and content as a posteroriori." That is, Erickson's "formalists" generalize about the abstract properties of networks and only bring meaning—content—back in to explain variation or as an outcome, such as in the study of norm diffusion (Nexon 2009, chap. 2).

Erickson's "relationalists," on the other hand, "focus on the act of interaction, in which meaning is not separate from but instead creates—or instantiates—relationships" (Erikson, 2013, 228). Indeed, as she notes, many prominent sociological relationalists—Mustafa Emirbayer, Margaret Sommers, and Ann Mische—draw heavily from pragmatist theory in their understanding of the research program. Some have increasingly turned to Bourdieu and practice-theoretic ideas, whether pragmatist or otherwise.

Still, these disputes should not obscure the importance of social-network international-relations scholarship as a vector of relational theory in the study of world politics. Work in this idiom moves away from explanations focused on the internal dispositions of actors or the interaction of their categorical attributes (see Emirbayer 1997). Hence, scholars have looked at patterns of relations to understand dynamics of global political economy (Oatley et al. 2013) or how networks created by membership in international organizations shapes interstate conflict (Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006). From a network perspective, Cranmer and Desmaris (2016) criticize the standard use of directed dyads in conflict studies as making unsustainable wagers about the independence of units. That is, the leadership of states do not make decisions to go to war or to join alliances in isolation from the overall pattern of their relations with other states.

Complicating matters is Charles Tilly's (e.g., 2003) notion of "relational realism." Much of Tilly's analytic infrastructure—such as his use of ties, networks, and brokerage—is firmly lodged in social-network analysis. While he maintained skepticism of many wagers of cultural sociology, his work increasingly supplemented the formalist concepts of social-network analysis with attention to identity, stories, and meanings. As he linked up key conceptual innovations—such as contentious repertoires (a set of standard scripts associated with political contention that evolved and changed, in part through improvisation)—to his overall "relational realist" program, he offered a distinctive intervention in these debates. This intervention, as Diani (2007, 323) argues, sought to hook up social-network scholarship's "specific conceptual and methodological apparatus to much broader theoretical and empirical issues in the study of social change."

The Columbia School of Relational International Studies

Tilly's eclecticism—his navigation between the conceptual apparatus of formal network analysis and relational social theory—matters a great deal to the introduction of relationalism qua relationalism in international-relations theory. In the mid 1990s, Tilly relocated from the New School for Social Research to Columbia University. He brought with him his storied workshop on Contentious Politics, and took up a joint appointment in Sociology and Political Science. This helped link together a variety of scholars and graduate students in the New York area, including Ann Mische and Mustafa Emirbayer. Columbia was also a hub of more socially-theoretically inflected network sociology, with both Harrison White and Peter Bearman in its Sociology department (see Mische 2011).

Here, McCourt's (2016) story also comes into place. A number of graduate students in Political Science at Columbia were invested in the explosion of constructivist scholarship but dissatisfied

with its handling of the agent-structure problem, its focus on a 'modus vivendi' that deployed neopositivist methodologies, and its comparative neglect of power politics. They were looking primarily to post-structuralist social theory and scholarship in order to make sense their dissatisfaction. At the same time, a few of them remained influenced by international-relations realist scholarship—and so the trick was how to marry these concerns in a way that presented a coherent path forward.

Jackson and Nexon (1999) may not have introduced the term "relationalism" into international-relations scholarship, but they arguably provide the most detailed and influential statement. In an attempt to navigate between more static, formal conceptions of network analysis and dynamic, relational variants, they came up with the rather clunky term "processual-relationalism." But, more importantly, the extended circle at Columbia attempted to marry relational analysis to ongoing debates in the international-relations field. For Stacie Goddard (2006, 2008), Ron Krebs (2004),[1] and later Paul MacDonald (2014), this produced interventions often oriented toward realist theory. Jackson (2003, 2006) focused on the nexus between post-structuralism and constructivism when looking specifically at debates about an actor's identity (Jackson 2002, 2004). Nexon (2009) adopted a more formal—but qualitative—analysis of empires and state formation (see also Nexon and Wright 2007; Cooley and Nexon 2013).

