

A RELATIONAL REALIST VISION FOR EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

BASEM ADI





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 Basem Adi



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Attribution should include the following information:

Basem Adi, *A Relational Realist Vision for Education Policy and Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0327>

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0327#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-898-2

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-899-9

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-900-2

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-901-9

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-903-3

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-904-0

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0327

Cover image: Tamanna Rume, Yellow color pencil isolated on blue paper background (2020), https://unsplash.com/photos/FtJEat_S7Q4

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Introduction

This book presents an argument for a new governance model wherein policy-making is underpinned by a relational realist approach. Its central contention is that prevailing governance models produce analytical closure due to starting from a system-based perspective wherein the state regulates the structure of relations that defines the standards reciprocated between citizens. As a result, the regulation and integration of subjective motivation and its value-orientation represent the central problem of governance. Integration into the state-defined collective becomes necessary to enable the responsible citizen to benefit from public goods and occupy roles contributing to economic growth.

Therefore, a re-think is needed to express responsive modes of sociability that valorise the human element as an active contributor to the production of the *common good*. The position adopted here is that governing bodies benefit from a shift away from providing opportunities in the form of public goods towards the fostering of a relational social state. In the relational social state, individual and collective social actors are *Relational Subjects* who participate in the making of social policies and practices. The starting point for an alternative to state-defined governance is an appreciation of the way these *Relational Subjects* relate to one another in the production of the *common good*. In this book, the idea of a relational social state is applied in the context of education. The student serves as the reference point for identifying the learning criteria that guide the development of agency in potential *Relational Subjects*.

This book builds on key themes in sociological theory, reusing established terminology. When one such term or concept is introduced here, it will be italicised to indicate its inclusion in a glossary at the end of the book.

Why Relational Realism?

In a relational social state, practices and policies emerge from the interdependence of different elements of social relations that generate social structures. Relational realism names an epistemic approach that starts from the ontological reality of these social relations; its explanatory capacity is more encompassing than the self-justifying mechanisms of system-based governance. The nature and benefit of relational realism is perhaps best understood by contrast with contemporary methods of policy formulation and their effects. In late modern social formations, the functionalist conceptual infrastructure is limiting because it oscillates between the state/market binary, thus bypassing the dynamics of social relations.

The current model, against which relational realism is set, is called *lib/lab* governance (Donati 2011; 2021). It works through two poles representing the market/state nexus that forms its operation logic. These poles represent different dimensions of governance. ‘Lab’ refers to the holism of state interventions that enable individuals to pursue their set of preferences as consumers and producers within a productive economic order. The ‘lib’ pole, with which it is in continuous tension, encompasses the economic activity of subjects as both producers and consumers and is the referential point of adaptation (Donati 2021). In turn, the state is represented as an organisational dimension that regulates relations to ensure the referential dimension of governance operates to provide opportunities for the individual to occupy roles in the market of goods and services. The referential character of the market (lib) directs the organisational role of the state (lab) and generates modes of observation, diagnosis and intervention that rely on impersonal mechanisms. As will be discussed in Chapter One, the perspective of the subject and the reality of the interactions they stimulate are secondary to the impersonal gaze of the lib pole that represents the finalism of state-defined relations (lab). Hence, the *lib/lab* mode of governance is first an epistemic approach to seeing the world through the prism of the lib end of governance. It sees freedom in a negative sense (freedom *from*), and the referential role of marketisation and economic growth generates inherent tensions that the lab pole needs to adapt continuously. The central goal of the state in the provision of public goods is to ensure fairness that provides

access to the same forces of marketisation. By bypassing the dynamics of social relations, both poles become antagonistic, which requires state management. In the case of policy triangulation, as discussed in Chapter One, the attempt to resolve the relationship between both poles through some form of synergy is firmly located within the needs of a productive economic order.

In this book, the need for relational realism is first justified by its conceptual starting point that transcends the functionalist conceptual infrastructure of modernity's *lib/lab* governance. Relational realism is a general knowledge assumption that underpins a mode of observation that explains the relational emergence of the human-in-the-social. This observation is focused not merely on regulating individual preferences but on active mediations that impact the concerns of the observed. The ontological status of mediation between the subject-observer and the object observed in their relationality is the epistemic focus of relational realism and offers insight into the observed object, be that society or a policy of governance.

Rather than impersonal mechanisms steering relations in the *lib/lab* model, the dynamic relationship between observer and observed in relational realism is ascribed an ontological status with a mode of reflexivity that is shaped by the socio-cultural context. Three perspectives are considered in these mediations — the personal, interpersonal, and systemic — as part of a stratified understanding of social reality. To meet the needs of the human individual's constitutive relationality, it becomes necessary to re-draw the epistemic parameters so that social practices organise the structural dynamic that connects freedom and control as part of the dialectic processes of personal and social morphogenesis (covered in Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six). The necessity of control in relations — the structure that gives purpose and direction — is viewed as emergent from the relationship between observer and observed.

