

The Entrenchment of Clientelistic Practices: Methodological and Conceptual Issues of Transferability

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Abstract:

Political Sciences' enquiry into such deep embedded social practices as clientelism necessitates new approaches within the discipline. This article explores the evolution of the interpretative approach from the periphery of scientific research to the main alternative to positivist studies. The enquiries into clientelistic practices must account simultaneously for an inner, subjective dimension, as well as for a broader structural picture. Auyero's (2000) study is explored both as an example of such a successful interpretative enquiry, as well an answer to the question of transferability. Because interpretative studies are focused on specificities and idiosyncrasies, it is hard to integrate them in comparative studies. Still, an analytical generalization is possible, as each case study adds value to the overall theoretical umbrella.

Key Words: Clientelism, interpretative approach, transferability, case study

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of conceptual and methodological transferability in political science. It is an increasing dilemma, as new complex and dynamic ways of obtaining and organizing data emerge. The main concept under discussion here is political clientelism. The first section of this paper will briefly define and trace the evolution of this political practice, and the way scholars have generally characterized it.

In line with the interdisciplinary tendencies of today's academic work, such a subject as clientelism is better assessed through the lenses of a more humanist ontological and epistemological basis - interpretivism. The second part of this article explores the origins of interpretivism's transgression from anthropology into political science, the liabilities of its application, and the development of a new approach that is rooted in the interpretative tradition - constructivism. The third part of this paper will then show how a study concerned with the issue of clientelism applies these methodological assumptions. Through this example, I will try to answer the question of whether or not an in-depth, interpretative account can yield transferable knowledge. This is an essential question for a discipline that has been mostly advanced through comparative studies, both Large N and Small N, which have been designed from the start for conceptual transferability. Interpretative qualitative studies, such as Auyero's, are no longer designed for conceptual transferability from the beginning, but are better suited for additive conceptual development. In other words, similar studies may be connected to each other disregarding contextual prerequisites. As long as we are not trying to make a point-by-point comparison between different cases, the theoretical framework offers a broad umbrella for theory testing case studies.

2. Defining Clientelism

A historic-cultural assessment of patron - client relations led to a widespread belief in the 70s-80s literature that they were typical for pre-industrial societies, a primitive form of

organization that would be destroyed by democratization or strengthening of states. In this conceptual frame, Scott (1972: 92) defines patron-client relationship as:

“a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.”

This definition portrays an asymmetrical relationship between the patron and the client that is independent from other hierarchies (national government). As explained by Lande (in Schmidt et al 1977: xiii) “dyadic relationships are composed of only two individuals, and thus are micro-level entities”. Therefore it is not a form of sub-national authoritarianism, but rather one of para-national authoritarianism, as it exists outside any structure of statist rule.

The reemerging interest in clientelism in recent years is due to the fact that the prophecy of self-defeat turned out to be false. Clientelism persisted in developed countries as well as less developed ones, disregarding the system of rule (authoritarianism, democracy). Therefore, both developmentalism’s and institutionalism’s accounts of clientelism proved to be erroneous. Piattoni (2001 in Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007:4) explains this fallacy by observing how “democracy strengthens the clients’ bargaining leverage vis-à-vis brokers and patrons”. Therefore, clientelism was not crushed by democracy and programmatic platforms, but rather forced to evolve into a more “complex pyramidal exchange network of client-broker-patron exchange” (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007:8). Hopkin (2001) emphasizes the distinction between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ clientelism. He argues that ‘this ‘mass party clientelism’ involves parties distributing state resources to groups, areas or individuals in exchange for their votes, and is less unequal, less personalized and more explicitly materialistic relationship than the ‘old’ clientelism’ (2001:3). Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2001:4) underlie other changes: ‘clientelism thus evolves into a more symmetrical (rather than asymmetrical), instrumental-rational (rather than normative) and broker-mediated (rather than face-to-face based) exchange relationship’. In accordance to this new mechanism of clientelistic dominance, they also develop a new definition of clientelism as a transaction - “*the direct exchange of a citizen’s vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods and services*”(2007:2).

