


Social Theory and the Sociology of Clientelism: Groundwork for a Gramscian Alternative

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Submitted: March 5, 2024 – Accepted: April 27, 2025 – Published: December 22, 2025

Abstract

The category “clientelism” captures a very wide variety of political phenomena, wider perhaps than other peer concepts. It also harbors the potential to serve as an alternative to both liberal institutionalism and power elite theory. But recent trends in the literature have not realized the category’s potential. The key problem with the literature is that it is on shaky conceptual ground. Toward a revamped sociology of clientelism, this essay attends to associated theoretical problems and potential payoffs. It surveys definitions and probes normative issues at the heart of clientelism. It identifies the accomplishments and limitations of the leading theoretical traditions, offshoots of neo-Durkheimian gift theory and neo-Weberian principal-agent theory. Drawing instead from Gramscian theory, it proposes that we view *soliciting subordination* as the central feature of clientelism. This approach offers both *a lens* for unifying phenomena hitherto thought to be very different under a single conceptual scheme and *a model* for explaining political development. This helps enable the category to serve in a quite general theory which could ultimately provide an alternative to liberal-institutional and elite-pact brands of political sociology.

Keywords: Clientelism; Social theory; Gift theory; Principal-agent theory; Gramsci.

Acknowledgements

I thank Andrew Jaeger, Jonah Stuart Brundage, Paige Sweet, and participants of the University of Michigan’s Social Theory Workshop for comments. I alone am responsible for the arguments advanced and any feathers ruffled among students of clientelism.

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1 Introduction

Clientelism was once a prominent object of study across the social sciences (see especially Schmidt et al., 1977).¹ In a rare instance of convergence, scholars drawing from the Durkheimian (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1980 & 1984; Roniger, 1990), Marxian (Flynn, 1974; Rothstein, 1979; Mouzelis, 1985), and Weberian (Nelson, 1979; Scott, 1972; Weingrod, 1968) traditions all vouched for the substantive importance of clientelism. In recent years, however, a narrow brand of political science has come to dominate the literature, championing formal models of so-called “vote buying” (Stokes et al., 2013) and emptying the concept of its social substance in pursuit of what two internal critics ridicule as “red herring” theories (Hicken & Nathan, 2020). Those sociologists who continue to study clientelism typically either reply to the “red herring” theories by adopting them as their point of departure (Gay, 1994 & 1999; Wang & Kurzman, 2007) or react against them by reverting to approaches of an older, anthropological inspiration (Auyero, 1999 & 2000; Shefner, 2001 & 2008).²

But there is now an incipient interdisciplinary movement that implicitly proposes an alternative direction for the study of clientelism (Auerbach & Thachil, 2023; Auyero & Benzecry, 2017; Ferguson, 2013). The problem is, it remains on shaky theoretical ground. To help rectify this deficit, this conceptual article lays some groundwork — specifically, along Gramscian social-theoretical lines — to help resuscitate the sociological study of clientelism. First, I clear away enough conceptual confusion to propose a new theoretical approach to clientelism. Second, I outline how that alternative has broad applicability. Centering on what I call “soliciting subordination”, the alternative I propose breaks with prevalent theoretical assumptions in pluralistic liberal-institutionalist theory — the idea that government institutions are an expression of popular will (see Saward, 2008, pp. 1000–1001) — and power-elite theory — the idea that elites of different kinds are able to form pacts and shape society as they wish.

I aim to show that there are two upshots of a Gramscian theory of clientelism. In the first place, it provides a lens through which different sets of empirics, which we would otherwise take to be quite different from one another, can be seen to constitute instances of the same thing, namely clientelism. This is an exercise in using theory to generate new insights, and it thereby makes the familiar (taken-for-granted assumptions) seem strange (requiring further investigation). In the second place, a Gramscian theory of clientelism centered on soliciting subordination allows us to explain important political developments in a new way. This implies that the theory can actually explain far more than current clientelism literature is able to, meaning it can and should be applied to new problems previously thought to be beyond the remit of clientelism theory. Both upshots expand the scope of clientelist theory, helping it serve as a quite general framework. The Gramscian alternative to existing approaches to clientelism is thus suitable for a very wide range of societies and for political phenomena that students of clientelism seldom examine or endeavor to explain.

In general, clientelism is defined as a class of political relations between individuals and/or groups characterized by informality, reciprocity, and hierarchy, with patrons occupying superordinate positions and clients occupying subordinate ones (I provide numerous specific

1. Clientelism was never a central concern of *American* sociology, perhaps because, with their moral commitments to civil service reform, American sociologists “thought the best thing that could be done with patronage relationships was to ignore them and hope (indeed theorize) that they would go away”, even though this “meant ignoring a type of relationship that [...] was of fundamental importance perhaps in most of the world’s societies” (Martin, 2009, p. 204).

2. For noteworthy exceptions, see Auyero & Benzecry (2017) and Álvarez-Rivadulla (2017).

definitions below).³ The concept has a remarkable range (Dorman, 2024, p. 1390) — many periods' and places' politics approximate clientelism better than perhaps any other peer concept — which endows it with considerable value for social theory. Clientelism may indeed be something like the elementary form of politics, a veritable default to which political relations gravitate in the absence of countervailing factors. It encompasses an immense swathe of sociopolitical relations — relations, that is, which are *not* characterized by complete rational-legality, despotic extraction of value, or full horizontality. Research thus uncovers clientelism all over: in ancient Rome (Roniger, 1983), early-modern France (Kettering, 1986), the post-colonial global South (Barnes, 2019; Karpas, 1976; Roniger, 1990), and, of course, in the iconic case of Italy (Chubb, 1982; Graziano, 1973; Silverman, 1965). One might say clientelism envelops us, both geographically and temporally. It also transcends substantive domains. Clientelist relations feature in both agrarian (Roniger, 1990; Scott, 1977; Singelmann, 1981; Wilson, 1990) and industrial (Dench et al., 2006, pp. 123–125; Street, 1996) relations, generally promoting conservatism; inside the government bureaucracy (Grindle, 1977; Toral, 2024), sometimes thought to be the preserve of rational-legal authority; and even in the academy (Dorman, 2024, pp. 1402–1403; Peacock, 2016), sometimes thought to be the domain of merit. It also appears across very different scales: clientelism “can operate at any level ranging from the relationships between individual persons through that between sub-national groups to that between nation states” (Landé, 1977, p. xxxi).

In spite of its remarkable range, gridlock has all but precluded the self-conscious adoption of a focus on “clientelism” and its cognates (patronage, patron-clientelism) in sociology and social theory in recent years (the most important exception is Martin, 2009). There are at least two important reasons for its marginalization. Perhaps the main reason clientelism has been marginal to social theory is that one of the main branches of the empirical literature — the literature that views clientelism as an outcome and assesses how various variables may moderate or counteract it — has proven dreadfully unattractive to theorists, as it has arrived again and again at a dead-end that is inhospitable to conceptualization. This branch of the literature has several specific limbs. One concerns the relevance of political party systems, with some asserting that competitive systems undermine clientelism (for a review, see Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007, p. 4). Others, however, show that clientelism can persist amid multiparty competition (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2012 & 2017; Auerbach, 2020; Auerbach & Thachil, 2023; Gay, 1990, 1994 & 1999; Krishna, 2007; Nichter & Peress, 2017).⁴ Another limb assesses whether capitalist economic development is related to clientelism, with some arguing that it undermines clientelism (for a review, see Stokes et al., 2013). Others, however, argue that clientelism thrives on the resources borne of economic development (Greene, 2007, p. 115; Magaloni, 2006).⁵ Yet another limb of this empirical literature, finally, examines the effects of urbanization, with one side arguing that urban growth undermines clientelism (for a review, see Post, 2018, p. 120). Numerous others, however, show that rural-to-urban migration across much of the postcolonial

3. For comparable definitions of clientelism, see: Auyero & Benzecry (2017, p. 179); Hilgers (2012, p. 7); Landé (1977, p. xx).

4. Relatedly, some argue that the secret ballot is a death knell for so-called vote-buying. While I disagree that clientelism is coextensive with vote-buying (cf. Berenschot, 2018, p. 1586), it is important to note that such secrecy can be circumvented by asking voters to use carbon paper or to photograph filled-in ballots (Schaffer & Schedler, 2007, p. 23), along with other techniques to track votes (Hollnsteiner, 1963, p. 105).

5. Relatedly, some argue that clientelist exchanges persist because they shelter clients from vulnerability, i.e., that clientelism negates vulnerability (Scott, 1977, pp. 31–33), while others argue that clientelism persists because of client vulnerability, i.e., that vulnerability spawns clientelism (Nichter, 2018).

global South generated clientelist relations between the urban poor and political elites (Auerbach & Thachil, 2023; Barnes, 2019; Cornelius, 1975; Gay, 1994; Karpat, 1976; Shefner, 2008; Wiebe, 1975).⁶

Taken together, this empirical branch of the literature, essentially dedicated to identifying solutions to the nuisance of clientelism, has ended in a *cul-de-sac*. Nor is there much reason to think that further empirical research assessing correlations between exogenous variables and proxies for clientelism will eventually discover a silver bullet capable of vanquishing the clientelist nuisance once and for all. Indeed, this very quest would seem to be misguided. Since *clientelism is normal*, it does not respond to stimuli as would an alien parasite capable of being extirpated from the body politic. I take the evident confusion that has led empirical researchers of clientelism into this *cul-de-sac* to indicate a need for critical clarification and a conceptual review.

