

Part 1

Theory

1 Protean Power and Control Power: Conceptual Analysis

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In 2016, the Director of National Intelligence told the Senate Armed Service Committee that “unpredictable instability” is the new normal.¹ But is this a *new* normal? After all, surprises have been far from rare in world politics. Mere weeks before the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution in February 1917, Lenin predicted that the Russian revolution would come only after his death. Unexpected peoples’ revolutions toppled regimes in Asia in the 1980s; ended the Cold War in 1989; led to the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991; and convulsed the Middle East during the Arab Spring of 2010–12. In 2016, voters in Britain and the United States handed the incumbent parties and their neoliberal programs stinging unexpected defeats. And we were similarly unprepared in recent years for the financial crises of 1997 and 2008; Al Qaeda’s and ISIS’s entry onto the international security landscape; tidal waves of migrants heading for developed regions’ southern borders; and the social changes brought about by radical innovations in science and technology. How do we make sense of the unexpected in world politics?

In answering this question, scholars scramble to recalculate power configurations and alignments, point to distinct forms of control, such as soft power² and discursive framing,³ or simply invoke exogenous change as the source of puzzling surprise.⁴ Steadfastly, they hold on to the assumption that the world is dominated by calculable risk. If only we could accurately map and measure all of the different components of power, we would know the probabilities of outcomes, at least in principle. Unexpected change is typically thought of as part of the diffusion of the power to control events and peoples. This is an old trope of international relations scholarship. Harvard professor and power theorist Joseph Nye restates the insights of liberals and realists like Ray Vernon and Susan Strange from decades past: power is diffusing away from states to a kaleidoscope of non-state actors.⁵ Repeating Henry Kissinger’s arguments

¹ Garamone 2016. ² Nye 2011. ³ Haas 2002; Price 1998.

⁴ Krasner 1984; Streeck and Thelen 2005. ⁵ Nye 2011: 118–22.

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from the late 1960s, a former head of Policy Planning under President George W. Bush and the current President of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard Haass, concurs: “Power is more distributed in more hands than at any time in history.”⁶ Although the diffusion of power is often not aligned with the interests of political actors accustomed to exercising control, it is a relatively orderly and predictable process that lends itself to social scientific analysis.⁷ Rationality points to the feasibility of controlling legible, linear history. And this model of a “general linear reality” writes Andrew Abbott, “has come to influence our actual construing of social reality.”⁸ We put the unexpected aside at the cost of being tripped up by it time and time again.

This failing, we argue, has two roots. An exclusive focus on existing control power capabilities overlooks the actualization of potential capacities that mark what we call here protean power.⁹ We define protean power as the effect of improvisational and innovative responses to uncertainty that arise from actors’ creativity and agility in response to uncertainty. Furthermore, the assumption that the world is governed only by risk overlooks the pervasiveness of uncertainties not amenable to probability calculations. The result is to underline the efficacy of control power and slight the importance of protean power. Unexpected changes or shocks are not exogenous to how power relations unfold, but to how our theories depict them. The actualization of potential power capacities in conditions of uncertainty always loom. Machiavelli is not alone in reminding us of the importance of chance in the affairs of states. Actors at the front lines of financial, humanitarian, energy, environmental, and other political crises routinely acknowledge the pervasive intermingling of the known and unknown, and direct our sight to potentialities in the shaping of power dynamics.¹⁰ The fluidity of those dynamics is what prompted former President Obama to echo Thucydides by invoking “hope in the face of uncertainty.”¹¹

Our argument embraces the usefulness of risk-based power calculations in many situations. At the same time, we must take account of the

⁶ Haass 2017: 11.

⁷ It is, therefore, understandable that diffusion has become an important subject of study in international relations, political science, and the social sciences. See Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2014.

⁸ Abbott 1988: 169.

⁹ “Protean” derives from the sea god Proteus in Greek mythology who had shape-changing capacities. We thank Lukas Linsi who pushed us to adopt a term that, according to Google Books, is quite common in many fields of scholarship though not in the analysis of world politics.

¹⁰ Rumsfeld 2011.