This new definition accounts for three major changes in perspective. Firstly, it captures the relationship between the patron and the state, which is the original supplier of the goods and services the patron transacts. It thus portrays a full-scale social hierarchy. Secondly, this definition accounts for Piettoni’s emancipation of the client. In theory, it is no longer an asymmetrical relationship of dominance, but rather a commercial transaction between equal parts each offering what the other desires. Apparently it is a shift from vertical relationships to horizontal ones. The citizenship offers a bargaining leverage to the client, but it is not always respected / applied and therefore, the dependency of the client remains significantly higher than that of the patron in the absence of popular mobilization. Thirdly, this new definition accounts for the need of intermediation in modern clientelistic networks. Electoral clientelism requires vast mobilization structures that can no longer be served by Scott’s dyadic relationship. Auyero (1999, 2000) uses for Political Clientelism Robert Gay’s (1990: 648) definition that is based also on a transactional logic - “the distribution of resources (or promise of) by political office

holders or political candidates in exchange for political support, primarily - although not exclusively - in the form of the vote”.

While the understanding of the clientelistic relationship has changed to a certain degree, an essential component persists: both in the classical dyadic relationship, as in the new market structured understanding, the glue that holds together the system is the parties' mutual interest to participate in the relationship. Lande (in Schmidt et al 1977: xx) adds to Scott's definitions this aspect: “an alliance between two persons of unequal status, power or resources *each of whom finds it useful to have as an ally someone superior or inferior to himself.*” This rationale of need is instituted by the clientelistic mechanisms of control and coercion. The key to breaking the dependency on patron-client relationships is to limit and suppress its control over the every-day lives of citizens.

3. Enquiry Approach: Interpretivism

Interpretivism's coming of age

Concomitantly with the emergence of interpretative propositions from anthropology and sociology, there were rising critiques towards positivist research. The latter was accused of transposing to the social world the standards and expectations of the natural world. From this “methodological war - of the 1970s and 1980s” (Almond 1996), interpretivism emerged as an anti-science alternative. In Kuhn's terms, interpretivism can be seen as the new paradigm (1962). Although it never got close to achieving the proper hegemony expected from a ‘normal science’ (probably because it never claimed the scientific standard), it has enriched immensely the qualitative research by conferring it with autonomous references. Denzin and Lincoln explain this point: ‘qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (1998, 3 in Mottier 2005). This is the “interpretive turn” that brings forth disciplines such as ethnography, phenomenology or hermeneutics (Malinowski 1941; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Rainbow and Sullivan 1987). Shapiro and Wendt agree that ‘Interpretivisms come in various forms; what they share in common is resistance to the logical empiricist notion that theories are true insofar as they correspond to facts that exist in the world out there’ (2005, 31).

Interpretivism, as an approach to the systematic analysis of social life, is rooted in the anthropological discipline. It builds on the Weberian premises of “*verstehen*”-understanding. In this spirit, Geertz (1973) provided a theoretical reference for interpretivists of all disciplines. He argued in favor of “thick descriptions” that go beyond the mechanics of human behavior, and explore its deeper motivations and subjective references for acting in a particular manner. He states:

‘Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretative one in search of meaning’ (1973, 5)

As significant as it is to interpretative scholars, Geertz's anthropological perspective remains an extreme benchmark in social sciences. It is more of a humanistic stance than an interpretative one, as it holds that ‘reality does not exist beyond the (relative or partial) images the various actors have of it’ (Della Porta and Keating 2008, 25) -‘turtles all the way down’ (Geertz 1973, 29). Della Porta and Keating (2008) explain how interpretivist accounts search for contextual knowledge, while humanistic accounts (such as Geertz's) focus on empathetic knowledge. Given methodological criteria of validity and reliability,

empathetic knowledge can hardly constitute the basis of scientific research in social sciences. Therefore social sciences today, although building on its philosophical framework, seldom draw on its epistemological premises.

The liabilities of the interpretative approach

Green points out that the interpretivist approach can be held accountable for ‘extreme relativism, antifoundationalism, and rejection of the possibility of a social science’, as well as for a “hermeneutic circle” of continuous interpretation and deconstruction of everything’ (2002, 13). Lichbach supports this critique by pointing out that interpretative accounts of culture are both hard to identify and to test (2007). He states that ‘the existence and causal impact of culture is difficult if not impossible to investigate’ and that because ‘action and the material world are swept up into an all-embracing Hegelian idealism, teleology and tautology are inevitable’ (2007, 257). Lichbach recognizes that these are built-in lacunas of the epistemological premises of the method, given that it does not ‘attempt to separate the material from the ideal because they assume that material must always be interpreted in terms of the ideal’ (2007, 257). He thus seems to imply that no causal inferences can be drawn from interpretative enquiries, given the lack of traceable proof. This kind of critique is provoked by interpretivism’s inclination to excessive relativisation, which may turn an academic enquiry into nothing more than an ‘armchair reflection’ (Shapiro and Wendt 2005, 37).

