

A FIRST DISCUSSION OF POWER AND VALUE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

FROM A GENERATIVE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Wanhong HUANG
huangwanhong@serendip.ngo

Abstract

Theories of international politics measure power, aggregate it, and ask what follows from its distribution. They seldom ask why there is any. Power admits of derivation. A process that generates must differentiate, since a generation that leaves the world indistinguishable from what it was has generated nothing; what it differentiates includes the capacity to supply the terms on which coordination proceeds; and a relation whose terms are supplied by one of its parties is a relation with a direction. Asymmetry is therefore a condition of relations in which something is made, rather than a corruption of them, and it resists removal that leaves generation standing. The question of justice cannot then be how to eliminate asymmetry, and becomes instead what the asymmetry does to the relation in which it stands.

Answering that question in international politics runs into an obstacle that the available frameworks do not meet. A state supplies technology and receives recognition, supplies a guarantee and receives basing rights. Between such goods there is no ratio, and for the account to close, something must be made to count as repayment for something of another kind. That operation requires a rate, and the rate is not given by the values it settles. It is posited, and there is no correct one. Three evasions are closed. Monetisation performs the conversion it claims to avoid; categorical separation forbids the question it claims to answer; subjective satisfaction consults the effect of the rate as the test of the rate.

That the setting of a common metric among unlike things is a mode of power belongs to the sociology of commensuration and is inherited here rather than claimed. But that literature theorises the *boundary*: a metric advances upon a sphere held apart from it, and resistance takes the form of refusing the metric outright. Refusal presupposes a position from which one may withdraw and remain what one was. A state that cannot withdraw without ceasing to count as a party has no such position, and is settled against notwithstanding its objection. Where refusal is foreclosed, commensuration ceases to be a contested boundary and becomes a constitutive condition of the relation, so that the international case is not one further instance of the sociological phenomenon but its limit, at which the phenomenon changes character.

Two consequences follow. The colony whose material ledger runs positive, a case on which generative justice, unequal exchange, and the sociology of commensuration are alike silent, is diagnosed: the injustice lies neither in the flow nor in the unfairness of the rate but in the foreclosure of any position from which the rate might be reopened. And the normative condition of a settlement is located in the contestability of its rate, which is not a proceduralist retreat but the residue of resistance once refusal has been foreclosed. The argument surrenders the classical vocabulary of exploitation, which requires a common measure that the goods of international politics do not admit. The paper closes on the question it does not answer, which is who reorganises a loop from which no party may withdraw.

Keywords: power; asymmetry; commensuration; generative justice; balance of power.

AI usage statement: The ideas, claims, and theoretical framework of this paper originate with the author. AI tools were used as an aid in drafting, in the location and verification

of empirical and bibliographic sources, and in revision. The origin of each idea has been verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content.

1 INTRODUCTION

Balance-of-power theory treats power as a stock. It measures it, aggregates it across the units of a system, and asks what follows from the way it is distributed. It asks whether a distribution is stable, whether a concentration is dangerous, whether a transition tends toward war. It seldom asks why there is any power to distribute.

The omission has consequences beyond the point at which it occurs. A theory that receives power as a primitive is poorly placed to say what kind of thing power is, since it has no account of what power is a kind of, and a theory that is silent on the kind is confined to the register of quantity. It can say that there is more here and less there, that the more is threatening and the less is vulnerable, and that a prudent policy inclines toward the equalisation of the two. What it struggles to say is whether a given exercise of power built something or consumed something, for that is a question about the character of a relation and the theory has the magnitudes alone.

Power admits of derivation. A process that generates must differentiate, since a generation that leaves the world indistinguishable from what it was has generated nothing. What it differentiates includes the capacity to supply the terms on which coordination proceeds, for the supplying of terms is itself a productive act and falls under the same differentiation as everything else produced. And a relation whose terms are supplied by one of its parties is a relation with a direction. Power is what that direction is called.

Asymmetry appears on this account as a condition of a relation in which something is made, rather than as a corruption of relation, and it resists removal that leaves generation standing. Two consequences follow at once. The tragedy on which realism has long insisted requires neither an appetite for domination nor a condition of anarchy: it would arise in any system that produced anything. And the programme that proposes to abolish asymmetry is self-defeating in a manner that is structural rather than practical, since in the degree to which it removed difference it would remove the differentiation in which generation consists.

The question of justice cannot then be how to eliminate asymmetry, and becomes instead what the asymmetry does to the relation in which it stands. Some asymmetries raise the capacity of both parties to generate independently; others raise the output of the weaker party while lowering its capacity to produce on its own account, which is how dependency is ordinarily manufactured, through provision rather than through deprivation. The distinction is invisible to a theory that reads magnitudes, and it is the distinction on which everything else in this paper turns.

Asking whether value returns to those who generate it therefore becomes the right question to ask, and in international politics it runs immediately into an obstacle. A state supplies technology and receives recognition. It supplies capital and receives legitimacy. It supplies a security guarantee and receives basing rights. It supplies an apology and receives, or fails to receive, the closure of a grievance. What goes out and what comes back belong to different registers, and between the registers there is no common substance and no ratio. For such a loop to close, something must be made to *count as* repayment for something of another kind. That operation requires terms, and the terms are not supplied by the values themselves, since values of different registers stand in no relation of magnitude to one another. The terms are therefore posited, and once it is seen that they are posited, it must be asked who posits them.

The obstacle is general and it defeats the available frameworks severally. Realism does not meet it, having converted the whole of the difficulty into a single scalar before the difficulty can arise. The theory of unequal exchange meets it and answers it with a common measure,

labour time, which is unavailable for guarantees, recognition, and apologies. And the theory of generative justice, which has established that value ought to return to those who generate it, was built in domains where return is homogeneous: the value produced by a craft returns to the craftsman, as income or skill or ownership or time, and one may inspect whether it did. Where what returns is of a kind with what was given, the account is kept in one currency, and no rate of conversion is required. Carried onto terrain where the registers differ, the requirement that value return becomes a requirement that cannot be checked until someone has said what counts.

The question of who sets the terms on which unlike things are made to settle against one another is an old one, and much of the ground has been taken. Espeland and Stevens established, in 1998, that the setting of a common metric among unlike things is a mode of power, that the power is constitutive rather than merely strategic, that it grows invisible through routinisation, and that political bargaining presupposes it. Postcolonial criticism established that what returns to the colonised returns in the coloniser's language. Constructivism established that meaning precedes interest and that institutions are sedimented practice. The relational theories of world politics share with the present argument the premise that relations precede entities. And Eglash established that value ought to return to those who generate it, which is the claim this paper carries onto terrain where it cannot be checked. The debts are large, they are acknowledged throughout, and the argument that follows is what remains once they are paid.

The sociology of commensuration is a theory of the *boundary*. Its cases are cases of encroachment, in which a metric advances upon a sphere that has been held apart from it, and the political drama is the drama of whether the advance shall be permitted. Resistance, in that literature, tends to take one characteristic form, and it is the claim of incommensurability: the assertion that this is not the kind of thing that may be traded against that. The Yavapai make it of their ancestral land. Homemakers make it of their lives. Movements make it of their commitments when they decline the bargaining table. It is the strong form of refusal, and where it can be sustained it is the apt one, since it does not dispute the terms of an accounting but declines to have the accounting at all. But the strong form requires a position from which it may be held. The party must be able to walk away and remain what it was.

A state is rarely placed to do this. It may declare its sovereignty incommensurable, and it will be settled against notwithstanding. It may hold that no quantity of investment discharges the obligation incurred by a colonisation, and the ledger will be drawn up regardless, the investment entered on the one side and the extraction on the other, and the account declared square by parties who did not require its assent. The declaration is heard. The account is closed anyway. The reason is not that states are weaker than communities, which they are not. It is that to refuse settlement is to withdraw from the field within which settlements are made, and to withdraw from that field is to become, not a state that has declined to be settled against, but a state that does not register as a party.

Where refusal is foreclosed, commensuration ceases to be a contested boundary and becomes a constitutive condition of the relation. The international case is then not one further instance of the phenomenon that sociology has described, but its limit, at which the phenomenon changes character.

The argument costs something that is better declared at the outset than discovered in the course of things. If the rate of settlement is posited rather than discovered, then there is no correct rate, and a critique that condemns a settlement for having been struck at the wrong

rate has helped itself to a measure it does not possess. This removes the classical vocabulary of exploitation, which works by comparison to a true value and requires that a true value be available. The theory of unequal exchange possesses such a measure in labour time. No comparable measure is available for the goods that constitute international politics, which are not produced by labour and are not quantities of any substance, and other ground must therefore be found.

The ground proposed is contestability. Where a true rate is unavailable, the one property a rate can have that is not itself a posit is its openness to being reopened by those it binds. The features of a rate's content were put there by somebody. That it may be questioned was not. And since the strong form of resistance, the refusal of the metric altogether, is foreclosed to a party that cannot withdraw, contestation of the terms is not a weaker substitute chosen for convenience. It is what remains.

One consequence concerns the discipline within which the argument is offered. Realism converts recognition, justice, identity, culture, and legitimacy into a single scalar, and holds that these bear upon the conduct of states in the measure, and largely only in the measure, that they can be so converted. That is itself a settlement across registers, performed at a rate, and realism's claim to be a science of international politics rests upon its not acknowledging as much. It presents the conversion as a description of what moves states, where it is better understood as a stipulation about the terms of the account. That everything else can be settled against capability is less an observation about the world than the founding posit of the field.

The paper proceeds as follows. The literature is classified, not by school, but by what each tradition does with asymmetry, and the classification locates a gap while conceding what fills the neighbouring ones. Power is then derived from generation, and the derivation is turned against realism, against egalitarianism, and against the relational theories that share the premise of this argument and draw from it the conclusion that relations are fundamentally harmonious. A criterion is supplied for distinguishing the asymmetry that builds from the asymmetry that consumes. The heterogeneity of international value is established, and with it the unavoidability of a posited rate, by closing the three evasions that might otherwise avoid it. The consequences of foreclosed refusal are drawn out and applied to the colony whose material ledger runs positive, a case on which the rival frameworks are silent. A mechanism is proposed, at a lower level of confidence, for why the weak accept rates they can perfectly well see to be arbitrary. A normative condition is offered in place of the one surrendered. A formal representation is sketched and its difficulties stated. The paper closes on the question it does not answer, which is who is to reorganise a loop from which no party can withdraw.

2 THE LITERATURE ON ASYMMETRY

This section does not survey schools. It classifies theories by what they do with asymmetry, and the classification is itself an argument. Three questions organise it.

Q1. The genetic question. Whence asymmetry?

Q2. The normative question. Does asymmetry as such constitute injustice?

Q3. The settlement question. When the values exchanged belong to different registers, how is the account settled?

The thesis of the section is that Q3 has been answered principally in one place, the sociology of commensuration, and answered there for the case in which the parties may refuse the metric. The case in which refusal is unavailable, and settlement therefore compulsory, has received little

attention. That case is the ordinary case of international politics.

2.1 ASYMMETRY AS GIVEN

The realist family takes asymmetry as the starting point of analysis rather than as a thing to be explained. Classical realism grounds it in the appetite for domination; structural realism in the distribution of capabilities; offensive realism in anarchy compounded by uncertainty about intentions; the balance of threat in perceived threat rather than raw capability; power transition theory in differential rates of growth. Hegemonic stability theory, alone among them, permits the concentration of capability to be beneficial.

The difficulty at Q1 runs deep and is not a matter of emphasis. Waltz's distribution of capabilities redescribes the explanandum rather than explaining it. Power transition theory's appeal to differential growth restates the explanandum: asymmetry arises because things grow at different rates, and growing at different rates is what asymmetry consists in. Morgenthau's appeal to human nature is the tradition's one sustained attempt at a genesis, and it is an anthropological hypothesis rather than a structural one, which leaves it poorly placed to explain the emergence of power in a system whose members are states rather than persons, except by an analogy that is seldom defended.

