Why Social Relations Matter for Politics and Successful Societies

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Abstract

Political science can gain from incorporating richer conceptions of social relations into its analyses. In place of atomistic entities endowed with assets but few social relationships, social actors should be seen as relational entities embedded in social and cultural structures that connect them to others in multifaceted ways. Understanding those relationships requires a deeper understanding of how institutional and cultural frameworks interact to condition the terrain for social action. More intensive dialogue with sociology can inform such an understanding. We review the analytical tools cultural sociology now offers those interested in such a perspective and illustrate it in operation in studies of inequalities in population health and the effects of neoliberalism. We close by outlining several issues to which this perspective can usefully be applied, including the problems of understanding social resilience, how societies build collective capacities, and why some institutions remain robust while others deteriorate.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an old adage that the most innovative insights are discovered at the boundaries of disciplines, and political science has often gained from dialogue with the other social sciences. In this review, we make the case for incorporating richer conceptions of social relations into analyses of comparative politics through more intensive dialogue with sociology, consider what that would entail, and identify some of the issues such approaches could address.

Although some political scientists, such as those studying social movements or ethnic politics (cf. McAdam & Tarrow 2001, Horowitz 1985) work on this boundary, comparative politics as a whole has drifted away from the intensive interchange with sociology it had during the 1960s and 1970s, when the work of political sociologists, such as Lipset (1960), Moore (1966), and Tilly (1975), was recognizably central to the field. An intensive conversation began during the 1950s, when scholars seeking to put the study of comparative politics on a more scientific footing were inspired by the structural functionalism of Parsons (1951) to develop early formulations about the political system with cultural underpinnings (Almond & Verba 1963, Almond 1966, Bill & Hardgrave 1981, Chilcote 1981). By the end of the 1960s, this interchange centered on a modernization paradigm, influenced by the collapse of Weimar, which suggested that stable democracy had cultural prerequisites, and on a behavioral revolution that directed attention to political attitudes and their determinants (Eulau 1963, Hall 2007).

During the 1980s and 1990s, however, comparative politics drew away from sociology and into a deeper dialogue with economics. Reacting against behavioral perspectives, new generations of scholars began to reemphasize how institutions structure political life (Evans et al. 1985, Hall & Taylor 1996, Immergut 1998). One prominent strand of this new institutionalism was a rational-choice variant, influenced by microeconomics, that rejected behavioral formulations in favor of micro foundations that specified utility-maximizing actors endowed with assets rather than attitudes (Shepsle 1986, Weingast & Marshall 1988, Weingast 2002). The recessions of the 1970s also inspired a new literature in political economy that embraced institutional explanations often defined as an alternative to cultural ones (Hall 1986, Steinmo 1994, Weingast & Whitman 2006). Even the study of electoral behavior, where issues of political socialization were once prominent, turned toward political business cycles, retrospective voting, and the rationalist logics of electoral rules. Research on state building and social movements moved away from issues of identity toward structural explanations (Skocpol 1979; cf. Adams et al. 2005).

This ongoing dialogue with economics has yielded insights of great value, but just as economists are developing new behavioral perspectives (Camerer et al. 2006), so scholars of comparative politics are exploring new formulations. These formulations can usefully be informed by developments in sociology, which has moved well beyond the oversocialized concepts of man that once led James Duesenberry (1960, p. 233) to remark that "economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about how they don't have any choices to make" (cf. Wrong 1976).

We see new opportunities, in particular, for scholars of comparative politics to develop and deploy theoretically richer understandings of social relations. We use the term social relations here to refer to the multiple ways in which people are connected to one another in society. Of course, political scientists have always been attentive to some aspects of these relations. The concept of civil society is a prominent one in the discipline, and political organizations, such as parties and interest groups, are notable features of social relations (cf. Keane 1988, Howard 2003). Institutions are by definition elements that structure social relations, and scholars of comparative politics have devoted considerable attention to them.

However, there are two lacunae in the dominant perspectives of the discipline that deserve more attention. The first might be termed the problem of social structure. Although we have learned

a great deal about how that realm known as the political system is structured, the discipline is generally less attentive to relationships within civil society and to variation in these relationships across societies. Indeed, some political analyses posit individual actors who are largely unconnected to one another, except through political organizations. This would not be a problem if relationships in civil society or cross-national variations in social structure had little import for politics, but they often matter a great deal. Thus, there is an argument for seeing societies in more relational terms.

The second gap of concern is one that has opened up between institutional and cultural analysis. When they focus on social relations, political scientists have become accustomed to thinking of them as structured by institutions, and of thinking about institutions in largely rationalist terms, as matrices of sanctions and incentives. There is certainly value in that. However, these perspectives neglect the extent to which institutions are also cultural artifacts, embodying particular ways of thinking and often built on reservoirs of authority with cultural roots. Cultural frameworks can structure social interaction with just as much force as the material incentives built into institutions. In other words, the challenge is not simply to incorporate social relations in political analyses but to develop more refined understandings of those relations and, in tandem, more expansive conceptions of how institutions work.

We think this challenge calls for more intensive investigation of the ways in which institutions and cultural frameworks interact, and we argue that such investigations are both possible and likely to be fruitful. In the next section, we take an example from contemporary debates about redistribution to show that comparative politics is already benefiting from movement in this direction. Drawing on contemporary conceptions of institutions in political science, we then explore what cultural perspectives might add to them. The following section outlines some of the conceptual tools that recent work in cultural sociology offers political science. To illustrate the value of taking social relations more seriously, we then consider the efforts of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) Successful Societies program to develop better explanations for two important phenomena, namely, inequalities in health and the effects of neoliberalism. We conclude by identifying several research problems for which this kind of integrated approach would be especially useful. Although many sociologists, such as those who study the social embeddedness of the economy, and constructivist political scientists will immediately recognize the force of this argument, we think it deserves a wider hearing in the discipline as a whole.