Another issue of interpretivism relates to the “bias” provoked by, or belonging to, the researcher. Most critiques of interpretivism accuse the inescapable subjectivity of the researcher who gives his interpretation on things leading to a “double hermeneutic” loop (Giddens 1976). In addition, the subjects have their own interpretation of the researcher, which may bias the findings in untraceable ways - e.g. a woman researcher may obtain fundamentally different answers from the interviewees than a man. The subjectivity of the researcher vis-à-vis the subject/subjects is by far the lesser evil of the two, as it can be clearly stated along with the assessment of the findings. I support that such transparency of “bias” can be satisfactory even to King’s et al criterion of ‘public procedures’ (1994, 9). The “bias” provoked by the researcher, on the other hand, is much harder to trace and, therefore, to be transparent about. While subjectivity by itself can be considered a way of acquiring in-depth, otherwise unobtainable information, it has to be thoroughly accounted for if the research is to measure up to academic standards of rigor.

Shapiro and Wendt (2005) take issue with the potential errors of actors’ self-interpretations - because ideology and power relations often operate via the more opaque dimension of language on agents’ self-understandings, any method (...) that limits the inquiry to those self-understandings potentially involves bias’ (2005, 33). They therefore conclude that interpretivism ‘is constitutionally predisposed to miss phenomena like ideological distortion, dimensions of actions that involve overlooking and neglecting, unconscious intentions, and the functional dimensions of actions for social structures that may or may not be evident to agents’ (2005, 33).

The ‘opaque dimension of language’ points to another trap into which interpretivism may fall: ‘linguistic behaviourism’ (Chihara and Fodor 1966 in Shapiro and Wendt 2005). It draws on the presumptions of the ‘Linguistic Turn’ that sees all understanding to be shaped by the subjective use of language, and therefore, considers meaning as being both uncontrollable and undiscoverable (Bryman 2008, 681). The ‘Linguistic Turn’ is obviously an extreme standpoint-just because people use language, as a culturally codified system of constructing and transmitting ideas, does not make all linguistic based observations futile. I take this emphasis on the subjective dimension of the use of words

as a good (rather than bad) aspect of interpretivism. People do use words in different ways and with different meanings, and the interpretative approach is the best theoretically equipped means of discovering those variations and what they stand for.

I draw these conclusions on my personal experience in the field. Last year I attended a local Council meeting in Bucharest as part of my research interest in the underpinnings of local power structures in Romania. The council members were supposed to vote a public project of rehabilitating the facades of the apartment buildings in their constituency. There was a widespread discontent caused by the rumor that the mayor would give the rehabilitation contract to his brother's firm. Still, they could not vote against the project because it was of high interest to the voters and no proof of corruption had yet been produced. So, before they finally took the vote in favor of the project, each gave a speech. In the overall majority of those speeches, the frenetic use of the word "sincopa", in a metaphorical sense, stood out. The equivalent of that word in English is "syncope" meaning 'temporary loss of consciousness caused by a fall in blood pressure' (Oxford American Dictionaries). This is an extremely rarely used word in the Romanian language and its use in that context seemed to me to bring about broader meanings that could not otherwise be conveyed. Expressing "temporary loss of consciousness" was not a simple statement of a medical condition, but a "speech act" (Searle 1969, Austin 1976) that was intended as a warning, a threat, a manifestation of actual awareness of the mayor's venal intentions.

All these different perceptions on the failures of the interpretivist approach gravitate around the basic premise of the method-subjective enquiry into social life. I find all these arguments convincing and I believe that a researcher should be careful when using interpretivism, as the investigation path is mostly unchartered and rules are often too abstract for the actual practice of interpretation. But, the practice of interpretation is fundamentally bound to the instinct, inspiration and predispositions of both the researcher and the subjects of the researcher. Therefore, I find it hard to believe that any all encompassing methodological standards can be ever found in the products of interpretivism-no one product is the same with the other, just because no two identical persons can perform the same investigation in identical circumstances. This failure to replicate an investigation of political science may be found even in non-interpretivist research, but it is especially emblematic for interpretivism. Because of this, it is advisable to take into consideration the critiques and to attempt to perfect it, but only in a modified form can we truly address all the above-mentioned issues. This attempt to develop a better version, a new generation of interpretative enquiry, manifested itself in the attempt to bridge the divide of the social sciences and to gather the strengths of each approach while leaving behind their weaknesses. It is still an ongoing endeavor, which may or may not be resolved, but valuable propositions are put forward.