There is besides an internal difficulty in structural realism which this paper takes seriously and which the tradition has not resolved. Waltz declares structure to be constituted by the positional relations among units, and then computes the third of its three elements as the sum of unit attributes. Structure is claimed to be relational and is calculated as substantialist. This paper takes the relational claim seriously and follows it to consequences other than those Waltz drew.

Hegemonic stability theory deserves separate treatment, since it lies near to the present argument and is a friend rather than an adversary. It concedes what the rest of the family does not, that a concentration of capability may strengthen the system in which it is concentrated, when the concentrated party supplies public goods rather than extracting rents. But it offers no criterion by which the two cases may be told apart. It distinguishes them after the event, and by their outcomes, which is a record rather than a criterion. The criterion advanced in the following section is offered to hegemonic stability theory as the thing it has been missing.

2.2 ASYMMETRY AS GOVERNABLE

The liberal family treats asymmetry as a hazard to be neutralised. Institutions reduce transaction costs and supply information; regimes stabilise expectations; democratic peace locates the danger in regime type rather than in the differential itself.

Keohane and Nye must be taken seriously, since *Power and Interdependence* lies close to this paper's concerns. Their insight is that asymmetry in a relation of interdependence is a resource of power within it, and not merely a condition of it, and that this power is detachable from military capability. The insight is correct and it is important.

Its limitation at Q3 is nonetheless exact. Asymmetric interdependence is theorised as bargaining leverage, and bargaining leverage is a matter of which party better tolerates the severance of the relation. This is a scalar, a measurement along the single dimension of tolerance, and it presupposes that the matters in dispute have been rendered comparable enough to be bargained over. It answers the question of who holds leverage. It does not pose the question this paper poses: when one party supplies a security guarantee and the other supplies basing rights, who owes whom, and by what measure? The framework converts a heterogeneous relation onto a single dimension without remarking that it has performed a conversion.

The difficulty at Q2 belongs to the family as a whole. Asymmetry is assumed, with little argument, to be something for institutions to neutralise. That it might be the condition of generation rather than a threat to it is seldom considered, and where the institutional aim is levelling, the institutional achievement tends toward the suppression of what the levelling was to have distributed.

2.3 ASYMMETRY AS STRUCTURAL DOMINATION

2.3.1 UNEQUAL EXCHANGE

The theory of unequal exchange lies close to this paper's central question, and the relation between them must be stated with precision if the paper is not to be dismissed as a rediscovery.

Emmanuel's mechanism is the differential of wages. With capital mobile and labour immobile, and with wages institutionally determined and therefore exogenous, the periphery sells its products below their social value and the core sells above, and surplus is transferred in the direction of the core. Amin extends the account. What Emmanuel condemns is a rate, and the rate he condemns is denominated in labour time.

The first difference is that Emmanuel possesses a common measure and this paper does not. Labour time is the invariant substance against which the price is found wanting, and it is what permits the exchange to be called *unequal*. Without a measure the concept is difficult to form, since inequality is a relation to a metric and there is little to be unequal in where no metric obtains. The difficulty this paper faces is therefore harder than Emmanuel's, and it is not incidental: between technology and recognition, between a security guarantee and a basing right, between capital and legitimacy, there is no common substance, and not merely none yet discovered.

The second difference follows. Where a true value is available, one may say that the correct rate is one thing and the actual rate another, and that the difference is exploitation. The critique targets the deviation of the rate from its truth. This paper denies that a true rate is available, and is therefore unable to appeal to a correct one. Its normative fulcrum must be placed elsewhere, and the placing of it is the subject of a later section.

The surrender of the common measure is a vulnerability, and it is stated as such. To abandon the measure is to abandon the classical definition of exploitation. The cost is real and it is paid deliberately.

The reason for paying it is that the labour theory of value is ill suited to the terrain of international politics. Security guarantees, recognition, legitimacy, strategic position, and historical apology are not produced by labour time and are not quantities of a substance. A critical theory that depends upon a common measure falls silent where international politics is thickest. Emmanuel can tell us a great deal about coffee and textiles. He can tell us little about whether the Marshall Plan was repaid, about what would repay a colonial apology, or about whether a state has purchased its recognition too dearly. These are not the marginal cases of the field. They are among its central ones.

It should be recorded that this paper is not alone in its abandonment. Hornborg has objected, against the recent revival of ecologically unequal exchange, that the labour theory of value which guided Emmanuel and Amin can be conceptualised only in monetary terms, and that to infer a transfer of value from a discrepancy in wages is to reify value into a substance created at particular points in the system. He asks how value could be represented in any metric other than money, and treats the absence of an answer as a difficulty for the theory. This

paper takes the absence as its datum. Where Hornborg finds the want of a metric a problem for critique, this paper finds it the starting point of one.

There is a further asymmetry between the two frameworks which will matter below. Emmanuel requires a negative material balance in order to detect exploitation, and has therefore little to say about the case in which capital flows inward.

2.3.2 GRAMSCIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

Cox's hegemony is coercion together with consent, materialised in a historic bloc and reproduced through ideas, institutions, and material capabilities. It comes close to a theory of symbolic power over structure, and it is a considerable achievement.

The difference is this. Cox theorises how a particular order comes to be accepted as legitimate. He does not theorise the operation by which a good of one kind comes to count as settlement for a good of another. Legitimation is the consequence of that operation; Cox describes the consequence with great insight and leaves the operation unsupplied. He can tell us that the postwar order was consented to. He tells us less about how the provision of a security order came to be an acceptable answer to the extraction of monetary autonomy, which is to say, how a good in one register came to be received as payment for a good in another.

2.3.3 POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial criticism has established much of the substance that this paper's central sections describe. Spivak's epistemic violence, Chakrabarty's provincialisation of Europe, and Fanon's account of the colonised subject converge upon a single observation: what returns to the colonised returns in the coloniser's language, and the language in which the return may be assessed is the language of the party that made it.

The discovery belongs to postcolonial criticism. What is claimed here is narrower, and must be kept narrow.

The insight has been developed as cultural and epistemological critique. What is attempted here is its reconstruction as a formal mechanism within a system of value circulation, specifically as the unilateral positing of the rate at which a good in one register discharges a debt incurred in another. The purpose of the reconstruction is not to improve upon the critique, which stands in little need of improvement. It is to render the critique connectable to the theory of generative justice on one side and to institutional design on the other, which cultural critique in its own idiom is not. Whether this is a gain or a loss is left to the reader. It is a gain in tractability and a loss in thickness, and both should be said.

2.4 ASYMMETRY AS CONSTITUTED

Constructivism established that meaning precedes interest, that anarchy is what states make of it, and that institutions are the sediment of practice. The English School established that international society possesses common norms and institutions. Relational theories, in the work of Jackson and Nexon and of Qin, have established that relations precede entities. The affective and practice turns have established that emotion and background competence are constitutive of conduct rather than residual to it.

This paper contests little of this and claims none of it. The temptation to position the present framework as the theory that explains how value emerges, in contrast to a generative justice that explains only how value flows, is to be refused. That position is occupied, and it has been occupied since 1992.

Qin's relational theory requires separate treatment, because it asserts as its ontological premise exactly what this paper's programme asserts, that relations precede entities and that actors are actors-in-relation. Its metaphysical core is the correlated relationship of 阴 and 阳, whose basic state it posits as harmony, and from that posit it infers that all relations are fundamentally harmonious and are able to be managed as such. The 中庸 dialectic supplies the epistemological schema.

The standing objection to relational theory, which Qin has addressed directly, asks how a theory beginning from relation rather than from opposed substances can identify subject and object at all, and how it can then give any account of the relation of domination and subordination between them. Qin's answer is to dissolve the dichotomy: the appearance of irreducible opposition is an artefact of a dualistic lens, and a dialectic that assumes no binary in the first place refuses the terms in which the difficulty was posed.

The answer given in this paper is the opposite one, and it is given from within the same premise. It is set out in the following section.

The difficulty of this class at Q3 is general and structural. These are theories of the generation of meaning rather than theories of circulation. They seldom ask whose meaning counts when a cross-register account must be settled, and they offer little account of the settlement function of meaning, which does not follow from an account of its generation and is not contained in one.

2.5 THE SOCIOLOGY OF COMMENSURATION

The tradition that has answered Q3 lies outside international relations, and it must be given its due at length, since the greater part of what this paper might have claimed for itself belongs to it.

Espeland and Stevens define commensuration as the expression or measurement of characteristics normally represented by different units according to a common metric. It transforms qualities into quantities and difference into magnitude. Their account establishes, and this paper inherits rather than asserts, the following. Commensuration is a mode of power, and its power is both strategic and constitutive. It is not the neutral technical process its advocates claim, and it reconstructs relations of authority, creates new political entities, and establishes new interpretive frameworks. Its operation becomes invisible through routinisation, so that the labour it requires and the assumptions surrounding it are forgotten. It constitutes what it purports to measure. Marx is read within their account as holding that labour is the great commensurator and that value commensurates by abstracting away the distinctiveness of particular work, which is the reading this paper has given of Emmanuel and which is therefore not this paper's. And politics itself, understood as the art of compromise, is on their account a broad instance of commensuration, so that interest-group bargaining presupposes the very operation whose terms it is not placed to examine.

Within international relations the concept has entered by a narrow door. Broome and Quirk employ it in their account of global benchmarking, where commensuration figures as one step in a chain of numerical translation, alongside simplification, extrapolation, reification, and symbolic judgment. But the object of that literature is the indicator and the ranking: the translation of normative values into scores by which distant governance is conducted. Its object is not the

settlement of a cross-register account between two parties, and the question this paper asks does not arise there.

Two limits of the commensuration literature define the space in which this paper works, and they must be stated exactly.

The first is that it declines the normative question by design, and the design is a virtue in a review article and a limitation here. Commensuration, on its account, may enlarge decision-making or may legitimate a decision taken in advance; it may be manipulated by elites or may constrain them; it may arm dissenters or produce disciplined subjects. The even-handedness is scrupulous and deliberate. What it means is that the literature is not placed to say when a commensuration is extractive, and this paper must be.

The second limit concerns not what the literature says but the direction in which it looks.

The cases from which the sociology of commensuration is built are cases of encroachment. A metric advances upon a sphere that had been held apart from it, and the political question is whether the advance shall be permitted. Resistance accordingly tends to take one form: the claim of incommensurability. The Yavapai say of their land that it is not the kind of thing that may be traded against a dam. Espeland and Stevens even name the diplomatic instance, observing that the territorial commitments of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples have confounded countless efforts to commensurate territorial interests at diplomatic bargaining tables, and the case appears in their account as a case of refusal.

It is a theory of the boundary. Its account of resistance rests upon the possibility of saying: not this, not here, not on those terms.

International politics, in the greater part of its ordinary operation, takes place in the interior.

2.6 ASYMMETRY AS A GOVERNABLE CONDITION OF GENERATION

The final class is sparsely populated within international relations and exists largely outside it. Eglash's generative justice holds that asymmetry is not injustice and that the severing of the value loop is. Ostrom supplies the design principles of self-governance without thematising asymmetry. Sen and Nussbaum move the criterion of justice from resources to capabilities. Mauss and Sahlins establish the obligatory and relation-producing character of the gift. Polanyi establishes that not all integration is market exchange and that reciprocity and redistribution run upon different logics.

