

'Politics of Gratitude' – Bridging Ontologies: Patronage, Roles, and Emotions

Written by Rainer Ricardo

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Patronage is a pervasive feature of international politics. Indeed, Great Powers have been pursuing, historically, a foreign policy based on the “acquisition of client states” (Sylvan and Majeski, 2003). During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged with this kind of foreign policy in multiple regions of the world (Waltz, 1993; Sylvan and Majeski, 2003; Veenendaal, 2014). At present, the “off-shore” American hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001) in East-Asia is mostly a system constituted of client states (Ikenberry, 2011). China has also attracted client states to its “sphere of influence”, such as Cambodia (Ciorciari, 2013), and it is expanding its tentacles to the blind spots of American hegemony (Ikenberry, 2011), mostly in Africa and Latin America. Patronage seems thus to be a powerful force shaping states’ behavior as well as international politics as a whole. Yet, the study of patronage between states could be considered “an underdeveloped area of international relations theory” (Stables, 1996).

This article examines two themes. First, it offers a synthetic review of how International Relations (IR) scholars have been speaking of about patronage, mostly since the concept was first introduced, in the 1980’s, through the subfield of foreign policy analysis (FPA). Second, it will show that research based on patronage would benefit, greatly, from a dialogue with two theoretical trends introduced in IR Theory during the last decades: Role Theory and Emotions Theory. By bridging these ontologies, I am inviting IR scholars to explore more about how “politics of gratitude” work at the level of international politics.

Patronage and IR Theory

IR scholars have not yet developed a research program within the discipline of IR to tackle the phenomenon of patronage between states. There are some reasons for this. First, studies based on patronage between states have adopted a narrow perspective. Since they have only pursued the development of a “conceptual framework” (Carney, 1993; Stables, 1996), there has been no ambition for theory-building. Second, patronage is considered mainly “an instrumental strategy” (Jaffrelot, 2012) pursued by rational actors – unitary and rational states – in order to obtain “benefits” from the relationship (Carney, 1989; 1993; Stables, 1996; Sylvan and Majeski, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2012; Veenendaal, 2014). Consequently, patron-client relationships are ephemeral alliances in the landscape of inter-state relationships since they are out there as long as benefits are obtained. Finally, research have been focusing on “dyads” as the main structural element of this international hierarchy. Yet, scholars have also engaged with “clientelistic networks” (Médard, 2000) as well as international systems constituted by “client states” (Ikenberry, 2011).

The Patron-Client Model

First introduced within the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), the Patron-Client Model (PCM) defines the patron-client relationship as a *negotiated* solution to the problem of insecurity between *unequal states* (Shoemaker & Spanier, 1984; Carney, 1989; Stables, 1996). Why sovereign states enter *voluntarily* into this special relationship? The PCM answers to that question by locating the rationale behind patron-client relationships on the “benefits” extracted from the relationship.

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Great Powers *expect* to benefit mostly from “intangible goods”, such as “ideological convergence” and “international solidarity”. They expect also to gain some “strategic advantage” over rivals (Carney, 1989; 1993; Stables, 1996). By attracting allies to their sphere of influence, Great Powers “want to tout their particular ideology as being superior” (Carney, 1989: 49). Consequently, client states are *obliged* to reciprocate patronal generosity by performing “gestures” of solidarity as well as loyalty. Great Powers make use also of client states’ sovereign territory as a geostrategic fortress to dissuade adversaries. In geostrategic terms, patron-client relationships could be viewed as *dissuasive* interstate alliances. Client states also benefit greatly from this special relationship with Great Powers. Rationally, the cost of losing some independence, or sovereignty, is, from the point of view of states with small capabilities, lesser than the benefices obtained from the alliance with a superior power. So, when sovereign states become “clients” of Great Powers, they do so to enhance both “regional security” and “legitimacy” within the domestic space (Shoemaker & Spanier; Carney, 1989, 1992; Stables, 1996). For client states, we must say, to have a powerful “friend” in the harsh environment of international politics pays off very well in both military and economic terms (Carney, 1989; 1993; Stables, 1996). If the relationship is used to improve the well-being of the national population, the alliance will be well perceived and encouraged since the national well-being is mainly associated to the influence of this particular international partner (Carney, 1989: 48).

