

Explanation and Temporality in International Relations

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Abstract : What makes for a good explanation? Twenty years after Wendt's important treatment of constitution and causation, non-causal explanations (sometimes referred to as 'understanding', or 'descriptive inference') have become, if not mainstream, at least accepted within International Relations. This article proceeds in two parts: firstly, it examines closely Wendt's constitutional claims, and while it agrees there is a difference between causal and constitutional, rejects the view that constitutional explanations lack temporality. In fact, this author concludes that a constitutional argument is only possible if it relies upon a more foundational, causal argument. Secondly, through theoretical analysis of the constitutional argument, this research seeks to delineate temporal and non-temporal ways of explaining within International Relations. This article concludes that while the constitutional explanation, like other logical arguments, including comparative, and counter-factual, are not truly non-causal explanations, they are not bound as tightly to the 'real world' as temporal arguments such as cause-effect, process tracing, or even interpretivist accounts. However, like mathematical models, non-temporal arguments should aim for empirical testability as well as internal consistency. This work aims to give clear theoretical grounding to those authors using non-temporal arguments, but also to encourage them, and their positivist critics, to engage in thoroughgoing empirical tests.

Keywords : causal explanation, constitutional understanding, empirical, temporality

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