The reason few sociologists focus on clientelism may be that the recent clientelism literature is on shaky conceptual ground. On the one hand, the concept has considerable theoretical value, for it can help us interpret and explain a ubiquitous form of politics that would otherwise elude us. Despite their disagreements on many other matters, scholars in the Durkheimian, Marxian, and Weberian traditions all recognize this. Still, the broad range of eligible substantive phenomena to which researchers often apply the term “clientelism” makes it a *difficult concept* with which to work. Its use implicitly raises a series of issues that are inherently both political and theoretical, normative and scientific. Thus, for sociology to profit from the range of phenomena which the concept “clientelism” can accommodate requires some under-laboring prior to empirical application. That is where this article comes in.

In what follows, I first survey definitions of clientelism, some of its normative features, and difficulties associated with the term’s social-scientific use. I examine the two foremost theoretical traditions — neo-Durkheimian gift theory, the ur-theory behind the anthropological study of clientelism, which is focused on the interpersonal scale, and the body of research inspired by neo-Weberian principal-agent theory, which focuses on extended clientelist relations of brokerage and intermediation — showing that both assume top-down origins and control of clientelist relationships. I propose an alternative view of clientelism as a form of politics stemming from bottom-up requests for subordination, drawing on recent developments in the literature. I show that Gramscian theory has already developed along these lines and thus provides a number of useful conceptual resources. And I outline how my bottom-up, Gramscian proposal provides both a lens that imparts a fresh perspective on familiar facts and a model that may help us trace political dynamics not previously thought to stem from clientelism. Both are potentially valuable not just because they may help us put clientelism on a firmer conceptual foundation, but because they may help us do better political sociology by treating more topics as cases of clientelism.

2 Conceptual and Normative Problems

Social researchers once viewed clientelism as a form of lingering traditionalism destined to disappear with modernization (see Combes, 2011, p. 16; Hicken, 2011, pp. 296–302). And since it was assessed negatively and thought to be destined for the dustbin of history, “liberal political theorists” often deemed clientelism unworthy of study (Desai & Singh, 2020, pp. 676–

6. Some even assert that, as a result, clientelism may be stronger or more ubiquitous in urban areas than in rural ones (Roniger, 1994, p. 209).

677; see also Ferguson, 2013). Given the dominance of pluralistic liberal-institutional theory in the social sciences, particularly in the realm of political topics, the result was to relegate substantive conceptions of clientelism⁷ to the margins, leaving the field bereft of a center of social-theoretical gravity capable of structuring the clientelism literature. Researchers from diverse theoretical traditions have proposed numerous definitions and employed varied empirical strategies. But the conceptual work has largely failed to go beyond that.

2.1 Existing Definitions and Empirical Strategies

Overall, clientelism is a class of political relations between individuals and/or groups characterized by informality, exchange, and hierarchy, with patrons occupying superordinate positions and clients occupying subordinate positions. Within these parameters, students vary in their definitions of the substance and scale of clientelist relations.

Let me start with *substance*. Substantively narrow definitions, which usually reduce political support to votes, include “giving material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you/will you support me?” (Stokes, 2011, p. 648) and “a transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen’s vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods, and services” (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007, p. 2). Substantively broad definitions include “the individualized exchange of goods or services for political support” (Auyero & Benzecry, 2017, p. 179) and “a long-term relationship of unequal power in which identifiable actors exchange goods and services that often involve political allegiance” (Hilgers, 2012, p. 7).

Similarly, definitions vary according to the *scale* of the relations in question. On the small-scale extreme, some define clientelism as “lop-sided friendship” (Pitt-Rivers, 1954, p. 140), that is, as “a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron” (Scott, 1972, p. 92, emphasis removed). Large-scale, mediated patron-client relations are defined, for example, as cases in which “brokers solve voters’ problems by providing them with material and nonmaterial benefits in exchange for participating at rallies and elections” (Szwarcberg, 2015, p. 2) and as “activist networks [that] screen deserving from undeserving voters and mediate access to goods [accordingly]” (Calvo & Murillo, 2013, p. 852, emphasis removed).

One could hypothetically operationalize clientelism in terms of both substance and scale by simply selecting items *à la carte* from the menu just outlined. However, some narrow substantive definitions, namely vote-buying, do not pair well with a dyadic or small-scale focus. Thus, if a student aims to pursue the question “will *you* support *me*?” (Stokes, 2011, p. 648, emphasis added), they will quickly find that the operationalization fails to gain empirical traction since voters (“you”) almost never enjoy *dyadic* relations with the politicians who seek their votes (“me”). To avoid both aspects of this conceptually-confused operationalization, I assume here that *clientelism is not exhausted by so-called vote-buying* (cf. Auerbach & Thachil, 2023, pp. 26–27) — although I will make reference to vote-centric examples as a shorthand for political support more broadly — and that *clientelism often entails larger-scale, mediated forms of sociopolitical relations*, which involve intermediaries or brokers and which can persist for a long time.

7. As opposed, for example, to formal conceptions focusing on vote-buying.

Definitions, of course, inform *empirical strategies*. As it stands, some start with an *a priori* definition, conceiving of both patrons' material aid and clients' political support narrowly and for a limited time horizon — especially during electoral campaigns — and proceed to measure the relationship between variables representing patronage goods and political support (e.g., Baldwin, 2013; Stokes, 2005). Others proceed inductively, allowing both material aid and political support to vary widely and manifest over a relatively long period of time, in order to examine how a specific place's politics actually worked (e.g., Auerbach, 2020; Auerbach & Thachil, 2023; Auyero, 2000; Shefner, 2008; Zarazaga, 2014). Findings can then be characterized as “clientelism” by making recourse to the substantive and scale aspects of a suitable definition.

However, the co-presence of both empirical strategies points to a conceptual problem. Those opting for each may equally invoke the label “clientelism” to characterize their respective findings when the findings themselves share little in common (Berenschot, 2018, p. 1586). While obviously a scientific liability, it is difficult to lay blame for this quandary at the feet of either empirical strategy, since in principle it is just as valid to say *D* is a poor definition of clientelism as it is to say *E* is a bad example. Clearly, there can be no empirical resolution to this muddle. It is instead symptomatic of broader conceptual deficiencies in the field of clientelism studies.

2.2 Normative and Prescriptive Dissensus

Of the many disagreements populating the clientelism literature, perhaps the most formidable nexus of contention centers on normative concerns, especially whether clientelist relations are exploitative or mutually beneficial. In clientelistic *quid-pro-quo* exchanges, there are important qualitative differences between the goods and services bestowed by the patron (often use values or material aid) and those reciprocated by the client (often labor or service) (Blau, 1964, p. 156; Landé, 1977, pp. xx, xxiv–xxv; Scott, 1977, pp. 23–26), differences which make exact measurement difficult, and thus preclude determining who is benefitting from whom (Dorman, 2024, pp. 1392–1393; Hilgers, 2012, p. 11). Meanwhile, clientelistic relations do clearly bring different parts of the social body into a relationship with one another, increasing “dynamic density” (Durkheim, 1984, p. 201). Observers are sensitive to the implications. An old branch of the literature saw clientelistic solidarities as orthogonal to national ones. But it seems more likely that clientelism is basic to political development (Martin, 2009).

A Durkheimian is therefore likely to conclude that although patron-client relations are “asymmetric”, they are nevertheless “mutually beneficial”, as Roniger (1990, p. 4) says, due precisely to their integrating function. Thus, Scott (1977, pp. 31–33) argues that the patron may exploit the client, more in some years and less or even not at all in others, but the client may still opt into the relationship and benefit from it in the long term. This is the case when the patron occasionally rescues the client during crises — e.g., a crop yield insufficient to sustain subsistence — leaving the client to view the patron as a *good* patron, *not* an exploiter. Insofar as one adopts the Durkheimian concern with social integration, clientelism can be viewed as a social good.

Marxians, in contrast, would argue that clientelism is really a form of class domination. Marxian elaborations sometimes disaggregate clientelist relations into their economic and political dimensions. Focusing on the *economic* dimension, Bodemann (1997, p. 203, emphasis removed) argues that, “by guaranteeing the peasant's subsistence, the patron actually guarantees his own survival as patron” through the “reproduction of the exploitative relation between lord and peasant in which both patron and client are embedded”. In other words, as Gould-

ner (1973, pp. 272 & 279) says, “the security of an upper class [...] is fortified when it repays the exploitation it practices, the taking of something for nothing, by the giving of something for nothing”, because this cynical move “endows the advantaged with legitimacy”. That is, the client may like or even love the patron, but the latter still exploits the former.

Focusing on the *political* dimension, Mouzelis (1985, p. 333) argues that the presence of vertical bonds between client and patron “safeguards the status quo against any serious threat from below”, in large part because these relations draw clients “into conflicts [with one another] in which fundamental class issues are systematically displaced by personalistic politics and by squabbles over the distribution of spoils” which “[undermines] horizontal modes of political integration” among clients. This renders solidarity from below — e.g., effective trade unions — impossible. Putting all this together, Rothstein (1979, p. 26) argues that, by pitting workers against one another in a competition for limited patronage resources, clientelism is a crucial mechanism that helps the ruling class exclude many people from access to the use values they help produce.

Clearly Durkheimians and Marxians disagree about the question of exploitation. Seeing no easy answer in view, Scott (1977, p. 37, emphasis added) argues that we ought to acknowledge that the phenomenon encompasses “relations of personal dependence between members of different classes” but leave “the question of how equitable or exploitative they are” to “*empirical* analysis”. At first glance this may seem like a reasonable avenue toward détente. But it is actually unlikely to satisfy any Marxian. While much can indeed be left to empirical study, no Marxian would agree that empirical study alone can resolve what they see as a fundamentally normative-theoretical question. From a Marxian perspective, this would mean conceding that it is difficult — perhaps even impossible — to determine who benefits from whom, a view closer to the Durkheimian position, which regards clientelism as acceptable, or even desirable (Merton, 1968, pp. 125–130; Widlok, 2017, p. 190). The theoretical debate between Durkheimians and Marxians is polarized, and there are no *empirical* grounds for agreement.

