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Towards global relational theorizing: a dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relationalism

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Abstract:

What is 'relational theorising' in International Relations and what can it offer? This article introduces a thematic section that responds to these questions by showing two things. First, relational theorising is not a doctrine or a method, but a set of analyses that begin with relations rather than the putative essences of constitutively autonomous actors. Second, relational theorising has emerged from different geo-linguistic traditions, and a relational approach to International Relations (IR) can offer the language and space for increased and productive engagement beyond Anglophone scholarship. This thematic section takes a significant step in this direction by staging a dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relational IR theorising. Such an engagement shows points of comparison and contrast, convergence and divergence. In this way, the essays presented here contribute to developing a more 'global' IR.

Introduction

What is 'relational theorising' in International Relations (IR) and what can it offer? The essays collected in this thematic section respond to these questions by showing two things. First, each of these essays takes as its starting-point the idea that any analysis of international affairs should

begin with relations, not with the putative essences of constitutively autonomous actors. The essays illustrate that there are a range of ways to both approach and theorise ‘relationality’. Relational theorising is, then, exactly what it says – it is not a doctrine or a method, but a set of interconnected analyses whose starting-place is a concern with relations. Second, relational theorising has emerged from different geo-linguistic traditions, and a relational approach to IR can offer language and space for increased and productive engagement beyond Anglophone scholarship. This thematic section takes a significant step in this direction by staging a dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relational IR theorising. Such an engagement shows points of comparison and contrast, convergence and divergence. In this way the essays presented here contribute to developing a more ‘global’ IR.

Here, scholars who have elaborated on relationality in different geo-linguistic contexts and based on different philosophical traditions take on this challenge by considering a number of key questions (Zalewski, this volume):

What is meant by ‘relational thinking,’ ‘relationalism,’ and ‘relationality’ in the specific context they consider?

Where are these observed or practiced?

Who cares about which relations, and why?

What is at stake in relational thinking?

What are the limits to relationality?

Each article in this thematic section approaches these questions from a different angle. Contributors represent distinct theoretical positions in Anglophone and Sinophone traditions, as well as in the space in between them. All articles in this thematic section share an underpinning assumption of relational ontology, whether they draw it from Anglophone or Sinophone traditions of thought. By this we mean that for the purposes of analysis, we all treat the world as consisting of relations.

The remainder of this introduction outlines the general contours for understanding the thematic section as a whole. It first explains in more detail why and how IR scholars have argued for an approach that starts with relations rather than with things. It then explains the reasoning and significance behind beginning with relating Anglophone and Sinophone relational thinking approaches. Such an engagement contributes towards a more global IR – although it recognises that more voices need to be heard in this conversation, and this thematic issue is just the beginning. Finally, this introduction briefly sketches each of the papers commenting on how they relate to the theme of relationality, and to each other.

What to start with: Relations or Things?

Every approach to seeing and studying the world must start somewhere. In this respect, it might be said that there are two broad approaches to the study of international relations (IR): an ‘ontology of things’ and an ‘ontology of relations’. The first approach, the ontology of things, begins its analysis from allegedly static units such as states, civilizations, and individuals. Such entities are conceived of as having a primary or rudimentary ‘givenness’. They are perceived to be fundamental or basic building-blocks of the international system. The second approach, the ontology of relations, starts instead by studying the unfolding, dynamic, and productive processes through which states, civilizations, and individuals emerge. Indeed, this second approach tends to take ‘relations’ as a given, and the things related as being in a condition of constitution, transformation, and becoming. Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but the focus on one tends to limit attention to the other. This is perhaps inevitable -

to see something, a perspective and focus is needed. However, scholars must remain cognizant given the potentially serious consequences for that which is not given attention. In focusing on one group of things other things are blurred, marginalised, or excluded. No one perspective can see everything, and it is likely that multiple perspectives are needed if greater understanding is to be obtained.

This thematic section therefore rests on the increasing emphasis, in the last couple of decades, on relational approaches as a starting point for theorising international or global politics. This renewed emphasis on relational theorising has involved approaches with a range of different methodological, epistemological, and ethical commitments, including but not confined to, social network approaches, practice theory, and pragmatism; variants of feminism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism; and role theory and the ethics of care (Jackson and Nexon, 1990; Stern and Zalewski, 2009). Though they treat relations in a range of different ways, as far as they are relational these approaches all insist, implicitly or explicitly, that we begin our analyses with relations, rather than structures or actors that are first imagined to exist in their own right and only subsequently interact. Thus, rather than a single coherent theory, ‘relational theorising’ here denotes a set of approaches united by a broad sensibility that foregrounds concrete connections and ties, and their different functions, rather than individual characteristics or general categories. In other words, they form a related and interconnected group, and it is useful to think of them together, but this does not mean that they all share the same features or characteristics.