Sen's move deserves acknowledgment, since the criterion advanced in this paper is its cousin. The difference is twofold. Sen's capability is an attribute of individuals and a matter of functionings and freedoms, of what a person is able to be and to do. The generative capacity employed here is relational, being a property of a position within a circuit rather than of a node, and it is measured across a closed circuit rather than at a point. The question is less what a party is able to do than whether, after one complete circuit of the relation, it is more or less able to generate independently than it was.

Polanyi is a near antecedent to the recognition that value circulates in more than one register. He did not ask how the registers settle against one another, and the question does not arise within his framework, but it was he who made it possible to see that there are registers.

Eglash's limit is the limit of his domain, and it is not a defect. His cases are the braiding shop, the cooperative, the community of makers, and in these the return is homogeneous: the value generated by labour returns to the labourer, as income, as skill, as ownership, as time. He

therefore has little occasion to require a rate of conversion, and little occasion to encounter the power that posits one. This paper begins where his domain ends.

2.7 POSITIONING

This paper displaces little. It observes that a question difficult to avoid in international relations has been left open at the junction of two literatures that do not meet.

The theory of generative justice supplies the norm and presupposes that return is homogeneous. The sociology of commensuration supplies the account of heterogeneity, establishes that settling it is a mode of power, and declines the normative question by design. Neither reaches the case in which settlement is compulsory because refusal has been foreclosed.

And since no true rate is available, this paper is unable to appeal to a fair one. The normative fulcrum must be moved. That difficulty is the paper.

3 THE GENESIS OF POWER

Realist theory takes power as a primitive. It measures power, aggregates it, distributes it, and asks after the consequences of its distribution, and it seldom asks why there is any. The omission is not a small one. A theory that is silent on where power comes from is poorly placed to say what kind of thing it is, and a theory that is silent on the kind is largely confined to asking how much of it there is here and how much there. This section supplies the derivation that realism lacks, and the derivation has consequences that realism is unlikely to welcome and that egalitarianism will welcome still less.

3.1 THE DERIVATION

The chain runs from generation to power in five steps.

If a process produces nothing that was not there before, it is not a process of generation. This is a matter of what the word means, and little turns on it beyond the fixing of terms.

If what is produced introduces no difference, it has not been produced. A change that changes nothing is not a change, and a generation that leaves the system indistinguishable from what it was has generated nothing. Generation therefore entails difference, as a condition of its being generation rather than as a frequent consequence of it.

Difference among the parts of a system is what permits those parts to stand in relation. Where the parts are indistinguishable there is nothing for a relation to obtain between. Relation therefore presupposes difference, and generation supplies it.

Parties that stand in relation must coordinate, and coordination proceeds upon terms. The terms are not given with the relation. They must be supplied, and the supplying of them is a further question which the fact of the relation leaves open.

And where the terms of coordination are supplied by one of the parties rather than jointly, the difference between the parties acquires an effect that runs in a direction. This directed effect is what the word power names.

3.2 THE PROVENANCE OF THE TERMS

The fourth and fifth steps are where the argument is most exposed, and the exposure should be met rather than passed over. It may be granted that coordination requires terms, and granted also that terms unilaterally supplied produce a directed effect, while the intervening claim is denied. Why should the terms be supplied by one party rather than settled between them? Nothing in difference as such appears to require it. Two parties may differ and may negotiate the terms of their coordination as equals, and if that is the ordinary case, then power is a contingency of bargaining rather than a consequence of generation, and the derivation collapses into a description of unlucky circumstances.

The reply is that the supplying of terms is not a further activity standing outside the generative process, to be distributed between the parties by some arrangement external to it. The supplying of terms is itself a generative act. To furnish the terms on which a relation shall proceed is to produce something that was not there before, and to produce it is to exercise the very capacity whose unequal distribution the preceding steps have established.

Generation produces difference, and what it differentiates is the capacity to generate.

The terms of coordination are themselves something generated. The party better placed to generate is therefore better placed to generate the terms.

Unilateral conditioning is accordingly not a supplementary assumption laid upon difference from outside. It is difference, applied to the coordination problem itself.

The point may be put as a dilemma for the objector. Either the terms of coordination are produced, or they are found. If they are found, we must be told where: they are not in the parties, since the parties differ and each would furnish different terms; and they are not in the relation, since the relation is what the terms are required to constitute. If they are produced, then their production falls under the account of production already given, and is subject to the differentiation that account establishes. The objector who wishes the terms to be settled jointly and as equals must therefore hold that the parties, unequal in their capacity to generate everything else, are equal in their capacity to generate this. No ground has been offered for the exception, and it is difficult to see what ground there could be.

It does not follow that the party with the greater capacity always supplies the terms, and the claim is not that it does. Capacities may be unequal in one respect and reversed in another, and a party weaker in production may be stronger in the particular production of terms, which is a matter of language, of precedent, of the possession of a forum. What follows is weaker and sufficient: that the supply of terms is subject to the same differentiation as everything else generated, and that a symmetrical supply would require a symmetry the system does not otherwise exhibit. Joint settlement between equals is therefore not the default from which unilateral conditioning departs. It is an achievement, and where it occurs it is because something has been done to produce it.

3.3 THE MIDDLE TERM

One clause carries the argument, and the argument fails without it.

Difference is not power.

Difference under unilateral control of the terms of coordination is power.

The clause must be insisted upon, since without it the derivation slides toward the position that all difference is power, and a concept that applies to everything discriminates nothing. That slide is a familiar hazard of the poststructural tradition, and this paper declines to take it. Two parties may differ in many respects and stand in a relation whose terms neither supplied alone, and in such a relation the difference is fertile and is not power. What converts a difference into a power is neither its magnitude nor its persistence. It is that the terms on which the parties coordinate were furnished by one of them.

Difference is accordingly the potential of power rather than its actuality. The distinction is what permits the theory to say, later, that some asymmetries generate and others extract. A theory that identified difference with domination could not say this, since on such a theory every relation would be a domination and the word would have ceased to do work.

The reader may notice that the argument has begun to describe the operation with which the paper is principally concerned. The terms on which unlike things are made to settle against one another are terms of coordination, supplied by a party, and the account of their provenance given here is the account that will be required again when the rate of conversion is examined. The two are the same structure met at different depths, and the later sections may be read as the working out of what has here been established in general.

3.4 TWO PROPOSITIONS

Proposition 3.1 (Genesis of Power). Power does not originate in the possession of resources. It emerges from relational differentiation within generative processes. Generation produces difference, and what it differentiates includes the capacity to supply the terms on which coordination proceeds; the terms so supplied lend the difference a direction, and the directed difference is power. Power is therefore to be expected in a generative relational system, and its occurrence does not depend upon greed, fear, or intention on the part of any actor.

Proposition 3.2 (Ineliminability of Asymmetry). A system without difference is a system without generation. The elimination of asymmetry and the maintenance of generation are not jointly achievable.

3.5 THREE CONSEQUENCES

3.5.1 FOR REALISM

The tragedy on which realism has long insisted is relocated and, in being relocated, deepened. It arises neither from the human appetite for domination, as the classical realists held, nor from the condition of anarchy, as the structural realists hold. It arises from generation, and it would arise in a system that produced anything, however its members were constituted and however authority above them were arranged.

The claim is at once friendlier and more radical than realism's own. It is friendlier because it removes the imputation of vice: no appetite need be posited, and the power that arises among states arises as it would among parties of any kind who produced and exchanged. It is more radical because it forecloses the standing hope of the discipline's other half. If power is the price of generation, then institutional arrangement is unlikely to escape it, and the world state, arriving at last, would find that it had exported the problem to its own interior rather than solved it.

3.5.2 FOR EGALITARIANISM

The programme that proposes to abolish asymmetry is not merely difficult. It is self-defeating in a manner that is structural rather than practical. In the degree to which it succeeds in removing difference, it removes the differentiation in which generation consists, and therefore removes the production of the value whose distribution was the point of the exercise. A perfectly level system is a system in which little is made. This does not condemn the egalitarian impulse, which this paper shares. It condemns one construal of its object, and it obliges the impulse to find another, which the following section attempts to supply.

3.5.3 FOR RELATIONAL THEORY

Relational theories of world politics have advanced upon a premise this paper shares, that relations precede entities and that actors are actors-in-relation rather than substances that subsequently enter into commerce. Qin's relational theory is the most fully developed of these, and it takes as its metaphysical core the correlated relationship of 阴 and 阳, whose basic state it holds to be harmony, concluding that relations are fundamentally harmonious and are able to be managed as such. The claim is grounded in a long tradition of reflection upon the relational character of the world, and it is not advanced lightly.

The standing objection to relational theory, which Qin has addressed directly, asks how a theory that begins from relation rather than from opposed substances can identify subject and object at all, and how it can then give an account of domination and subordination between them. Qin's answer is to dissolve the dichotomy. The appearance of an irreducible opposition between the dominating and the dominated is, on his account, an artefact of a dualistic lens, and the 中庸 dialectic, which assumes no binary in the first place, dissolves the tension by refusing the terms in which it was posed. The move is coherent and it is available.

This paper accepts the same relational premise and returns the opposite answer.

Domination need not be an artefact of the lens. It is derivable from the premise. Relations that generate must differentiate; what they differentiate includes the capacity to supply the terms on which the relation proceeds; and a relation whose terms are supplied by one of its parties is a relation with a direction. The derivation requires no dualism and posits no opposed substances. It requires only that the relation be generative, which is what a relational theory of a living world must in any case maintain.

Relational ontology does not deliver harmony. It delivers the necessity of power, and with it the necessity of governing it.

Harmony, in the relational theory as Qin develops it, lies at the foundation. In the theory developed here it lies at most at the end, as an accomplishment, and the greater part of the work consists in specifying the conditions under which the accomplishment is possible. The disagreement is not about whether relations come first, on which the two theories agree, and it is not a disagreement about the value of harmony, which both hold in view. It concerns what a relational ontology is entitled to conclude once relations are granted priority, and this paper's answer is that harmony is among the things such an ontology must earn rather than among the things it may assume.

3.6 DEBTS TO OTHERS

The materials of the derivation are not new, and it would be idle to pretend otherwise.

That generation produces difference, and that difference is prior to identity rather than derivative from it, belongs to Deleuze. That individuation is a process rather than a state, and that the individual is a phase of a system rather than its atom, belongs to Simondon. That power is exercised rather than possessed, that it is productive as well as repressive, and that it is distributed through a field rather than concentrated at a summit, belongs to Foucault. That a living system maintains itself through structural coupling with a medium it does not command belongs to Maturana and Varela, and to Luhmann after them.

The increment claimed here is not the ontology. It is the joint.

The pieces lie in different hands. Eglash supplies the normative claim, that value ought to return to those who generate it, and has no occasion to ask why asymmetry should arise at all, since in the domains he studies it is simply given. Deleuze and Foucault supply the ontology of difference and emergence and offer no *ought*, which is no failing in them, since they were not writing normative theory. Qin supplies the relational premise and takes harmony as its basic state. What is attempted here is the joint, and the joint alters what generative justice is. It ceases to be a moral preference among the available preferences, and becomes a response to a structural fact that resists removal.

The difference this makes is worth stating exactly. Were asymmetry contingent, a corruption to be cleaned away, the right response to it would be its elimination, and generative justice would be one proposal among others for what to do in the meantime. If asymmetry is a concomitant of generation, then it can be shaped and is unlikely to be eliminated, and the question of the shape it takes is no longer one question among others. It becomes the question.

3.7 OBJECTIONS

That this is pan-powerism. If a generative relation produces power, it may be said, then the concept has been inflated until it discriminates nothing.

The reply concedes the premise and denies the conclusion. The *existence* of power is pervasive in generative systems, and at the level of existence the concept does little work. This is conceded without reluctance. The discriminating force lies in the form rather than the existence, and the following section supplies the criterion by which forms are told apart. A theory that says only that power is everywhere has said little. A theory that says power is pervasive and that here is how to distinguish the power that builds from the power that consumes has said what needed saying, and it needed the first clause in order to say the second.