THE ISSUE OF EMBEDDEDNESS: AN EXAMPLE

Recent debates about how to explain why governments redistribute resources offer a nice example of the ways in which political scientists are building more expansive conceptions of social relations into their analyses. The starting point for much of this literature is a set of classic studies by Meltzer & Richard (1981) and others that operate from an analytical framework borrowed from neoclassical economies. Those studies present what might be described as a Schumpeterian view of politics in which the polity is an arena composed largely of rational actors, who may be citizens or organizations representing them, seen as atomistic entities endowed with specific levels of income but few relationships with other actors. Politics is a competitive market process for support from voters concerned mainly with maximizing a continuing stream of income. With this type of model, Meltzer & Richard (1981) explain governmental efforts at redistribution as a function of the existing distribution of income. Moene & Wallerstein (2003) then incorporate a desire for insurance against adverse economic events in similar models to improve the ability of the model to describe cross-national patterns of redistribution.

The problem, of course, is that voters and politicians are not atomistic actors without relationships to one another. Thus, in an important step forward, Persson & Tabellini (2003) explore how political institutions structure these relationships, arguing that governments elected by proportional representation will redistribute more than those dependent on majoritarian electoral rules, on the premise that politicians elected in single-member districts will have incentives to distribute public spending relatively evenly across those districts, whereas the process of coalition formation required by proportional representation is more likely to result in bargains that redistribute across social groups (Persson et al. 2007). In these models, voters are still atomistic actors, but politicians are influenced by relationships rooted in formal institutional structures.

In elegant work, Iversen & Soskice (2006) take the analysis a step farther to argue that electoral rules also condition the behavior of voters. Proportional representation is said to result in more redistribution because, by promoting separate parties for distinctive groups, it allows low- and medium-income voters to form a coalition to redistribute from the rich. By contrast, under majoritarian rule, voters can usually choose governments only from catch-all parties and, in the absence of guarantees that a center-left government will not redistribute only to the poor, the decisive median voter opts more often for the center-right.

Although these works illuminate how institutions structure political relations, their image of relationships in the mass public remains minimal. Voters are seen as individuals, concerned entirely about their income, largely uninfluenced by ideological frameworks or social relationships. Lupu & Pontusson (2011) exploit this gap to argue that the decisive voters at median income will be more likely to support redistribution where the social distance between them and lower-income groups is smaller, presumably because they will then identify more closely with the less affluent. This analysis measures social distance relatively crudely, by the ratio of market income at the median and tenth deciles. However, by suggesting that voters' preferences are conditioned by social relationships, Lupu and Pontusson take a significant step beyond the Schumpeterian model.

In more recent work, Iversen & Soskice (2012, Abrams et al. 2011) also move in this direction. They argue that preferences over redistribution do not flow automatically from a person's material position but are influenced by discussions in the social networks to which people belong, including those promoted by trade unions, and they find cross-national evidence for such effects. These formulations resonate with other literatures in political science that emphasize the impact of social networks on the preferences or behavior of actors (Kahler 2009). Shayo (2009) takes the debate a step farther to argue that social connectedness construed in terms, not of networks, but of identification with a social group or nation also conditions attitudes toward redistribution.

Of course, we have highlighted only some of the most influential contributions to a voluminous literature. However, forward movement in this research program has been marked by progressively greater interest in understanding how various dimensions of social relations impinge on a problem initially analyzed through a Schumpeterian lens. This example is deliberately taken from a subfield focused on material issues because it provides a hard case for the point we are making. If scholars in this field are finding it useful to incorporate more sophisticated conceptions of social relations in their analyses, other issues may deserve similar efforts. Social relations are by definition central to the study of ethnic politics, for instance, and that field too is moving away from analyses founded on the familiar ethnolinguistic fractionalization (ELF) index toward more sophisticated formulations that see ethnic relations as politically constructed phenomena (Miguel 2004, Lieberman & Singh 2012).

TOWARD BETTER UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Scholars who want to move in this direction face the theoretical challenge of developing more sophisticated understandings of social relations. To that task, comparative politics brings some formidable conceptual tools, born of its long-standing interest in institutions, understood as sets of regularized practices with a rule-like quality in the sense that actors expect them to be observed and meet deviations from them with formal or informal sanctions (cf. Hall & Thelen 2009). Institutions are central to social relations by virtue of how they guide social and political interactions.

We can touch on only some of the relevant formulations. Whether people have the capacity to cooperate is arguably one of the most important features of social relations, and rational-choice analysts have devised powerful accounts of collective action dilemmas and of the ways in which institutions allowing for credible commitments make cooperation to resolve them possible (cf. Calvert 1995, Scharpf 1997). Parallel studies of agenda-setting, decision rules, and flows of information have also been revealing about the prerequisites for cooperation (Weingast & Marshall 1988, Knight 1992, Krehbiel 1992).

Seeing institutions not only as instruments in the hands of well-informed, strategic actors but as the legacy of past struggles, historical institutionalists have also developed insightful formulations about how institutions privilege some sets of actors and push societies along distinctive paths (Thelen 1999, 2004; Pierson 2004; Moe 2005). Their concepts of critical junctures, layering, defection, and reinterpretation provide useful ways of thinking about how the institutions structuring social relations change (Streeck & Thelen 2005, Capoccia & Keleman 2007, Mahoney & Thelen 2009). Here, there is room for a dialogue with sociology whose own institutionalist turn yields different conceptions of institutions, as the embodiment of specific logics of appropriateness or templates for action with cultural authority (Meyer & Rowan 1991, March & Olsen 1989, Powell & DiMaggio 1991).

With some notable exceptions (Ross 1997, Wedeen 2002, Sewell 2005), however, scholars of comparative politics have been less adept at conceptualizing the roles played by culture in social and political life. In this respect, they lag well behind international relations scholars whose constructivist perspectives have generated vibrant debates about how to construe interstate relations (for overviews, see Katzenstein 1996, Checkel 1998, Hopf 1998, Finnemore & Sikkink 2001). In some instances, those perspectives have found their way into comparative politics, notably under the aegis of works that explore the role of ideas in politics (Berman 1998, 2001; McNamara 1998; Blyth 2002; Schmidt 2008; Beland & Cox 2011). But, in general, comparativists have been more willing to talk about ideas than about culture.

In some measure, that reluctance may be a legacy of early works, such as Almond & Verba's (1963) study of civic culture, which were pioneering and powerful but so influential that many political scientists still equate culture with attitudes, considered largely in terms of the responses to survey questions. Others associate cultural explanations with works citing nationally specific policy styles or proclivities for certain beliefs, whose amorphousness has inspired skepticism about the explanatory power of culturally based accounts (Richardson 1982, Vogel 1986; cf. Elkins & Simeon 1979, Goldstein & Keohane 1993, Steinmo 1994). That skepticism has been fed by critiques of essentialist concepts of culture or ethnicity emerging from studies of gender, race, and class (Dawson 1994, Okin 1994, Morning 2011).