Relational theorising might also provide the basis for an ethics or normativity: it might be thought, for example, that relations are ‘good things’ and should be promoted. However, these two claims are distinct. It is perfectly conceivable to study relations without claiming that all relations have positive normative value, just as it is possible to study individuals without claiming that individualism has positive normative value. Thus, relational approaches *per se* do not resolve the normative question. Relational theorising as such does not say whether any existing relations are good or bad – although individual scholars might go on to add this dimension to their accounts. A relational – and hence also strategic and pragmatic – approach can also simply condition an unquestioning deference to the powers-that-be, and perhaps with that, the normative *expectation* that others ‘should’ do likewise. To the extent that ‘relationality’ is allowed to get away with posturing as *itself* a normative orientation, it could also readily support a project of sheer self-assertion of the supposed (and likely fetishized) cultural ‘home’ of such thinking.

Where to start: Anglosphere and/or Sinosphere?

Just as theories must start by focusing on something, so too must they be generated by persons who inhabit a place. Although theory is an abstraction, it is not only an abstraction – it is conducted by people who are located in particular places, with particular experiences, and using particular languages. This does not mean, of course, that theory is simply ‘relative’ and ‘subjective’ – but all theories are the products of someone, somewhere, and so they inevitably involve perspective. The essays presented here are aware of such differentiated positions and perspectives, and try to navigate them. Indeed, these essays contribute to wider efforts in IR to move the discipline towards more global international relations (Acharya, 2014; 2016). We begin this work by juxtaposing the aforementioned largely Anglophone renditions of relational theory, with largely Sinophone relational thinking that has gained prominence in the same period through increasingly vocal calls for a ‘Chinese school’ of IR theory. This geo-linguistic tradition is said by many to rely on a ‘Chinese ontology, the ontology of relations, instead of the western ontology of things’ (Zhao Tingyang, 2006: 33-34). It understands relationality as core to a Chinese contribution to theorizing world politics, and looks for its expression in concepts drawn from Chinese tradition, such as ‘friendship/relations’ (*guanxi*, Qin Yaqing, 2009; 2016; Nordin and Smith, 2018; Kavalski, 2018), ‘harmony’ (*hexie*, Nordin, 2016a; 2016b; Huang Chiung-Chiu

and Shih Chih-yu, 2014), and a ‘Daoist dialectic’ (*Zhongyong/yin-yang* dialectic, Qin Yaqing, 2016; Ling, 2014). As others have noted, such theoretical writings ‘are already making a difference by exposing the limitations of mainstream IR theories in the regional context. And they have the potential to offer new and alternative concepts that are more contextually grounded and relevant for Global IR’ (Acharya, 2017: 1).

These two strands of relational thinking appear to share key interests and aims, yet dialogue between the two has been sparse to date. The Anglophone debate rarely acknowledges or engages contributions from China (or other traditions beyond the West). The Sinophone debate rarely acknowledges that Western traditions (or other traditions beyond the West) also have an intellectual history which seeks to foreground relationality. To see how they are related, to see what they share and how they differ, this thematic section brings these two geo-linguistically situated clusters of discussion into conversation, by bringing together key interlocutors from the two debates. Key advocates and critics of both discussions are invited to take stock of the discussion to date, and to draw out areas for mutual reinforcement, contradiction and contention. The aim is to thereby nourish future relational thinking that is more aware and inclusive with regards to relations between diverging (or converging) global epistemologies and ontologies.