That the derivation is merely verbal. The chain is analytic, it may be said, and analytic chains discover nothing.

The reply concedes the character of the argument and disputes the inference from it. The chain is analytic. Its value lies in removing a primitive rather than in discovering a fact, and the removal of a primitive changes what can be asked. A theory that treats power as given is poorly placed to ask what kind of power it is, having no account of what power is a kind of. A theory that derives power from generation can ask whether a given power serves the generation from which it came, and that question organises what follows.

That joint settlement is the ordinary case. The terms of coordination, it may be said, are commonly negotiated rather than imposed, and treaties, conventions, and standing bodies of law are the evidence.

The reply is to accept the evidence and dispute what it shows. That terms are negotiated establishes that the parties took part in supplying them. It does not establish that they took part symmetrically. A negotiation proceeds within a language, upon a precedent, in a forum, and at a table whose shape was settled before anyone sat down, and each of these was supplied by somebody. The question is not whether the weaker party spoke. It is whether the terms in which it was obliged to speak were of its own making. Joint settlement is therefore not the refutation of the account but an instance of the thing to be explained, and the account predicts what is in fact observed: that negotiated outcomes track, with tolerable fidelity, the distribution of the capacity to furnish the terms in which negotiation is conducted.

That states are not generative processes. The derivation applies, it may be said, to processes of production, learning, and differentiation, and it is an open question whether states are such processes.

The reply is that the question, though empirical, is not a difficult one. States produce technology, knowledge, institutions, culture, and capability; they learn; they differentiate internally and from one another; and the differences so produced are the differences that enter into the coordination which constitutes international politics. What the derivation requires of a state is that it generate, and states generate.

4 TWO KINDS OF ASYMMETRY

If asymmetry resists removal, then the question that matters is less how much of it there is than what kind it is, and a theory with one category of asymmetry is poorly placed to ask. Realism has one category. Asymmetry appears within it as a differential of capability, and a differential of capability is read as a threat, since the theory offers little else for it to be read as. This section supplies the second category, and with it a criterion for telling the two apart.

4.1 THE DISTINCTION

An asymmetry is *generative* when the parties differ, when the difference is complementary, and when the relation raises the capacity of each party to generate.

An asymmetry is *extractive* when the parties differ and when one of them employs the difference to lower the other's capacity to generate for itself.

The two are difficult to distinguish at the level of the scalar. Both are asymmetries. Both may present identical ratios of capability, identical distributions of resources, identical flows of goods across the relation. Little that can be read off the magnitudes tells them apart, and a theory that reads magnitudes alone will therefore misclassify systematically, treating the first as a danger to be corrected and correcting away the condition of its own prosperity.

4.2 THE CRITERION

An asymmetry is generative or extractive according to the net change, across a closed loop of interaction, in each party's capacity to generate *independently*.

The weight of the criterion rests on the final word, and the word must be given its force.

The signature of extraction is not that the weaker party produces less. It is that the weaker party produces *more*, and produces under conditions that the stronger party supplies. Output rises; independence falls. The relation is experienced as beneficial, defended as beneficial, and

shows as beneficial on a ledger that counts what was produced rather than what could be produced were the relation to end. Dependency, in its developed forms, is manufactured through provision rather than through deprivation, which is why it is so seldom recognised by those it is practised upon and so readily defended by those who practise it.

The canonical contrast is that between the transfer of a production line and the transfer of a design capability. The first raises output and lowers independence, since what has been installed can be operated but is less easily modified, extended, or replaced, and its operation continues so long as the supplying party continues to supply. The second raises independence, since what has been transmitted is the capacity to make the thing rather than the thing itself, and the capacity, once transmitted, is not readily recoverable by the party that gave it. The two transfers may be of identical monetary value and may look alike in any account that money can keep.

4.3 THE CRITERION IS OBSERVABLE

The criterion is behavioural and does not require the tracing of value flows, which is in any case impracticable.

One observes the degree of dependence: what proportion of the recipient's productive activity requires inputs, licences, standards, or authorisations that the counterparty controls. One observes survival under severance: what the recipient can continue to do when supply is withdrawn, and how quickly its capacity degrades. One observes the rate of subsequent independent innovation: whether the recipient, having received, goes on to make things on its own account.

And one observes a further test, which is the discriminating one.

A loop is generative if it produces, in the recipient, capacities the donor did not design.

The test is sharp because generosity does not satisfy it. A donor may give a great deal, may give it freely, and may give it with every intention of benefit, and the recipient may nonetheless be able to do only what the donor equipped it to do. Where the recipient begins to produce what the donor did not anticipate and could not have specified, something has passed between them that was not in the transfer, and it is that passage which the criterion is meant to catch.

4.4 THREE KINDS OF LOOP

The criterion yields three cases rather than two, and the third is absent from the existing normative literature.

The extractive loop. At least one party's independent generative capacity falls across the circuit. This is the case that generative justice was designed to identify, and it identifies it correctly.

The sustaining loop. Neither party's independent generative capacity changes across the circuit. Little is taken and little is built. The relation persists, the accounts balance, and no one is wronged.

The generative loop. Both parties' independent generative capacity rises across the circuit. The relation produces a surplus that neither party held before and that neither holds against the other.

The middle case does not arise in the domains from which generative justice was built, and the reason is instructive. The braiding shop and the cooperative are generative by construction: they exist in order that something be made, and a relation among makers that produced nothing

would have dissolved before it could be studied. Where the generative character of the relation may be taken for granted, a criterion that detects extraction is sufficient, since extraction is then the only way the relation can fail.

International relations may not be taken for granted in this way. A relation between states may persist for a century while producing little, sustained by inertia, by the cost of exit, or by the interest of both parties in the appearance of a relation. Such a relation is formally clean and substantively inert. Value has not been extracted from those who generated it, and the loop has closed; but little was generated, and the closure of the loop is the closure of an account in which few entries were made. The absence of theft does not establish the condition of a relation, and a framework carried onto terrain where inert relations are common requires a third category, which on its home terrain it had no occasion to need.

4.5 AN INCOMPATIBILITY

There follows a conclusion about realism which is derivable and which is therefore stated without polemic.

Realism's criterion of success, that the system does not collapse and that capabilities are distributed symmetrically, stands in tension with the signature of a generative loop, which is pointwise asymmetry sustained over time.

A system that fully achieves the realist objective is unlikely, by the criterion advanced here, to be generative.

No claim is made that realists desire to suppress generation, and none is needed. The point is that the success condition of the one theory approaches the failure condition of the other, and that the tension follows from the definitions rather than from anyone's motives.

The instance is one that realism claims with confidence. Two blocs held for four decades in a balance of nearly perfect symmetry, a system that did not collapse, a distribution of capabilities that each side laboured continuously to keep level: on the realist criterion, a success, and it has been so recorded. On the criterion advanced here it is a sustaining loop at best, and over much of its extent an extractive one, in which each party expended its generative capacity upon the single domain in which the other had locked it, and the capacity of each to generate much else declined for as long as the lock held. That the system did not collapse is true, and it is among the least interesting things that can be said about it.

4.6 LIMITATIONS

The criterion has three weaknesses and they are named here rather than buried.

Measurement. Independent generative capacity is observable in principle and difficult in practice. The proxies proposed above are proxies, and each can be gamed by a party that knows it is being measured by them. No fully satisfactory operationalisation is offered here.

The boundary of the loop. The criterion is defined across a closed circuit, and the determination of where a circuit closes is itself a judgment. In many cases it is a contested one, and the party that gets to draw the boundary of the loop is in a position not unrelated to the position that gets to set the rate. This is not resolved here.

Aggregation. The gravest of the three weaknesses is aggregation. A state's generative capacity is an aggregate over an internal structure of great heterogeneity, and it may rise in the aggregate while falling for a region, a sector, or a class. A transfer that raises a state's capacity to generate may do so by concentrating the capacity in a metropolitan centre that is itself extractive with respect to its own periphery.

The criterion, applied at the level of the state, may therefore certify as generative a loop that conceals extraction one level down. A framework that stopped here would risk complicity at the level it declined to examine. What is required is a multi-level treatment, and this paper does not provide one.

5 THE HETEROGENEITY PROBLEM

The argument now arrives at the operation with which it is principally concerned. The preceding sections have derived asymmetry from generation, shown that it resists removal that leaves generation standing, and supplied a criterion by which the asymmetry that builds may be told from the asymmetry that consumes. The criterion asks whether, across a closed circuit of the relation, each party's capacity to generate independently has risen or fallen. It presupposes that the circuit can be closed, and that the closing can be inspected. What follows is a difficulty with that presupposition, and it is a difficulty that arises on the terrain of international politics and not on the terrain from which the criterion was drawn.

5.1 THE CARGO OF INTERNATIONAL LOOPS

The relations that carry value between states carry it across registers. A state supplies technology and receives recognition. A state supplies capital and receives legitimacy. A state supplies a security guarantee and receives basing rights and strategic alignment. A state supplies an apology and receives, or fails to receive, the closure of a historical grievance. A state supplies market access and receives votes in a multilateral body. Each of these is an ordinary transaction of international life, and in each of them the thing that goes out and the thing that comes back belong to different kinds.

They are, in the relevant sense, incommensurable. There is no evident substance of which technology and recognition are both quantities, and no measure that stands behind a security guarantee and a basing right and expresses each as so much of a common stuff. The claim is not about the present state of measurement, as though a sufficiently refined instrument would eventually supply the missing scale. It is a claim about the values themselves. They are not produced from a common source, they do not enter the world as differing quantities of one thing, and aggregation is unlikely to recover a unity that was not there to begin with.

The cases from which the theory of generative justice was developed are not ordinarily of this structure. In the workshop, in the cooperative, in the community of makers, what the labourer creates returns to the labourer, and it returns as income, as skill, as ownership, as time. The return may be adequate or inadequate, timely or delayed, but it is a return of the same kind as the contribution, and its adequacy is therefore a matter that can be inspected. One counts what went out and one counts what came back, and the accounts are in the same currency because they are accounts of the same thing. This is not a defect in the theory. It is a property of the domain in which the theory was worked out, and it is a property that the international domain does not share.

5.2 CLOSURE AS JUDGMENT

The consequence is that a question which is empirical in the homogeneous case becomes something else in the heterogeneous one.

Where return is homogeneous, the question whether a loop has closed is a question of fact. Did the value generated by the labour come back to the labourer? One inspects, and one finds that it did or that it did not. The finding may be difficult, the records may be poor, the causal chains may be long, but the difficulty is of a kind that better inspection could in principle overcome. The question has an answer, and the answer does not turn on who is asking.

Where return is heterogeneous, this is no longer so. For the loop to close, something must be made to *count as* repayment for something of a different kind. Recognition must count as repayment for technology. A basing right must count as repayment for a guarantee. The word that carries the weight is *count*, and what it names is an operation, not a discovery. Little in technology and little in recognition determines how much of the second discharges an obligation incurred by the first. The two stand in no ratio, since a ratio requires a shared dimension along which it is taken.

In the heterogeneous case, the statement that a loop has closed is not a report of a fact. It is a judgment, and a judgment requires terms on which it is made. Those terms are not supplied by the values judged.

This is the operation that will be called conversion throughout what follows, and the terms on which it is performed will be called the rate of conversion. The vocabulary is deliberately plain. What is at issue is the everyday operation by which an account containing entries of different kinds is declared square, and the question is where the terms of that declaration come from.

5.3 THREE EVASIONS

The argument requires that conversion be difficult to avoid. Were there a way to answer the question of closure in the heterogeneous case without positing a rate, the rate would be an artefact of one method among others and would carry little weight of its own. Three such ways present themselves, and each must be closed. They are set out in the order of their initial plausibility.