Bridging the divide

Still loyal to the search for embedded meanings, French sociologists, such as Bourdieu (1977) and Levi-Strauss (1963), attempted to complement the analysis of the individual's subjective dimension with the structural prerequisites of his environment. This functionalist/structuralist interpretivism brings forth the encompassing ambition of bringing together external and internalist explanations. Through a functionalist perspective, cultural interpretations begin to 'seek to bridge external explanations, by reference to the social world, and internalist explanations, which rely on individual interpretation and decision' (Keating 2008, 99). Ferejohn (2004, 146) details further on the actual distinction between the two perspectives: 'Externalists explain action by

pointing to its causes; internalists explain action by showing it as justified or best from an agent's perspective. Externalist explanations are positivist and predictive; internalist explanations are normative and hermeneutic' (in Della Porta and Keating 2008, 27). Green agrees that positivist social science 'assumes exteriority; "outsiders" examine the social world as a natural world, seeking to explain its workings with lawlike generalizations' (2002, 12). In contrast, interpretivist or cultural enquiry 'takes an "insider's" interest in understanding the meanings of events' (Green 2002, 12). They thus appear as divergent quests-one in search of generalization, the other in search of specificity and meaning.

Weinberg (2008, 13) argues that although there seem to be 'fixed philosophical divides that separate causal explanation and *Verstehen* understanding' a bridge can still be built. He goes on to assert the practical considerations for which the divide cannot hold:

'As Weber suspected long ago, there is no philosophical chasm here. Social research (including constructionist research) cannot be purely nomothetic because social life is not a closed system and because it is replete with hugely consequential singular events (e.g., the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Holocaust) that cannot be understood as mere exhibits of universal laws of history. But it cannot be purely idiographic, either, because social life is impossible to understand exclusively in terms of its particularity. (...) Hence there can, and must, be constructive dialogue between causal and Verstehen approaches to social research' (Weinberg 2008, 13)

Therefore, if we accept that a bridge is not only possible, but also deeply needed, we must look at how cultural enquiries can be carried out, given that they are the *pièce de la resistance* of the interpretative approach. Culture, in a broader meaning is 'a means of communication and a link among other factors' (Keating 2008). Ross defines culture as being firstly a 'system of meaning that people use to manage their daily worlds, large and small', but also a 'basis of social and political identity that affects how people line up and how they act on a wide range of matters' (2007, 42). The first part of Ross's definition of culture corresponds to the Weberian "webs" that Geertz takes as a subject of interpretative enquiry. Still, the second part of the definition that Ross puts forward taps into a much more modern preoccupation with predicting (as opposed to just understanding) political behaviour based on cultural prerequisites-identity foundations, social interactions, means, norms etc. This analysis of the instrumental function of culture may be the basis of a scientifically warranted political assessment. Indeed, cultural factors may be seen even as a bridge towards rational choice in the sense that 'cultural and rational choice explanations may be compatible at a deeper level, as cultural norms may be seen as historically learned responses to collective action problems' (Kiser and Bauldry 2005 in Keating 2008). Although this association may be less orthodox, the fact remains that the issue of culture bridges many divides in social sciences. It does that by bringing different approaches together under the communality of the research question, as opposed to that of the research method.

Some authors see such cultural prerequisites as traditional meanings that are transmitted through social interaction. Gadamer argues that 'the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being' (1989, 276 in Mottier 2005). Others see them as emerging from social interaction. Hay (2006) attempts to make this distinction between, on one hand, pre-existing institutional templates, that may be transmitted or 'diffused' through social interaction and, on the other hand, the

constructivist conception of co-constitution-on-going forging of ideas and identities. Therefore, one may see the “transmission” of meanings as a traditional interpretative stance, while the “forging” of meanings is a more dynamic way of attempting to understand actions and outcomes in the social sphere.

Wedeen conducted an interpretative enquiry into the underpinnings of the political and public life in Syria-the political sphere and the public sphere being mostly overlapped as everything people did in their private life was politically accountable (1998; 1999). She shows just how instrumental cultural norms and values are. The Syrian regime subversively and efficiently exerts obedience by imposing a set of norms and specific rituals that reflect the regime’s power. Thus, although people began by acting “as if” they believed in the required codes of conduct, they ended up being cognitively shaped and suppressed by the very empty gestures they saw as a façade. Wedeen’s accounts of symbolic politics and ambiguities of social life show to what extent the individual or the community shape, and are shaped, by the more rigid structures of power. She makes the case for both the traditional stance-cultural norms are being transmitted, diffused through a community, as well as the more dynamic account of the forging process of norms and identities. Her papers show the workings of co-constitution and development of those initial “empty” norms into something else, much less benign, and much more entrenched into the psychic of everyman. This kind of cultural enquiry into the practice of power proves the interaction, and the symbiotic relationship between structure and agency. This interaction is the basis of a more integrative interpretative approach-constructivism.

