

Chapter 2

Political Asymmetry: A Characterization for Social Science Research Inquiry

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to develop a taxonomy and further the definition of the concept of political asymmetry for operationalization into social science research inquiry. On the one hand, the chapter covers the single main categories to offer a taxonomy of the concept, exposing the semantic context of symmetry and asymmetry, and depicting the idea of the political sphere from a classical Aristotelian tradition as well making use of public political science and philosophy of law. Later on, drawing on contributions of critical constructivism, and particularly Habermas communicative action theory, the chapter addresses how political asymmetry can be found in contemporary social structures at the level of subsystems of administration, such as institutions, as well as at the level of individual interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of asymmetry refers to either a subjective impression that a structure generates upon the senses or to the recognition of inconsistencies between patterns belonging to a structure, inequality to a material direct differentiation. Two or more actors can relate to a structure equally, even if they are unequal. For instance, the right to equality before the law, found in the fourteenth amendment of the US Constitution that views persons as legal rights holders (Convention, 1788) (Rosenfeld, 2001) (Balkin, 2011). Contrariwise, relations with a structure of correlated actors can be unequal, even if the actors are equal, such as the 1865 Jim Crow Laws that prevented black citizens from voting in the US, though acknowledging them as equal individual political entities (Crespino, 2003). In the interaction between actors, their relation cannot be unequal or equal, because one is portraying and not comparing an interaction; thus, in such cases, their relation can be symmetric or asymmetric. It is only by considering the role and the identity of an actor upon a structure, that it can be said whether a relation has symmetry or sensorial harmony¹.

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The concept of political asymmetry in political science and international relations has often been influenced by research on realism, yet theoretical and empirical engagement is absent from modern research. Customarily, it has been characterized by the role that *asymmetrical* arrangements maintain over the definition of *unfair*, or uneven, political and social settings. In such representations, asymmetry is frequently understood as inequality. This inadequate assumption, however, undermines the significant contributions of the subject as an entity in itself, that constructivist research has systematically revealed during the recent decades. In any case, by now, neither a semantic depiction, nor a theoretical contextualization has been rigorously addressed, much less an operationalization for the study of the role and the praxis of actors with diverse normative baggage within governance architectures.

This paper aims to address this issue by offering a characterization of the concept of political asymmetry for further operationalization into social science research inquiry. The paper builds on sociology, public philosophy, and, particularly, Habermas' contributions on communicative action theory to address the topic from a systemic dimension, aiming to stress how contemporary structures of governance are highly indebted to architectural settings that end up defining further stages of system organization. The goal of the paper is to offer a coherent framework to further address research on political science and international relations theory, especially concerning the relation between macrostructures and norms production. On the other hand, from a critical constructivist perspective, the paper also aims to offer explanation on the evolution of power relations indebted to organizational arrangements that end up being replicated over time.

The chapter is divided in two parts. The first offers a semantic depiction of the conception of *asymmetry*, as well as the notion of the political sphere, to further provide a characterization of the concept of political asymmetry. The second part, operationalizes the contribution of the depiction within late modern social systems. The implications for further research of the present paper are given by the necessity, within social science inquiry, to offer a coherent characterization of asymmetry, stressing both the systemic and the political implication of such settings along organizations. The chapter also aims to enhance research directed at increasing scrutiny on the outcome of normative interventions of institutions, and, to diagnose how unbalanced relations of actors within structures can be empirically measured. On the issue of best practices to organizational culture, the papers offers fundamental conventions for digging out coherently about the implications of normative constructions that affect plural agencies interactions, which are further internalized within formal institutions. Finally, the characterization of the concept of political asymmetry provides guidance for further study of both, organizational normative constructions, and the practical implications of power and cognitive relations along informational structures, such as formal systems or societal subsystems of governance.

PART ONE

Social Science Research Contributions On Asymmetry

Arguably, the most consistent recent attempt to define the concept of political asymmetry was carried out by Philip Kitcher (Kitcher, 2001). In his view on the relationship between science and democracy, he stresses that societies tend to favor positions that not only are "scientifically" accountable, but at the same time, belong to a defined epistemic approach. In this fashion, agreements between individuals frequently take place on arenas that differ from each other within decision making procedures. This natural

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