In this respect, the emphasis on (Anglo/Sino/other-) *phonics* is not coincidental. The ontology of relations shared by the approaches discussed in this thematic section does not merely critique the ‘authorized imaginaries’ of the IR mainstream, but *listens attentively* to the voices of those that have been neglected, delegitimized, and scorned by the dominant ontology of things (Querejazu, 2016). The epistemic compassion of relationality decentres the sense-making habits of an IR accustomed to modernity’s insistence that the only way of relating to the world is through the lens of (Western) scientific knowledge. *Thea* – the Greek root of the notion of theory – meant ‘to see’ (in particular, seeing the world from within the interiority of the self), which in the context of the Enlightenment became associated with a mode of knowledge production premised on dispassionate observation. Insisting that the proper way to acquire knowledge about the world is through the modelling of linear relationships with homogeneous independent variables that discern between discreet stochastic and systemic effects, this form of theorising remains oblivious to manifold social effects. Particularly, it neglects those effects that obfuscate its collusion in the production of the overwhelming inequality proliferated through the geopolitics of distinct European hierarchical assemblages (such as the ‘Third World’, ‘Global South’, etc.), which have come to normalize unjust governmentalities of life and subject-formation (Morefield 2014). In contrast to such framing, the phonics of relationality encourages the ‘un-bordering’ of IR theory by reaching outside the binary metanarratives of its Eurocentric self and listening attentively to the spaces for ‘learning to learn from others’ (Ling, this issue, see Chih-yu Shih et al 2019 for an attempt at integrating the two). The dialogical learning of this type of relationality engages with the possibilities afforded by the interactions of multiple worlds, and privileges the experiences and narratives of neither of them. At the same time, such attentive listening has to heed the dangers of ignorance and denial, the idealization of others, and the appropriation and instrumentalisation of their knowledges.

The papers and their scope

The focus on relationality thus generates both opportunity and challenges. These challenges will not be overcome by one thematic section. However, by bringing together relational theorising in the Anglophone and Sinophone spheres of the discipline, this issue contributes towards taking relational theorising in a more genuinely global direction. The articles presented here develop around different, but related, foci. Some focus on developing what may be called relational analytics, which encompasses both method and methodology. They examine how different theoretical approaches propose tools to evaluate statements by starting with relations. Others develop substantive theory about specific empirical relations or ways of relating. They identify

differences and similarities of contextualized instances and highlight patterns across numerous case instances in a parsimonious relational structure. Yet others examine the modalities of relations, specifically with an interest in modelling different ways of understanding relations between ‘self’ and ‘other’, with ethical implications. These modalities cut across both analytic and substantive relational theorising. The contributions also reflect a range of ways of relating the reader to the text, from standard academic article format to a scholarly play.

The first three papers focus on established approaches to the theorisation of relations. The remaining two papers think about these in terms of the intersection and encounter between the Sinophone and Anglophone world.

The article by Daniel Nexon and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson delivers a taxonomy of relational analytics in an important cohort of Anglophone relational theorising. They argue that the wider family of relational social theory is best grasped by distinguishing it from other families of broad social theory like individualism and structuralism, and cuts across the range of so called ‘paradigms’ in Anglophone international studies. Understanding relational social theory in this way allows us to treat it as a whole, rather than as a subordinate gesture that takes place within other schools of thought, and therefore to isolate the key commitments of this broadly relational sensibility. Thinking from relations as the starting-point also allows us to better appreciate how differences between and among relationally-inclined scholars form a complex tapestry of debates internal to relational theory, broadly understood. The article discusses variants of Anglophone relational theory as displaying more or less preference for position or process respectively. It underscores that a relational ontology does not oblige one to a particular methodology. By doing so, Nexon and Jackson pave the way for comparisons and contrasts with other geo-linguistic traditions.

Qin Yaqing and Astrid H. M. Nordin’s article provides a substantive as well as analytic theoretical sketch, whose central argument is that representation is practice. According to the article, academic representation in the social sciences rests primarily on the background of a community of practice and highlights what is embodied therein. Qin and Nordin further argue that the prototype of a community of practice is a cultural community. Different cultural communities have different practices and therefore different background knowledge. As a result, representational knowledge produced by academic practitioners in various cultural communities may well contain different core concepts for social theories. In contrast to Nexon and Jackson’s article, Qin and Nordin argue the background knowledge of Western societies rests on rationality, while relationality performs a similar role in Confucian cultural communities. They develop this notion of relationality based on Sinophone resources, specifically the *zhongyong* dialectics that derive from a Daoist understanding of *yin* and *yang* in relational terms, refined by Confucianism to interpret human relations. As such, Qin and Nordin see in the Anglophone and Sinophone traditions two different modalities for relating self and other.

Marysia Zalewski develops a paper that offers feminism as a key approach for relational theorising. She asks ‘why did we not focus the whole workshop around feminist theory? This question is posed knowing that the workshop was not ‘about’ feminism and thus it might not seem rational to choose such a focus. But given the concept and practice of *relationality* is so deeply embedded in feminist work, ‘forgetting feminism’ is troubling. Her paper explores the idea of ‘forgetting feminism’ through a further question namely, ‘is sexism (still) at work in IR?’ This involves a perusal of the work of sexual politics and sexism, IR’s putative ‘failure to love’, and a personal, relational detour into the life, work and career of Lily Ling – corporeally suddenly absent but remaining a vital part of the work in which we are all engaged. Central to her paper is that feminism has consistently worked with ideas about relationality – or forms of connection between things (ideas, concepts, behaviours, emotions) in contrast to the (masculine) model of linearity, objectivity, rationality and cold calculation. Zalewski shows that this

conceptual, emotional and material work of relationality has a firm base in feminist theorising. It also illustrates two analytics or modalities for imagining relations that are drawn along gendered rather than geo-linguistic lines.