And even if we were to set aside the Durkheimian position and grant that clientelism is normatively problematic, another disagreement looms right around the corner, this one between Weberians and Marxians. Broadly speaking, traditional Weberians and Marxians agree that clientelism reflects an intelligible form of political order, but they view its intelligibility in totally different ways. Such Weberians appreciate patrimonialism, a type of clientelism, as a *legitimate* form of domination, whose claim hinges on putative assent to such relations. On this reckoning, clientelism is fundamentally acceptable. The hermeneutic implication is that, if its nature is revealed to clients, it will still be able to endure. In contrast, Marxians view clientelism as a form of false consciousness, as I discuss further below. From this perspective, clientelism is fundamentally unacceptable, and the more its nature is revealed to clients, the more unstable these relationships are likely to become.

An American strand of neo-Weberian theory also disagrees with Marxians, albeit for quite different reasons. Some such Weberians view bureaucratic institutions as the *sine qua non* of political order and are thus likely to view clientelism as a reflection of political failure or even the absence of political order *per se* (“clientelism-riddled failed states”, etc.). Marxians, in contrast, are likely to respond that although clientelistic politics may arise spontaneously, they still reflect political order, for “one of the principal political results is the reinforcement of class control” (Flynn, 1974, p. 150).

While perhaps less fundamental than the disagreement between Durkheimians and Marxians, this dispute also seems intractable. Because while both Weberians and Marxians are likely to mobilize the concept in conjunction with calls for political change, the forms of change

for which each camp calls are fundamentally different. For neo-Weberians, perfecting bureaucratic institutions is the way to combat clientelism. For Marxians, in contrast, the prescription involves equalizing the distribution of wealth. These normative-political proposals cut in different directions: strengthening formal institutions is unlikely to promote equality *per se*, and equalization is also unlikely in itself to strengthen formal institutions (Banégas, 1998; Shefner, 2012). As with definitions and empirical strategies, the literature has also failed to find a suitable resolution to this disagreement. The clientelism literature is thus riven by theoretical disputation.

2.3 Practical and Scientific Conceptions of Clientelism

A common approach to achieve conceptual clarification and even unification is to try to separate scientific-empirical from folk-normative conceptions, define the latter as out-of-bounds, and then decree that a specific scientific-empirical conception should guide research. Almost all the clientelism literature seems to implicitly assume this approach. However, due to the substantive nature of clientelism — the phenomenon itself *is* normatively charged — this approach denies one of its important aspects. For clientelism is both a substantive phenomenon (and thus eligible for scientific study) *and* one that is inherently normatively charged (and thus must be examined in a value-oriented manner). Deeming the normative aspects of the phenomenon off limits would be tantamount to refusing to study clientelism *qua* clientelism. It is only at the intersection of “is” and “ought”, that is, that we can acquire a satisfactory theoretical position.

While clientelism can be used as an analytical concept in social scientific research, it is also a normatively charged folk concept. The term references a “morally weighted concept”, like “exploitation” (Parkin, 1983, p. 47) and “alienation” (Skotnicki & Nielsen, 2021, p. 838), and is often used as a “flexible epithet”, like “populism” (Jansen, 2011, p. 77) and “corruption” (Hilgers, 2011, pp. 576–577). Actors append “clientelistic” to denunciations of alleged degeneracy in the political sphere.⁸ Because the noun (“clientelism”) and the adjectives derived from it (“clientelist”, “clientelistic”) feature in both theory and practice — just as the nouns “corruption” and “populism” are important theoretical concepts, while the adjectives “corrupt” and “populist” are common terms of derision in political speech — *clientelism belongs to a class of concepts that are used for both scientific and applied ends* (Briquet, 2006; Combes, 2011, pp. 25–28; Rocha, 2012, pp. 124–125). Just as political actors tend to try to avoid being tarred as “populist” or “corrupt”, so too “no one wants to be perceived as clientelistic” (Hilgers, 2011, p. 576).⁹

The term “clientelism” has an impressive perlocutionary force, associated in a broad array of people’s minds with a variety of almost taboo practices and behaviors. This may present obstacles to comprehending substantive phenomena that we may wish to qualify as “clientelism”; however, I disagree with Combes’s (2011, p. 28) assertion, rooted in the idea that concepts should be value-neutral, that this means the term “clientelism” lacks a fixed meaning. When addressing substantive phenomena that do not carry as much negative moral freight, the research objective is often to make a compelling case for why a specific style of behavior is understandable and reasonable given the circumstances — and, therefore, within a relativist frame, morally

8. Of course, some contrarian anthropologists take a very different tack, trying to undermine the idea that dependence relations are undesirable. I outline my reasons for disagreeing with this view below.

9. Meanwhile, to a broadly Marxian sensibility, elite bystanders who accuse their social inferiors of clientelistic behavior, such as vote-selling, are essentially victim-blamers (Garrido, 2019, p. 164).

acceptable, albeit not necessarily desirable. But when it comes to “clientelism”, the moral die is already loaded. Many social scientists, to say nothing of political actors, maintain an *a priori* view that “clientelism” describes a problem that should be solved or denotes a class of activities deserving of opprobrium, and they would chafe at the idea that this should be conceived as normatively acceptable (for important exceptions, see Auerbach & Thachil, 2023; Auyero, 2000; Auyero & Benzecry, 2017; Banégas, 1998; Hagene & González-Fuente, 2016; Shefner, 2012). The converse is also sometimes the case among clients: to some, it is unconscionable to question the moral standing of their loyalties (Garrido, 2019, pp. 191–192). Taken together, pervasive scholarly disdain and client stridency mark an important dissonance between the subject and object of inquiry.

And it gets worse. The value-ladenness of the concept “clientelism” arguably runs much deeper than some occasional slippage across the folk-scientific or emic-etic divide — a divide many sociologists are familiar with navigating. It inherently cuts deep into core controversies in social theory, since as noted students of the phenomenon have long debated whether clientelism serves to exploit (Flynn, 1974, p. 150; Rothstein, 1979, p. 26; Street, 1996, pp. 662–667) or benefit (Roniger, 1990, p. 4) clients, about which Marxians and Durkheimians disagree, and whether conclusions concerning this and similar matters should (Auyero, 1999; Scott, 1977, pp. 31–33) or should not (Bodemann, 1997, p. 203; Mouzelis, 1985, p. 333) be based on research subjects’ own views and opinions, about which ethnologists, who champion emic perspectives, and realist social scientists, who pursue etic ones, disagree.

There are, however, grounds for agreement, even if they cannot possibly satisfy everyone. Some, perhaps many, argue that one of the key features of patron-client relationships is that, from the client’s point of view, they are both voluntary (and thus in a sense “good”, as a Durkheimian shorthand might say) and exploitative (and thus in a sense “bad”, as a Marxian shorthand might have it) (e.g., Hilgers, 2011, p. 570). These are, of course, the basic ingredients of “false consciousness”.

In a nutshell, then, the concept’s heavy moral freight would seem to require that those who dare to embrace the study of “clientelism” grapple, implicitly or explicitly, with some of the thorny questions about “false consciousness” central to social theory. Many try to avoid such questions — and would, therefore, want to avoid the study of clientelism. Nor are most sociologists particularly well trained in normative theory. However, that does not diminish in the slightest the substantive importance of clientelism, much less its ubiquity. Moreover, scholars in each of the main social-theoretical traditions — Durkheimian, Weberian, and Marxist — assume that falsity is an aspect of clientelism, albeit in each case in a different way; this suggests that falsity is inherent to clientelism. Yet, as I show in the following section, neo-Durkheimian and neo-Weberian theories are somewhat implausible in this connection; this leaves neo-Marxian theory, upon which I build thereafter.

3 Existing Theoretical Traditions

The main descriptive fault line in the clientelism literature separates neo-Durkheimians from neo-Weberians, concerning whether clientelism is best understood as a micro or interpersonal phenomenon, in which those who initiate are patrons and those who respond are clients (positions that may alternate), or as some kind of principal-agent relationship, involving intermediaries. These two theoretical schools agree that clientelism is a top-down phenomenon; beyond this, they diverge. Those who assume the small-scale perspective see clientelism as a subspecies of the relations captured in gift theory, popularized by Durkheim’s student Marcel Mauss. To

those interested in larger-scale clientelism, gift theory's critical weakness is that it fails to differentiate intermediaries from gift givers and receivers, for it conceives of them only in terms of elongated giver-receiver relationships (e.g., Sahlins, 1972, p. 159). Those who do focus on intermediaries depart from the insight, articulated by Weber (1978, p. 1058), that when there are relatively few patrons and many clients, relations between them are typically mediated. Much of this literature is grounded in principal-agent theory.¹⁰ Among the chief shortcomings of this work, I shall argue, are that it is conceptually flawed and lacks empirical support.

3.1 Gift Theory

Scholars draw heavily on neo-Durkheimian gift theory to conceptualize clientelism and related forms of political dependence (Aspinall, 2014, p. 556; Auyero, 2000, pp. 175–181; Graziano, 1975, p. 25; Médard, 2000, pp. 77–78). All gift relations involve two parties: the giver or donor and the receiver or recipient. In Mauss's (1966, p. 72) seminal account of “the gift”, *A* bestows material aid on *B*, who in turn relinquishes autonomy. Viewed superficially, such gifts may just appear to reflect generosity. However, for “the one who receives it”, a gift is actually “an attack” on her or his “freedom”, for it requires some kind of reciprocation (Bourdieu 1998, p. 94). Bourdieu (2000, p. 192) calls this the *two-fold nature of the gift*: gifts are both *altruistic*, “a refusal of self-interest” in virtue of the fact that they involve giving, and *egoistic*, based on “the logic of exchange” in virtue of the fact that the giver expects reciprocation (even when this is not made explicit). Caillé (2020, pp. 26–27) argues these aspects are actually two different forms — “symbolic” and “diabolical” — of gift relations. Gouldner (1973, pp. 270–271) frames this in Hegelian terms, which reference the self as a result of recognition from helplessness. Regardless of terminology, gift exchanges involve *material aid* in exchange for *dependence*.