Constructivism as the “ontology of becoming”

Moving away from the Popperian divide of “coulds” and “clocks” (Almond and Genco 1977), Constructivism (or Constructionism, as it is most often called in sociology) holds at its core a synergistic agent-structure interaction, which accounts for both “clouds” and “clocks” at the same time. Still, it neither incorporates the extreme of relativism, nor that of deterministic empiricism. Green sees it as a ‘delicate compromise in the middle’ and goes on to quote Adler (1997, 322) in stating that ‘the true middle ground between rationalist and relativist interpretative approaches is occupied neither by an interpretative version of rationalism, nor by some variety of ‘reflectivism’...but by constructivism’ (2002, 15). Therefore, constructivism is a step away from interpretivism. It does indeed rely on interpretatively acquired knowledge about the agent’s motivations, but it integrates this knowledge in a pattern of fixed structures, that are themselves subjects of enquiry. This acknowledgement of the existence and role of structures is what distinguishes constructivism from interpretivism’s relativism. Furthermore, constructivism is not only an approach that integrates the agent and the structures of reality, but it attempts to account for the synergistic interactions of the two. Bryman (2008, 19) defines constructivism as an ontological position ‘that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors’ and ‘implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision’. This definition fits well with the dynamic model of cultural formation.

Constructivism is still in need of clearer demarcation and methodological definition. Gubrium and Holstein claim that it ‘now belongs to everyone and to no one-a highly variegated mosaic of itself’ and ‘it has come to virtually mean both everything and nothing at the same time’ (2008, 5). Lynch also observes that it is ‘remarkably protean’ (2001, 242). Kratchowil considers constructivism to be neither a theory, nor an approach, but rather a meta-theoretical stand (2008, 81). Gubrium and Holstein agree that ‘it is a

distinct way of seeing and questioning the social world—a vocabulary, an idiom, a language of interpretation’ (2008, 5). Constructivism is therefore, a problematic issue for political scientists eager to adhere to it. It appears to solve just as many issues as it rises. It bridges the divide between interpretivism and positivism, but it does so at the cost of high theoretical and methodological indeterminacy.

Its roots are also disputed. Kratochwil traces back its roots to the reasoning of Kant, Descartes or Vico and claims that in the last century, ‘constructivism was deeply influenced by cybernetics and modern systems theory, which severed the link between determinism and predictability/uniqueness’ (2008, 84). He also points to Mead’s symbolic interactionism, Luhmann’s systems theory and to Berger and Luckmann’s manifestos (2008,84). Others, such as Hay, are content to frame the constructivist perspective in terms of the subject of enquiry. He thus puts forward the concept of Constructivist Intitutionalism, and starts with a historical *tabula rasa*, debating only the present and applied features of the approach and not its ideological lineage (Hay 2006). In a similar manner, Green makes reference to the Constructivist Comparative Politics and thus restrains his analysis to the substantive areas of the comparative framework (2002). Green states his goal clearly—the development of ‘an analytic framework, incorporating the interpretivist revolution, that is adept at examining sociopolitical change in the late modern world and that places the state/polity/society in a larger, and theorized, global-system and historical context’ (2002, 9).

Both Hay and Green provide valuable additions to the constructivist approach by discussing its application to specific fields of enquiry. Focusing on the practicality of constructivism is especially beneficial, as the debates about its ideological lineage are unresolved. Kratochwil himself acknowledges that the ‘various sources of constructivism impacted differently on different authors’ (2008, 85). On this basis, he goes further in attempting to assess the common ground for constructivists of all disciplines. He thinks that ‘two basic commitments can be identified as the minimal core of constructivism’: ‘agency matters in social life and, therefore, agents are not simple throughputs of structures—material or ideal—working behind their backs’ (2008, 86). Gubrium and Holstein point out that it ‘has highlighted both the dynamic contours of social reality and the processes by which social reality is put together and assigned meaning’ (2008, 3).