The PCM offers good insights from a rational choice perspective. It helps to answer the following question: *why states enter in this special bilateral relationship*. Still, IR scholars have only ambioned the development of a “conceptual framework” (Graziano, 1976; Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1980; Carney, 1989; 1993; Stables, 1996). If *theories* are “mental pictures”, or “artistic creations”, constructed in order to explain logical connections among significant elements isolated from a complex reality (Waltz, 2010), *conceptual frameworks* are only concerned with the specification of “empirical properties” (Graziano, 1976). I believe that focusing on empirical properties leads research on patronage to tautological and functional explanations. In order to go beyond the PCM limits, I propose an interdisciplinary dialogue with new theoretical trends flourishing in the margins of IR.

Bridging Ontologies: Patronage, Role Theory, and Emotion Theory

Research on patronage share a common theoretical ground with research on “roles” and “emotions”. In this section, I will make the case for a dialogue between these research programs.

Roles and Patronage

Role theory and research based on patronage have not been linked consciously by IR scholars. This is surprising since patron-client relationships could be easily conceptualized as *structures of roles* made of representational practices of Self and Other (Patron & Client). Patron and Client are thus two complementary and co-constitutive roles/identities that political actors – in this case states – must internalize and perform in order for these international structures to acquire the “corporate body” of an institution.

The concept of “role” was first introduced to the study of international relations within the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) (Thies, 2017; Harnisch, 2011; Nabers, 2011; Breuning, 2011; Holsti, 1970). In his seminal article, Karl Holsti (1970) argued that “national role conceptions” held by decision-makers do affect states’ foreign policy. Holsti’s argument was mainly concerned with the “Ego” part of the equation, which is a limit on itself, but his research opened big the door to Role theory in the discipline of IR (Thies, 2017; Harnisch, 2011). In the 1990’s, IR scholars, such as Alexander Wendt (1999), re-engage with role theory by espousing “symbolic interactionism” and “structurationism”. From such an intellectual place, Wendt considers *Alter’s* “expectations” in the process by which “role/identities” are constructed and argue that “anarchy is what states make of it” (1992), that is, a “structure of roles” made of “collective representations” of Self and Other (Wend, 1999). From a social constructivist point of view, the concept of “role” is thus defined as a “social identity” “performed” during social interaction (Harnisch, 2011; Wendt, 1999). Following Wendt, I argue that patron-client relationships could be better conceptualized as *structures of complementary and co-constitutive roles*. In this sense, it would be accurate to sustain that patron-client relationships, as “structures of roles”, are shaping states’ interests, identities and behavior, and yet, IR scholars do not possess the theoretical tools necessary to tackle such phenomena.

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Emotions and Patronage

"Emotions" are everywhere in international politics as well as in patron-client relationships. Christopher Carney (1989: 46) defines patron-client relationships as "asymmetrical dyads marked by a strong element of *affectivity*" (emphasis added). Veenendaal (2014: 4-5) also argues that an "element of affectivity or loyalty has to be [present] so we can speak of an international patron-client linkage". In this paper, we approach "emotions" as an "umbrella" concept that includes related concepts such as "feelings" and "affection" (Clément & Sangar, 2018). We do not engage with debates about their ontological distinctions.

In mainstream IR Theory, emotions are unproblematic features of international politics, since they are hard to define, to measure, and to isolate from other factors (Crawford, 2015; Gregory & Ahall, 2015). One way of tackling the complexity of emotions is by considering them as "hybrids" features constituted of at least three elements: "bodily reactions", "feelings", and "cognitive elements" (Coicaud, 2014). The idea that emotions are "bodily reactions" and "physiological experiences" is problematic for state-centric approaches in IR since, from a materialistic point of view, the state has not really "a body", neither a "conscience". Consequently, states cannot "feel", since only individuals have the capacity to express emotions (Lowenheim and Heimann, 2008). Yet, state-centric approaches in IR, such as Neorealism, Neoliberalism and Social constructivism, conceptualize the state as a "corporate agent" capable of "acting" with "intentions" (maximizing security) and expressing "emotions" (fear). But, in order to be expressed cognitively, emotions need a body as well as consciousness. IR scholars, such as Alexander Wendt (1999) have argued that the state has a "body". However, Wendt (2015) also recognizes that "consciousness" has not been located yet within the state. So, to conceptualize the state as an "agent" is still problematic since a body without consciousness is a dead body, not an alive one. A solution has been given to this tension by emotion theorists in IR. They have located emotion within "corporate actors", such as states, in the "emotional experiences" of "individuals that compose them, identify with them, and are constituted by them" (Lowenheim and Heimann, 2008: 690).