However, this skepticism is holding the field back from a potentially fruitful research frontier by limiting the development of more sophisticated formulations about social relations. There are important cultural dimensions to social relations. Even institutions are inescapably cultural artifacts. In many instances, institutions do not simply shift material incentives but color people's interpretations of the world. Even where the principal contribution of an institution is to facilitate

credible commitments and hence cooperation, for instance, the capacity of actors to negotiate a cooperative outcome is typically contingent on the presence of common knowledge—constituted by shared understandings often thick enough to be described as cultural phenomena (cf. Chwe 2003, Johnson 2002). By merely assuming common knowledge, many accounts rule an important determinant of collective action out of the inquiry. We need to discover more about how shared understandings arise and are sustained, and to do so without invoking cultural phenomena is to work with one hand tied behind one's back.

A similar point applies to the formulations that historical institutionalists are developing to describe how institutions change. It is possible to analyze the key processes of defection and rein-terpretation, with which Thelen (2004) and others are working, as instrumental actions motivated by material concerns, without reference to the cultural dimensions of such processes. But, as Streeck (2009) observes, doing so may well understate the extent to which institutional practices are conditioned by underlying normative orders. And reinterpretation is often a quintessentially cultural act (Sewell 2005, ch. 8).

The cost paid by comparative politics for reading culture out of its analyses is a set of institutional theories that are often overly thin. Many theories identify the principal effects of institutions correctly but ascribe effects that are complexly determined to relatively simple mechanisms, thereby losing purchase over the problems of why institutions come into existence or persist. By failing to take the cultural dimensions of social relations more fully into account, many political scientists are missing an opportunity to enrich the theories central to the contemporary discipline. Contemporary research on social capital provides a good example. Few concepts have been more influential than Putnam's (1994, 2000) pioneering formulations about it. In his terms, social capital is created by the frequency of face-to-face contact between people in secondary associations or local networks and the levels of generalized trust engendered by that contact. Underpinning the concept is the rationalist premise that iterated interaction promotes mutual reciprocity in the exchange of favors and thus capacities to cooperate for the common good. As a parsimonious formulation with wide import, tractable to measurement across settings, this concept was destined to be influential, and it has done much to revive interest in the political implications of social relations.

At the same time, however, this image of social capital is limiting our understandings of such relations. Even when distinctions are drawn between bridging and bonding social capital, the rationalist logic underpinning the formulation offers a limited vision of how social networks bear on collective outcomes, which pays little heed to the cultural messages such networks transmit (Putnam 2000, Coleman 1988; cf. Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994, Berman 1997, Lichterman 2005, Pachucki & Breiger 2010). Thus, the dominant lens through which political science views social relations at the local level misses the variation in moral solidarities, status hierarchies, and normative orders such relations promote (cf. Thompson 1971). What is lost is evident in the finding of Sampson et al. (1999) that levels of crime in the neighborhoods of Chicago correspond less closely to traditional measures of social capital than to respondents' answers to a question about whether they feel entitled to admonish neighborhood children who misbehave.

Many political scientists will respond to these points with wariness. Some of their foremost concerns will be about parsimony and generalizability. Can the cultural dimensions of social relations be built into prevailing models without making those models so complex that they lose explanatory power or so specific to a singular context that they do not travel well? Others may be concerned to defend the core heuristic of a discipline that emphasizes material incentives: politics is about "who gets what, when, where and how" (Lasswell 1936). These are legitimate concerns.

However, arguments about the role of cultural factors in social and political life do not have to be amorphous or case-specific, and invoking culture does not mean that it has to be turtles all

the way down. Contemporary sociology has developed precise concepts with concrete empirical reference that can be used to enhance, rather than deplete, the explanatory power of political analyses. To acknowledge that cultural factors enter into an explanation does not need to imply that material incentives or rational calculations are unimportant there. Cultural sociology generally posits goal-directed individuals, multiply motivated by material as well as ideal interests (cf. Weber 1978). Although analytical tastes vary, and some sociologists will be more critical of rationalist explanations than most political scientists, this is not a zero-sum game: many of the concepts developed by sociologists to describe the cultural dimensions of social relations can also be used to enhance the broadly rationalist formulations typically found in political science.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Recent developments in cultural sociology, in particular, offer political science an increasingly nuanced set of conceptual tools.[1] At the heart of cultural sociology is the contention that every human action involves meaning, as agents interpret and evaluate their environment and actions through distinctive filters. These meanings are typically delimited in spatial, social structural, or temporal terms, and together with other types of determinants, they enable and constrain action (Sewell 2005). Earlier conceptions of the link between culture and action often rested on the Parsonian notion that people hold cultural values that engender actions consistent with those values (Parsons 1951). Traditional social-psychological perspectives often posit a similarly straightforward link between attitudes and behavior, seeing acts as the result of attitudes. But social scientists have identified many cases in which individuals behave in ways inconsistent with their articulated values and attitudes, and in response, cultural sociologists have begun to reformulate their models of culture and action (e.g., Swidler 1986, Wilson 1996).

To simplify somewhat, cultural sociologists now generally conceive of human beings as actors in worlds filled with publicly available symbolic goods, such as stories, scripts for action, ways of interpreting people and events, and styles of self-presentation. These symbolic items provide people with tools to interpret other people's actions, to anticipate their behavior, to imagine themselves in the future, and thus to act. Using the metaphor of a toolkit, Swidler (1986, p. 19) sees culture as the supply of "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views" on which people draw to create "strategies of action." In a Durkheimian vein, Sewell (1992) goes farther to argue that cultural schemas can harden to the point that they become well-established, diffused structures constraining and enabling action. Thus, cultural sociologists now emphasize how actors draw on and create available meanings in the form of evaluations, interpretations, and understandings of their life-world.