Taking advantage of such a synthetic definition of constructivism, other scholars (Wendt 1999, Shapiro and Wendt 2005, Collier 2005) forgo the constructivist label all together, and fit its premises under scientific/ critical realism. Collier (2005) and Shapiro and Wendt (2005) agree that what realism (whether “critical” for Collier or “scientific” for Shapiro and Wendt) brings to the table is a mix of the strengths of positivism and interpretivism with none of the failures of the two schools of thought. From these two very similar papers we can extract the overall conclusion that, through the realist lenses, social science incorporates causality (like positivism/ logical empiricism), includes ideas and intentions (like hermeneutics/ interpretivism) and is counterphenomenal (unlike either positivism or interpretivism).

Still, others dispute this association and they see constructivism as being epistemologically different from realism (Bryman 2008, Kratochwil 2008). They believe constructivism could go as far as to support an indeterminacy of knowledge—‘the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive’ (Bryman 2008, 19). In contrast, scientific realism holds a ‘foundationalist belief in being able to go to the things themselves and capture them by some hard data’ (Kratochwil 2008, 87). Another argument against the association of

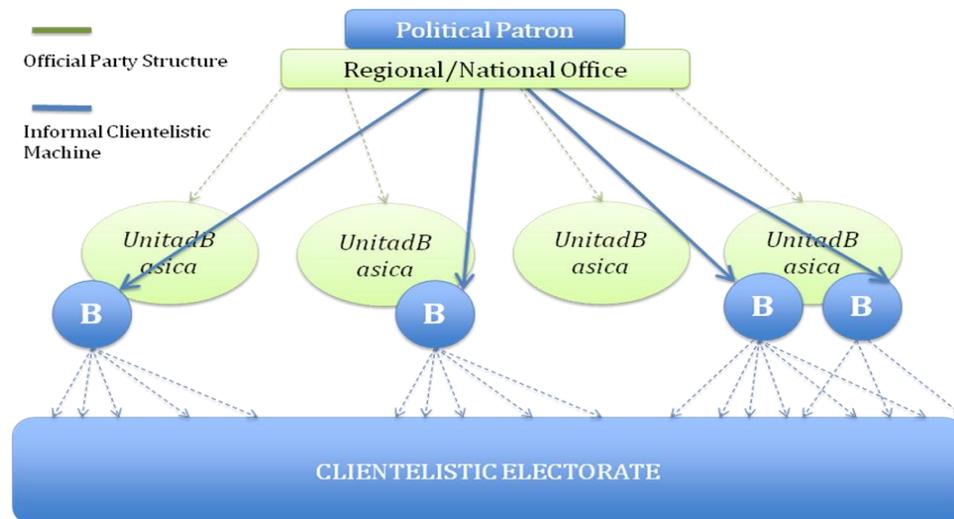
constructivism with realism is that the first, although looking at structures as well as actors, holds at its core the supremacy of the participants' agency in creating those structures. In contrast, realism holds that there are autonomous structures-‘generative mechanism’ (Bhaskar 1975 in Bryman 2008) that exist independent of the agency of individuals, and even more, they play an active role in shaping social reality. In this debate, I take constructivism to be a meta-interpretivist approach, rather than a realist one. In my view, constructivism essentially reflects the individual’s role in constructing social reality. In this sense, we can take communities, societies or constructed structures (such as states) as units of analysis, and thus expand the analysis from the individual level to a broader, macro-level. We cannot though, go as far as to see these aggregates as “prime numbers” by themselves. They are synergistic interactions that exert an effect greater than that of the individual’s sum, but they are not independent of the individual’s ultimate agency.

4. Context-bound Conceptualization: Clientelism in Argentina (Auyero 2000)

Problem-Solving Networks

Auyero’s account of the social order of Argentinean slums develops a new perspective on the everyday workings of political clientelism. He focuses on the reality on the ground, and on how slum dwellers themselves perceive such ties. Auyero puts forward the interesting concept of “Problem-Solving Networks”. He argues that there is more than a ‘quid pro quo exchange’, there is an actual sociocultural logic, and a deeper inter-personal mechanism behind political domination. The elements of his analysis of the shantytown Villa Paraiso are: the “clients”, the “political brokers”, the “political patron” and the mediation platforms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Peronist Clientelistic Machine in Villa Paraiso



Source: adapted after Auyero’s description

The “clients” are the slum dwellers, a clientelistic electorate willing to exchange votes or political support for personal favors (e.g. goods, services). Auyero is careful not to show this electorate as being captive, but rather as a sum of rational agents trying to maximize their gains. Still, he himself acknowledges that in the face of state retreat, ‘politics (and personal ties) are increasingly important for gaining access to resources’ (2000:60).