The missing link

How "patronage" and "emotions" are linked? I argue here that "gratitude" is the missing link. Social psychologists have defined gratitude as a "a moral emotion" (McCoullough & Tsang, 2004), with "positive value", since showing gratitude for the benefits received implies the recognition that "another person has intentionally given, or attempted to give, one something of value" (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006: 319). In psychological parlance, feelings of gratitude are related to the *recognition* "that one has obtained a positive outcome" from "an external source" (Emmons, 2004: 9). As a "positive emotion" attached to the exchange of gifts (Komter, 2004), feelings of gratitude for the benefits received seem to encourage "reciprocity" as well as bonds of "trust" among egotistical and rational actors (Harpham, 2004). Yet, gratitude could also be understood as an emotion linked to a particular kind of "moral coercion". As Komter (2004: 195) noted, "beneath the warm feelings of gratitude resides an *imperative force* [emphasis added] that compels us to return the benefit we have received". In other words, feelings of gratitude are intimately connected to feelings of "indebtedness", that is, to the idea that a "debt of gratitude" has been contracted (Callard, 2019; Roberts & Telech, 2019). When applied to the realm of international politics, the notion of "debts of gratitude" opens a window to what historian Louis A. Pérez (2008: 4) has named "politics of gratitude". From this starting point, the world of international relations becomes one in which states with small capabilities contract frequently "debts of gratitude" with Great Powers through the exchange of international "gifts". Still, IR scholars do not have developed the theoretical tools to tackle the phenomenon of "politics of gratitude" and how it really works in the realm of international politics.

Conclusion

This article followed two main themes. First, it offered a review of how IR scholars have been speaking about patronage since the concept was first introduced in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis. It has shown that the Patron-Client Model is a good starting point for researchers whose goal is to come about an explanation of *why* sovereign states enter voluntarily in a patron-client relationship. Research based on patronage locates the "rationale" behind states' behavior within the benefits obtained through the relationship. Patronal powers are expecting to benefit mostly from "intangible" goods, such as ideological alignment and international solidarity, while pursuing at the same time a

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foreign policy based on the acquisition of geostrategic advantages over rivals and enemies. Client states also benefit from the relationship with a Great Power by using “their sovereignty as a bargaining tool” (Veenendaal, 2014: 3). They expect to extract from the relationship resources critical to their regional issues and domestic politics. From the point of view of states with small capabilities, just having a powerful “friend” in the anarchic environment of international relations is a benefit of great value (Carney, 1989; 1993; Stables, 1996).

In the second part, I argued that in order to better understand how patronage really works at the level of international politics, actual research would benefit, greatly, from a dialogue with two theoretical trends evolving in the margins of IR Theory: Role Theory and Emotion Theory. Considering their theoretical common grounds, I argued that patron-client relationships could be better conceptualized by appealing to concepts such as “politics of gratitude” and “debts of gratitude”. By doing so, I invite IR scholars to engage theoretically with these “structures of roles” made of “gratitude” as political power in order to reveal how these international structures shape states’ identities, interests, and behavior. Until now, research on patronage has failed to do so. This failure may mean two things. One: patron-client relationships do not have structural effects at all. Two: actual theoretical efforts have been inadequate. My bet goes to the second horse.

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Rainer Ricardo is a PhD candidate in political science at University of Montreal. His approach to the study of international politics is eclectic and interdisciplinary, bringing to dialogue IR Theory, Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Psychology. Under the direction of Professor Mamoudou Gazibo, Rainer is actually conducting a doctoral thesis based on the study of international hierarchies built upon gratitude as political power. He also holds a master's degree in political science from Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM), as well as a doctoral scholarship from the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et Culture (FRQSC).