In his discussion of the gift, Mauss assumes that dependence is temporary because the party who gives the gift can and does alternate: after *A* has given *B* a gift, putting *B* in a dependent position, *B* can bestow a counter-gift and thereby both dispense with their own dependence and compel *A* to assume the dependent position, as depicted in Figure 1. In this way, gifts and counter-gifts can continue *ad infinitum*, and, as they do so, the set of those involved can expand to include far more parties than just *A* and *B*, thereby constituting an intricate tapestry of “total prestation” (Mauss, 1966, pp. 4 ff.), relations that serve to redistribute wealth — not downward, to the deprived, but outward, to those elites who are not currently dominant¹¹ — in exchange for power. It is for this reason that, according to gift theory, the asymmetry inherent to dependence — with one side dominant and the other subordinate — can itself reverse or alternate over time. For example, amid the British Empire, English merchants were initially the clients of Indian elites. This period was followed by “a reversal of status between incoming [colonial] administrators and indigenous leaders”, after which the Indian leaders became the dependents (Newbury, 2003, p. 13).

If the gift-giver is to alternate, the gift-receiver must bestow a counter-gift that is *larger* than (and different from) the initial gift (Bataille, 1988, pp. 67–68 & 70; Bourdieu 1990, p. 105; Landé, 1977, p. xxvi). However, this may be impossible if the gift recipient is at a material

10. Weber was well aware of the accountability problems upon which principal-agent theory pivots — as evidenced by his distinction between the types of intermediaries characteristic of different political systems, i.e., between cases in which the intermediary is relatively autonomous from the patron (“feudalism”) and those in which the patron dominates the intermediary (“patrimonialism”) (Weber, 1978, pp. 264, 952, 1024, 1091) — though of course he did not dwell on them as principal-agent theorists do.

11. This is why Bourdieu (1977, pp. 10–15) describes honorific games as a form of gift exchanges.

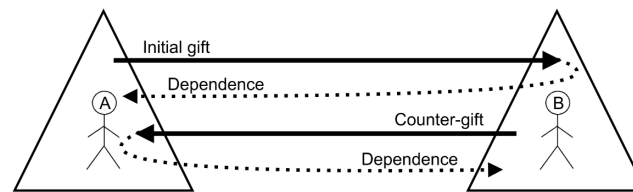


Figure 1 – Gifts, Counter-Gifts, and the Reversal of Dependence Relations

disadvantage vis-à-vis the gift giver. There are therefore two kinds of gift-based relationships: “colleague” ones between equals, and “patron-client” ones between those who are not equal (Singelmann, 1981, p. 112). The latter harbors important implications. When the receiver cannot bestow an adequate counter-gift, there is no alternation of superior and inferior, much less the ensuing rise of an intricate gift-based tapestry of “total prestation”. Instead, clientelistic relations result.

These unilateral gifts confer superior *rank* on the donor over the recipient (Bataille, 1988, p. 71; Blau, 1964, pp. 21–22, 118–119, 321–322; Landé, 1977, pp. xxvii–xxviii). In such cases, gift-bestowal gives rise to “lasting relations of dependence” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 200) because, “[until] he has given back [a counter-gift], the receiver is ‘obliged’, expected to show his gratitude toward his benefactor” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 106). As Caillé (2020, p. 44) puts it, “those who are not able to give in return find themselves in a position inferior to that of the donor — they are obligated — and this leads them to lose face and even in some cases to fall into slavery”. This, for those who draw from gift theory, is the essence of clientelism: an enduring pattern of client dependence resulting from patrons’ material-aid bestowal (Banégas, 1998, p. 93), as depicted in Figure 2. For gift theory, clientelism is thus a patron-driven affair.

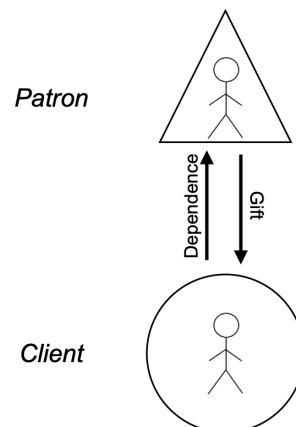


Figure 2 – A Gift-Based Clientelistic Relation

The existing literature identifies several scope conditions that enable gifts to foster clientelism. First, this is only likely under conditions of *inequality*. Only in such cases can s/he who has more wealth grant unilateral aid to others, without recipients being able to counter-gift, thus amounting to what Auyero (2000, p. 94) calls a “foundational favor” (see also Martin, 2009, pp. 216–217). Second, patrons and clients must be *spatially proximate*. When spatial

distance between them increases, as was the case between 19th century London elites and slum residents, it can lead to a “deformation of the gift”, allowing clients to gain political autonomy (Stedman Jones, 1971, p. 252; cf. Bataille, 1988, p. 70). Third, gifts and corresponding expressions of gratitude must be *separated in time* (Silverman, 1965, p. 176), although expressions of gratitude should not be delayed too long (Landé, 1977, p. xxvi). A temporal lag, as in the case of gift-giving between political party activists and urban squatters in late-20th century Buenos Aires, is necessary in order for all parties to be able to “[reject] the very idea of an exchange” and thereby preserve their misunderstanding about the nature of the hierarchical relationship established through gift-bestowal (Auyero, 2000, p. 177; cf. Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 105–106; Bourdieu, 1998, p. 94).

According to gift theory, it is not the *things* exchanged that are important, but rather the *relationships* between the parties to the exchange and their *understanding* of these relationships. Since it is not things *per se* which matter, LiPuma and Postone (2020, p. 170) are able to move beyond an object-bound conception of the gift by arguing that “all that is needed is an inscription of sociality in the gift, and the recognition by the participants that what is being given creates or re-creates [an obligation]”. Importantly, such obligations have very specific — and very onerous — hermeneutical requirements (Bataille, 1988, p. 73; Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 94–95). Namely, under gift-based relations, “everyone knows — and does not want to know — that everyone knows — and does not want to know — the true nature of the exchange” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 192). When these conditions are violated — e.g., when a gift is measured and thus becomes a debt (Graeber, 2011, p. 21) — gift-bestowal appears coercive, like loan-sharking. Thus, a tacit agreement to misunderstand the nature of the relationship is what most helps such relations arise and endure. In other words, according to gift theory, gift relations rely, in large measure, on the *misunderstanding* of *all* the parties involved.

3.2 Principal-Agent Theory

Clientelism often involves one or a few patrons and lots of clients. This introduces a “group element in[to] clientelist politics” (Hilgers, 2011, p. 580). Under such conditions, which Weber (1978, p. 1058) viewed as ordinary patrimonial politics, intermediaries or brokers play a crucial role: they “mediate” ruler-ruled relations (see also Adams, 1996 & 2005; Auyero, 1999, pp. 303–304). The nature of mediated clientelism differs from gift relations. Whereas direct patron-client linkages have only one avenue — running from the patron to the client — along which the relationship proceeds, mediated patron-client relationships are comprised of two avenues: one between patron and intermediary and another between intermediary and client(s), as depicted in Figure 3. Students of large-scale clientelism typically embrace principal-agent theory to conceptualize these avenues.¹² Brokers, they either argue or assume, receive orders from patrons, and clients receive orders from brokers, giving rise to accountability problems along both avenues. Let me discuss each in turn, highlighting where empirical findings contravene theory.

The patron tries to control brokers’ behavior (Medina & Stokes, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013, pp. 92–95; Szwarcberg, 2012). Patrons are likely to prefer loyal and hands-on intermediaries — the kind of brokers who, to use an electoral example, stand outside polling stations checking how clients voted (Hagene & González-Fuente, 2016, p. 15). Analytically, patrons are likely to want three things from brokers: loyalty, reliability, and efficiency (Szwarcberg, 2012). Satisfac-

12. On how broker loyalty to patrons can be conceptualized very precisely in terms of principal-agent binding, see Reed (2017 & 2020) and Stokes et al. (2013).

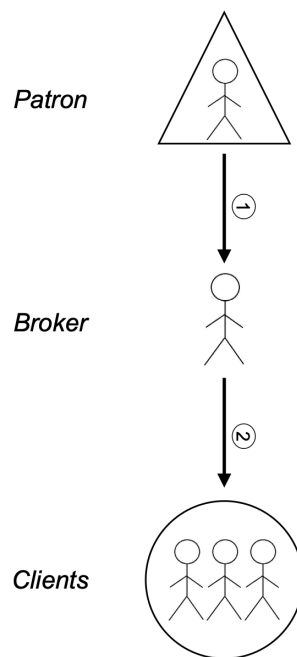


Figure 3 – The Two Accountability Problems of Mediated Clientelism

tion of these *desiderata* would constitute a resolution of the patron’s accountability problem. But this is rare.

Many find that intermediaries are autonomous, not loyal to patrons at all. Brokers exhibit autonomy in various ways. In urban Latin America, they sometimes try to “[build] patron-client relationships” and “use their clientelistic following to make bargains at higher echelons of the political hierarchy” (Hilgers, 2011, p. 580). Intermediaries in rural Northern India, *naya netas*, are “not bound by any political party” and, indeed, “parties chase after *naya netas* as much as or more than *naya netas* chase after parties” (Krishna, 2007, p. 148). And in Jaipur and Bhopal, “parties do not dispatch party workers to live in slums. Nor can they indiscriminately crown residents as locally influential figures” (Auerbach, 2020, p. 83; see also Auerbach & Thachil, 2023, p. 34; Cornelius, 1975, p. 142).