The important point of this history is that early uses of the term "relationalism" in international-relations theory emerged from a heterodox stew, over which Charles Tilly loomed large as both intellectual figure and mentor. Concepts such as "processual-relationalism" represented attempts to make sense of the distinction that Erikson calls formalism and relationalism, but also reflect the intellectual promiscuousness of the approaches that developed in conversation with one another. Participants drew upon, for example, Norbert Elias' (1978, 1989, 1994) processual sociology and his recasting of structures as dynamic figurations Nicholas Rescher's (1996) work on process philosophy,[2] Harrison White's (1992) social-theoretic grounding of network analysis, and John Shotter's (1993a, 1993b) dialogical approach to how communication constructs the social world. But all participants equilibrated, whether directly or indirectly, on styles of analysis indebted to Tilly and to his theoretical infrastructure. This is true even for those, such as Jackson, who rejected Tilly's analytical realism in favor of much more thoroughly social-constructionist sensibilities (e.g. Jackson 2005).

The result:

- An understanding of individual and corporate actors as sites constituted by dynamic social ties, composed of both material and symbolic transactions;
- A focus on relative stabilities in those ties as network structures, comprehensible in terms of concepts of social-network analysis, such as density, structural holes, and centrality;

[1] But see, in particular, (Krebs and Jackson 2003; Krebs and Chowdhury 2009).
[2] Suggested to several members of the Columbia School by Yosef Lapid; see (Lapid 1996).

- Explanations that combined, on the one hand, analyses of the conditions of possibility created by those network structures and, on the other, how situated actors deploy material and symbolic resources;
- The use of mechanisms—such as brokerage, switching, and yoking—focused on the manipulation or transformation of the structure of social relationships; and
- Efforts to recode existing international-relations concepts—from hegemony and empire to balancing and revisionism—in the language of social-network analysis (see Goddard and Nexon 2016).

For example, Jackson (2006) treats discursive configurations as networks of rhetorical commonplaces, and argues that political debates about their relationship profoundly shape political outcomes. Goddard (2008) looks at how rhetorical contestation activates and deactivates political ties—how actors reconfigure their social relations and 'lock in' bargaining positions—in the context of the social construction of indivisible conflicts. MacDonald (2014) explains variation in imperialism in terms of the dynamics of social ties between conquerors and collaborators. Krebs and Jackson (2007) build an account of rhetorical coercion focused entirely on public meanings and variation in the structure of discursive environments.

Practice Theory in International Studies

Neumann's (2002, 628) key early statement of the need for a "practice turn" criticized post-structural and linguistic-turn theory. He argued that the "analysis of discourse understood as the study of the preconditions for social action must include the analysis of practice understood as the study of social action itself." That is, we should look at how meanings are enacted through social practices in ways that configure and reconfigure social life, power relations, and conditions of possibility for action. Post-structural theory generally understands the stabilization and transformation of social life in terms of configurations of linguistic signs and signifiers. However, Neumann's intervention amounted to a call for more emphasis on processes and on the kinds of transactional analysis that lies at the heart of relational theory.

Other scholars soon roped these arguments—along with early statements of relationalism—into the broader development of practice-theoretic approaches to the study of international relations (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot 2008, 2010). Of course, deployments of practice theory—especially in its Bourdieu-inflected variants—predate these developments (Bigo 2012), but the key point is that most variants of practice theory overlap with, or constitute a subset of, relational social theories. Practices are obviously processes; they are the doings of agents. But when we treat them as our primary unit of analysis, then we study them as analytically independent of actors—as operating 'between' two or more social sites and as only sensible in the relations among those social sites. Thus, they become the 'stuff' that constitutes both agents and structures (Jackson and Nexon 2013; Bigo 2012, 236–83).