5.3.1 THE FIRST EVASION, MONETISATION

The first proposal is that heterogeneity is only apparent, because everything can be priced. Technology has a value in money, recognition has a value in money, and once each has been assigned its price the account can be inspected in the ordinary way. The heterogeneity that seemed to obstruct the audit turns out to be a heterogeneity of appearance only, dissolved by the universal solvent that modern economies have in any case already applied to nearly everything else.

There are three replies, and they are cumulative.

The first is that the goods with which international politics is principally concerned resist pricing, and that their resistance is not incidental to what they are. Recognition, dignity, sovereignty, and historical justice are political goods, and they are political in the measure that they resist pricing. A party that accepts a price for its recognition has, in accepting, conceded much of what recognition was to secure, since what recognition secures is standing as a party rather than as a quantity, and a party that may be bought out at a price is a quantity. The refusal of a price is better understood as constitutive of the good in question than as obstinacy in the

face of a valuation that could in principle be made. Espeland and Stevens, whose account of these matters is developed at length below, give the general form of this observation: there are values whose incommensurability is not a residue of imperfect measurement but a condition of the identity of those who hold them.

The second reply is more damaging, because it shows the evasion to be an instance of the thing evaded. To price recognition is to establish a rate at which recognition settles against money. The pricing is less an alternative to conversion than an instance of it. It *is* a conversion, performed at a rate, and it differs from other conversions chiefly in that the register into which everything is translated is a monetary one, and is so familiar that the translation passes unnoticed. The proposal therefore does not answer the question of where the rate comes from. It answers it in one particular way, by fixing the rate in money, and it then declines to defend the fixing on the ground that it is natural. This is the founding move of a great many settlements, and the ease with which it is made is precisely why it must be refused.

The third reply is empirical, and it is worth stating because the first two are conceptual and the reader may suspect that conceptual scruple is being purchased at the cost of the facts. If monetisation closed the loop, then monetised settlements of political debts would settle them. They routinely do not. Reparations are offered and refused. Compensation is accepted and the grievance persists, and persists in a form that the acceptance of the compensation has not touched and sometimes has aggravated. The offer of money for a wrong is regularly experienced as a second wrong, and the experience is better read as perception than as confusion: the rate at which money settles against the wrong was set by the party that did the wrong. A theory unable to accommodate this would miss a great deal of what it is meant to explain.

5.3.2 THE SECOND EVASION, CATEGORIAL SEPARATION

The second proposal is that conversion may be refused. Let each register be audited on its own terms. Let technology settle against technology and recognition against recognition, and let no account be permitted to cross the line between them. If the registers never meet, no rate is ever required.

The reply is in three parts, and the first is simply that the world is not so arranged. The loops of international politics are cross-register by constitution rather than by corruption. Development assistance is exchanged for votes in multilateral bodies. Security guarantees are exchanged for bases and for alignment. Market access is exchanged for political accommodation. These are less degenerate cases in which a purer practice has been contaminated than the practice itself. A theory of international value circulation that begins by excluding them has not idealised its object so much as abandoned it.

The second part of the reply is a *reductio*. Suppose the separation were enforced, and each register audited alone. Then in nearly every bilateral relation nearly every register would be found unbalanced, because the balancing item lies in another register. Technology flows one way and is not repaid in technology. Recognition flows the other and is not repaid in recognition. On the proposed accounting, most relations in international politics would be extractive in most registers, and the conclusion is absurd. The absurdity indicts the accounting rather than the parties, and it indicts it at the point where the accounting refused to convert.

The third part is the shortest. The separation does not answer the question of settlement. It forbids the question. To say that registers may not settle against one another is less to have found a way of settling them than to have declared that settlement does not occur, in a world where it occurs continually and constitutes the substance of the relations under study. An evasion that succeeds by denying its explanandum is better described as a refusal.

5.3.3 THE THIRD EVASION, SUBJECTIVE SATISFACTION

The third proposal is the most modest of the three and, for that reason, the most tempting. Let the parties decide. The loop has closed when both parties agree that it has closed. There is no need for an external rate, because the rate is whatever the parties in the event accept, and a settlement that both parties accept is by that fact a settlement.

The reply is that this criterion consults, as its evidence, the very thing it is supposed to evaluate.

Consider what determines whether a party accepts a settlement. It accepts when what it has received registers, within its own scheme of valuation, as adequate to what it gave. But its scheme of valuation is not independent of the relation. It has been formed within the relation, over time, under conditions in which the terms of adequacy were being continually rehearsed by the stronger party and continually inhabited by the weaker one. The satisfaction of the weaker party is therefore an effect of the rate, and to use it as the test of the rate is to validate the rate by its own consequence. The circularity is not a subtle one, and refinement of the wording is unlikely to avoid it, since it lies in the structure of the situation rather than in the phrasing of the test.

The colonial case is the paradigm, and it is why appeal to sincerity is unlikely to salvage the criterion. The colonised subject who is satisfied with the settlement is not thereby shown to have received a just settlement. It is among the accomplishments of a long relation that satisfaction can be produced, and a theory of justice whose highest court is satisfaction has, at the decisive moment, little to say. What it has is a report on the success of the relation in producing the disposition that vindicates it.

It should be added that this evasion, if accepted, would make the mechanism examined in a later section invisible by construction. The question of how unfavourable rates come to be accepted is the question this paper regards as central. A criterion that treats acceptance as the terminus of inquiry has determined in advance that the question will go unasked.

5.4 THE PROPOSITIONS

The three evasions are those that present themselves, and each has failed. Monetisation performs the conversion it claims to avoid. Separation forbids the question it claims to answer. Satisfaction consults the effect of the rate as the test of the rate. What remains may be stated directly.

Proposition 5.1 (Necessity of Conversion). Where values of heterogeneous registers circulate in a relational system, the judgment that a loop has closed presupposes a rate of conversion among those registers.

Proposition 5.2 (Positedness of the Rate). The rate of conversion is not derivable from the values it converts, since values of heterogeneous registers stand in no ratio to one another. The rate is therefore posited rather than discovered.

From these there follows a corollary that will govern the remainder of the paper, and that costs it a great deal.

Corollary 5.3 (No Correct Rate). There is no correct rate of conversion. A critique that presupposes one has imported a common measure unavailable for the values at issue.

The expense should be stated at once, and it will be stated again when it falls due. Corollary 5.3 removes the classical vocabulary of exploitation from the hands of this paper. That vocabulary works by comparison to a true rate. The labour theory of value supplies such a rate, and it is what permits the theory of unequal exchange to say that an exchange conducted at a certain ratio of prices is *unequal*, for inequality is a relation to a measure and requires that a measure exist. A critique that denies the measure is in no position to say that the rate is wrong. It has surrendered the sense in which a rate could be wrong.

This paper accepts that surrender deliberately, on the ground that the alternative is worse. A theory of international value that retains a common measure retains it at the cost of the values that constitute international politics, which are not produced by labour and are not quantities of any substance. A theory equipped to say that coffee was underpriced and unable to say anything at all about whether a guarantee was repaid, whether an apology was owed, or whether recognition was purchased too cheaply has bought its rigour by narrowing its object until the object no longer contains what it was supposed to explain. The surrender of the measure is the price of speaking about the things that international politics is about, and the question of what remains of critique once the measure is gone is the question to which this paper's normative section is devoted.

5.5 THE LIMITS OF THE ARGUMENT

The limits of the argument should be stated plainly, since the section carries the weight of the paper and an overstatement here would collapse it.

It has not been shown that conversion is illegitimate. Conversions occur, they are difficult to avoid, and little said here counts against them. It has not been shown that a particular rate is wrong, and by Corollary 5.3 no such thing could be shown, since there is no rate against which a rate might be found wanting.

What has been shown is narrower and sufficient. In a settlement across registers a rate is present; it is posited; and it is not derivable from the things it settles. From which it follows that in such a settlement someone has done the positing. The question of who, and of what it is to occupy the position from which positing is done, is the subject of the sections that follow.

6 SETTLEMENT WHERE REFUSAL IS FORECLOSED

The preceding section established that every settlement across registers presupposes a posited rate, and closed with the observation that someone must have done the positing. It is tempting to proceed directly to the naming of a power, and the temptation should be resisted, since the power has been named. This section therefore begins by stating what it inherits, and it inherits a great deal.

6.1 THE INHERITANCE

The operation this paper has called conversion is the operation that sociology calls commensuration, and it has been studied under that name for close to three decades. Espeland and Stevens define commensuration as the expression or measurement of characteristics normally represented by different units according to a common metric, and observe that it transforms

qualities into quantities and difference into magnitude. They devote a section of their account explicitly to the question of how commensuration refracts power relations, and they answer that it is a mode of power, that its power is both strategic and constitutive, that it reconstructs relations of authority and creates new political entities and establishes new interpretive frameworks, and that it is emphatically not the neutral technical process its advocates claim. They observe that its operation becomes invisible through routinisation, so that the labour it requires and the assumptions surrounding it are forgotten, and that commensuration constitutes what it purports to measure. They read Marx as holding that labour is the great commensurator, and that value commensurates by abstracting away the distinctiveness of the particular forms of work. And they observe, in a passage that bears directly on the present subject, that politics understood as the art of compromise is itself a broad instance of commensuration, so that interest-group bargaining presupposes the very operation whose terms it is unable to examine.

This paper does not re-derive the foregoing. It stands on it. The claim that the setting of terms of settlement is a mode of power, that this power is constitutive rather than merely strategic, and that its operation is concealed by its routineness, belongs to the sociology of commensuration and is credited to it without reservation.

What this paper adds lies elsewhere, and it can be located precisely by attending to the direction in which the sociological literature travels.

6.2 THE BOUNDARY AND THE INTERIOR

The cases from which the sociology of commensuration is built are cases of encroachment. A metric advances into a sphere that had been held apart from it, and the political question that arises is whether the advance shall be permitted. The economist attempts to synthesise a price for an activity that had not been priced. Advocates of comparable worth attempt to bring domestic labour within the metric of wages. Legal scholars attempt to establish, or to resist, a market in children. In each case a mode of valuation is pressing upon a region where another mode has prevailed, and the drama is a drama of the border.

Resistance, in such cases, tends to take a standard form. It is the claim of incommensurability. Following Raz, Espeland and Stevens name a strong version of this claim the constitutive incommensurable: a category of value whose incommensurability is bound up with the identity of those who hold it, so that to permit the trade-off is to become someone else. The Yavapai, whose ancestral land was threatened by a dam, held that land as a constitutive incommensurable, and the models by which bureaucrats evaluated the dam required that the land be made commensurate with the other components of the decision. The requirement was not merely inconvenient. It was a contradiction of the values in question and of the identity that those values defined. The parents who decline to think of their children as substitutable, the homemakers who refuse to have their lives priced against occupational attainment, and the movements that decline to bring their commitments to the bargaining table are all making the same move, at different scales and with different degrees of success. They are saying: this is not the kind of thing that may be traded against that.

Espeland and Stevens even name the diplomatic instance, and they read it in exactly this way. The territorial commitments of the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples, they observe, have confounded countless efforts to commensurate territorial interests at diplomatic bargaining tables. The case appears in their account as a case of refusal, and the refusal is what makes it interesting to them.

The sociology of commensuration is a theory of the boundary. Its subject is the advance of a metric and the refusal that resists it, and the political possibility on which its account of resistance rests is the possibility of saying: not this, not here, not on those terms.

International politics, in the greater part of its ordinary operation, takes place in the interior. The boundary was crossed long ago, and it is not readily recrossed. The parties are already being settled against, continually, and the question before them is not whether to permit the metric but on whose terms the metric will run.