Aspinall (2014, pp. 547 & 561) identifies two types of broker betrayal: predation (when brokers usurp resources) and defection (when they desert the patron). And brokers play a “double game” when they take resources from multiple candidates, distribute only those that correspond to one of them, and pocket the rest (Aspinall, 2014, pp. 563–564). They play what we could call a “half game” when they only do part of the job asked of them by a single patron, such as during the 1993 Taiwan elections, when “brokers would give away part of the money [allocated for vote-buying] as instructed [...] and keep the rest for themselves” (Wang & Kurzman, 2007, p. 238). Brokers refuse to play ball altogether when they opt to simply appropriate the patron’s resources, as was the case among the brokers involved in the Taiwan election who simply “pocketed the money allocated to them for vote buying” (Wang & Kurzman, 2007, p. 238; see also Hagene & González-Fuente, 2016, p. 6; Shefner, 2008, pp. 42 & 70; Shefner, 2012, p. 45).

As we might imagine, patrons are acutely aware of the principal-agent problem. For in-

stance, during the Taiwan elections, the threat of intermediaries' disloyalty prompted "Kuomintang campaign leaders to monitor the brokers closely" (Wang & Kurzman, 2007, p. 238). Some students of clientelism have taken patrons' worries to heart and suggested focusing on patrons' monitoring of brokers. But "scholars have found very little evidence of voter monitoring" (Hicken & Nathan, 2020, p. 282). So much for the idea that patrons control intermediaries.

As applied to large-scale clientelism, principal-agent theory involves the additional claim that intermediaries (assumed to be controlled by patrons) also control clients. Here, too, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary; in the Taiwan election, for instance, "many voters who accepted money from the Kuomintang simply chose not to vote for the Kuomintang candidate" (Wang & Kurzman, 2007, p. 236). Some try to defend the hypothesis, arguing that patrons "seek to attract brokers with loyal personal followings" and adding a caveat: this "may not be efficient" (Hicken et al., 2022, pp. 83 & 86). However, others have taken contrary evidence to heart and shifted their focus from how intermediaries attempt to control clients' behavior to how they try to coax them into settings where the desired behaviors are more likely, incorporating clients into group-level mobilization efforts (Szwarcberg, 2012 & 2015).

Rather than "buy" votes, brokers may "buy" turnout among those whom they think will vote in patrons' favor (Calhoun, 1996, p. 202; Nichter, 2008). But a major conceptual snafu compromises this argument. Mobilization is indeterminate vis-à-vis support for patrons. Not only does it take considerable political alchemy to convert mobilization into support. More fundamentally, as Foucault (1977, p. 237) notes, "solitude is the primary condition of total submission". The isolation of clients from one another has long been understood as a precondition for large-scale clientelism (Cotler, 1967), but mobilization inherently introduces client-client interaction. This raises the possibility of solidarity from below, which cuts against the vertical bonds of loyalty from which patrons benefit, and points instead to the potential for autonomous, bottom-up demand-making. To the extent that patrons dispatch brokers to mobilize clients, they inevitably introduce client-client interaction and thereby potentially undermine their dominance. Assuming patrons have Machiavellian designs to amass power, mobilizing clients is thus not in their interests.

To be sure, my theoretical claim that mobilizing clients does not work as a top-down strategy to extract political support is not an empirical claim about patrons' and brokers' mobilization practices. As many researchers have demonstrated, patrons and brokers sometimes do attempt to mobilize clients. But insofar as this is a losing strategy and these researchers still assert that patrons dispatch brokers to these ends, they implicitly claim that patrons suffer from false belief, namely, from the delusion that what they reap in vertical bonds of loyalty has nothing to do with what they sow by way of horizontal relations among clients. So, whereas gift theory maintains that all parties misunderstand the clientelistic relationship, principal-agent theory's empirical failings have led it to adopt the position that those who benefit most from clientelism actually suffer from the worst understanding of the domination they hope to get from the relationship.

3.3 Summary

There are strengths and weaknesses to both gift-theoretic and principal-agent conceptions of clientelism. Gift theory can encompass a variety of qualitatively different forms of relations (Parry, 1986). This is important because clientelism itself varies qualitatively, from vote-buying and selling to factional conflict (Shefner, 2008, pp. 40–41) and from aid to vendettas (Landé,

1977). For its part, principal-agent theory's strength lies in the fact that it emphasizes the extra-dyadic nature of clientelistic relations. This is important because it makes clientelism relevant beyond the interpersonal scale.

But both neo-Durkheimian gift theory and neo-Weberian principal-agent theory have significant theoretical shortcomings. Both make extreme assertions about false understanding. Neo-Durkheimians argue that "everyone" must misunderstand gift relations for them to function as theorized (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 192). And neo-Weberians argue that those who putatively control and benefit from the relationship — patrons — suffer from the delusion that popular mobilization will sustain their position of power when it is actually likely to undermine it.

More broadly, and beyond their many differences, both Durkheimian and Weberian approaches lead to top-down theories of clientelism, converging on the idea that clientelism is a patron-driven affair. Nor do the leading theories fully appreciate the normative implications of clientelism. Clientelism is undesirable — except to patrons and, perhaps, steadfast cultural relativists.

Because the clientelism literature has failed to appreciate this, and amid the poor performance of top-down theories, it has become possible to proffer uncritical bottom-up theories loosely in both the Durkheimian and Weberian traditions. Ferguson (2013 & 2015) and Widlock (2012 & 2017) try to preserve neo-Durkheimian theory by deemphasizing top-down gifts and dependence and exploring bottom-up demands for "sharing" — putting the client in the driver's seat. Auerbach and Thachil (2023) and Nichter (2018) make efforts to preserve the principal-agent framework by altering who is deemed the principal — again, putting the client in the commanding position. The problem with both alternatives is that, to the degree that they construct the client as autonomous, they dispense with the very idea of clientelism, for clientelism just is the subordination of clients to patrons.¹³

4 Toward a Gramscian Alternative

Gramscian theory offers grounds for an alternative. It allows us to consider that clientelism may be a bottom-up phenomenon (or have important bottom-up aspects) that is undesirable. This alternative is committed to the idea of false consciousness. But it has a less-extreme view of falsity than both the neo-Durkheimian and neo-Weberian alternatives: it only requires that *clients* have false consciousness (in Gramscian jargon, "common sense") — and even that can be altered (made into "good sense", in Gramsci's terminology) (Burawoy, 2019, pp. 69–71). Moreover, Gramscian theory insists that "meaning and practice" are "inseparable" (Levenson, 2022, p. 191), implying that false consciousness is intertwined with client practice and that breaking with client practice is tantamount to jettisoning false consciousness.¹⁴ In this way, Gramscian theory helps further clientelist theory — and, I think, vice-versa.

4.1 A New Definition

I propose considering *soliciting subordination* as the essential feature of clientelism. This involves instances in which a client or (assuming a larger scale) a representative of clients, in ef-

13. The neo-Durkheimians seem more comfortable with this, largely abandoning the terminology of dependence. The neo-Weberians continue to use the terminology of clientelism even when what they describe is essentially "client" autonomy.

14. Thus, it is inaccurate to reduce a Gramscian conception of false consciousness to "thought", as does Scott (1990, esp. p. 90).

fect, conveys to a superordinate patron, “I would like to support you because you plan to do *X* (for me)”, when in fact the superordinate actor never planned to do *X* (for the client). In other words, *one or more persons put one or more other persons on notice, communicating that they want to give support or subordinate themselves and receive beneficence or recognition in return*. The implication is that *if* the superordinate entity wants to avail itself of the support, it would be natural to at least passively endorse *X*.¹⁵

Some refer to such behavior as “negotiating” identities. Let us not quibble about terminology. The key point is that the people in question act on an extremely tilted playing field (Auyero, 1999, pp. 311–312). Such requests are sometimes disingenuous, representing opportunistic attempts to secure benefits; other times, they are communicative, reflecting requesters’ belief that patrons or intermediaries sincerely want to help them but lack insight into how to do so (cf. Garrido, 2017). Either way, clients “demand sharing” from patrons (Widlok, 2012, p. 189). From the client’s point of view, domination is perhaps seldom a major concern (Auyero, 1999, p. 305), as “the important thing [...] is to find patronage” (Wiebe, 1975, p. 118). Clientelism thus represents an “exchange of political support in return for a favorable allocation of politically mediated resources” (Jessop, 2016, p. 62). This is true even at the macro, geopolitical scale: “weak states as states buy the protection of strong states by arranging appropriate flows of capital” (Wallerstein, 2004, p. 55). On a tilted playing field, what else *can* those in a subordinate position be expected to do? When soliciting subordination, the requester conveys the idea, in words or in deeds, that support for the benefactor will be forthcoming if the benefactor delivers the requested aid or recognition.

Others, hailing from intellectually disparate fields, have developed insights somewhat similar to “soliciting subordination”. Those working in rational choice-theoretic political science (Nichter, 2018, pp. 79–83; see also Nichter & Peress, 2017, p. 1099) have recently advanced the idea that the poor “request” benefits which patrons “fulfill” in a configuration of “relational clientelism”, while those hailing from post-liberal anthropology (Ferguson, 2013, p. 224; Haynes & Hickel, 2016, pp. 5–7) highlight the logic of “declarations of dependence”, on the basis of which clients seek to ingratiate themselves with patrons. And a proponent of evolutionary psychology who insists clientelism reflects innate pro-social behavior argues that “the patron’s status” depends “to some degree on the support of the client” (Dorman, 2024, p. 1398), while a major Black feminist theorist highlights the importance of “the willingness of the victim to collude in her or his own victimization” (Collins, 1990, p. 227; see also James, 2016).