Practice theory extends well beyond the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bueger and Gadinger 2015), but his framework provide a useful—and highly influential—alternative to social-network analysis for building relational theory. For Bourdieu, *"habitus* bridges macro- and microlevel processes." It "refers to habits of the head and heart, as well as the bodily comportment of

individuals." The "'durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation' produces that individual's repertoire of practices" (Nexon and Neumann 2017, 5).

Fields compromise specific spheres of social action. They are constituted by 'rules of the game.' These shape how actors relate to one another as they jockey for power, status, and influence. Bourdieu (1991, 230) describes fields in terms of "a set of objective power relations imposed on all those who enter the field, relations which are not reducible to the intentions of individual agents or even to direct interactions between agents." Position in the hierarchy of a field depends on the accumulation of field-relevant capital—that is, assets and performances valued within a field (Berling 2012, 45).

Bourdieu (2011, 81) defines capital as "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated' embodied form which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor." Capital "comes in three basic forms" or "species": "economic capital; social capital, the resources generated by network ties to individuals and institutional sites; and cultural capital, specific material tokens of higher or lower cultural standing—such as expensive works of art or, among states, highly-esteemed archeological sites." More commonly, it refers "to the knowledge of prestigious cultural codes—philosophy, arts, and so forth—as well as one's habitus, which in this sense take the form of *embodied* cultural capital" (Nexon and Neumann 2017, 6)

Forms of capital also come in subtypes, or "subspecies". For example, "subspecies of economic capital include currency, ownership of businesses, government bonds, derivatives and other financial instruments, and so forth. The relative value—or even existence—of subspecies of capital varies across time and space" In turn, "there are, in principle, as many forms of capital as there are social fields, and as many fields as there are distinct spheres of social life with their own power relations." Power relations within fields take the form of the "patterns of relations among agents: the power that a particular participant in the field enjoys relative to other participants. These are putatively measurable and graphable structures of social dominance. They capture position within the field." They also manifest in terms of "the rules of the game and participants' 'feel' for when and how to apply them. This involves Bourdieu's emphasis on habits, dispositions, and embodiment. It relates to understandings of practices as competent performances." (Nexon and Neumann 2017, 6–7).

Fields play a similar role in Bourdeiusian practice theory as network structures in relationalist analysis, discursive configurations in post-structuralist theory, and figurations in the work of Norbert Elias (Musgrave and Nexon, 2018). They provide ways of cutting into structural analysis—the workings of relation and position—while maintaining a focus on processes and ongoing dynamics of agent-structure co-constitution (Bigo 2012; Pouliot 2016; Leander 2012). As Marion Fourcade (2007, 1022) argues:

> Like network analysis, then, field analysis emphasizes relational thinking—the relative position of actors in a particular space.... But unlike a large amount of network analysis, field analysis is not based on pure social interaction. (Note that although the concept of structural equivalence refers to relations that are not

themselves interactional, it is still grounded in patterns of concrete ties.) When network analysis focuses primarily on intersubjective connections (e.g., market relations between buyers and sellers), then, correspondence analysis (Bourdieu's preferred methodological tool) purports to analyze relations between the actors' objective positions.

Pragmatism

Another way of cashing out basic relationalist sensibilities is to concentrate on what we might call, with apologies for the sexism, the "model of man" (Moon 1975) that stands at or near the center of particular social theories. Understood as a *theoretical* (rather than as a *methodological*) move, the pragmatist turn in international studies (Cochran 2002; Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009) does just this. It replaces the figure of the human being as a processor of information, making decisions under constraints, with a creative actor embedded in a structured social context. Pragmatists move beyond treating social factors as rules and resources for action; they relax the often implicit notion that human beings are constitutively autonomous entities whose behavior is driven by the interaction of their (internal) desires and beliefs with the (external) features of the environment. Instead, a pragmatist account of action begins with concretely located actors inhabiting what John Dewey (1910) would call "problem-situations" with which they are wrestling. In their efforts to find and implement solutions, such actors creatively rework the materials—including cultural materials—that they find themselves in the midst of. The resulting solutions are not the result of the essential properties of the individual actors, nor are they the result of essential properties of the social setting, but emerge instead from the complex transactions between and among situated actors and their environments (Franke and Weber 2012, 676–671).