This stratified social ontology, with its concomitant forms of reflexivity, implicates a relational state with a societal governance that encompasses the elements of relations (personal, interpersonal, and systemic). The social includes a relational continuum that comprises personal and collective *Relational Subjects* that operate within a morphogenetic sociocultural context. In turn, within societal governance, the control of

the structures of the socio-cultural context is meant to enable positive freedom in the form of *relational reflexivity* capable of transforming the same socio-cultural context in future *morphogenetic cycles*. Freedom is thus understood positively, that is, the capability to act upon the direction of existing mechanisms and their emergent impact on future social relations are recognised. Relational realism understands freedom and control as two interrelated realities that require each other to operate to maintain societal governance and the production of *relational goods* that sustain this governance.

This acknowledgement of the interrelated realities of freedom and control distinguishes relational realism as a general approach and its explanatory powers. To transcend modernity's analytical closure, the societal mode of production necessitates a dynamic that ascribes efficacy to the relationality of the mechanisms of freedom and control. Affirming the societal dynamic between freedom and control is grounded in a *philosophical ontology* that does not dictate the parameters of knowability as it does not establish an *a priori* judgement on the relation's *symbolic reference*. While it starts from the relational constitution of the subject, it does not view this relationality as an end — its realism is identified in its affirmation of the relation and its determinants as co-principles of reality (Donati 2021). Acknowledging determinants in a stratified social ontology means confirming the human and non-human distinction.

The *relational reflexivity* that steers the interdependence between freedom and control entails *relational goods* produced in the third space between freedom (lib) and state-regulated constraint (lab) (Donati 2021). Starting from the relationality of relations results in an approach that avoids the closure of system-based governance while not falling into a relationism that negates the distinctions of pre-existing determinants of sociability. In the context of societal governance, the morphogenesis of both realities of freedom and control ensures *relational goods* generate *Relational Subjects* (engines of morphogenesis) within an adaptable socio-cultural context (constraint). When the subject's identity within the social is acknowledged, the latter can be continuously reimagined in reference to the emergent human reality that pre-exists but is also relationally constituted.

Structure of this Book

Arguing for the necessity of transcending *lib/lab* governance, the book is structured into seven chapters. Chapter One aims to demonstrate the continuity of policy from New Labour to Conservative governments in recent decades. Policy triangulation or a 'third way' is presented as an alternative to the inadequacies of past policy templates in their over-reliance on one pole in governance. The goal is to rectify these limitations by synergising individual freedom (*lib*) and the state's collective control (*lab*) within the conceptual infrastructure of a functionalist mode of governance. In the *lib/lab* mode, the attempt to balance individual freedoms and state-defined collective initiatives is defined from the perspective of system needs. The aim is to provide enough space for individuals to identify their needs but always within a regulated environment, which provides the basis for agreed-upon reciprocal interchanges. The relational autonomy of the personality system is pre-defined in the context of a system-based structured dialectic of freedom (*lib*) and control (*lab*). In functionalist terminology, the *lib* side represents the capability of the individual to freely choose a status-role, while the *lab* side represents the extrinsic powers of the state to intervene to ensure fairness through the provision of opportunities that enable individuals to pursue their choices. Nevertheless, as the attempt to reach a synergy is pre-defined, the horizons of possibility are restricted to maintaining what is posited as adaptations necessary for economic productivity. The freedom to choose a role, therefore, is externally controlled by the state's articulation of the parameters of public goods through which these roles can be accessed.

Chapter Two proposes an alternative epistemic approach capable of opening new horizons that transcend the pre-defined outcomes of system-based governance. First, the chapter argues that an *a priori* epistemic approach is a reasoned necessity. Second, it presents a general approach based on Donati's (2011; 2021) relational realism that takes as its fundamental starting point the relation and its contingencies (the contingencies of social reality being the conditions of emergence of personhood). An epistemic quadrangle is introduced as a map to analyse progressive problem-solving between the observer and observed within the context of mediations between both realities. Mediating these

realities establishes a morphogenetic dialectic between lib (freedom) and lab (directive control). Within the morphogenetic dialectic, the person is emergent, raising ethical questions about the human element as an outcome of freedom and control. Because interventions are sought within the mediations, horizons are, by implication, always reflexive and open to novel policies and practices responsive to the human element. Chapter Three, following this implication, expounds on the *morphogenetic paradigm* derived from relational realism.

In the third chapter, the relational realist approach is applied to explain personal morphogenesis. Archer's *morphogenetic paradigm* is expounded as a theory that explores the internal dynamics of relational orders to explain the emergence of the human-in-the-social (Archer 2000; 2003). Derived from the relational realist approach, this paradigm views the deliberations of persons in their relationality. When the mediations are understood as part of relational orders that shape personal concerns, they become the place of interventions to ensure relevance to the human element within socio-cultural contexts. The normative emerges from within the relations that generate reflexive deliberations. Further, the chapter argues that reflexivity as a meaning-making mechanism extends to the personal, collective, and broader social networks — the interactive dynamics of these different facets of sociability anchor social morphogenetic processes. In a relational order of reality, these dynamics valorise the human element as the emergent referential reality of morphogenesis.