But there are important differences between distinct types of the sought-after subordination (Shah, 2013). Thus, while soliciting subordination is similar to relational clientelism in its declarations of dependence, pro-social behavior, and willingness to be victimized in various ways, it is quite distinct in other ways. By centering on the key categories of Gramscian thought — hegemony, consent, coercion, and domination — we can see better that, when they hope to be included, the client or representative cannot make claims that explicitly contradict the patron’s aims, even when (or even though) their interests diverge (as they typically do).¹⁶ The client or intermediary is limited to presenting their immediate-term goals as identical with the long-term goals of the patron or broker in the hopes of thereby securing some sort of advantage

15. Widlok (2012, pp. 189–190) describes the demand side of this problem (the putting-on-notice). But since he focuses on the distribution of food and similar objects, he does not adequately explore the political implications for the superordinate recipient of the demand (that if the superordinate wants the support, it ought to endorse *X*).

16. This is of course a general claim analogous to the classical problem of “bargaining with patriarchy” (Kandiyoti, 1988).

(cf. Auyero, 1999, pp. 322–323; Reed, 2017, pp. 111 & 120; Scott, 1990, pp. 94–103).¹⁷ This involves disavowing one's own variance with the patron from whom one seeks beneficence. In other words, soliciting subordination reflects *false consciousness*.¹⁸ This is not a matter of exaggerating putatively innate tendencies to pledge allegiance (Dorman, 2024, p. 1399), but a denial of the social self, of subjectivity.

This theoretical position is not easy to sustain, but it is necessary. The problem with failing to see requests for subordination as a reflection of false consciousness, like Scott (1990, p. 97), is that they can then be recoded as “resistance”, a line of theorizing that leads to absurdities: it leads Scott to assert that the social situation of the Russian peasantry — some of the most dominated people in modern human history — was not domination at all but rather autonomy. For science's sake, when one asks to be subordinated to another with significantly more power, we should not consider it a case of “defiance and rebellion”, as if the dominated somehow enjoy “freedom” when they patently do not (Scott, 1990, p. 98), but of willing submission to domination, or false consciousness. That is, to do better sociology we should ground clientelism in false consciousness.

We can move beyond both the cultural relativists who would assert that the dominated may really prefer domination and those who believe that clients' bottom-up appeals for subordination, whether in general (Scott, 1990, pp. 97–100) or specifically when brokers compete against one another to represent them (Auerbach & Thachil, 2023). Drawing from Lukes's (2004, pp. 25–29) conception of power as control of others' desires so as to point them away from their interests, I suggest instead that just because clients may request *X* does not mean *X* is in their interests. To the contrary, a potential client may make such a request, which is in the interest of the potential patron, precisely because it is in their interest but not necessarily in the client's interest. Clients' requests for subordination are in this sense fundamentally false — since they are orthogonal to their own interests — despite the fact that their bids are typically thought-through, intentional, even strategic. (Gramscian thought is unsurpassed in its ability to appreciate this rational political logic without losing touch with interests.) Requests for subordination thus represent false consciousness in the same way that commodity fetishism does: they misconstrue the substantive problem of who benefits and who loses, on the basis of intentional behavior.

For those daunted by the concept of false consciousness, I can offer some reassurances. To be sure, clients do not solicit subordination after freely choosing in the best of conditions; they typically do so under severe material constraints and amid a lack of horizontal solidarity. Soliciting subordination is a completely rational survival strategy (cf. Kandiyoti, 1988) — again, just as commodity fetishism is a rational response in the relevant circumstances. These clarifications are essential: I am not, and Gramsci is not, saying people are dupes. The point I want to emphasize is that even if we are referencing the most rational potential client imaginable, their request for subordination is no less “false” in terms of whose interests they serve.¹⁹

17. Not all clients do so, or not all to the same extent, as Auyero (1999, pp. 318–326) illustrates. Beyond top-down Althusserian theory, there is nothing about false consciousness that necessarily gives it a singularity of expression, although its myriad expressions can still be grouped together, as Fanonians do, as cases in which subjecthood is recognized from above rather than won through bottom-up struggle (Coulthard, 2014, pp. 38–39 & 43).

18. As noted above, on this conception, meaning and practice are not separable (Levenson, 2022, p. 191), which implies that ridding oneself of false consciousness is not just a matter of changing one's thoughts (as erroneously posited by Scott, 1990, esp. p. 90) but of changing one's actions and aims simultaneously (Coulthard, 2014, pp. 37 & 48).

19. It is because it can capture both self-interested rational behavior *and* social interest self-negation that the

Soliciting subordination entails false consciousness among clients but *not* false understanding among patrons.²⁰ It thus helps perpetuate inequality — both material (in terms of wealth) and symbolic (in terms of recognition) — between them. From this perspective, “clientelism is not only a means to procure livelihood” — something on which top-down theories also shed considerable light — “but also a component of identity-making, ideology, mobilization, and submission” (Tuğal, 2009, p. 254). This makes clientelism substantively continuous with Gramsci’s view of politics more generally. To advance a bottom-up conception of clientelism, we can therefore draw from Gramscian theory. (And I think advancing clientelist theory also helps further the Gramscian alternative to liberal-institutionalism.)

4.2 Relationship to Gramscian Theory

Gramsci opposed viewing politics in terms of formal political institutions (Gramsci, 1971, p. 160; Thomas, 2009, pp. 137 & 186–190), thus preempting the course of thought that can culminate in the liberal-institutionalist idea that government institutions somehow represent popular will (see Saward, 2008, pp. 1000–1001). In his conceptualization of mass politics, he instead stressed the importance of *consent to domination* (Gramsci, 1971, 80 n., pp. 193–194, 266 et passim; see also Burawoy, 2019, p. 68; Przeworski, 1985, pp. 136–137; Thomas, 2009, pp. 163–167).²¹ Given his fascination with the intersection of consent and domination, he seems to have attributed great importance to the general conceptual area in which one would have to locate “soliciting subordination”. Gramsci can thus help this form of clientelist theory.

The key, I think, is to return to the problems of hegemony and political intermediation and view them, as I think Gramsci did, from a bottom-up perspective. Beyond Gramscianism, liberal-institutionalism defaults to the top-down perspective of political institutions. Many semi-Gramscians uncritically follow suit, amalgamating their arguments with top-down Althusserian theory. One way to elaborate on this perspective further is to argue that civil society is the locus of consent, while the “state” is the locus of coercion, and hegemony is the combination of both: consent to coercion. However, I want to emphasize instead the importance of the bottom-up perspective that Gramsci advocates in connection with his discussion of hegemony and intermediary entities.²²

In his discussion of hegemony, Gramsci is clear that bottom-up dynamics are fundamental, stating that “the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161). That is, rulers have to respond to requests emanating from below if they are to rule (Przeworski, 1985, pp. 135–137; see also

concept of false consciousness is both distinct from and more appropriate than value-neutral concepts like bounded rationality.

20. Indeed, it is for this reason that elite patrons are able to assert that clients are dupes and proceed to question their moral standing (Garrido, 2019, pp. 108–109, 144–156).

21. This was probably due not only to his Marxism but also to the fact that he hailed from perhaps the foremost iconically clientelistic region in the world: Southern Italy. Given that he was intensely interested not only in developing Marxist theory but also in learning from political history and contemporary politics (Anderson, 2017a), and that not only debates within Marxism but also debates about clientelism were pervasive in his midst (Briquet, 2006), he had to have been interested in what we now call “clientelism”.

22. It is of course one-sided to stress only the aspect of Gramsci’s work dealing with issues adjacent to soliciting subordination, since his thought encompasses much more than just this. But my goal is not exegesis or interpretation of Gramsci. It is to furnish a Gramscian theory of clientelism. For this purpose, I think, the emphasis is warranted.

Gouldner, 1973, p. 279). Hegemony is not the sum of government coercion and civil societal consent. Instead, civil societal consent comes first analytically. Hegemony is, in the first place, a matter of the relations between classes — workers and peasants to Marxists before Gramsci, and workers and bourgeoisie in Gramsci’s modification of the terms of the debate (Anderson, 2017a, ch. 1). On this basis, political domination is somewhat simpler to account for. On this reckoning, to rule is, to a considerable degree, to abide requests for subordination. And, indeed, insofar as political elites fail at this, nothing short of revolution becomes likely (Thomas, 2009, p. 193). To clench domination requires a surfeit of consent emanating from below — even though it is also ultimately backed by coercion (Anderson, 2017a, p. 90).

Gramsci takes great pains to direct attention to intermediary entities involved in orchestrating consent. He points to organizations like trade unions, the Church, schools, and, more broadly, “traditional intellectuals” — leaders who play an important role in mass politics — making them the most important empirical referent for his category of “civil society” (see especially Gramsci, 1971, n. 56, p. 12). For Gramsci, traditional intellectuals are the pivot for political domination. First, they promote hegemony (Anderson, 2017b, pp. 21–22; Gramsci, 1971, pp. 14–15). Second, as intermediaries per se, they catalyze consent to political coercion.²³ In sum, Gramsci directs attention toward consent to domination and the intermediaries orchestrating it.

Gramscian theory thus offers the rudiments of a sociology of clientelism centered on soliciting subordination. As such, it offers both a lens and a model. Each of which helps clarify Gramscian political sociology’s distinctiveness vis-à-vis liberal institutionalism and power elite theory — and thereby promises both theoretical and political payoffs.