¹¹ Obama 2016. In the Melian Dialogue the Athenians call “hope danger’s comforter.” Strauss 2008: 353 (5.103).

existence of uncertainty that is experienced as familiar by most international actors. The power to control thus must always be viewed in its relation to protean power, which is not a mere appendage of control power. Instead, it can pass from potentiality to actuality in a flash, changing power's terrain, often dramatically. Effects of actions in contexts of risks, experienced as such, can be understood in terms of control power; effects of actions in contexts of uncertainty, experienced as such, in terms of protean power. The two kinds of power co-exist and co-evolve.

How, for example, was it possible for the Berlin Wall to fall? The answer to this question encapsulates our central point: the confluence of two different kinds of power. Mary Sarotte focuses on the accidental nature of the Wall's opening. Her analysis stresses the agency of local actors and historical contingency such as the misreading of a list of government instructions that was handed to a government spokesman named Günter Schabowski during a press conference on the evening of November 9, 1989.¹² That mistake permitted people to stream across a border that had been hermetically sealed for a generation. This constituted a heartening, though rare, event of citizens disarming peacefully a repressive regime. People power as the actualization of protean potentialities was one part of the story. Diplomatic and financial control power was the other. During the 1980s, economic power drained away from East Berlin as the GDR leadership became dependent on Western capital. Lacking sufficient productivity gains in manufacturing to serve the escalating cost of its debts, the unforeseen collapse of the price of oil in 1985 sharply reduced earnings from the GDR's most important export product, mineral oil refined from Soviet crude.¹³ Gorbachev's reform program in the Soviet Union put additional pressure on the East German government. East Germany's leadership faced only unappealing options: sharp reductions in living standards or blood on the streets. Permitting emigration in the hope of further West German loans with lenient conditions thus became the preferred policy that the government planned to adopt before the end of 1989. While the specific details of what happened on the night of November 9, 1989 were contingent, the diffusion of control power away from East Berlin was central for matters to evolve as they did. Significantly, the GDR's financial and political straits produced consequences that Western actors did not foresee.¹⁴

To help us better understand the unexpected in world politics, our argument in this chapter takes three steps. First, we begin the analysis by reviewing the discussion of the different faces of power, ending with the notion of power demarcating fields of political possibilities. Second, we

¹² Sarotte 2014. ¹³ Hertle 1999. ¹⁴ Bartel 2017: 395–465.

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distinguish between two kinds of power. Control power seeks to dominate; operating in a world of risk, it penetrates and diffuses. Protean power results from the improvisations and innovations of agile actors and processes of the actualization of potentialities; coping with uncertainty, it creates and circulates among actors and sites. Control power operates most clearly, and reliably, in situations marked by calculable risk that actors experience as such; protean power arises in situations of deep-seated uncertainty that actors often experience as a crisis. Because they can create room for each other, the two types of power are not mutually exclusive. As hopes of deliberately controlling outcomes diminish, protean power potentials loom large. The balance between them follows from an interaction of two dimensions affecting actor practices: the degree to which such actors experience the world to be risky or uncertain and whether it is, in fact, so. Third, in contrast to conventional international relations scholarship, we show that control and protean power analysis requires us to conceive of world politics as an open rather than a closed system.

Power

One of the many paradoxes of power is this. It is an explanatory construct practitioners and scholars of international relations cannot do without. It is also a concept that needs to be explained, rather than do the explaining. The prevailing understanding that power is a thing we “have” or “lack” in order to create a desirable effect is a starting point of our political experience and analysis.¹⁵ In the study of international politics, for example, power is widely understood to be about capabilities typically measured by indicators such as military spending, the size of the economy, or technological advancement; articles and books proceeding in this manner fill libraries. Such capabilities are then used to explain or predict specific effects or outcomes.

Yet what remains normal in the analysis of international relations, theorists of power have dismissed as inadequate long ago. Unfortunately, their writings have had little discernible effects on the field of international relations, which treats the concept of power as a synonym for more or less narrowly construed actor capabilities. While not denying the importance of the base and means of power, theorists of power insist that power is grounded in the relationships among actors rather than in their attributes.¹⁶ Along with David Baldwin, we thus view “the elements of

¹⁵ Hayward 1998.