This perspective accords with an institutionalist view of social reality developed by Berger & Luckmann (1966), Meyer & Rowan (1991), and many others (cf. Dobbin 1994, Hall & Taylor 1996). However, it is at odds with neo-Marxist views that see culture as a direct reflection of material reality and with instrumentalist views in which culture simply maintains relations of domination. Instead, cultural sociologists contend that culture—that is, practices, dispositions, and orientations—contribute to the constitution of relationships in a wide range of domains (some focused on the exercise of power but others in the realms of love, work, family, religion, etc.). At the same time, cultural analysts recognize that these practices, dispositions, and orientations are constrained by cultural and social structures, including ones rooted in time, space, technology, material scarcity, and the availability of social resources.

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[1] This section draws on Daniel et al. (2011).

The contemporary sociological study of culture has three main analytical goals: to reveal the meanings that operate in a situation, to help us understand (*verstehen*) how these meanings contribute to social processes, and to explain why situations lead to an observed outcome. It provides a number of analytical tools that can be used to examine culture as an *explanandum* or as an *explanans*. Those tools can be used independently or together and have brought empirical precision to studies concerning the cultural aspects of social life. Among them are highly popular conceptions of frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, habitus, and institutions (Lamont & Small 2008, Daniel et al. 2011, Small et al. 2010). Other useful concepts include orders of worth and collective imaginaries. Sociologists often use cultural repertoires as an umbrella concept to describe the symbolic elements from which people create strategies of action. Whereas strategies of action refer to the behaviors themselves, repertoires are the sets of ideas, stories, discourses, frames, and beliefs that people draw on to create a line of action in the first place.

These formulations rest on two premises: first, that people have a set of strategies in their minds (not only about how to apply to college but about how to fire a gun or how to be a good son-in-law) and, second, that people are unlikely to engage in an action unless they have the symbolic tools to do so. Tilly (1986, p. 4) has analyzed, for instance, the repertoires of contention on which workers draw to make their demands known, describing them as "the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups." Moreover, these repertoires vary systematically across settings. Dubet's (2009) interviews show that French workers often denounce meritocracy as unfair on the grounds that it benefits those who are performing best at the expense of weaker workers, whereas American workers rarely make such arguments. Lamont (2000) shows that French workers are far more likely to define morality in terms of solidarity than their American counterparts, who more often attach moral value to a work ethic, responsibility, and self-reliance. She argues that Republicanism, Catholicism, and a strong leftist tradition provide cultural repertoires sustaining these notions of solidarity in France, whereas their salience has declined in the United States. Such conceptions of solidarity, in turn, feed strategies of political as well as individual action, promoting the street demonstrations that are more frequent in France than in most other advanced industrial societies (Mayer 2010).

Note that this concept of repertoires is at variance with the notion that specific groups have a culture. It suggests, instead, that groups such as the poor or blue-collar workers usually subscribe to the same values as others in society but pursue different lines of action because they have access to different sets of repertoires from which to construct their strategies of action. Moreover, although repertoires may be shared across social groups, some are made more salient to particular groups by the life conditions specific to them (Hays 2003). This concept of repertoires has become an important alternative to conceptions of national culture or ideology. Instead of positing a one-to-one correspondence between ideology or culture and geo-political borders (one society, one nation, one culture), the concept is useful for analyzing the relative availability of cultural schemas within and across national contexts. In comparative work on France and the United States, for instance, Lamont & Thévenot (2000) and their collaborators consider the relative salience of various schemas of justification in national contexts. They show that Americans are more likely to rely on market arguments than the French and to use them in contexts in which the French would have deployed other types of justifications (based on civic, political, or moral criteria of evaluation).

Moreover, although notions of national culture (and national character or ideology) downplay the interactional character of the processes associated with the production of meaning, the concept of cultural repertoires captures the active elements in the processes through which actors make sense of their ability to pursue certain lines of action. Thus, laborers' attitudes toward work might be rooted in their experiences of interactions on the job, in structural aspects of their work

environment, and in widely available criteria of evaluation pertaining to work. Investigations into this process of sense making at its multiple levels can be complementary to survey research on attitudes and revealing about the experiences and symbolic goods—including cultural repertoires—on which workers draw to make sense of their activities.

Another way to study culture is to analyze symbolic boundaries, that is, the conceptual distinctions that we draw between objects, people, and practices. This concept recognizes that schemas of social categorization are culturally constructed. These schemas constitute systems of classification that define the similarities and differences between individuals and groups, often linked to a hierarchy of moral worth. Usually termed boundary work, the act of constructing and sustaining symbolic boundaries involves constructing collective identity by differentiating oneself from others, drawing on criteria such as common traits and experiences to create a sense of shared belonging. Symbolic boundaries are a frequent concomitant of the more readily visible social boundaries of residential and occupational segregation, racial or class exclusion, and patterns of intermarriage (Lamont & Molnár 2001). In an ethnographic study of a white working class neighborhood in Chicago, for instance, Kefalas (2003) shows how residents construct symbolic boundaries to protect the sense of place and lifestyle that gives them meaning and a feeling of stability, by drawing moral and symbolic distinctions between themselves and "bad" neighbors. Many enact these boundaries by keeping immaculate lawns and homes, which "make it clear to the rest of the world that they are fundamentally different from those just below them on the social ladder" (p. 100). In this case, symbolic efforts are closely linked to the economic transformations that contemporary workers are experiencing.

Orders of worth provide principles for these symbolic boundaries (Lamont 2012). They are the grammars that ground a hierarchy in which various types of resources are valued (such as skills, productivity, or the like) and that support particular constructions of community. A liberal grammar may favor forms of social organization centered on market performance, for instance, whereas a civic grammar values community (Boltanski & Thevénot 2006). Another tradition in organizational sociology analyzes such grammars as institutional logics defined as "supraorganizational patterns of activity by which individuals and organizations produce and reproduce their material subsistence and organize time and space ... symbolic systems, ways of ordering reality ... rendering experience of time and space meaningful" (Friedland & Alford 1991, p. 243). These approaches attempt to identify the principles that structure social action, much as Polanyi (1944) did when he pointed to the centrality of market, state, and civil society as organizing social forces, but in terms more open-ended than his.