Pragmatist work in international studies is relational precisely in that it foregrounds this "situated creativity" (Jackson 2009) in its explanations. For example, Simon Pratt (2016) argues that efforts by actors to seek "ontological security" are best understood as efforts to stabilize the social environments that sustain them, rather than as expressions of actors' feelings of insecurity. On a pragmatic account, shoring up actor identities necessarily means preserving the rules of the game within those actors exist. So it is not necessary to posit a separate *motive* for an actor to seek its own ontological security; it is instead sufficient to note that the ways that an actor acts in context necessarily upholds aspects of that context as a condition of acting in the first place. Similarly, Deborah Avant (2016) argues that the growth of the governance regime for private military and security companies over the past decade comes not from shifts in actor preferences or from changes in the material attributes of those actors, but from the unfolding process of negotiation that reconfigured ties between governments and corporations alike. Here again, creative efforts loom large in the causal story. Situated individuals forged novel connections in order to work on—and, in important ways, redefine—their common problem-situation: the unregulated growth of private military and security companies around the globe.

While pragmatist scholarship concurs with practice theory in foregrounding practice, the distinctive spin that pragmatists put on social practice means that they often treat political

contestation as a kind of collective deliberation rather than as simply the continuation of power politics by other means. Many pragmatists are thus more likely to emphasis processes of collective learning or the achievement and persistence of epistemic unity amidst political disagreement (Rytövuori-Apunen 2014). While this sometimes leads to charges that power has been ignored or sidelined, it is perhaps more accurate to say that pragmatist approaches *reconceptualize* power as productive, rather than merely coercive. To exercise power, on a pragmatist account, is to participate in the shaping of "joint action" (Shotter 1993b) that invariably overspills, and sometimes reconfigures, the initial agendas of the participants. In keeping with the focus on the creative process of action, pragmatist explanations highlight the ways that complex concatenations of *doing* produce outcomes often unforeseen at the start of the process. Persistent social arrangements, particularly arrangements that apportion benefits in unequal ways, thus have to be *explained*, rather than being used as structural inputs to explanations—and they have to be explained as emerging within social action rather than standing parametrically outside of it (Onuf 1989).

Fractals in Relationalism

As noted above, these are not the only way to do relational theorizing. Various forms of post-structural and linguistic-turn theories adopt relational modes of analysis. McCourt (2016) rightly includes Actor-Network Theory as another variant of relationalism. Notions of "assemblages" provide a way of tapping into the dynamic, processual, and contingent production of larger wholes out of smaller-scale configurations (See Bousquet and Curtis 2011; DeLanda 2006). This collection aims to bring together some of the scholars working in these idioms with those who build relational theory from non-North Atlantic social theory and philosophy. But social-network analysis, Columbia School relationalism, practice theory, and explicitly pragmatist approaches serve well as focal points for interrogating the state of relational theorizing in the field.

One of the persistent problems with efforts to define schools of thought in the field—deriving at least in part from weak and largely indefensible readings of philosophers of science like Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn (Jackson and Nexon 2009)—resides in our insistence that a school of thought must involve some kind of consistent set of theoretical propositions to which everyone who is a member of that school assents. Thus we end up with statements of "core principles" for realism, liberalism, Marxism, constructivism, and other "isms"; these statements function as shibboleths for identifying members of the club, as well as serving as standards for adjudicating whether a given piece of scholarship is "really" a contribution to disciplinary knowledge. We tell the story of international-relations scholarship largely in terms of the interaction of such theoretical aggregates, whether in terms of the replacement of one by another as dominant in the study of some specific topic, or ongoing tussles between "isms" (Wæver 1998; Jackson and Nexon 2009).