4.3 A Lens

I assume that the value of a sociological lens is that it brings into a common field of vision multiple sets of observations which we would otherwise consider unrelated, and that a good lens does so in ways that may lead us to question our assumptions (making the familiar seem strange), forcing us to consider connections and parallels we might otherwise overlook. Soliciting subordination is such a theoretical lens: it helps bring important political phenomena into view in new and potentially fruitful ways. Let me give two examples that many normally view as quite different to show how this lens reveals parallels.

The first example of soliciting subordination arose when progressives in the United States put a damper on the protest movement opposing the U.S. war on Iraq when President Barack Obama came to power (Heaney & Rojas, 2015, p. 134). During the preceding George Bush Jr. era, United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) had been a vibrant antiwar network. But after Obama came to power, many of its leaders, according to one of them, thought continuing to protest would only help “the right wing”, and felt that what they needed was to allow the government to work its magic, which implied refraining from causing disreputable disruptions (quoted in Heaney & Rojas, 2015, p. 164).²⁴ Refraining from protesting government policy, even when one disagrees with it, might seem puzzling, but it makes perfect sense when one aims to secure beneficence. This strategy, then, reflected consent to domination and was thus

23. This, I suggest, is not unique to advanced capitalist societies, as some have anachronistically asserted of Gramsci’s thought. In this way I do follow Althusser: in principle, soliciting subordination, like ideology, transcends historical epochs.

24. Naturally, other pacifists and leftists sought to continue to pressure the government to draw down its military activities.

arguably an instance of soliciting subordination, a group's rational attempt to negate its interests. Gone were *demands* that ideological preferences or political interests be reflected in government policy; in their place were implicit or explicit pledges of support, essentially saying, "we support you, since you plan to de-escalate the war". If this is true, the whole episode was an instance of clientelist politics.

The second example is immigrant Latino support for anti-immigrant U.S. President Donald Trump. As one put it, support for Trump was forthcoming because "you're seeing me as an American — you're not seeing me as a Hispanic that's separate" (quoted in Cadava, 2020). As with those of antiwar movement operatives, such statements might seem puzzling, but they are intelligible if they reflect a belief on the part of the potential client that a potential patron was willing to care for them. They thus appear to be instances of soliciting subordination — perhaps out of fear (Petty et al., 2022), since consent is backed by coercion. There are broader implications for populist politics, at least when we consider the intermediaries who channeled this message up toward political elites, orchestrating consent to domination, like the organization Latinos for Trump. But the point to hand is that, insofar as potential clients and intermediaries expressed support for an anti-immigrant politician without making any sort of demand in pursuit of their presumed interest in immigration reform and/or other issues of political-ideological substance, it would seem they proceeded on the basis of false consciousness. Indeed, some even went to considerable lengths to downplay the importance of these questions, saying "I don't believe [...] he's racist. I believe that he was just looking out for the working class. And that includes Latinos" (quoted in Cadava, 2020).²⁵

Taking both the foregoing examples together allows us to see how a focus on soliciting subordination brings what we might otherwise think of as very different political phenomena into a common field of vision. Just as antiwar Obama supporters put that president on notice, so too did immigrant Trump supporters put him on notice, essentially bending the knee as a political down-payment. The theory developed here, grounded in soliciting subordination, reveals that these aspects of the base of support, for these two very different governments, were fundamentally similar. On this basis, we can appreciate how, while obviously different in various ways, both kinds of government shared important qualities in common regarding the mechanics of domination. Beyond regime type and other differences between these examples, both enjoyed bottom-up pledges of support for policies contrary to the interests of those making the pledges, pledges that were to all appearances motivated by a desire to elicit beneficence.

When such a situation obtains, one could conclude that the dominated are somehow being irrational, and many liberal institutionalists have said as much regarding Latino support for Trump. But we can surpass that crude idea. Clients typically seek benefactors for quite rational reasons (again, false consciousness does not imply irrationality), even if we wish they would not (Ignatiev, 2022). Given how charged this topic is in American political discourse, a distant example may be the best way to illuminate the point. In 19th-century Bengal, peasants frequently suffered extortion at the hands of the Mughal empire's revenue collectors and village-level oligarchs. To circumvent this eventuality, peasants often transferred their tenure and "allegiance" to local notables (because, being more powerful, they were less likely to have to pay exorbitant rates) — who paid on their behalf — and received their land back in the form of a lease (Ray, 1979, p. 240). That is, peasants solicited subordination to landlords. They did

25. Of course, there were many Latinos who would never subscribe to this perspective and who did continue to push for immigration reform and other issues of political substance; my claim is not frequentist, concerning prevalence, but conceptual, concerning the nature of the politics reflected in the statements quoted and in others like them.

so not because they were irrational but because, given the circumstances, it made good sense to avail themselves of protection. In contrast to the case of 19th-century Bengal, we probably have a poor understanding of *why* Latino immigrants and antiwar activists solicited subordination to recent United States' presidents. But this is a feature of the lens offered here, not a bug: by making the familiar seem strange, a focus on soliciting subordination directs us to pressing empirical questions that merit inquiry.

Indeed, taking the clientelist lens seriously points to the possibility of a major shift in how we view mass politics, for seen in this way it would seem that not only is clientelism basic to authoritarianism, as is routinely acknowledged (e.g., Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020), but that "clientelist relations are [...] intrinsic to representative democracy" as well (Combes, 2011, p. 21). On this basis, we might posit that the reason for liberal institutional resilience (when it is forthcoming) is much the same as the reason for the advent and longevity of authoritarian regimes (when the latter are not wholly top-down): the dominated, through intermediaries, consent to and even opt for those who dominate them, as Figure 4 depicts.

By the same token, the lens also informs politics in ways that neither liberal institutionalism nor the current Gramscian literature does. For if soliciting subordination is an expression of false consciousness, refraining from doing so is "*unfalse*" consciousness;²⁶ and insofar as soliciting subordination sustains liberal and authoritarian governments alike, the significance of its withdrawal is revolutionary regardless of the type of regime in question.²⁷ Through this lens, neither liberal nor authoritarian governments appear as the end of history.

4.4 A Model

Soliciting subordination also helps explain elite-level political development in a way that does not rely disproportionately on the agency of elites, as is characteristic of power elite theory. From this latter perspective, political success is often thought to stem from elites' abilities to form pacts with one another (see especially Burton & Higley, 1987). But if elite political success is instead a function of the size and nature of their following, and if their following is the result of bottom-up requests for subordination, this means elite political success cannot be explained in a purely elite-centric manner. Indeed, some suggest that the main avenue available to patrons for exercising their agency is *dropping* clients (Barnes, 2019, p. 93), which would undermine their political success. This suggests that, in some cases, political elites' ability to dominate stems from dynamics that are largely beyond their direct control. To dominate, they depend less on elite-level negotiations than on others' requests for subordination to them and beneficence from them.²⁸ Significantly, when such solicitations operate on political elites similarly, despite divergent elite-level interests, they will be drawn closer to one another, sometimes

26. On the conceptual problems with the development of consciousness from a class-theoretical perspective, see McCarthy & Desan (2023).

27. In other words, a Gramscian conception of brokerage is one which reserves conceptual space for two possibilities: on the one hand, for brokers to deliver support from the subordinated to the dominant group or class, and, on the other hand, for them to modify the commonsense that subordinates share, politicizing it and ultimately diverting it in a revolutionary direction. I thank a reviewer for a more optimistic version of this observation.

28. One should not go too far, writing top-down initiatives out of a given account, since empirically it is often synergies between those seeking supporters amid political competition and those seeking benefactors in a world of insecurity that makes clientage so compelling and widespread.

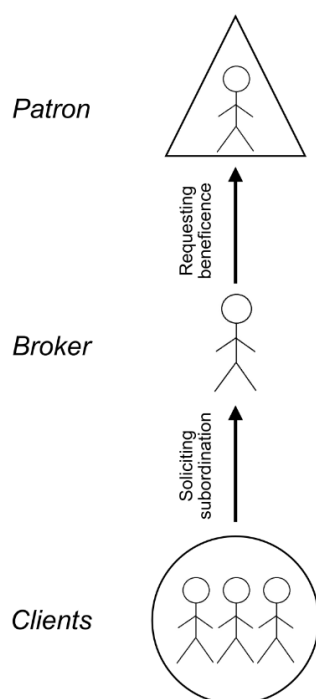


Figure 4 – Soliciting Subordination in Mass Clientelism

even allowing them to congeal into political configurations typically referred to as “institutions” but perhaps better thought of as “historic blocs”.²⁹

Let me discuss a pair of examples, starting with the historic bloc formed between the English crown and Parliament. For most of the 17th century, the English, Welsh, and Scottish landmass that would become Britain was rent by two major political disputes. On the one hand, there were attempts by lesser lords to gain power over greater lords, and for the greater lords to prevent this; analytically, this was a *realpolitik* dispute over the degree of centralization of government power. On the other hand, there were different proposals regarding the form of government; here, monarchical preeminence clashed with Parliament’s preference for shared governance, or even Parliamentary sovereignty. The two conflicts had beset “Britain” with on-again, off-again battles ending only in 1688, when Parliament appointed William and Mary of Orange as joint monarchs. This development was consonant with shared governance, settling the conflict over the proposed form of government for the time being, but it did nothing to address the *realpolitik* conflict; in other words, it was unclear whether the kingdom would remain united under the new rulers, such that the government institutions would persist.