¹⁶ Guzzini 2016a: 3–6. See also Baldwin 2013: 288; 2016: 50, 77, 128.

national power” approach with its exclusive focus on national capability as profoundly misleading.¹⁷

A relational view of power has been the shared premise of a vigorous and prolonged debate about the different faces of power, here understood as different forms of control. Ultimately, the debate has centered on where and how to draw a distinction between “free action and action shaped by the action of others.”¹⁸ Generally speaking, over time scholars have broadened substantially the empirical context where we should look for the effects of power.

For Lasswell and Kaplan “political science, as an empirical discipline, is the study of the shaping and sharing of power.”¹⁹ Building on what he called Lasswell’s seminal contribution, Robert Dahl started the modern debate with his definition of power as the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not.²⁰ Dahl drew a distinction between the base of an actor’s power and the means of employing the base, on the one hand, and differences in the scope of responses elicited and the number of comparable respondents, on the other. For the purpose of comparing the power of actors, Dahl insisted, we need to focus primarily not on the actions of A but on the responses of B;²¹ power base and means, though important, do not provide us with a comparison of the power of actors.

In an important critique of Dahl, Bachrach, and Baratz broadened the context of the effects of power by drawing a different distinction between free and constrained action. They focused on political dynamics that Dahl’s analysis of bilateral power relations, revealed in concrete decisions about key issues, blended out. Two in particular: power exercised to limit the scope of the political process to safe issues; and power exercised to avoid taking a decision. Non-participation and non-decisions are effects of power that can stop a conflict from arising and from being acted upon. Unobservable processes and issues thus can be the effects of power and help to maintain the status quo in the absence of overt conflict.²²

Steven Lukes broadened further the context where we should track free and constrained action. He pointed to a basic agreement between Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz. All three assumed that power was exercised by actors. Lukes focused also on the effects of structures that can shape the wants, needs, and desires through the impersonal workings of socio-cultural arrangements and practices.²³ To have effects, power does not

¹⁷ Baldwin 1989: 166. ¹⁸ Hayward 1998: 3; 2000: 1–39.

¹⁹ Lasswell and Kaplan 1950: xiv. ²⁰ Dahl 1957: 202–3. ²¹ *Ibid.*: 206.

²² Bachrach and Baratz 1962; 1963.

²³ Lukes 2006a; 2005: 485–91; 2006b. For an empirical application of this perspective, see Gaventa 1982. Despite its greater emphasis on political agency than structure, and

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need to be intentional or active.²⁴ Lukes argued that power should neither be reduced to its exercise nor its means, and that it operates within and upon structures.²⁵ His theory highlighted structural features of society that make actors powerful without having to exert control directly. Yet, like Dahl, Lukes insisted that we need to study both the agents and the subjects of power. Power is about an agent's potential capacity and specifically the scope for personal reasoning and self-definition. "Power identifies a capacity: power is a potentiality, not an actuality – indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized."²⁶ Lukes' theory is thus both subject- and agent-centered.²⁷

Building on and adapting different aspects of the writings of Michel Foucault, theorists of power, including in the field of international relations, have broadened still further the context of tracking the effects of power.²⁸ Foucault's analysis is subject- rather than actor-centric. Power both controls and generates through every-day mechanisms of discipline. It creates the characters of actors and streamlines, among others, their sexual, health and mental practices so that they fit existing social and political arrangements. Disciplinary power molds souls and inscribes bodies.²⁹

Informed by Lukes and Foucault in particular, Clarissa Hayward's subsequent analysis proves especially fruitful for our purposes. Hayward argues that power's mechanisms are best conceived not as instruments that powerful actors use but as social boundaries. "Power defines fields of possibility."³⁰ Laws, rules, norms, customs, identities, and social standards are such boundaries. They enable and constrain all forms of action, including for the most powerful. Actors can change the shape and

despite its lack of specificity about different modes of persuasion, "soft power" has considerable affinity with Lukes' third face of power. See Nye 2011; Lukes 2005: 485–91.

²⁴ Lukes 2005: 479. ²⁵ Hayward and Lukes 2008: 6–7, 11–12.