There are at least two problems with this conventional approach. First, mapping the field with reference to these theoretical aggregates, which are largely if not entirely centered on *substantive propositions about international affairs*, means dividing the field up into groups

based on what adherent of different schools of thought think international affairs is about. This means that will likely miss broader social-theoretic commitments that cut across international-relations "paradigms." Such commitments do not fit neatly into any of our existing boxes. For example, a general commitment to "social construction" as the notion that international affairs are "not determined by the nature of things" and are thus "not inevitable" (Hacking 1999, 9) characterizes some—but not all—realists and liberals and Marxists, and the majority of constructivists, but the opposite commitment (to explaining international affairs in terms of natural necessity) can also be found across all of these "isms." Despite efforts by self-identified constructivists to insist that constructivism is more of a general sensibility than a specific theory about international affairs (Finnemore 1996; Klotz and Lynch 2007; Onuf 1989; Wendt 1999), our existing maps of the field make this a difficult claim to follow through on.

Second, presuming that theoretical aggregates or schools of thought consist of consensus core principles misleads us into looking for *agreement* where we ought to be looking instead for *structured disagreement*. We operate with a tacit picture of an academic discipline in which the primary contribution of scholars in that discipline comes through the successive refining of a central set of ideas such that the discipline's overall contribution is precisely those central ideas. But as Andrew Abbott (2001, 9) shows, actual academic disciplines simply don't work this way. Instead, they feature a "fractal" pattern of differentiation that "repeats a pattern within itself" both *in* time and *over* time, as scholars seek to locate themselves and their work by using portable dichotomies that echo distinctions made elsewhere in the discipline or even between disciplines.

So we have the distinction between history and the social sciences, for example, constituted largely in terms of the differing roles of narrative and theory in explanatory protocols; and then we have that self-same distinction recurring *within* each camp, producing a structured set of positions revolving around a central distinction and the variety of positions that one can take up concerning it. We could say the same of the distinction between "social construction" and its natural-necessity opposite; within "social construction" broadly understood we have disagreements between the complete rejection of natural necessity and the embrace of some non-socially-constructed floor to processes of social construction, and within the opposing camp we have disagreements between those for whom everything happens because of natural necessity and those for whom natural necessity provides parameters within which a significant amount of contingent social construction takes place.

One challenge that fractal differentiation poses for the identification of schools of thought is that any such identification depends on the *scale* and the *time-frame* within which one is working. All of the social sciences are in some sense on the same side when it comes to the question of whether human behavior is determined or completely free (Abbott, 2001, 202), but between and within different organized social sciences, we find different positions on that question. But sorting this out is particularly difficult because of another challenge: because fractal distinctions are portable, the use of the same words in one context may not mean the same thing as it means in another context. So one social scientist accusing another of "determinism" because of a lack of consideration of creative human agency doesn't mean the same thing as when someone outside of the social sciences—a libertarian politician, for example—accuses a social scientist of

"determinism" because the social scientist points to observed regularities in how people act. Thus, we have to specify the scale of the analysis both in space and in time in order for the identification of schools of thought to have any purchase, and any school of thought is going to have both a position on a distinction that distinguishes members of that school from other schools, *and* a repetition of that self-same distinction within the school itself.