6.3 THE FORECLOSURE OF REFUSAL

The claim of the section may now be stated. The refusal that the sociological literature documents requires a position from which it can be sustained, and a state that lacks an exit from the relation is poorly placed to occupy it.

Consider what refusal accomplishes in the sociological cases. The Yavapai, in declaring their land incommensurable, do not thereby prevent the dam. They may lose. What the declaration secures, whether or not it prevails, is that the loss is registered as a loss rather than as a settlement. They have not been paid for the land, since they have refused the terms on which payment would have been payment. The wrong remains a wrong, and remains available to be named as one, since the accounting that would have closed it was declined.

A state is rarely placed to do this. It may declare its sovereignty incommensurable, and it will be settled against notwithstanding. It may hold that no quantity of investment discharges the obligation incurred by a colonisation, and the ledger will nevertheless be drawn up, the investment entered on one side and the extraction on the other, and the account declared square by parties who did not require its assent. The declaration is heard. The account is closed anyway.

The reason is not that states are weaker than communities, which they are not. It is that the refusal available to the Yavapai is a refusal to participate, and participation is what a state is least able to decline. To refuse settlement is to withdraw from the field within which settlements are made, and to withdraw from that field is to become, not a state that has declined to be settled against, but a state that does not register as a party. The mechanism is taken up in the following section. Here it is enough to record the structural fact.

Proposition 6.1 (Foreclosure of Refusal). Where a party cannot withdraw from a relation without ceasing to count as a party, the claim of incommensurability is unavailable to it as a form of resistance. Commensuration then ceases to be a contested boundary and becomes a constitutive condition of the relation.

The international case is then not one further instance of a phenomenon that sociology has described, but its limit, at which the phenomenon changes character. Where refusal is available, commensuration is a border under dispute, and the political question concerns the location of the border. Where refusal is foreclosed, the border is not in dispute, and the political question concerns the terms on which the interior is governed.

The foreclosure of refusal has a consequence for the normative argument developed later, and it is worth marking here, since it converts a proposal into a derivation. Where the strong form of resistance is unavailable, what remains is contestation of the rate rather than refusal of it. The normative condition advanced below is less chosen from among alternatives for its attractiveness than left standing when the others fall.

6.4 AGAINST THE FACES OF POWER

The commensuration literature has not placed its object against the standard taxonomy of power. The placement is worth performing, both to locate the operation and to forestall the objection that it is a known one under a new description. Each of the received forms of power is examined in turn, and the operation of settlement is found to lie beside each of them rather than within any.

Dahl's coercive power gets one party to do what it would not otherwise do. The setting of a rate compels no action. It operates upon the ledger rather than upon the will. A party may act freely throughout, choose each of its own moves, and find at the end that its account has been settled at a rate it did not set.

The second face of power controls the agenda and excludes items from it. Here nothing is excluded. A grievance may be raised, tabled, and entered into the account. What the rate determines is less what may be said than what a thing that has been said is worth against another thing. A grievance may be fully voiced, fully admitted, and fully entered, and settled at a rate the aggrieved did not set.

Lukes's third face shapes wants, so that grievance does not arise. The operation examined here works upon equivalences rather than upon desires, and the two come apart in the ordinary case. A party may want what it would have wanted under conditions of undistorted formation, may articulate the want with clarity, may press it with vigour, and may find that it has been discharged by an offer of a different kind, since the terms on which that kind settles against this kind were not its to establish. The third face prevents the complaint. The rate prices it.

Keohane and Nye come close here, and the point deserves care. Their insight is that the asymmetry of a dependence is itself a resource of power, and that this power is detachable from military capability. But the power they describe is a scalar: a matter of who can better tolerate the severance of the relation, measured along the single dimension of that tolerance. Bargaining leverage presupposes that the matters in dispute have been rendered comparable enough to be bargained over, and the setting of the rate is what renders them so. The rate is therefore prior to bargaining rather than a species of it, and the framework that reduces the question to leverage has performed a conversion of its own without remarking upon it.

Gramscian hegemony explains how an order comes to be consented to. The operation in question here is the one by which a good of one kind comes to count as settlement for a good of another. Legitimation is a consequence of that operation, and the theory of hegemony describes the consequence while leaving the operation unsupplied.

Bourdieu lies nearer than the rest, and requires careful handling. His symbolic power naturalises an arbitrary order and secures its acceptance through misrecognition. But misrecognition is a relation to an arrangement already in place, and naturalisation presupposes something to naturalise. Bourdieu explains with great power why the rate goes unquestioned. He leaves unexplained how there came to be a rate, and the two questions are distinct.

Nye's soft power is a stock of attractiveness, a resource held by a party and expended in the ordinary way, and it belongs therefore to the scalar tradition this paper has been at pains to leave behind. What is at issue here is less a resource than a position: the position from which equivalences are declared.

6.5 THE COLONY WITH A POSITIVE LEDGER

The framework shows its use where the rival frameworks are silent, and there is a case in which they are.

The central operation of colonial rule was not plunder. Plunder is visible, calculable, and protestable, and it was frequently contested and occasionally curtailed. The central operation

was the unilateral positing of the rate, and it is preserved in the sentence that colonial administration composed for itself: *we gave civilisation, railways, law, and medicine; you returned resources, labour, and land; the account is square.*

The word that carries the argument is *square*. It presupposes a rate at which railways settle against sovereignty, and medicine against land. The rate was set by the metropole, and the language in which its fairness might have been disputed was set by the metropole also, so that the colonised party wishing to object was obliged to conduct its objection in terms of what a railway is worth, which is the question that had already been answered.

Now consider the case in which the material ledger runs positive. There are colonial relations in which net capital flowed inward, in which railways were built and schools founded and mortality reduced, and in which an honest accounting of material flows shows the colony to have received more than it sent.

The rival frameworks are poorly placed to find the injustice.

Generative justice does not find it, since value flowed toward the generators rather than away, and the loop, materially, closed. The theory of unequal exchange does not find it, since it detects exploitation through a negative balance and requires the labour theory of value to establish that the balance is negative; where the balance is positive the theory has little to grip. And the sociology of commensuration sees the power at work and declines, by its own methodological commitment, to call it unjust: it observes, with studied even-handedness, that commensuration may enlarge decision-making or legitimate a preordained decision, that it may be manipulated by elites or may constrain them, and it stops there.

This framework finds the injustice and locates it. It lies not in the flow, which ran the other way, nor in the unfairness of the rate, since by Corollary 5.3 there is no fair rate against which this one might be found wanting.

It is in the foreclosure of any position from which the rate could be reopened.

6.6 REALISM AS A REGIME OF SETTLEMENT

One further application is required before the argument proceeds, and it concerns the discipline within which the argument is offered.

Realism converts recognition, justice, identity, culture, and legitimacy into a single scalar, which it calls capability, and it holds that these things matter to the conduct of states in the measure, and only in the measure, that they can be so converted. This is a commensuration, and it is performed at a rate.

The claim of realism to be a science rests upon its not acknowledging as much. It presents the conversion as a description of what moves states: in the end, it says, only power counts. But that everything else *can* be settled against power is less an observation about the world than a stipulation about the terms of the account, and it is the founding stipulation of the field. The conversion is prior to the findings, and the findings do not test it, since they are recorded in the ledger the conversion established.

There is a consequence, and it explains something long noticed and never accounted for. When realism, in its prescriptive mode, informs a state that its claims to recognition count for little unless backed by capability, it is less reporting a regularity than enforcing a rate. The tendency of realist prescription to bring about the conditions it describes has been remarked upon for as long as the doctrine has existed, and has generally been attributed to the psychology of statesmen or to the dynamics of the security dilemma. The mechanism proposed here is simpler. A theory that supplies the terms on which accounts are settled, and is believed by those

who settle them, need persuade no one of anything in order to make the world it describes. It need only be used.

7 THE GROUND OF THE RATE

This section is offered at a lower level of confidence than those preceding it. It advances a mechanism, and it advances it because there is an explanandum which the available mechanisms do not explain, and not because it has been demonstrated. The status of the argument is stated at the end of the section and should be borne in mind throughout it.

7.1 THE QUESTION LEFT OPEN

If the rate is posited rather than discovered, and if it therefore has no authority in the nature of the things it settles, why is it not simply contested into symmetry? Two parties confront one another across an account whose terms are arbitrary. Each has an interest in terms favourable to itself. Why do the terms of one of them prevail?

The available answers are insufficient, and each falls short for a reason that is instructive.

Coercion is insufficient because rates persist where coercion has lapsed. The formal sovereignty of the postcolonial state is complete, and its accounts continue to be settled on terms established elsewhere. Were the rate held in place by force, its persistence after the withdrawal of the force would require explanation, and little is forthcoming.

Bargaining power is insufficient because it presupposes what is to be explained. To bargain over a settlement is to bargain within a set of equivalences already established, and the question is where the equivalences came from. An account that grounds the rate in bargaining power has placed the effect before the cause.

Information is insufficient because rates persist under conditions of full information. Nobody is deceived. The weaker party is quite capable of stating that the terms are arbitrary, that they were set by the stronger, and that its acceptance of them serves the stronger's interest. It states this, often with great precision, and accepts the terms.

7.2 THE LOCUS OF JUDGMENT

The proposal begins from a feature of the operation left so far unexamined. An equivalence is less a property of the two things it relates than a judgment, and a judgment is made from somewhere.

To say that a basing right counts as repayment for a security guarantee is less to report a fact about basing rights and guarantees than to say that, within some scheme of accounting, the entry on the one side discharges the entry on the other. The scheme is somewhere. It is occupied, and the party that occupies it is the party for whom things count.

Proposition 7.1. The power to posit the rate of conversion is structurally linked to occupying the position relative to which things count. Whoever occupies that position sets the rate, not by compelling assent to it, but by being the one for whom the account is an account.

The structure has been worked out with care in the psychoanalytic vocabulary, in which the position for which a subject's productions count, and from which they receive their value as productions, is the position of the Other. Little in the argument requires acceptance of the

clinical apparatus this vocabulary carries with it, and a reader who declines the apparatus may read what follows as a claim about the pragmatics of recognition and will lose little.

7.3 THE ACCEPTANCE OF UNFAVOURABLE RATES

The mechanism earns its place by explaining a phenomenon that realism handles poorly and that has been evident for as long as anyone has looked.

Realism predicts that a state possessing an exit option and confronting an unfavourable settlement will exit. States routinely do not. They remain in relations whose terms they can articulate as unjust, whose arbitrariness they can demonstrate, and from which the material cost of withdrawal would be bearable. The behaviour is neither marginal nor confined to the weak. It is the ordinary conduct of the international system, and a theory that predicts otherwise owes an account of why the prediction so regularly fails.

The proposal is this.

Exit from the relation is exit from the field within which one counts.

To withdraw is to become, not a state that has declined an unfavourable settlement, but a state that does not register as a party. The relation is less the site at which the account is kept than the condition of being the kind of thing that has an account.

The weaker party therefore accepts an unfavourable rate in order to remain within the accounting. It purchases its legibility with the surplus.

This closes a gap left open by the preceding section. The foreclosure of refusal was there recorded as a structural fact about the international system, and a structural fact recorded without a mechanism is an observation awaiting explanation. The mechanism is now supplied. Refusal is foreclosed because it costs the refuser its standing as an actor, and standing as an actor is less one good among the goods at stake in the settlement than the condition of having anything at stake.

It follows that the weaker party's acceptance is better read as a purchase than as weakness of will, miscalculation, or false consciousness. What it purchases is the one thing that holding out would not obtain.

7.4 A TESTABLE CONSEQUENCE

The proposal has an implication that discriminates it from the alternatives and that could come out against it.