Therefore, the “clients” are, in fact, captive to a narrow range of options for self-sustainability. The “political patron” or the “*referente*” is usually a politician who holds a local office and has access to resources that he channels in a discretionary manner. In Auyero’s depiction, the political patron is Gustavo Pedele, a Peronist councilman and an aspiring mayor. The “political brokers” or “*punteros*” represent a third and essential input to the “Problem-solving Networks”. These are inhabitants of the shantytown themselves, who, in search of social mobility, become mediators between the political patron and the population—the actual clients. Auyero presents such political brokers as Norma, Matilde, Juan, Cholo, Andrea. They have a double identity, as being both clients of the political patron, and patrons of the slum dwellers. They are the gatekeepers of the clientelistic machine. Neither the name of the patron or those of the brokers are the real names of the actual persons studied by Auyero. Finally, the grassroots offices of the Peronist Party—the ‘*Unidad Basica*’, represent the “mediation platform”, the meeting place or convergence site. These are elements of both the official party structure and the informal clientelistic system (see Figure 1).

In sum, a Problem-Solving Network is defined as a ‘web of material and symbolic resource distribution’ (2000:57) that ‘some neighbors establish with the local political brokers to obtain food, medicine, and solutions to other everyday concerns’ (Auyero 2000:60). It thus serves two functions: resource control and information hoarding (2000:60).

A shortcoming of Auyero’s assessment is that he only looks at the power underpinnings of the Peronist Party. He actually states that one of the goals of the article is to ‘shed light on the convergence of Peronism and clientelistic politics’ (2000: 58). Because of this, he is actually only describing Peronist Political Clientelism, and not the broader concept of Argentinean Political Clientelism. From Auyero’s account we have no information about other parties, how they acquire their political support, and how they are perceived by the slum dwellers. Such a broader description of the political life of Villa Paraiso seems necessary especially when Auyero acknowledges different levels of involvement in the Problem-Solving Networks. He portrays concentric circles of followers around the political brokers. The inner circle is constituted of people who develop close, personal ties with the broker, while the outer circle (much bigger) is constituted of people who adhere to the clientelistic system due to necessity, and on a punctual manner. This outer circle is much more cynical and suspicious with respect to the broker’s actions of aid and support. This is why, there seems to be enough space in Villa Paraiso for other political influences or mechanisms to which Auyero makes no reference in this article.

Methodology

As stated in the title itself, Auyero conducts an ethnographic enquiry of the underpinnings of political clientelism in an Argentinean shantytown. He adopts an interpretivist perspective inspired by Bourdieu or Wacquant. Like Wacquant, Auyero attempts a cultural assessment that bridges ‘external explanations, by reference to the social world, and internalist explanations, which rely on individual interpretation and decision’ (Keating 2008:99).

For this purpose, he conducted primary field research involving participant observation, more than forty in-depth interviews, fifteen life-stories, survey on a stratified random sample of three hundred cases. For the interviews, he addressed a wide range of subjects, such as local brokers, party activists, public officials, social workers, and community activists. He inductively constructs the concept of peronist political clientelism by accounting for individuals’ own narratives, rather than conducting guided, structured or

semi-structured interviews. It would have been impossible to tap into the essence of such a controversial matter if he had not allowed people to speak on their own terms. The range of his field research is convincing, thorough, and, in one instance, even exhaustive—he interviewed all the block delegates of the Plan Vida, the largest state-funded food-distribution program operating in Villa Paraiso. Above all else, Auyero's great merit in conducting his research is that he obtained the trust of his subjects. Because of this, he has received truthful confessions about their everyday lives, and could accurately describe the “subjective dimension” of slum clientelism.

Auyero has not assembled only a good descriptive assessment. He also developed a case study analysis that supports causal inferences into broader, structural areas. In his endeavor to assemble a broad perspective on Peronist Political Clientelism, he employed secondary sources such as statistical data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censo (INDEC) and text analysis of the main local newspaper-La Union, over the span of one year. He infers that ‘clientelist networks are important precisely because they fulfill the functions that the state is abandoning’ (2000:60) and he points at the high poverty levels, at the hyper-unemployment and at the conditionality of basic public services such as sewage systems. These insights go beyond the scope of a simple ethnographic account. They provide a better understanding of the structural dynamics and the incentives for establishing and participating into clientelistic networks, in the first place. Vennesson (in Della Porta and Kaeting 2008:235) explains how process tracing differs from story telling in 3 ways: it is focused, structured and provides a narrative explanation of a causal path. Auyero does all that: he is focused on Peronist Political Clientelism in an urban slum, he explores his subject on the basis of certain theoretical premises about political clientelism and he hints to a causal path between the retreat of the state and the development of problem-solving networks. By adopting this analytic approach, Auyero describes more than the “subjective dimension”, and surpasses interpretivism, accomplishing a constructivist assessment.