As Wittgenstein (1953, sec. 242) once commented, communication in language requires "agreement not only in definitions but also…in judgments". Translated into fractal terms, this means that in order for there to be schools of thought organized around positions on some particular issue, there must also be broad consensus among those disagreeing about some distinction that they are in some sense all on the same side vis-a-vis a broader instance of that same distinction. Whether this applies to international-relations "paradigms" is a separate question (although we think that it does not). For present purposes it is sufficient to note that the pattern of fractal differentiation *does* characterize relationalism quite nicely. From an initial "relations" position in a relations-substances dichotomy, we see *within* relationalism as a whole—across academic fields and disciplines, as well as across sub-fields within academic disciplines and across lines of scholarship on particular topics—the recurrence of something very much like that initial distinction between and among relationalists themselves. Despite broadly agreeing that relations matter, relationalists disagree on whether those relations *themselves* are, broadly speaking, actively fluctuating processes made up of the active doing of entities, or relatively fixed patterns that position entities in ways that produce the appearance of entities with stable attributes. This position vs. process dichotomy replays the initial relations-substances distinction in a context in which all involved agree on relations as an analytical starting-point, and in so doing generates controversies *internal to* relationalism that look very different if we don't start our examination from that broader agreement.

Methodology

As a broad social ontology translated into a scientific ontology that can more or less directly inform empirical accounts, relationalism has precisely *no* methodological implications. A scientific ontology that foregrounds relations is compatible with any one of a variety of scientific ways of knowing and generating knowledge. Relations between entities can serve as independent or dependent variables in nomothetic generalizations; they can function as causal powers making possible certain outcomes rather than others; they can be treated as analytical ideal-types that can help us make sense of the characteristic pressures on situated actors; and they can serve as a locus for reflection on how our knowledge *of* something is implicated in our dealings *with* that thing. While taken as a broad social ontology relationalism might seem to incline more strongly towards "reflexive" modes of inquiry (since the knower and the known are taken not to be separate substantial entities), this conclusion does not necessarily follow. Indeed, significant methodological debate and discussion takes place *within* relationalism, just as significant debates between "process" and "position" conceptions of relations do.

Consider, in this regard, the differences between an implementation of social-network theory that seeks to explain outcomes by correlating relational variables with observed outcomes, and

an investigation of how the deployment of particular rhetorical tropes or commonplaces produces outcomes by making some possibilities unacceptable while allowing others to remain acceptable (Jackson 2006; Krebs and Lobasz 2007). While both of these are relational accounts, the way in which they go about generating knowledge could hardly be more distinct in methodological terms. The social-network theorist operates in a basically neopositivist mode, treating well-verified correlations as the necessary mark of causation. The scholars working on rhetorical deployment are largely working in an analyticist mode, using ideal-typical specifications of particular commonplaces and mechanisms of deployment to construct explanatory accounts that foreground moments of liminality and rely on counterfactual scenarios to demonstrate the causal impact of rhetorical deployments and constellations. But both kinds of account privilege relations over attributes, and place the causal action in the transactional space "between" actors. They differ, instead, on their approach to working with relational data, and the epistemic standards to which they aspire.

Consider also Colin Wight's (2006) approach to social structure, which presents a markedly relational ontology whereby individuals' activities drawn on and reproduce social arrangements. Methodologically, Wight's position is decidedly realist, and much of his account is dedicated to establishing the independent reality of social structures. That realism leads him to the claim that social theorists can establish the contours of social structure "in advance," through a careful combination of transcendental reasoning and abductive inference. Contrast to this the claim that social relations *cannot* be known in this way because of their ongoingly emergent character: social arrangements emerge not just from social processes "out there" "in the world," but also and perhaps equally from efforts to conceptualize and interpret them by participants and researchers alike (Shotter 1993a and 1993b). Here we have another example of a methodological divergence within relationalism, as all parties agree on the scientific ontology—social relations surround and sustain actors, such that it makes no sense to talk about actors in constitutive isolation—but disagree on how one ought to study those relations and their impact on outcomes of interest.

