

What Do We See Differently When We Adopt a Relational Perspective?

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In one of his lectures, Foucault formulates his understanding of power relations as entangled and trans-actional in these words: “unless we are looking at it from a great height and from a very great distance, power is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively, and those who do not have it and are subject to it . . . Power is exercised through networks, and individuals . . . are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays” (“Society Must Be Defended”, 29).

The passage illustrates how the relational “lens”, which is not just for studying power, but can also work for identity, memory, art and more, shows the world in a different way to the substantialist lens when used for looking at historical phenomena. Choosing NOT to look “from a very great height and from a very great distance”, but from closer to the ground, we see (a) “smaller” actors and processes that were previously invisible; (b) no static structures, since they now all appear as processes, as a result of which they may also look less stable; and (c) compact entities like nations, events or even individual people that appear as arenas of a multitude of trans-actions in their own right.

Given their epistemological kinship, entangled history studies could fruitfully engage with many relationally inflected approaches, such as the Tartu-Moscow school, Cultural Studies, or Relational Sociology. I may propose a brief example of the potential of Relational Sociology, which can be used to discuss the canonical “Warwick debates” between the nationalism theorists Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner, where they disagree over the patterns of nation formation, and I use the Estonians as the test case of the argument. The categories “self-action”, “inter-action” and “trans-action”, developed as a meta-methodological framework of analysis by Mustafa Emirbayer, François Dépelteau and Peeter Selg, let me compare Smith’s and Gellner’s interpretations of how the Estonian nation is formatted, alongside an interpretation that could result from a relational approach.