It is hard to estimate the extent to which his depiction of the form, functions and dynamics of political clientelism in Villa Paraiso is transferable in other settings, such as Romania. Mabry (2008:223) explains how in case studies certain generalizations are attempted. Firstly, there is an *analytic generalization* in which the ‘theory in question is embedded in a broader web of theories... [used] to link specific study findings to the theory of interest’ (Firestone 1993:17 in Mabry 2008:223). Auyero sees his findings in Villa Paraiso as a contribution ‘to the growing body of research on contemporary forms of political clientelism’ (2000:58) and in this sense it could be seen as a potential analytic generalization. Secondly, Mabry acknowledges a ‘more common’ *case-to-case generalization*, which is represented by the links readers assemble between the case reports and the cases of personal interest to them (2008:223). In this sense, vicarious experiences may be brought under comparison and an enriching contribution can be made to the comparative studies’ literature. Beyond the one comparison that Auyero does make—‘Peronist problem-solving networks resemble the classic party machine in the U.S. cities’ (2000:70), the reader can easily find similarities between his account and such cases as the Brazilian favelas (see Arias 2004), southern Italy’s politics in the 80s (see Chubb 1983), post-Franco Spain (see Hopkin 2001), or the local power grabs in Russia (see Volkov 2002, Varese 2005).

Still, both such generalizations are thin ice for the researcher as they are hard to prove. King et al warned ‘no one cares what we think—the scholarly community only cares what we can demonstrate’ (1994:15). Auyero does not irrefutably prove the transferability of his account to other Argentinean slums, let alone to other countries. Yet extrapolating

does not seem to be Auyero's goal. Once we relax the concept for the purpose of making it transferable or, at least, comparable, we lose the most important insight of Auyero's depiction—the specific synergies that develop in response to a specific context. In defense of the significance of in-depth research Kratochwil makes a valid point:

'Submitting blindly to the search for generalizations, or cleansing our language of all (value-laden) points of view might miss what is of the greatest interest to us (...) While generalizations insure against idiosyncrasies or adhocery, they are not a potent antidote to irrelevance in both description and appraisal (...), since the more general the concepts are, the less informative they become' (Sartori 1970: 1033-53) (2008, 92)

Through his depiction of Villa Paraiso's case, Auyero adds conceptual value to the broader enquiry of contemporary political clientelism. He provides valuable insights into the "subjective dimension" of the clientelistic ties and assesses the structure and dynamics of the Peronist Political Machine. He bases his assumptions and inferences on a methodologically solid and convincing fieldwork. He shows "the client's point of view", but also how their interpretations shape their world. He provides a constructivist explanation based on interpretivist and structuralist data. These are all valid benchmarks for any other study on clientelism. A comparative perspective is opened by Auyero's account, in the form of analytic generalization. In other words, the theoretical framework supporting the study of clientelism in Argentina may be very well used for a study of clientelism in Romania, or any other place. Still, this does not entail a perfect symmetry between cases, or even a proper comparative study. Due to the approach of enquiry such studies involve, there are too many idiosyncrasies involved, to be able to rigorously compare without losing the conceptual value of the in-depth research.

5. Conclusion

In contemporary political science, there is a growing tendency to build new epistemological and ontological foundations. Disregarding traditional disciplinary borders, original and enriching research is produced through a more interpretative approach, borrowed from the more humanistic disciplines such as anthropology. While many believed such an approach is not rigorous enough, Auyero's study proves the contrary. He accomplishes a benchmark research for qualitative social scientists, as he applies a methodological framework that taps into both the actor's subjective perspective, and into the structural interactions that form the clientelistic networks. Such a framework can easily be applied to another case study, although generalizations, in the classic sense, cannot be supported. This type of study does not aim to generalize on the basis of a single case study, but rather to integrate each case study into a cumulative theoretical design. While each case of political clientelism may lead to a revision of the theory of clientelism, each case is itself informed by that theory, and so a virtuous circle of research is formed. The evolution of the interpretative approach made this way of doing research possible. It is questionable in terms of concept and method transferability, and as was mentioned throughout the paper, it is often liable in this regard because it is an approach focused on idiosyncrasies and specificities. Still this is sooner a strength, than a weakness. Political Science especially, and Social Sciences in general, stand to gain a lot from the constructivist approach and its premise of synergistic agent-structure interaction.

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