The paper by Astrid H. M. Nordin and Graham M. Smith draws from previous efforts to globalise IR. They focus on the way relations between self and other are imagined, and examine such imaginations in different strands of primarily Sinophone theorising. To them, what is at stake in the turn towards or away from relational theorising is the relative willingness and ability to acknowledge and theorise a particular type of otherness, what they term 'absolute otherness' or 'alterity'. This form of otherness provides a bulwark against domination and colonialism: there is always something that is truly other which cannot be incorporated, understood, synthesised, or assimilated. However, two problems arise. First, if this form of otherness is truly inaccessible then how can the self relate to it? Does otherness undermine relationality? Second, can we talk about otherness without making it the same? Is the very naming of this otherness a new form of domination? The article draws out and explores the possibilities for this form of otherness in different modalities of relations identifiable in the literature. As such, they point to the contributions made by Qin's and Ling's versions of a 'Daoist dialectic', as well as Shih's 'balance of relationship', but also point to their respective limitations for stepping up to the ethical demands of the other. In doing so, the article addresses the difficulties presented by the need for a sense of absolute otherness on the one hand, and on the other hand the seeming impossibility of either detecting it or relating to such otherness.

Finally, L. H. M. Ling has contributed a dramatic piece in order to explore both relational theorising, and the ways in which that theorising plays out in concrete relations between theorists and between a written text and its reader. In doing so, she has contributed to both relational analytics and substantive theorising about relations. She has also offered an exploration of modalities for relating self and other. In the play, two professors engage in deep conversation about their thoughts on un-bordered thinking, epistemic compassion, interbeing, democratic learning, intellectual freedom, and culinary cosmologies, until they encounter a third thinker. He verifies yet upturns their worlds with an absurd joke. The professors then realize that humour is sometimes more divine than love. Laughter, after all, affirms the humanity behind relations and relationality.

Towards global relational theorising

One of the purposes of this thematic section is to 'uncover' aspects of relational theorising, by discovering and excavating what many appear to have forgotten (Bially Mattern, 2005). It also focuses on what might appear to be separate, but what can also be related and usefully compared and contrasted. On this understanding, this thematic section focuses on two geo-linguistic traditions or debates. However, as its contributions show in more detail, these two traditions are not clearly separate, but are mutually constitutive. Many arguments about relationality draw on both, or merge into both. Many of the articles in this thematic section, especially those by Nordin and Smith, and Ling, demonstrate the benefits of locating our analyses in the hybrid space in between the two, to the point where they are no longer distinguishable, if they ever were. Through this thematic section, we begin to elaborate on the basis for comparison and cross-fertilisation between two identifiable, and particularly vocal, traditions for relational thinking. This is just the beginning. This thematic section can form the basis for developing future comparative work in relation to other geo-linguistic traditions, and new ways of understanding the relations between different relational analytics, substantive relational theories, and the modalities for imagining self-other relations that cut across both with ethical implications. As stressed from the outset: a perspective is needed in order to see something, but we should not fall into the complacency of thinking that our current perspective is the only one, nor the hubris

of claiming that our current perspective is the right one and discounting or ignoring others. A key implication of this relational thinking is the impetus to open up space for ways of relating that do not reproduce existing patterns of violence and exclusion, but are oriented towards the other. Though never total and ultimately successful, this focus on relational thinking implies, to many of us, a sensibility that emphasizes receptivity, without the guarantee of reception.

Before we end this introduction and move into the articles, we want to take a moment to remember one of our contributors – L.H.M. Ling – Lily as she was known to most of us. Lily passed away on 1 October 2018. A shock and source of great sadness for so many, not least her husband Gavan, her wider family and friends – but also all the friends and colleagues she has in the International Relations community. She is such a loss to us all, though her work and spirit remain very strongly. She was an intellectual power house and a joyful, kind soul – she left so many traces of friendship, kindness and powerful support to junior and senior colleagues alike. We miss her very much. We dedicate this special issue to her. We miss her, but we will remember her.

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