Disunity was especially salient given disparate degrees of colonial success. William and Mary backed the English chartered companies, such as the East India Company, but refused to provide funding, expertise, and assistance to the Company of Scotland, which was chartered for similar overseas trading and colonization purposes. This provoked considerable discontent among Scottish elites. Fortunately for the Scots, the Spanish Succession of 1702 posed a threat

29. I use the term “historic bloc” to denote how different fractions of the elite align or agree with one another. Broadly speaking, this use of the term follows Poulantzas (1973, 188–189 & 275 ff.) – though I do not assume the elite is comprised only of fractions of the capitalist class *per se*, as he does – rather than de Leon et al. (2009 & 2015), who conceive of blocs as elite-masses constellations.

to the Crown and Parliament bloc.³⁰ These conditions made England especially receptive to closer collaboration with the Scottish elite. But perhaps more important was that the Scottish elite began to see England as a possible source of beneficence — specifically, seeing union as a possible avenue by which to secure colonial spoils through inclusion in England's empire (Macinnes, 2007, p. 180). They therefore approached England as an inferior, asking to participate in the imperial project and offering loyalty in return.³¹ Scotland solicited subordination to England with the hope of securing its beneficence.³² The 1707 union was the key event behind the formation of the United Kingdom. Scotland's request for subordination to England profoundly affected British political development. It resolved the realpolitik conflict over the centralization of power, thereby helping to consolidate British government institutions and unify the crown and Parliament as an historic bloc. Civil war never returned, and the form of government has persisted to the present. In sum, soliciting subordination can factor massively into political development, serving to stabilize precarious political configurations.

Other examples suggest that the value of this model lies, in part, in its ability to highlight avenues of political change by making recourse to the onset or demise of requests for subordination. Take the U.S. Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). A pact-centric approach would explain this policy as the result of political horse-trading between insurance companies and the Democratic Party, in which the latter provided the former with the “individual mandate”³³ in exchange for a promise to cover those with preexisting health conditions³⁴ (e.g., Young et al., 2020). The bottom-up clientelist perspective, in contrast, would say that requests for subordination drove elites — in this case, pharmaceutical capitalists and the Democratic Party — into alignment. This thus points to the actors who subordinate themselves to this constellation, such as organized labor.³⁵

Whether requests for subordination reach political elites is a function of both the disposition toward subordination among potential clients and the actions of intermediaries who channel support upwards. As Figure 4 suggests, intermediaries occupy a strategic bottleneck. This enables them to withdraw support and destabilize the political configuration that obtained hitherto. Assuming the broker is relatively autonomous from the patron, two scenarios could result: they could utilize that autonomy to serve an organization representing former-clients (making them an “organization broker”), or they could pursue their own interests (as a “free agent”). In electoral contexts, for example, organization brokers “have the ability to negotiate with politicians who represent different political parties, ‘shopping’ for the best offer from election to election”, but “also represent social interests in the form of their organizations’ collective

30. It became a live possibility that the Bourbon monarchy would unite the French and Spanish realms into a formidable enemy.

31. As Richards (1991, p. 112) puts it, “having failed to carve an independent Scottish empire, they elbowed their way into England's”.

32. Leading historians argue, on the one hand, that Scots “negotiated” their right to participate in the empire (Macinnes, 2007, p. 197) and, on the other, that Scotland's “secondary status” in the union was “ascribed to and largely accepted by the Scots” (Richards, 1991, p. 77). If both of these interpretations are valid, Scotland solicited subordination: Scottish elites *negotiated* for a relationship with England, albeit not one in which they were equals but instead one that saw Scotland assume a *subordinate status* vis-à-vis England.

33. People were required to buy health insurance when their employers failed to provide it.

34. In order to reach “universal” coverage of the population.

35. It also points to a counterfactual: had U.S. unions demanded single-payer healthcare (perhaps as a condition of their support) *rather* than solicit subordination to the Democratic Party, this bloc would probably not have been possible, and the policy perspective of a single-payer healthcare system may still have been on the table during the COVID-19 crisis.

interests, which can lead them to support politicians who deliver the types of benefits that the group's members prefer" (Holland & Palmer-Rubin, 2015, p. 1201; see also Gay, 1999, p. 52). Free agents (Post, 2018, p. 120), in contrast, are not accountable to clients' interests. Opting not to channel support behind elites and unaccountable to client interests, they may aspire to secure their own following.

Withdrawal of support from political elites can result in very different outcomes depending on whether it comes from free agents or organization brokers. When the former revokes support, the result is bossism (cf. Wallerstein, 2004, p. 54). This scenario describes late-20th century Mexico City. Intermediaries had been crucial in securing support for the dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). However, after local-level relations had become highly conflictual, clients turned to intermediaries for protection, giving them a following regardless of their relationships with patrons. Whereas before they had channeled support toward the PRI, they were now free to peel support away from the party. Doing so, they helped precipitate the PRI's decline and fall after several decades in power. This coincided with the rise of bossist free agents (Newman, 2023, pp. 252–288 & 317–366).

However, if intermediaries are organization brokers, accountable to former-clients, a very different outcome can transpire, as the revocation of support in such circumstances represents a potentially revolutionary challenge. Thus, suppose American labor unions were to begin challenging the Democratic Party rather than soliciting subordination to it (as difficult as that would be).³⁶ In addition to a host of issues involving elite-level cohesion, the outcome would depend on whether the unions were led by free agents or organization brokers. If led by the former, as is perhaps usually the case (Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin, 2003), the result would be bossism. But if led by organization brokers, the outcome could be revolutionary. It could introduce a totally new dynamic into American politics.

In sum, a broad appreciation of soliciting subordination entails an entire explanatory model of political development. This model extends beyond the putative ability of top-level political elites to form pacts *ex nihilo*. It is thus capable of accounting for regime dynamics not on the basis of elite-level cohesion, as power elite theory does, but rather on the basis of the concrete mechanics of popular political support. This also enables it to account for the rapidity of some episodes of political change. By acknowledging recent withdrawals of subordination — the evident political disaffection and displeasure with the political establishment in a variety of countries — it is possible to account for the speed at which governments are presently collapsing. In other words, they are collapsing because they had been based on clientelist politics and because something undermined the "compromise equilibrium" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161) upon which these politics rested. (Decades of decline of real household wages — reflecting a broader crisis of capitalism — may have done the trick.)

5 Conclusion

Contemporary political sociology and related disciplines appear to be captivated by a republican ideal, viewing popular sovereignty as either possible or desirable. This may be the reason for the dominance of two diffuse perspectives. The first, to simplify, is that institutions of representative government express popular will and thus approximate popular sovereignty, and that they are, therefore, ultimately good. The second proposal suggests that elites enter into pacts

36. This would surpass registering an "uncommitted" position in presidential primaries while remaining loyal to the party (McShane, 2024).

with one another to control the government, and that this is essentially undesirable, because the government should be controlled by the will of the people. These two perspectives differ in terms of the substantive claims they make, but they seem to stem from the same fixation on republicanism.

This points to a massive theoretical deficit in political sociology, one that the withering Marxian literature, insofar as it is committed to crude conceptions of class politics, has addressed quite poorly. Clientelist theory — if reconfigured along the Gramscian lines proposed here — can describe the substantive political relations which prevail in the conceptual gap between liberal-institutional and power elite theories, thereby capturing a large part of our lived reality. Specifically, as I have attempted to outline above, it enables us to understand how mass groups can express their political will (as liberal institutionalism suggests) *without* resulting in, much less even demanding, popular sovereignty. Mass groups can instead express their political will by soliciting subordination. This puts political elites in control, to be sure (as power elite theorists propose), albeit not as a result of their putative Machiavellian genius.³⁷ And withdrawal, or refusal of the dominated to subordinate themselves, can take political elites out of control, which can lead to a variety of outcomes.

With the hope of motivating sociologists to return to the study of clientelism, this article reviewed a variety of conceptual problems that implicitly and explicitly arise when studying this phenomenon. I surveyed definitions of “clientelism” and several conceptual issues associated with the concept’s use, arguing that it is not reasonable to expect one to extricate oneself from normative issues when studying clientelism. I covered the two main theoretical traditions — neo-Durkheimian gift theory and neo-Weberian principal-agent theory — and identified important problems associated with each; and I proposed *soliciting subordination* as a new conceptualization of the gist of clientelism, a proposal consistent with Gramscian theory.

I showed that a focus on soliciting subordination imparts two theoretical gains. First, it furnishes political sociology with a lens that is capable of bringing into a common field of focus empirics often thought (I think erroneously) to be substantively divergent — such as support for liberalism and support for authoritarianism. Second, it provides a model of political development that helps explain the rise and fall of government institutions based on the onset and demise of requests for subordination. Both the lens and the model also serve to fortify Gramscian theory, enabling it to serve better as an alternative to liberal institutionalism and power elite theory than has been the case hitherto.

The result is an approach with a very broad range of applicability. Clientelism is *not* necessarily limited to a specific aspect of the manifold social division of labor (peasants but not workers), phase of political modernization (traditional but not modern society), part of the world (colonies but not colonizers), or mode of production (feudalism but not capitalism). The lens is capable of capturing comparable dynamics that transcend at least some of these familiar conceptual binaries. And the model promises to help explain vexing historical and contemporary political patterns in a new way: on the basis of soliciting subordination, which is likely to give rise to new political configurations, and on the basis of the breakdown of the linkages between masses of clients and political elites,

37. With this theoretical sketch in view, further research could elaborate a typology of clientelism or delineate specific axes of variation, including not just bottom-up vs. top-down but primarily voluntary vs. primarily involuntary, mediated vs. dyadic, prolonged vs. transactional, emotional vs. utilitarian, strictly political vs. more broadly social and cultural, and interstitial vs. constitutive: clientelism can be a constitutive feature of the organization of politics in some settings, or an appendage or supplement of either positive or negative value to politics organized by other means. I thank a reviewer for this insightful list.

which is likely to undermine existing governments, precipitating some sort of political transformation.

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