²⁶ Lukes 2005: 478. See also *ibid.*: 479, 484, 492–93.

²⁷ This is in contrast to Foucault and Nye, with the first refusing to draw this important distinction and the second failing to do so. *Ibid.*: 492.

²⁸ Barnett and Duvall 2005; Reed 2013; Digeser 1992; Neumann and Sending 2010; Krasner 2013. See also a further discussion of Foucault in Chapter 13. It is worth noting that in the field of American politics power has ceased to be a topic of intense discussion as attention has shifted toward the concept of information. See Moe 2005; Pierson 2015.

²⁹ In recent decades critical security and political economy studies have produced a substantial body of scholarship that analyzes power dynamics in world politics from this perspective. For some examples, see Bially-Mattern (2005) and Solomon (2014) on soft power; Diez (2013) and Manners (2013) on Europe's normative power; Epstein (2011), Hagström (2005) and Krebs (2015) on discursive and narrative power; Seabrooke (2010) and Hopf (2010) on everyday and habitual power; and Sending and Neumann (2006) and Guzzini (2012) on governmentality and dispersed power. For two reviews of recent writings on "relationalism" and the "practice turn" and historical institutionalism, see, respectively, McCourt 2016 and Fioretos 2011.

³⁰ Hayward and Lukes 2008: 10, 14, 16; Hayward 1998: 12; 2000.

direction of power through practices that result from both structured fields of possibility and actor endowments. Conceived as social boundaries and endowments, power defines what is possible for self and other. Contrary to Dahl's strong rejection, "action at a distance" for Hayward is an identifiable and important site for tracking power effects.³¹ In global politics, the possible can be constrained or enabled at long distance without the existence of any discernible connection between the source and the target of power. To inquire into the workings of power we should not ask "how is power distributed" as we seek to distinguish between conditions of power and powerlessness. We should ask instead "how do power's mechanisms define the (im)possible, the (im)probable, the natural, the normal?"³² What matters is the mutability of asymmetries in power that define the field of what is possible.³³

Control and Protean Power

Power is an elusive concept. Hence, no single framework can "claim to have found the essence of power."³⁴ Instead, each partial conceptualization can provide some important insights about key aspects of power.³⁵ Typically, analysis focuses exclusively on the shifts in the dynamics of control power operating under conditions of risk. The concept of protean power broadens the analysis by acknowledging the existence and explanatory potential of power dynamics operating under conditions of uncertainty. Including both types of power promises more analytical breadth and a richer explication of unexpected change in world politics.³⁶ As a first step we distinguish between two ideal typical situations. When the context and the experience of power are marked either by risk or by uncertainty control and protean power form an ideal typical distinction (Table 1.1).

³¹ Dahl 1957: 204. Dahl argues that a necessary condition for the exercise of power is that "there is no action at a distance." Although he leaves the term "connection" undefined, Dahl argues that "unless there is some 'connection' between A and a, then no power relation can be said to exist . . . One must always find out whether there is a connection, or an opportunity for a connection, and if there is not, then one need proceed no further." Protean power operates in the space that Dahl acknowledges opaquely by leaving the terms "connection" and "opportunity for a connection" undefined. Also see Hayward 1998: 17–18.

³² Hayward 1998: 16. ³³ *Ibid.*: 20–21. ³⁴ Haugaard 2010: 420.

³⁵ Berenskoetter (2007: 2, 13–14) insists that international relations and the social sciences are lacking a fully articulated, general theory of power that integrates analysis across all existing power concepts and theoretical as well as meta-theoretical domains. We agree and do not believe that such a general theory is possible since the concept of power depends on the theoretical context in which it is deployed. See also Guzzini 2012.

³⁶ Hagström and Jerdén 2014: 350; Guzzini 2016b; Haugaard 2010.