Considering policy initiatives, Chapter Four addresses the question of morphogenetic sociability and the making of social capital to generate *relational goods*. The chapter first critiques social capital theories to demonstrate the presence of analytical closure, wherein the dynamics of sociability are viewed as post hoc phenomena. It then presents a contrasting relational view of social capital in which the processes of social capitalisation are disentangled to include the activity of *Relational Subjects* as sovereign actors within a morphogenetic socio-cultural context. The interaction occurs in a relational order (a *civil society*) that *Relational Subjects* mediate between the constitution of sociability and the relational outcomes it produces. In turn, social capital is a crucial relational outcome that enhances the fabric of sociability in future *morphogenetic cycles*. Therefore, social capital is a *relational good*; its

features are a process and its outcome is directed by those actively in relation as sovereign producers of a morphogenetic relational order.

The fifth chapter relationally appropriates Parsons's *AGIL scheme* as a compass directed by the morphogenetic developmental points of the learner. The chapter argues that the learner's potentiality is AGIL's value-horizon that orients the structural axis's normative direction. Thus, the integration of the learner into the goals pursued is not regulated from above but is based on the inner dynamics of the relation. While pre-existing learning standards exist as a directive control, they simultaneously enable the development of capabilities. Correspondingly, it will be argued that the dialogical posture of learning is intrinsic to making the structural axis of AGIL responsive to its referential axis, that is, the development of the learner in dialogue with their changing subjective access points.

Chapter Six explores the idea of a relational order of the *civil society* — covered in chapters four and five — in the continuity between different levels of sociability. Specifically, it looks at learning planning within this order when evaluating the student's development as a self-reliant learner and a *Relational Subject*. In teaching and learning, the curriculum is expanded according to the level of sociability to which it refers. Chapter Six thus continues the earlier argument proposed in the book regarding the synergy between sociability's organisational and interactive dimensions. A three-fold distinction will be presented in the curriculum's role as both an aspect of the socio-structural axis of AGIL and as an adaptive resource that references the development of the student (the referential axis of AGIL). In this context, the curriculum is an organisational stabilising mechanism that outlines learning standards which monitor and evaluate learning in immediate relations. In turn, assessment evaluates learning based on criteria pre-set in the delivered curriculum, but *how* assessment strategies are applied first references the developmental point of the learner within the interactive dimension of teaching and learning. The integration of assessment directly into learning re-orientes education from a means to sort individuals to take up a status-role to the monitoring and enablement of development as learners and *Relational Subjects*.

Finally, Chapter Seven summarises the argument presented in the book and provides a conceptual guide toward a relational realist view of

education. It gives a point-by-point breakdown of each chapter and its relevance to the argument proposed in chapter six of the developmental mission of education.

Immanent Critique

In this book, I will adopt a position of immanent critique when articulating a relational realist alternative mode of governance. First, a transcendental refutation is utilised to establish the underlying pre-suppositions of existing governance models.¹ Based on a transcendental refutation of modernity's *symbolic code* — as covered in chapters one and two — the social effects of governance models are traced to starting points that shape their internal conceptual constitution. Because investigation of the internal *raison d'être* of a governance approach is pre-supposed by an *a priori* starting point, transcendental critique leads to an immanent critique. A transcendental critique is necessary to identify the starting point of theory articulation that directs its internal logic (Bhaskar 1998).

Immanent critique seeks to show the internal inconsistencies in preliminary premises. Determining how theoretical inconsistencies are reproduced in explanation, an explanatory critique builds on immanent critique as it returns to theory articulation to identify an explanatory logic (the basis of evaluating relations). Finally, the critique of theory application (methodological critique) refers to evaluative claims and the incapability of applying these claims due to internal conceptual inconsistencies (immanent critique).²

The immanent critique is applied in Chapters Two, Four, and Five. Chapter Two uses an immanent critique to identify the inconsistencies

1 Transcendental refutation is dependent on transcendental analysis. In transcendental analysis, the conditions of the possibility of social scientific investigation are analysed. Based on this analysis, the refuted account is critiqued in its capability to sustain its premises in reference to these conditions (Bhaskar 1998). In chapter two, the relation as the ontological starting point is justified as being able to sustain itself in reference to the conditions of social scientific activity without leading to analytical closure due to one element being the prism of investigation.

2 The organic relation between transcendental, immanent, methodological, and explanatory critiques is taken from Bhaskar's metaphysical preliminaries. In these preliminaries, transcendental problems — the way the conditions of possibility of social scientific investigation are defined — generate theoretical, empirical, and methodological problems (Bhaskar 1998: 142).

of both mid-range realism and pragmatist methodological realism. The claims of these approaches — with their differences — show inconsistencies when negating the necessity of an *a priori* starting point and, by implication, the conditions of the possibility of social scientific investigation. Similarly, in Chapter Four, in the case of social capital theory, different starting points identified generate different explanatory outcomes that are incapable of accounting for the process of social capitalisation. Chapter Five, appropriating Parsons's AGIL scheme as a relational realist compass, critiques Parsons's functionalist scheme as incapable of acknowledging the perspective of the human element independent of institutionalised value-patterns. Therefore, the relational realist use of the AGIL scheme becomes a compass to re-direct the referential dimension to the human element.