Position and Process

	Transactions & Dialogues	Practices	Networks
Focus on Positions	Relational Realism	Field Analysis	Static Social Network Analysis
Focus on Processes	Pragmatism	Critical Practices & Performativity	Dynamic Network Modelling

Table 1: Fractals of Relational Analysis

The position-vs.-process distinction helps parse the disagreements between social network theorists and those relationalists who are more interested in the performances (competent or otherwise) of actors. Social network analysis has, for the most part, been brought into international studies as a heavily quantitative technique in which scholars use relational data—information on how entities are connected to one another—as a way of accounting for outcomes. The typical form of such an argument takes a relational measure, such as the "relative centrality" of an entity to the network in which it is embedded, and correlates that measure with an outcome variable of interest (see, for example, Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006; Hammarström and Birger 2002; Maoz et al. 2006).

Set aside questions of methodology for a moment in order to focus on the theoretical issues involved in this kind of freezing or flattening of the relations between entities in order to use them as inputs to a causal explanation. Network theorists do not, as a matter of social ontology, regard an entity's relative position in a network to be an *attribute* of that entity precisely because an entity's relative position inheres in the structure of the network as a whole and is not really comprehensible outside of that network. Still, the kinds of explanations that they produce can sometimes look very much as though they ran from an attribute to an outcome. Conceptually, being on top of a hierarchy isn't a property of the entities at the top, but an explanation that links "position in a hierarchy" to an outcome is easy to read as though it did in fact involve such properties. The same goes for notions like centrality, network capital, and the like.

The issue here isn't formalism, per se, but rather the isolation of variables derived from formal analysis such that the dynamic—the processual—character of relations becomes a second-order concern. The same issue obtains with so-called "structuralist" readings of field theory, where capital endowments are divorced from the underlying processes that constitute fields (Bigo, 2012). Here to, position trumps process. These tensions show up in some Columbia School variants of relationalism. Nexon's (2009) work on empire, at least when it comes to his abstraction of imperial forms, sometimes privileges position over process (see also Nexon and Wright, 2007).

This should not imply that there is anything *wrong* with positional analysis—merely that the tension found in early attempts to synthesize a self-consciously relational approach, and that marked Tilly's engagement with network analysis, continues to relationalist theorizing. Indeed, it is inevitable—the basis for a fractal debate within relational theory.

Table 1 shows how relative emphasis on position and process differentiates specific approaches within three general relational approaches. As we have seen, although relational realists utilize network language, their focus is much more on transactions and understandings of social interaction as ongoing dialogues among people and other social sites. In relative terms, though, they tend to emphasize positional analysis, especially when compared to pragmatists. Pragmatists, however, share a very similar perspective on social and political life in terms of transactional and dialogical analysis.

Within practice theory, as noted above, we find a similar split, which divides, for example, those more interested in field-theoretic analysis from those who emphasize practices as units of analysis. Indeed, some working in this idiom adopt an extremely "bottom-up" approach emphasizing the fluidity of social life and expressing skepticism of any abstract characterization of social forms (Bueger and Gadinger 2015). Within social network analysis, this division manifests more in terms of approaches that focus on the measurement of properties of static networks and positionality and those that focus on dynamic modelling of network evolution over time (see Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2017)

We stress that the position-versus-process distinction is relative rather than absolute. Most theories and approaches combine elements of both, but disagree in emphasis. Moreover, the labels we attach to each sell are illustrative rather than comprehensive or definitive. And, as we have seen with the "Columbia School," research communities can spill across the cells.

Conclusions

As we were completing this paper, an article appeared in the *European Journal of International Relations* that nicely, if unintentionally, illustrates the problems that can arise when we fail to look at relationalism *as a whole* but instead focus on some particular and specific instance of relationalist commitments. Martin Coward (Coward 2017, 3) criticizes what he calls "network thinking"—"representing contemporary social and political phenomena primarily in terms of inter-linked nodes"—for ignoring culture and community, failing to take the importance of spatial contiguity into account in favor of a focus on trans-local connections between nodes, and therefore warranting the kind of counterterrorism strategies that feature strategic strikes intended to disrupt a network with little regard for collateral damage. Much of his critique takes social network analysis to task for "disembedding nodes from the influence of contiguous context and defining them simply according to their relations," and therefore being unable "to understand processes of alienation or the spread of ideas" (*ibid.*, p. 15). His preferred solution involves "overturning this hub-and-spoke, conduit-based image in favour of metaphors that foreground culture and community, not as a supplement to be added to network graphs, but as something that suffuses and animates the various sprawling assemblages that characterise the social, political and economic dynamics of the contemporary era" (p. 20).