If acceptance of an unfavourable rate is bought in exchange for standing, then acceptance should track the party's dependence upon the relation *for recognition as an actor*, and should not track, or should track only weakly, its material dependence and the availability of material alternatives. Two states with equal material dependence and equal alternatives should diverge in their willingness to accept unfavourable settlements according to how much of their standing as parties is constituted by the relation in question.

If, on the contrary, acceptance is fully accounted for by material dependence, the mechanism proposed here is superfluous and should be discarded. Little else in the paper depends upon it.

7.5 THE STATUS OF THE PROPOSAL

This section proposes a mechanism. It does not demonstrate one.

The claim that the position from which equivalences are declared is structurally the position for which things count is advanced as a hypothesis with explanatory reach. Its principal support is that it accounts for a phenomenon the alternatives do not: the acceptance of unfavourable rates where exit is materially available and where nobody has been deceived. That is a reason to entertain it. It is not a proof, and is not offered as one.

8 CONTESTABILITY

8.1 THE SURRENDERED GROUND

Corollary 5.3 denied that there is a correct rate of conversion. The denial was required, since the values that circulate in international relations stand in no ratio, and measurement is unlikely to recover a ratio that was not there. But the denial removes the ground on which critique has classically stood.

The classical form of critique against an exchange is that the exchange was conducted at the wrong rate. This is what the theory of unequal exchange says, and it can say it because it possesses a measure: labour time supplies the true value against which the price is found wanting, and the finding is a finding, not a preference. Take the measure away and the sentence loses its meaning. One is not placed to say that a rate is unjust where there is no rate against which it might be compared, and this paper has said that there is none.

A critical theory that has abandoned the standard by which it criticises is in serious difficulty, and the reader will have noticed. The difficulty is the hardest moment of the argument, and it is not smoothed over.

The remainder of the section attempts a recovery. It should be judged as an attempt.

8.2 THE RESIDUE OF RESISTANCE

Begin from what the sociology of commensuration has already established about resistance.

Where a metric advances upon a sphere that has been held apart from it, resistance tends to take a characteristic form. It is the claim of incommensurability: the assertion that this is not the kind of thing that may be traded against that. The Yavapai make it of their land. Homemakers make it of their lives against the metric of occupational attainment. Movements make it of their commitments when they decline to bring them to the bargaining table. It is the strong form of refusal, and where it can be sustained it is the apt one, since it does not contest the terms of an accounting but declines to have the accounting.

The strong form requires a position from which it can be held. The party must be able to walk away and remain what it was.

A party that cannot withdraw without ceasing to count is poorly placed to make that claim. It will be settled against whether it consents or not, and its declaration that the account may not be drawn is heard, and the account is drawn.

Contestability is what remains of resistance when refusal has been foreclosed.

It is not a weaker substitute selected for convenience, nor a proceduralist retreat from a substantive standard that might have been maintained. It is what is left standing, and its necessity is derived rather than preferred. A party that cannot say *this is not that kind of thing* may still say *not at that rate, and not by your reckoning alone*.

8.3 THE CONDITION

Proposition 8.1 (Contestability). Where no true rate of conversion is available, the normative condition of a settlement is not the justice of the rate but its contestability: whether the party against whom the rate is applied possesses standing, language, and forum in which to dispute it.

The three components are each required, and the second is the demanding one.

Standing is the recognised entitlement to dispute the rate, and it is to be distinguished from the entitlement to petition against its application. A party that may plead for lenience in a particular case, but may not question the terms on which cases of that kind are decided, has been given the appearance of the thing and not the thing.

Language is the availability of terms in which the dispute may be conducted that are not wholly supplied by the party that set the rate. This is the condition that the preceding sections have shown to be usually violated, and violated in the manner that makes the violation hardest to see. The colonised party wishing to dispute the rate at which railways settle against sovereignty must conduct the dispute in terms of what a railway is worth, and the question of what a railway is worth was answered when the rate was set. It is less that the objection is suppressed than that the objection, in order to be made, must be made in the coin that is under dispute.

Forum is the existence of a site at which the dispute is heard and at which it can have effect. A dispute that can be raised nowhere has been permitted in the manner in which the impossible is permitted.

8.4 AGAINST THE CHARGE OF PROCEDURALISM

The objection will be made that this reduces justice to procedure, and that a settlement may be perfectly contestable and perfectly iniquitous.

The reply is not that procedure suffices for justice. It is that where no substantive standard is available, the property of being reopenable is the one property a rate can have that is not itself a posit. The features of a rate's content were put there by somebody. Its openness to being reopened was not.

A rate that cannot be reopened is not thereby shown to be wrong, since there is little that would show it wrong. It is thereby placed beyond the reach of the parties it binds.

That, rather than its content, is what constitutes the injustice.

The proposal is a substantial revision of the normative tradition and should be stated as one. It removes symmetry from the conditions of justice. A settlement may be radically asymmetrical, transferring far more one way than the other by any accounting one cares to construct, and may nonetheless satisfy the condition proposed here, provided the terms on which it was reached remain open to those it binds. And a settlement may be scrupulously balanced and fail the condition, if the balance was struck on terms that one party alone established and the other has neither standing, language, nor forum in which to question.

8.5 CONSEQUENCES

Three follow directly.

The first is that a formally closed loop with an incontestable rate is extractive, whatever the material ledger shows. This is the operational form of the diagnosis offered for the colony with a positive balance, and it is what permits that diagnosis to be made at all.

The second is that symmetry has been removed from the conditions of justice, as stated above.

The third concerns institutional design, and is developed further below. The question to be put to an institution is not whether it distributes fairly. It is whether the rates of conversion embedded within it can be reopened by the parties they bind.

8.6 LIMITATIONS

Three weaknesses, and the third is grave.

The threshold. How much contestability suffices? The proposal does not say. Standing, language, and forum admit of degrees, and no account is given of how much of each is enough. The gap is real, and it is not filled here.

Capture. A forum may exist in which disputes are heard and reliably lost, and in which the existence of the forum serves to legitimate the loss. The condition, as stated, is satisfied by such a forum, and it should not be. What is required is a further specification distinguishing a forum that hears from one that absorbs, and it is not supplied.

Whether it is strong enough to condemn. Suppose that a colonial rate had been contestable; suppose that the colonised had possessed standing, language, and forum; suppose the rate had been contested and upheld. Would the settlement then have been just?

The answer this paper gives is that it would have been legitimate in a sense in which it was not, and that the distinction is real rather than verbal. The colonised party that has been heard and has lost stands in a different relation to its loss than the party that was not permitted to speak. But the answer is uncomfortable, and the discomfort should be admitted rather than argued away. A reader who finds that the framework, at this point, purchases its consistency too dearly is not making a mistake. He has identified the price.

9 TOWARD A FORMAL REPRESENTATION

This section is a research direction rather than a result. The substantive claims of the paper are stated and defended in natural language, and none depends upon what follows. It is included because the structure of the problem is unusually well matched to an existing mathematical apparatus, and it would be strange to notice this and say nothing.

9.1 THE MOTIVATION

The operations that have organised the argument share a character. Values that stand in no ratio must nonetheless circulate in a single loop. Comparison must be made without a global standard, since no such standard is available for the goods in question. And the comparison that matters is less that of one party with another than that of a party *with itself*, before and after a circuit of the relation.

These are the operations for which the mathematics of connections was developed. A connection is the object permitting comparison across the points of a space that lacks a global frame. It says how a quantity defined at one point is to be carried to another, and does so without requiring that quantities at different points belong to a common set. The problem this paper has posed is close to the same problem in another language, and the coincidence is worth recording.

9.2 THE SKETCH

Let the base space be the graph of relations among actors.

Let the fibre above each actor be that actor's space of generative capacities. The fibres are not compared across actors and are not required to be commensurable with one another. This is less a limitation of the construction than the point of it. The framework neither requires nor permits us to say what a technology is worth against a recognition.

Let a connection be given by the transport of capacity along an edge: an interaction, occurring between two parties, alters what each is able to generate.

Then the holonomy of a closed circuit is the net alteration in a party's capacity after the capacity has been carried around the loop and returned to the party from which it started. The comparison is *local*. It compares a party with itself in its own fibre, and requires no cross-party metric.

The sign of the holonomy is the criterion of the fourth section. Positive: each party can now generate independently what it could not before. Zero: the sustaining loop. Negative: extraction.

The attraction of the construction is precise, and it is worth stating what it buys. The incommensurability that defeats the theory of unequal exchange, and that obliged this paper to surrender the classical vocabulary of exploitation, is here structurally accommodated rather than assumed away. A common measure of value is not needed in order to ask, of each party, in its own fibre, whether it can now generate more than it could.

9.3 THE DIFFICULTIES

Four, and they are not small.

The ordering of generative capacity. The criterion of the fourth section requires more and less. Where the space of generative capacities is not ordered, the sign of the holonomy is undefined and the construction says little. That generative capacity admits of an ordering is not obvious, and it is not established here. Capacity may be only partially ordered, in which case some pairs of loops would be incomparable and the criterion would apply to fewer cases than has been supposed.

The specification of the connection. To say that an interaction transports capacity is at present a redescription rather than a specification. Until the transport rule is given, the formalism has

little content, and a formalism without content is a picture.

The place of conversion. The fourth difficulty carries the widest consequences. If the settlement of heterogeneous values is the central object of the paper, then the formalism must find a place for it. The natural suggestion is that the rate of conversion *is* the connection: it is the rule by which what is given in one fibre is registered in another, and it is precisely the sort of thing a connection is, being neither a property of the source nor a property of the destination but a rule for carrying between them.

Were that identification made rigorous, this section would become the spine of the paper rather than its appendix, and the identification of the posited rate with a chosen connection would supply a formal sense in which a rate is arbitrary: a bundle carries no canonical connection, and the choice of one is a choice.

It has not been made rigorous here, and the reader should not be left with a contrary impression.

The risk of ornament. A formalism that licenses no inference otherwise unavailable is decoration, and decoration in a work of political theory is worse than nothing, since it purchases an appearance of rigour at the cost of the thing. The construction earns its place if it permits a conclusion the argument in words does not.

9.4 STATUS

This paper does not demonstrate that the formalism earns its place. It states the correspondence and the difficulties, and leaves the matter open. It is the author's principal object of further work.

10 IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE

The normative condition advanced above has consequences for institutional design, and the consequences are not the ones the reform literature ordinarily pursues. This section states them, and then states the problem that stands in their way and that this paper does not solve.

10.1 THE DESIGN QUESTION

If a settlement is just in the measure that its rate remains open to those it binds, then the question to be put to an institution is not whether it distributes fairly.

Can the rates of conversion embedded in this institution be reopened by the parties they bind?

10.2 THREE OBSERVATIONS

The first is that international institutions characteristically fix their rates of conversion in their constitutive documents, and characteristically make those provisions among the least revisable parts of themselves. Voting weights, veto structures, the classes of claim that are admissible and those that are not, the terms on which a contribution in one register is credited against an obligation in another: these are less rules of procedure than rates, and they are entrenched, and entrenched more deeply than most of what the institution contains.

The second is that the standard reform debate concerns redistribution within a fixed rate. More seats, more votes, more voice, a larger share of an allocation whose terms of allocation are not in question. The prior question is who may reopen the rate, and it is seldom asked, in part because the rate does not present itself as a rate. It presents itself as the constitution of the body, which is to say, as the thing within which questions are asked rather than as a thing that may be asked about.

The third is a tentative design principle, offered as such.

An institution should place its rates of conversion at a *lower* level of entrenchment than its distributive rules, and not, as is universal, at a higher one.