Finally, sociologists also speak of social or collective imaginaries to refer to the collective representations linking the past of a society to its present and future. These imaginaries embody founding myths and narratives about crucial past events that become constituent elements of shared definitions of social identity. They specify a community, highlight the shared experiences that bind its members, and indicate how the community's aspirations for the future are shaped by a shared identity and past. This concept is more precise than the concept of social trust and, as such, is especially useful for capturing how members of a society understand what they are capable of doing together. In this respect, social imaginaries are constitutive of the collective capabilities of a community or society (for slightly different formulations, see Bouchard 2003 and Taylor 2002). They can (*a*) suffuse individuals and groups with energizing values, ideals, and beliefs; (*b*) establish the appropriate symbolic foundation conducive to integration, solidarities, and mass mobilization; (*c*) maintain vibrant, resilient institutions; (*d*) sustain long periods of development; and (*e*) allow for creative and productive adaptation to crises or challenges (Bouchard 2003, 2009). Thus, we take the concept of collective imaginaries to be an essential analytical tool for understanding social change (Hall & Lamont 2009).

Although the relevance of these concepts to political analysis will vary with the problem at hand, they provide insights that scholars of comparative politics can use to enrich their conceptions of social relations; in many instances, better explanations for important outcomes turn on the attentiveness paid to the social relations that underpin them. In order to illustrate this point, we turn now to two examples drawn from the efforts of the interdisciplinary Successful Societies program, sponsored by CIFAR, to develop better explanations for two quite different sets of outcomes. In one case, the effort is to develop better explanations for inequalities in population health, and in the other, the focus is on the impact of neoliberal initiatives in the contemporary world.

EXPLAINING VARIATIONS IN POPULATION HEALTH

Few inequalities are more pernicious than social inequalities in health, by which we mean systematic inequalities in health status found across social groups, communities, and countries. These inequalities concern governments and are attracting the attention of political scientists (Lynch 2010, Carpenter 2012). They have long been the subject of an extensive literature in social epidemiology (for reviews, see Adler & Newman 2002, Beckfield & Krieger 2009).

However, the approaches to explaining health inequalities that dominate the literature in social epidemiology suffer from some limitations. The two most influential can be labeled the material and the psychosocial approaches. At the heart of the material approach, in the pithy phrase of Pritchett & Summers (1996), is the observation that "wealthier is healthier." Population health tends to be better in countries at higher levels of economic development, and people with higher levels of wealth or income are generally healthier. Of course, this approach explains an important part of the variance associated with inequalities in health. Health outcomes improve with the correlates of income, such as access to better sanitation, healthier food, better housing, and good working conditions. However, this approach leaves large parts of the variance unexplained. Above a per capita national income of about $11,000, there is no systematic relationship between a country's level of economic development and its health outcomes, and spending on health care explains little additional variance. Although the United States has one of the highest levels of gross domestic product per capita in the world and the highest per capita expenditure on health, 44 other countries have lower levels of adult male mortality. At the national level, cross-national variation in the shape of the health gradient also corresponds very imperfectly to the distribution of income. There is a puzzle here: access to material goods is crucial to health but far from adequate for explaining inequalities in health.

Psychosocial approaches provide an important adjunct to such explanations. Although they come in several variants, for the most part, psychosocial explanations contend that inequalities in health are rooted not only in inequalities of income but in corresponding differences in status, found in human beings as well as other primates, which leave those at the bottom of the social ladder with status anxieties conducive to poorer health (Adler & Conner Snibbe 2003, Marmot 2004, Wilkinson 2005). Such analyses benefit from a concern for social context; however, from the perspective of comparative analysis, the psychosocial approach is unsatisfying because it attributes health inequalities to the effects of a status hierarchy that is a largely invariant feature of all societies. Thus, it cannot explain systematic variations in health inequalities across countries or communities, except by equating the steepness of the status hierarchy with the level of income inequality—at best a dubious proposition. If material approaches to inequalities in health explain too little, psychosocial approaches tend to explain too much.

This is where more refined analyses of social relations can be useful. The challenge is to develop a better conception of how social and economic relations vary across countries and how such variations condition inequalities in population health. For this purpose, Hall & Lamont

(2009) develop a capabilities approach to inequalities in health. Although it represents only one way of seeing social relations, we sketch an outline of it here to suggest how social relations might matter to important outcomes.

Our focus is on population health in the developed democracies, where the principal sources of mortality are chronic illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, and cancer. Well-developed science links the incidence of such diseases to the wear and tear of everyday life—namely, the anger, anxiety, or frustration that follow from experiences of stress (Brunner 2000). Thus, we focus on the ways in which a person's position within the structures of cultural, social, and economic relations affects the amount of wear and tear he or she will experience. We model this wear and tear as a function of the relative balance between the magnitude of the life challenges a person faces and the effectiveness of her capabilities for coping with them. Our premise is that all people face some basic life challenges, those associated with finding work, attracting a companion, securing housing, caring for children, and the like. To cope with such challenges, every person draws on a certain set of capabilities. People who confront more difficult life challenges or bring fewer capabilities to them will experience higher levels of stress, with adverse effects on their health that accumulate over time (Hall & Taylor 2009).

The issue, then, is: how do social and economic relations affect this balance between life challenges and capabilities? There are some obvious ways in which those relations affect the challenges facing people. However, we focus here on the ways they condition people's capabilities. Our contention is that a person's position within nationally specific structures of social and economic relations endows her with specific levels of resources constitutive of capabilities (for another formulation, see Link & Phelan 1995).

At least three facets of the structure of economic relations can be said to condition the economic resources available to a person. Every economy generates a particular distribution of income, supplies people with more or less economic security, and supports managerial hierarchies that provide workers with more or less autonomy at work. Each of these factors is constitutive of the capabilities that feed into the levels of stress a person is likely to experience. Income is a multipurpose resource that can be used to address many kinds of challenges. People with more employment security or unemployment benefits are better placed to cope with the challenges posed by economic fluctuations and demands beyond the workplace, such as those associated with caring for children (Bartley 2005). People with more control over the pace and direction of their work are more likely to be able to cope with workplace challenges with lower levels of stress (Siegrist & Theorell 2006).

In much the same way, three dimensions of social relations provide people with specific levels of social resources that can be used to cope with life challenges. The social networks in which a person is embedded provide information, logistical help, and the emotional support that enhances feelings of self-worth (Berkman & Glass 2000, Haslam et al. 2005). Some types of networks are obviously more useful for certain tasks: large networks based on weak ties are valuable, for example, for finding housing or employment, whereas smaller networks of denser ties may be more helpful for coping with the challenges of childcare or illness (Granovetter 1973, Berkman 1997, Lett et al. 2007, Mitchell et al. 2007). These are the horizontal dimensions of social connectedness.

