

The Relation of No Relation, and Relational Activism

Charles Bingham
Simon Fraser University

What is “the relation of no relation”? It occurs when one relation is abandoned in favor of another. Sometimes the very task of relation is to abolish itself in order that another relation, not the original relation, might take its place. In the abandonment of relation, there *is* relation. But since the task of relation is in this case to break itself, this relation might be called a relation of no relation.

The relation of no relation occurs when a teacher leaves his or her student to offer that student a relation with another teacher. Or it can be a relation recommended by one teacher to happen between *another* teacher and a particular student. And this educational relation of no relation occurs because the original teaching relation is not fully educative. As Avi Mintz notes in “The Midwife as Matchmaker: Socrates and Relational Pedagogy,” Socrates participates in this relation of no relation regularly. He recommends pairings between students and teachers. He seems to know who will be a good teacher for whom, which minds and which temperaments will complement each other.

In this essay, I propose that the relation of no relation has reverberations that are not only relational, but political as well. It is not enough to note that the relation forming of the “matchmaker,” that is, the act of creating relations other than one’s own, is a *relational* act of Socratic pedagogy. This matter has been well reviewed in Mintz’s essay. It must also be noted that this matchmaking practice is a political enactment. Here, I want to argue that this political aspect of relationality should change the way that social theorists describe the school as a political space.

Currently, the politics of pedagogy can be sorted into three types: critical pedagogy, political liberalism, or policy creation. In the first case, educational spaces are deemed political because power is operative everywhere, operative within “ideological state apparatuses” such as schools. Schools are political spaces because they serve to promulgate hegemonic notions of life in its academic and nonacademic forms. The stated curriculum serves to reproduce hegemony, but so does *hidden* curriculum. Following political liberalism, the school is deemed political because it is a public space. Children and adults leave the hearth and enter the *polis* when they enter schools and universities. While it might be argued that some schools are less public than others because of their funding and cultural makeup, the separation of school from family life is enough to validate the liberal version of education’s political situatedness. A third version of educational politics refers to the drafting of public policy that guides educational practice. Accordingly, schools are said to be political because the policies that run them are subject to political debate.

What we can note about each of these versions of educational politics is that they do not take into account the relational lives of students and teachers in schools.

Whether from the critical perspective, the liberal perspective, or the policy perspective, relation is seen to be a *nonpolitical* aspect of pedagogy. From the critical perspective, hegemony flows from the ranks of privilege, through the mouthpiece of the teacher, to the receptive ears of students. In this case, the relation of student to teacher serves to *transmit* hegemony, but hegemony itself is the benchmark of politics. Relation is merely an instrument in the service of hegemony's transmission. From the liberal perspective, relation is not only irrelevant to the political life of education; it is even antithetical to the political role of public education. Students come from the warm hearth of the home to the cold *polis* of educational institutions. Relation is central precisely where politics is not. From this perspective, the student-teacher relation is a fading remnant of the hearth rather than a constituent aspect of the *polis*. The policy perspective is equally dismissive of relationality as a constituent element of educational politics. For it is policy that creates the circumstances that enable educational relations. Without policy, schools would not be funded and there would be no teacher-student relations anyway.

Let us now return to Socrates-as-midwife, Plato's Socrates. As Mintz points out so well, Socrates matchmaking is an ancient form of the pedagogical relation. I must add that Plato's Socrates-as-midwife is also an ancient form of political relationality. Just as Plato's actors are not far removed from the political milieu of Plato's *Republic*, so Socrates' relationality has political connotations. Jacques Rancière points out that Plato presents us with an "archepolitics."¹ In the ancient form of "archepolitics," politics is occupied with government of the best over the less good. As Rancière points out, this ancient form of politics is not as different from modern forms as one might think, for the aim of political philosophy has always been to draw a design for "the part of those who have no part."² That is, political philosophy has been at pains to analyze who is most able to speak for whom.

This view of political philosophy has its image if not its pedagogical embodiment in the figure of Socrates. For just as Socrates is *the best* teacher, so too is he the best equipped to decide who should teach whom. He is, as Mintz points out, a matchmaker as well as a midwife. The matchmaker enters into a relation of no relation, and by doing so he also decides the fate of "those who have no part." The reverse side of Socrates' role as matchmaker is his role as legislator. When Socrates suggests who might teach whom, he is also speaking on the part of those other teachers who have no part. He is, in this sense, entering the realm of *political* philosophy as well as the realm of educational philosophy. He is deciding who needs to be spoken for and for what purposes. He is practicing the government of the best over the less good.

Consider then the government of students. If a less good teacher is recommended by the best teacher, one assumes that the designated teacher is recommended because he or she is at least *a bit* good at teaching. For the student, the matter is somewhat less felicitous. The student is not a *part* of the relation of no relation; he or she is the *object* of that relation. The student is the one "who has no part," the decided-for. The part of those who have no part is taken on by the-teacher-who-has-no-part, who in turn is nominated through a relation of no relation. Put more simply:

in the political economy of Socratic relations, Socrates has a voice, other teachers have less of a voice, and students have none at all.

What we learn from Socrates' relational pedagogy is not only that it was, indeed, relational. We learn an even deeper lesson about the political life of relational pedagogy, a lesson about today's educational politics that has been equally ignored by critical theorists, political liberals, and policy makers. We learn about the politics of relationality. Educational relations lend themselves to political activism because such relations are always contested. It is not enough to advocate relational pedagogy for there will always be circumstances wherein students are not happy with the relations that are foisted on them by their "best" teachers. There will always be "less good" teachers who do not like the relations foisted on them by their "best" master teachers. When these things come to pass, the only way for students and teachers to leave the realm of those "who have no part" is the way of political activism. It is only through political activism that relations change — to insure the best relations for all students and teachers, rather than relations decided by the best people.

Relational activism is different from the activism of critical theory or political theory or policy analysis. Relational activism acknowledges that there will always be gaps between the actual circumstances of those who are nominated for relation and the desires of those same nominees. It acknowledges that there is no silver bullet — no critical theory, no liberal paradigm, and no public policy — that can eradicate such gaps for all times. Unlike current perspectives, it does not deem relation as antithetical to political action. Instead, relational activism acknowledges that relation is part of what it means to be free, that freedom entails the act of speaking and being heard, and that one must have an Other in order to speak and be heard.

Relational activism also acknowledges that institutions such as schools are entirely incapable of producing empowering, freedom-enhancing relations across the board. Indeed, no institution and no particular social relation can do so, but schools are particularly unreliable when it comes to relational agency. Because there are many teachers for each student, there will always be many awkward relations. Teachers and students will always be mismatched, and these mismatches will always be ripe for change. There will always be relations of no relation and the resultant voiceless students and teachers whose part is no part. Empowering relations can be achieved through relational activism, but cannot be institutionally mandated. Empowering relations can be achieved when one person or a group of people demand to speak to an Other or a group of Others — and when they are heard. Speaking and being heard is both the enactment and the goal of relational activism. Only this sort of activism takes the part of those who have no part within a relation of no relation.

1. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

2. *Ibid.*, 29–30.