The irony here is that Coward's critique is a *relational* critique of social-network analysis, rather than—as it first appears—a critique of thinking and explaining in terms of relations between entities per se. In effect, Coward conflates relationalism with its social-network analysis variant, and is thus unable to see that his own preferred solution (which gestures at assemblage theory and Actor Network Theory) is, in important ways, of a piece with the approach that he deems responsible for "pathological sovereignty." Consider this biting criticism:

> The interconnections of the network are constitutive of the nodes that they connect. The node is treated as a black box with little

> analytic value. Thus, it is not so much the individual that matters, but how they are related to others. Put differently, an individual node has no specific characteristics or interest for the researcher until they are linked into a network (p. 13).

This could be the introduction of an individualist critique, but it isn't. We never get individuals with intrinsic properties as an alternative to "network thinking"; instead, we get thick cultural relations as constituting "the dispositions of…individuals" (p. 18), which is a decidedly relationalist position. Moving from individuals tied to one another only by communication flows such as cell phone traffic, to individuals tied to one another by their mutual imbrication in sets of cultural practices, is a move within the broadly relational sensibility that we have been seeking to disclose throughout this paper. As such, Coward's argument seems too hasty. The problem leading to "pathological sovereignty" may not be "network thinking," but a particular way of cashing out social relations coupled with a particular set of security-strategic imperatives (and a domestic-political imperative not to deploy more troops than necessary). And the solution is another form of relationalism, and not a repudiation of the basic commitment that the relations *between* entities, not the intrinsic properties of those entities or the overall structure of the entire social system, matter for the explanation of outcomes.

Seeing relationalism as a whole helps make sense of this. It also brings various groups of scholars who don't often directly engage one another, like social network analysts and poststructuralists, into potential dialogue with one another. We are not proposing relationalism as a 'big tent" that can or should include almost everyone; committed individualists and structuralists have their own scholarly traditions, and those should remain distinct. But relationalism too is a scholarly tradition, with distinctive explanations to offer. Clarifying the contours of that tradition, we hope, will enable more fruitful discussions across scholarly traditions, as well as the exploration of how relationalism in Anglophone international studies resembles relationalisms elsewhere.

What does this overview mean for the examples of Chinese relationalism in this collection? This work, in the broadest sense, shares a similar social ontology. But we do not see debates about, say, position and process. Instead, the focus seems to be on modalities of relations. That is, we see an underlying focus on relations as the 'stuff' of identity, power, and prestige—and a concurrent rejection of atomistic understandings of world politics. But the arguments concern the normative and practical implications of different *kinds* of relationships and relationality.

This approach is not entirely absent form Anglophone relationalism, but it hasn't been emphasized. It potentially links up with the way that some relationalists conceptualize identity as inhering in social ties, and in the way that some relationalists think about variation in the content of ties—in terms of amity and enmity, for example. But what it particularly reminds us of is the notion of a "repertoire": a stock of scripts and performances through which actors make claims on one another. Borrowing from Tilly (2003, 46), in particular cultural and historical contexts, actors "have only a limited number of performances at their disposal." The interaction of those performances "eliminate from consideration, and often from consciousness, a vast range of claim-making performances of which participants are technically capable." (Tilly 2002,

119). At the same time, actors innovative and repertoires alter over time. More attention to the stock of performances and the modalities they produce might constitute a fruitful avenue for relational approaches to the study of world politics.

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