There is also a vertical dimension to social relations. All societies have a social hierarchy that distributes status or social prestige, and lower social status is associated with more stress (Marmot 2004, Wilkinson 2005). From our perspective, however, variations in status also condition capabilities because they affect the levels of cooperation a person is likely to receive from others (Weiss & Fershtman 1998, Eckel & Wilson 2007). Moreover, there is evidence that the shape of this status hierarchy varies across societies in ways that are independent of the distribution of income (Barnes et al. 2008).

However, the social connectedness of a society turns not only on the density of its social networks but on what those networks convey—about social belonging, recognition, and identity. At the national level, the cultural representations in a society's collective imaginary play similar roles (cf. Bouchard 2009, Hall & Lamont 2009). Constructed by successive public narratives that link the nation's past to its future, specify its most valued accomplishments, and paint a vision of what it means to belong to the community, collective imaginaries also condition people's capabilities. By specifying standards of behavior, they affect the ease with which people can secure help from others. In the sense of belonging promoted by such imaginaries, people find a meaningfulness that can enhance their self-assurance, sense of purpose, and general well-being (Swidler 1986, Cornell & Kalt 2000, Barnes et al. 2008). Conversely, where these imaginaries promote negative stereotypes or stigmatize particular identities, they limit the sense of self-efficacy and the cooperation available to members of groups defined as marginal to the community (Steele & Aronson 1998, Haslam et al. 2005, Frye 2012). In short, people's capabilities are conditioned, not only by the organizational shape of a society, but by the cultural frameworks it promotes.

This approach offers richer explanations for the inequalities in health found within every nation. In all societies, the structures of economic and social relations distribute the resources salient to capabilities unequally. Like income, for instance, social connectedness is stratified by social class. Across the developed democracies, people with lower levels of income or education tend to have less extensive networks than those on higher incomes (Hall 1999, Barnes et al. 2008). In short, inequalities in health are rooted not only in inequalities of income but in inequalities in capabilities generated by the structures of social relations and the frameworks of worth or recognition they promote (Honneth 1996, Sayer 2005).

Moreover, such a perspective can be helpful for explaining cross-national variation in the level of health inequalities. Although health is distributed unequally everywhere, the gradient linking health to social class (or socioeconomic status) is much steeper in some countries than others. At present, we lack good explanations for such variation (cf. Beckfield & Olafsdottir 2008). Prevailing views usually ascribe it to variations in the distribution of income (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). But this capabilities perspective suggests that cross-national variations in the shape of the health gradient may also stem from other variations in the structure of economic or social relations across societies, and there is some evidence for this. McLeod et al. (2012) find that nationally specific varieties of capitalism condition health inequalities; Barnes et al. (2008) find a relationship between the shape of national health gradients and cross-national differences in the character of social relations. In France, for example, where the health gradient is especially steep, disparities in social connectedness across social classes are also unusually wide.

Of course, this capabilities model is contestable, and it deploys only one image of social relations among many, but the example should suffice to make the point that new explanations for important outcomes can be found by looking more deeply at social relations. For comparativists, in particular, there is an important opportunity here. Although we know something about levels of ethnic and linguistic fractionalization, we need to know much more about how other dimensions of social structure vary across countries and with what consequences (cf. Lamont 1992, 2000).

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERALISM

Studies of social and political change can also benefit from closer attention to social relations and, in particular, from approaches that integrate their institutional and cultural dimensions. Some of the potential in such approaches is visible in another project of CIFAR's Successful Societies program, which explores the impact of neoliberal ideas and initiatives over the past three decades (Hall & Lamont 2013).

As with globalization, neoliberal reforms are often analyzed as an economic or political fact—namely, as an exogenous shock to which governments and interest groups have to respond. But the perspective we develop in (Hall & Lamont 2013) suggests that such developments are not well-conceived as variables with homogenous effects. The impact they have occurs via complex social processes, mediated by social relations, which deflect their direction, inflect their meaning, and condition the resulting distribution of costs and benefits. Moreover, processes such as globalization and neoliberal reform have social as well as economic significance. The shifts in relative prices that accompany more open markets, for example, typically induce parallel shifts in social status—as the incomes and employment prospects of some groups rise, while the status of others declines.

The starting point for this perspective is the observation that the central developments of the neoliberal era comprised not only shifts in policy but also of shifts in broader understandings about how the world should be interpreted and managed, which are important cultural phenomena (McNamara 1998, Blyth 2002, Harvey 2005, Ong 2006, Greenhouse 2009). Thus, the changes made to policies and markets were responses to new ideas. But those responses were never automatic. Evans & Sewell (2013) show that, in each nation, neoliberal proposals were filtered through nationally specific sets of political relationships and cultural schemas and, ultimately, implemented very differently across nations. The surge of interest in neoliberal ideas inspired resistance as well as enthusiasm in most countries, setting in motion what are best described as syncretic social processes in which actors mobilized multiple instruments drawn from the local environment to transmute as well as trasnsmit those ideas.

In these respects, neoliberalism was never a blanket laid over the world or simply a smoke screen behind which a politics driven by material or ideal interests went on exactly as before. Neoliberal ideas provided the actors in that politics with new instruments, and the social impact of those ideas was inflected by the creativity with which political actors used the new language and optics made available. In many cases, the process was one in which old demands were framed in new terms, but this reframing changed the character of politics over time. In some cases, new ways of seeing the world also shifted actors' conceptions of their underlying preferences. In others, neoliberal schemas shaped the course of events much as new institutions change the outcomes of strategic interaction: without altering underlying preferences, they changed what the actors could achieve and how they achieved it. Kymlicka (2013) and Jenson & Levi (2013) show how this process conditioned political outcomes not only in domestic politics but in the international regimes for multiculturalism and human rights (cf. Merry & Levitt 2009).

This study reveals that actors usually responded to globalization and neoliberalism not as objective facts but as something that was experienced and of which they had to make sense. Thus, these developments had different meanings for different groups, and the process of sense making it engendered was invariably conditioned by long-standing local narratives, namely, the stories that people, organizations, and nations tell about themselves in order to connect their past to the future (Polletta et al. 2011). Ancelovici (2013) shows, for instance, that French trade unions interpreted globalization mainly as an organizational threat, and their response to it was fashioned primarily in those terms, out of the cultural schemas prominent in each organization's history. These are cases in which macro-level developments acquire force ultimately at the micro level, where the results are conditioned not only by external developments but by local cultural repertoires.