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Table 1.1 *Control and Protean Power: Basic Comparison*

	Control power	Protean power
<i>Actor experience and underlying context</i>	Calculable risk	Incalculable uncertainty
<i>Mode of operation</i>	Direct and indirect	Indirect and direct
<i>Agency</i>	Capabilities deployed by <i>ex ante</i> identifiable agents lead to probabilistic outcomes	Potential capacities of agile actors improvise to find solutions to local problems with <i>ex ante</i> unknown effects on others and the system at large
<i>Primary focus</i>	Actuality	Potentiality
<i>Power operating through</i>	Direction and diffusion	Creation and circulation

Of all the theorists of power Robert Dahl has been most explicit about the close affinity between control power and risk. Probabilities of an event with and without the exercise of power is for Dahl an indispensable way of comparing the power of different actors.³⁷ Observations of the two different conditions may be difficult but are “not inherently impossible: they don’t defy the laws of nature as we understand them.”³⁸ Many decades after the quantum revolution in physics, Dahl’s appeal to the laws of nature remained Newtonian and was expressed in classical notions of probability. Half a century later there is no indication that conventional views of international politics have changed – even though it is time for international relations scholarship to wake up from its “deep Newtonian slumber.”³⁹ Arguably, today quantum physics and quantum probabilities define the laws of nature “as we understand them.” They resonate with the concepts of possibility and potentiality that are central to protean power dynamics.⁴⁰

The incalculable provides the context and experience of what we call protean power. It arises either through direct relations between actors or indirectly in the follow-on effects that reconfigure complex systems. Protean power is the effect of actors’ improvised and innovative responses to an incalculable environment or their experience of the world as equally uncertain. This type of power cannot be harnessed consciously. It is a creatively generated shift in accepted problem-solving that circulates across different sites of political life. It emerges in specific moments. It is an inextricable part of variable combinations of risk and uncertainty

³⁷ Dahl 1957: 206–7, 210. ³⁸ Ibid.: 214. ³⁹ Kavalski 2012. ⁴⁰ Wendt 2015.

that encompass affirmation and refusal as well as improvisation and innovation.

Protean power has generative effects on the broader context. These can be entirely unanticipated and as such bypass all attempts to exert control. While the processes underlying the two power types may co-occur, and converge, their relation to actor experiences of the world are diametrically opposed. From the perspective of those amassing control capabilities, the effects of protean power in settings of uncertainty enhance the unpredictable and result in frustration.

In our understanding, the unexpected is an integral part of power dynamics. This means that we should add the concept of what is possible to what is probable and what is natural. The mutability of the world goes beyond the predictable effects that constitute control power. It includes convention-defying uncertainties that destabilize the world. Admittedly, in common language risk and uncertainty are often used as synonyms. The confusion between the two concepts is both perfectly understandable and intellectually damaging. The *Merriam Webster* dictionary, for example, defines risk in terms of uncertainty, as “the possibility that something bad or unpleasant (such as an injury or a loss) will happen.”⁴¹ Despite this confusion, we should distinguish clearly between the concepts of risk and uncertainty. Both are relevant for an analysis of power and unexpected change.

Terminological confusion has been deepened by a questionable translation of Max Weber’s analysis into English. A widely accepted view holds that Weber’s definition of power is operating only in the world of risk – power as the likelihood of achieving one’s will while overcoming the resistance of others. The conventional view is based on a problematic and theoretically constricting translation of the capacious German concept of *Chance*. That term has two valid translations: one probabilistic risk (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*), the other possibilistic uncertainty (*Möglichkeit*).⁴² Following Weber, we hold that power operates in the world of risk and uncertainty. Actors accomplish their objectives *over* others in dominating relations (*potestas*), as well as *with* others in enabling relations (*potentia*). Weber’s conceptualization of power thus invites us to look

⁴¹ See at: www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/risk, last accessed April 22, 2016. See also O’Malley 2004.

⁴² Weber 1925: 28. Although we develop it in a different direction than he does, we are indebted on this point to Felix Berenskoetter’s important observation (Berenskoetter 2007: 21, fn.4). Talcott Parsons insisted in his translation of the German concept of *Chance* that the concept should be stripped of all mathematical or statistical connotations, suggesting that “chance” could be measured numerically, a caution that has been conspicuously absent in the quantitative and behaviorist tradition of American political science and international relations research. See Guzzini 2016a: 7, fn. 8.