The ground is that distributive error is visible and correctable, whereas rate error is neither. A party that has received too small a share can say so, and in terms the institution supplies. A party settled against at a rate it did not set is poorly placed to say so in those terms, since the terms are what it wishes to dispute. The provision hardest to see is therefore the provision that ought to be easiest to change, and the institutions now in existence have the matter the other way about.

10.3 THE PROBLEM OF EXIT

The theory of generative justice relies, at the decisive point, upon the agency of those who generate. They may leave. They may form a cooperative, keep what they make, and reorganise the loop on terms of their own. Much of the value of the theory rests upon this possibility, and where the possibility obtains the theory is powerful.

In the international system, exit is foreclosed, and the argument of the seventh section proposes that it is foreclosed in a deeper sense than the material one. A state that withdraws becomes, not a state that has declined an unfavourable settlement, but a state that does not register as a party, and it loses thereby less the benefit of the relation than the standing in which benefits are had.

Then who reorganises the loop?

The answer is unlikely to be the parties themselves, which is the answer that generative justice gives. This paper has no other to offer.

The question of who reorganises the loop is the principal open problem of the argument, and it is not a small one. It bears upon whether the theory of generative justice survives transposition to the international level, or whether it remains a theory of communities in which the door is open and becomes, when carried to a system in which the door is shut, a description of a hope rather than a programme.

10.4 THE PROBLEM OF LEVELS

A second problem, recorded above and restated here as a problem of governance.

A loop may be generative at the level of the state and extractive one level below. A transfer that raises a state's capacity to generate may raise it by concentrating that capacity in a metropolitan centre which stands to its own periphery as the donor stands to it. An institution that certified the loop as generative would then have certified an extraction it had not examined.

The framework must eventually be a multi-level one. It is not one here, and until it is, it

should be applied with the knowledge that it may prove complicit at the level it declines to examine.

11 CASES AS TESTS

The cases that follow are tests rather than illustrations. Each is chosen because it discriminates between this framework and a named rival, and each is stated so that it might come out against the framework. Where a case would fail to discriminate, it is omitted, however vivid.

11.1 THE PRODUCTION LINE AND THE DESIGN CAPABILITY

This tests the criterion of the fourth section.

Two transfers of technology of equal monetary value are made to comparable recipients. In the first the recipient acquires the capacity to operate a process; in the second it acquires the capacity to design one. The prediction is that the two will diverge in the rate of subsequent independent innovation and in survival under severance of supply, and will do so even where the material ledgers are identical and the money transferred the same.

What would falsify it. Should recipients of process transfers show the same rate of subsequent unanticipated innovation as recipients of design transfers, the distinction between output and independent capacity is measuring little, and the criterion should be abandoned.

11.2 THE COLONY WITH A POSITIVE LEDGER

This tests the sixth section against three rivals at once, and it is the paper's principal case.

The case is chosen precisely because the material accounting runs in the colony's favour: net capital inward, infrastructure built, schools founded, mortality reduced. Generative justice should find no injustice here, since value flowed toward the generators. Unequal exchange should find none, since it detects exploitation through a negative balance. The sociology of commensuration finds power and, by its own commitment, declines to call it unjust.

The framework advanced here finds the injustice and locates it in the foreclosure of any position from which the rate might have been reopened.

What would falsify it. Should it be shown that the injustice in such cases is fully accounted for by a negative flow once the accounting has been done properly, the rate is doing little work in the explanation and the framework is redundant. Much of the paper's claim to increment rests upon this case, and the case is offered in that knowledge.

11.3 ASSISTANCE IN EXCHANGE FOR VOTES

This tests the fifth section, and it tests two of the three evasions in a single case.

Development assistance is exchanged for support in multilateral bodies. The loop resists separation into registers, since its two sides are constitutively of different kinds, and the second evasion therefore fails within it. And the loop is routinely monetised in the literature, the value of the assistance being priced and the value of the vote estimated by the price the assistance commanded, so that the first evasion is performed openly and may be watched failing: the

price of the vote is derived from the assistance, the adequacy of the assistance is then assessed against the price of the vote, and the circle is closed without remark.

11.4 THE GIFT REFUSED AND THE GIFT ACCEPTED

This tests the sixth and seventh sections.

Two diplomatic gifts, structurally identical in every material respect: the same value, the same occasion, the same relation between the parties. The first is refused as insulting. The second is accepted.

On a material accounting the two cases are alike, and no ledger distinguishes them. The difference lies in whether the conversion was accepted, which is to say, in whether the recipient consented to the terms on which a thing of one kind was to count as settlement for a thing of another.

What would falsify it. Should the acceptance and the refusal leave no persisting consequences, so that the relation proceeds alike whichever occurred, the settlement was epiphenomenal and the sixth section is idle.

11.5 UNFAVOURABLE RATES UNDER AVAILABLE EXIT

This tests the mechanism of the seventh section, and it is the case on which that section stakes itself.

The prediction is that a state's acceptance of an unfavourable settlement will track its dependence upon the relation *for recognition as an actor*, and will track only weakly its material dependence and the availability of material alternatives. Two states materially alike, with alternatives alike, should differ in what they will accept according to how much of their standing as parties is constituted by the relation in question.

What would falsify it. Should acceptance prove fully explained by material dependence, the mechanism is superfluous and should be discarded. Little else in the paper depends upon it.

11.6 THE COLD WAR AS A SUSTAINING LOOP

This tests the incompatibility asserted in the fourth section, and it is included because it is the case that realism claims most confidently as its own.

By the realist criterion the case is a success: a system that did not collapse, a distribution of capabilities that each party laboured continuously to keep level, a balance sustained across four decades. The framework advanced here predicts that over the same period the independent generative capacity of each bloc, in every domain other than the one in which the two were locked, declined or stagnated relative to a counterfactual in which the lock was absent.

The test is hard and the counterfactual difficult, and this is not concealed. It is included because a framework with little to say about the case realism most confidently claims would have declined the argument at the point where it is joined.

12 CONCLUSION

12.1 THE ARGUMENT

Power is not a primitive. It follows from generative differentiation, and deriving it rather than receiving it changes what may be asked about it. A theory that takes power as given is largely confined to asking how much of it there is. A theory that derives power from generation can ask whether a given power serves the generation from which it came.

Asymmetry is not injustice, and it resists removal that leaves generation standing. This is Eglash's insight, and what has been added here is the ontological ground it lacked. To which is joined a consequence that the relational theories of world politics have not drawn from the premise they share with this paper: relational ontology does not deliver harmony. It delivers the necessity of power, and with it the necessity of governing it.

In a loop that carries heterogeneous values, closure is a judgment rather than a fact. Something must be made to count as repayment for something of another kind, and the terms on which it is so made are not supplied by the values themselves. The rate is posited, and there is no correct one.

And where a party cannot withdraw from a relation without ceasing to count as a party, the strong form of resistance is unavailable to it. It is not placed to decline to be settled against. Commensuration then ceases to be a contested boundary and becomes a constitutive condition of the relation.

The international case is less one further instance of the phenomenon that the sociology of commensuration has described than its limit, at which the phenomenon changes character.

Realism, finally, is a regime of settlement. It converts recognition, justice, identity, and culture into a single scalar, and presents the conversion as a description of what moves states, where it is better understood as a stipulation about the terms on which their accounts are kept.

12.2 PROPOSALS NOT ESTABLISHED

That the position from which equivalences are declared is structurally the position for which things count. The mechanism explains what the alternatives do not, and that is a reason to entertain it rather than a demonstration.

That the normative condition, in the absence of a true rate, is the contestability of the rate. The proposal has a threshold problem and a capture problem, and it is uncomfortable in a case that ought to be easy.

That the mathematics of connections is more than a suggestive analogy for the structure of the problem. It has not been shown that the formalism licenses any inference the argument in words does not.

12.3 QUESTIONS LEFT OPEN

Who reorganises the loop when exit is foreclosed. The theory of generative justice answers that the generators do it themselves; in the international system they are seldom placed to, and this paper has no other answer. It is the central unsolved problem, and it bears upon whether generative justice survives its transposition.

Whether a loop generative at one level conceals extraction at the level below. The framework must eventually be multi-level. It is not one here.

How much contestability suffices. No threshold is given.

12.4 THE ARGUMENT COMPRESSED

Generative justice requires that value return to those who generate it. Where value is heterogeneous, return must be settled across registers, and settlement requires a rate that cannot be derived from what it settles.

The sociology of commensuration has shown that the setting of such a rate is a mode of power, and that the ordinary resistance to it is to refuse the metric outright.

This paper concerns the case in which that refusal is unavailable: in which a party is not placed to decline to be settled against, since to decline is to cease to count.

There, the condition of justice is not that the rate be fair, for there is no fair rate, but that it remain open to being reopened.

12.5 POSITION WITHIN THE PROGRAMME

Two remarks, offered without inflation.

Within the wider programme of which this paper forms part, the argument is the political instance of a structure worked out elsewhere. The settlement of heterogeneous values across a relation from which neither party can withdraw is formally close to the settlement of heterogeneous gifts within an intimacy, and the correspondence is a theorem rather than a metaphor. It is not developed here.

Within the programme's governance branch, the paper supplies a design criterion, which is the contestability of rates, and states the obstacle that must be overcome if the criterion is to be more than a wish. The obstacle is the foreclosure of exit, and it has not been overcome.

The paper closes, as it must, on the thing it does not do. It has argued that a party which cannot leave a relation is poorly placed to refuse the terms on which it is settled against, and that its remaining recourse is to contest them. It has not shown how such a party acquires the standing, the language, and the forum in which contestation would be possible. That is the question, and it is left open because it is open.

REFERENCES

- Amin, Samir. *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. *Value in Ethics and Economics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Bachrach, Peter, and Morton S. Baratz. "Two Faces of Power." *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962): 947–952.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Broome, André, and Joel Quirk. "Governing the World at a Distance: The Practice of Global Benchmarking." *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 5 (2015): 819–841.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Cox, Robert W. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–155.

- Dahl, Robert A. "The Concept of Power." *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 201–215.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1968].
- Eglash, Ron. "An Introduction to Generative Justice." *Teknokultura* 13, no. 2 (2016): 369–404.
- Emmanuel, Arghiri. *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972.
- Espeland, Wendy Nelson. *The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality, and Identity in the American Southwest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Espeland, Wendy Nelson, and Mitchell L. Stevens. "Commensuration as a Social Process." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 313–343.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963 [1961].
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Hornborg, Alf. "Unequal Exchange Is Not Primarily about Monetary Value." *Nature Communications* 16 (2025).
- Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus, and Daniel H. Nexon. "Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics." *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 291–332.
- Keohane, Robert O., and Joseph S. Nye. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.
- Kindleberger, Charles P. *The World in Depression, 1929–1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- Krasner, Stephen D. "State Power and the Structure of International Trade." *World Politics* 28, no. 3 (1976): 317–347.
- Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan, 1974.
- Maturana, Humberto R., and Francisco J. Varela. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. New York: Norton, 1990 [1925].
- Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Mennicken, Andrea, and Wendy Nelson Espeland. "What's New with Numbers? Sociological Approaches to the Study of Quantification." *Annual Review of Sociology* 45 (2019): 223–245.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Knopf, 1948.
- Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.
- Organski, A. F. K. *World Politics*. New York: Knopf, 1958.
- Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1944.
- Porter, Theodore M. *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Qin, Yaqing. *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Qin, Yaqing. "The Zhongyong Dialectic: A Bridge into the Relational World." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 17, no. 2 (2024): 206–221.
- Radin, Margaret Jane. *Contested Commodities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Raz, Joseph. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Simondon, Gilbert. *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*. Translated by Taylor Adkins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020 [1958].
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Sunstein, Cass R. "Incommensurability and Valuation in Law." *Michigan Law Review* 92, no. 4 (1994): 779–861.
- Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

- Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.