Such a perspective also emphasizes the ways in which the diffusion of neoliberal ideas affected the self-concepts, orders of worth, and criteria of evaluation central to social action (Boltanski & Chiappello 2007, Foucault 2008). Neoliberal schemas did not simply lead to more open markets. In many places, they also shifted the dominant scripts of personhood toward ones emphasizing a person's individuality and productivity, with disparate effects on people in different social positions (Greenhouse 2009). As the ability to prosper on competitive markets acquired more value, many

people were encouraged to approach their lives as if they were projects, whereas others who had derived self-respect from traditional criteria of evaluation often found it more difficult to do so. Being a hard worker was no longer adequate to sustain self-esteem in an era when more worth was attached to being a productive worker equipped with appropriate contacts and skills (Boltanski & Chiappello 2007).

These changes in the terms on which social recognition was accorded were highly consequential. Over time, the narratives that people used to describe themselves changed—with implications for how they saw themselves acting and what they thought they could do in the world (Abelmann 2003, Polletta et al. 2011). For some, whose lives had been dominated by local patrons or status hierarchies, it was liberating to become market actors (Kapur et al. 2010). Others saw their self-concepts challenged by developments over which they had no control, a phenomenon of potential importance to the political rise of the radical right and left (Ehrenreich 1989, Newman 1989, Silva 2012).

Such an approach also casts new light on how the costs and benefits of a neoliberal era are assessed. Although neoliberalism and globalization are often associated with rising levels of income inequality, their effects were more than material. In some cases, the intersection of economic and cultural developments delivered a double whammy. People whose economic security or income declined sometimes found that the criteria of worth on which they had long relied for self-respect were also no longer widely recognized. In such cases, cultural effects magnify the material effects of social change. Thus, Barnes & Hall (2013) find a growing gap in the subjective well-being of people in the upper- and lower-middle classes of the developed democracies that is only partly explained by inequalities of income; Son Hing (2013) reports that neoliberal beliefs made it more likely that women and members of minorities would blame themselves for experiences of discrimination.

Perspectives such as these draw attention to the active role played by people at the bottom of macrolevel processes in determining the outcomes of those processes and to the ways in which political developments are filtered through sets of social relations with cultural as well as organizational dimensions. It emphasizes the extent to which developments often seen as economic are also cultural, as international imaginaries are translated into local terms, new events interpreted through long-standing narratives, and self-concepts adjusted for new times. But it also indicates that cultural analysis is not inimical to economic analysis. It is entirely possible to integrate an appreciation for both the cultural and material dimensions of a phenomenon, with value for the overall explanatory enterprise.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE CAPACITIES

Progress on many kinds of research problems is likely to require more attention to social relations in terms that integrate institutional and cultural frameworks into our understanding of them. We close by elaborating two such problems with import not only for politics but for the challenge of building successful societies, understood as ones that promote prosperity, equal opportunity, and tolerance.

The first is the problem of understanding how societies build and sustain collective capacities, understood as capacities for cooperation in the service of collective well-being. Although they may also deliver (nonexcludable and nonrival) public goods, collective capacities are defined by the fact that the benefits they provide depend on ongoing cooperation from multiple members of the community. The issue can be described as one about how to deliver collectively implementable goods (cf. Hertzman & Siddiqi 2013).

Such capacities are important for addressing many kinds of challenges. They may entail cooperation to resolve common pool resource problems of the sort Ostrom (1990, 2005) has investigated.

Parallel capacities sustain cooperation among the firms that operate collaborative systems of research and development or vocational training in coordinated market economies (Hall & Soskice 2001). At the local level, they bear on efforts to enlist members of the community in voluntary efforts to clean up the neighborhood, combat crime, reduce corruption, or promote early childhood development (Putnam 2000, Sampson et al. 2002, Rothstein 2011). Collective capacities are an intrinsic element of social well-being.

A number of important literatures speak to the issue of how such capacities are generated, but often in divergent terms, and there is no consensus about precisely which features of social relations matter most to their construction. Approaching such problems as collective action dilemmas, Ostrom (1990) and others have shown that systems for monitoring and sanctioning defections from cooperative behavior can be important to such capacities. In similar terms, Putnam (2000) argues that dense social networks and secondary associations enhance a community's capacities for cooperation. Others contend that collective capacities have cultural underpinnings. Cornell & Kalt (2000) find, for instance, that native American communities are more likely to elicit such cooperation when there is a cultural match between the governing institutions of the tribe and its traditional institutions. Swidler (2013) argues that the collective capacities of African villages depend on the local institution of the chief—a figure with limited formal powers but the cultural authority to reward those who cooperate. That institution is rooted in customary beliefs, but there is a rationalist dimension to how it operates: chiefs promote cooperation partly by assuring everyone that others are cooperating as well. In a different context, Streeck (2009) argues that the collective capacities of German firms depend on the presence of shared values, akin to the conscience collective of Durkheim. This seems to be a domain where cultural repertoires often feed into logics of strategic action, either to reinforce collective capacities or to erode them.

This approach can also be applied to a parallel issue, namely, what makes some institutions robust whereas others are not? Robust institutions are now seen as a crucial determinant of many important outcomes, including effective economic and social development (Acemoglu et al. 2005, Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). Paradoxically, however, we do not know much about why some institutions operate effectively for long periods of time, whereas others fail to endure or decline. Arguably the most significant work on this subject was written by Huntington (1968) over 40 years ago.

Understanding why some institutions are robust is a problem likely to be resolved only with analyses that integrate accounts of cultural repertoires and theories of strategic interaction. Some intriguing steps have already been taken in this direction. Benabou & Tirole (2006), for instance, develop an argument about how beliefs in a just world and national economic institutions reinforce one another to generate equilibrium levels of national inequality. Thelen (2004) associates the durability of institutions with their coalitional underpinnings, and it is entirely possible that those coalitions rest on cultural as well as material foundations (Pierson 2004, Markus 2008). Along similar lines, Capoccia (2012) suggests that some institutions persist because of how they structure the power relations between their supporters and opponents, but others may endure because they are more resistant to reinterpretation—a fundamentally cultural process.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL RESILIENCE

Another issue likely to be addressed effectively only when we understand social relations better is the problem of identifying the sources of social resilience. Resilience is the subject of three prominent literatures: ecology, where it is seen as a property that allows a system to recover its prior state after suffering a shock; developmental psychology, where it refers to the features of personality or environment that sustain a person's performance despite exposure to factors putting

it at risk; and disaster studies, where it is associated with the capacity of a community to recover after a destructive event (Adger 2000, Folke 2006, Schoon 2006, Norris et al. 2008). However, we use the term social resilience somewhat differently—to refer to the capacity of groups of people bound together in organizations, classes, racial groups, communities, or nations to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges—an essential characteristic of successful societies and a prism through which the dynamics of social, economic, and political change can be explored (Hall & Lamont 2013).

Much of what we have already said applies to this problem. The social resilience of a community depends, at least partly, on its collective capacities, and the dimensions of social relations that underpin population health probably also feed into social resilience. People draw on the social resources derived from social connectedness, for instance, to cope with many kinds of challenges (Berkman & Glass 2000, Sampson et al. 2002). By virtue of how they support collective identities, collective imaginaries also provide resources on which people draw to cope with adverse experiences. Lamont et al. (2013) show, for example, that members of stigmatized groups draw on the cultural repertoires these imaginaries provide to cope with discrimination, and there is evidence that attachment to a strong collective identity reduces the negative psychological impact of adverse experiences (Chandler & Lalonde 1998, Feliciano 2005, Oyserman et al. 2006). The narratives and shared cultural references embodied in collective imaginaries offer people tools, such as moral repertoires, possible selves, or strategies of action, for addressing many kinds of challenges (Markus & Nurius 1986, Swidler 1986, Small et al. 2010). From the multicultural policies of a society, for instance, immigrants receive messages about their worth that are important to their capacities for many kinds of action (Wright & Bloemraad 2012).

However, these observations are simply the tip of an iceberg. We still know relatively little about how collective imaginaries vary across countries (but cf. Lamont et al. 2013) and the full range of ways they bear on the response to challenges (Bouchard 2013). We know that people draw on social networks to cope with adverse events but know little about how such events affect the stability or reach of these networks (cf. Erikson 1976). Moreover, interactional perspectives are important here. There is much still to be learned about how groups mobilize the institutional and cultural resources in their environment.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that scholars of comparative politics will gain from incorporating richer understandings of social relations in their analyses and from deeper investigations into the ways in which institutions and cultural frameworks interact. Although there are important debates to be joined about the precise roles that narratives, symbolic and social boundaries, criteria of worth, and other elements of cultural repertoires play in politics, we think it is important to have those debates and that more sophisticated formulations are likely to emerge from them.

Social relations deserve more prominence in political analyses in at least three ways—as explanans, mediators, and explananda. As explanatory variables, to cite only one example, they can figure in our understandings of how social attachments influence the formation of preferences and people's propensities for mobilization (Iversen & Soskice 2012). This is not a new insight: when social relations were seen primarily as class relations, these were lively issues (cf. Moore 1966, Paige 1978, Skocpol 1979). But as societies have become more fluid and electronic media shift the character of social relations, there is scope for new and innovative investigations of such issues.

Social relations also mediate many of the outcomes in which political scientists are interested. Although a great deal of attention has been devoted to explaining variation over time and space in levels of income inequality, the latter are meaningful only to the extent they impinge on

well-being, and we know relatively little about how income inequality affects people's well-being (cf. Wilkinson & Pickett 2009, Western et al. 2012, Barnes & Hall 2013). By conditioning feelings of relative deprivation or as alternative sources of social resources, social relations are likely to play mediating roles here (Runciman 1966, Oakley & Rajan 1991). Of course, those relations also condition the effectiveness of public policies. A large literature on neocorporatism indicates that the capacity of governments to implement some kinds of policies depends on the ways in which social groups are organized (Lehmbruch & Schmitter 1982, Goldthorpe 1984). To take another example, Swidler (2009) argues that the effectiveness of AIDS-prevention campaigns in Africa turned on the shape of local social networks and the moral solidarities they support.

There is also value in seeing social relations as dependent variables—affected both by socioeconomic change and by the policies that governments pursue. There are good reasons for thinking that governments concerned about the well-being of their people should be attentive to social relations. As we have noted, key features of those relations, such as the density of social networks and the characteristics of collective imaginaries, provide ordinary people with social resources constitutive of their capabilities for coping with the challenges of daily life. And public policies can have significant effects on social relations. To take only one example based on network effects, some governments address the unemployment problem with policies that subsidize work, thereby connecting the unemployed to networks of the employed—which network analysis tells us is just what they need to find permanent positions (Granovetter 1973). In this case, the network effects of the policy have a social multiplier effect that enhances its intended impact. By contrast, policies built on a requirement to report to manpower centers have few such effects: they provide the unemployed with contacts mainly among others who are unemployed. In principle, there are many other ways in which public policy might affect social relations (Hall & Taylor 2009).

Therefore, we might expect governments concerned about the well-being of their people to be concerned about the ancillary effects of their policies on social relations. In practice, however, this is rarely the case. In an era that is fixated on market relations, few governments implement new economic policies without asking whether the latter will have any unintended effects on the overall structure of market relations. But they are much less likely to ask whether their policies might have unintended effects on the structure of social relations, by eroding local social networks or by singling some groups out for opprobrium. The messages that policies convey about who is included in the symbolic community are often as important as how those policies distribute material resources (Art 2006, Small et al. 2010).

In this context, a focus on social relations can also yield new perspectives on policy making. Political science tends to view public policy making as a process that distributes economic resources or one that imposes sanctions and incentives designed to regulate behavior. But public policy making can also be seen as a process that creates or erodes social resources. Seen in this light, it is arguable that governments should be as concerned about the conservation of social resources as they are about the conservation of natural resources.

In sum, in the formulations about social relations emerging from sociology and other disciplines, we see exciting challenges and new opportunities for political science. Some scholars are already exploiting those opportunities. But our hope is that the next decade will bring even more debate about the roles that social relations play in politics, innovative efforts to compare social relations across nations, and more analyses that integrate the cultural and institutional dimensions of social relations into common frameworks. We think the results are likely to advance our understanding of how to explain a wide range of important political outcomes.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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