

**Protean Power and Uncertainty: Exploring the Unexpected in World Politics**

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**Abstract**

This article introduces the concept of “protean power” as the basis for a better analysis of unanticipated events in world politics. Protean power is the effect of actors’ agility as they adapt in situations of uncertainty. This definition departs from conventional definitions of power, which focus on actors’ evolving ability to exercise control in situations of calculable risk and their consequent ability to cause outcomes these actors deem desirable. We argue that this conventional view is overly confining; inclusion of protean power in our analytical models helps us to better account for unexpected change in world politics. Notably, actors respond to shifts between risk and uncertainty, in both context and experience, with *affirmation, refusal, improvisation, or innovation*. In doing so, they create room for control and protean power as effects, rather than causes, of such practices. However, protean power should not replace control power. These two basic forms of power relate to one another, in a variety of ways, in complex contexts characterized by both risk and uncertainty.

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Power confronts scholars with many paradoxes. It is an explanatory construct that practitioners and scholars of international relations cannot do without. But it is also a concept that needs to be explained, rather than doing the explaining. The prevailing understanding of power—that is, a thing we “have” or “lack” in order to create a desirable effect—provides a starting point for much of our political experience and analysis. Scholars of international politics, for example, widely understand power to concern capabilities. They typically measure power by indicators such as military spending, the size of the economy or technological advancement; articles and books proceeding in this manner fill libraries. Analysts then use such capabilities to explain, or predict, specific effects or outcomes. Over time,

scholars have broadened substantially the empirical context in which we should look for the effects of power. In doing so, they have moved beyond the materialist conception of capabilities favored by realists.

These and other efforts remain limited in an important way: they fail to draw a clear distinction between risk and uncertainty (Strange 1988; 1996; Mann 1986-2013). Thus, this article extends an invitation to scholars and practitioners of power—in both domestic and world politics—to incorporate uncertainty into a more complex analysis of power dynamics. This change in perspective does not enhance our predictive accuracy. However, it does add depth of understanding and a fuller explication of how power arises, operates, and dissipates in situations that are both risky and uncertain (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, chps. 1, 2, 13).

“Protean power” is the name we give to the results of practices of agile actors coping with uncertainty. That same condition bedevils and frustrates a multitude of Leviathans exercising control under assumed conditions of risk.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to relatively predictable control power, protean power stems from processes that are “versatile” or “tending and able to change frequently and easily” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Protean power emerges in uncertain contexts—which are often experienced as such—when previous performance provides an unreliable foundation for future moves. Although protean power follows from intentional actions, the outcomes of those actions are unforeseen and unforeseeable at the outset. Still, rather than emerging as a competing force, protean power often closely relates to, and co-evolves with, control power.

Protean power responds to, and deepens, unanticipated change. It often emerges as a response to crises that catch everyone by surprise—such as China’s unexpected rise (Ang 2016), the opening of the Berlin Wall (Sarotte 2014), and the Arab Spring (Toska 2017). Creative moves and their power effects can alter basic rules of the game; they can leap over or circumvent deeply grooved pathways of control power. Protean power stops us from assuming away the unknown. Instead, it makes us focus on how actors handle the unexpected with improvisation and innovation, deepening uncertainty as they go along. “Viral” manifestations of protean power invite attentive actors to adopt and normalize emergent innovations, converting what was once a novelty into best practice and eventually into an attribute of

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<sup>1</sup> “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.

control power. Nothing about protean power is inevitable; all of it is unpredictable. Its signature in world politics is real. Scholars of world politics, we contend, have missed it largely because they have not looked in the right way or in the right places.<sup>2</sup>

We begin by briefly contextualizing our argument within the existing literature on power. We then discuss control and protean power; explore political practices under conditions of risk and uncertainty; and show that international-relations scholarship has, in recent decades, neglected uncertainty altogether. This explains why scholars have failed to recognize protean power and its effects. We conclude with some final thoughts about the implications of taking protean power seriously.

## Power

When it comes to the study of power, international-relations scholars have persisted with approaches that theorists long ago dismissed as inadequate. While not denying the importance of its basis and means, theorists of power insist that power is grounded in the relationships among actors rather than their attributes (Guzzini 2016a, 3-6; see also Baldwin 2013, 288; Baldwin 2016, 50, 77, 128). As David Baldwin (1989, 166) argues, “the elements of national power” approach, with its exclusive focus on national capability, is profoundly misleading. Power must be understood in relational and situational terms. Adequate analysis of power should highlight both its causes and its effects (Baldwin 2016, 3, 32, 43-44, 45-47, 69). Viewed from this perspective, the “relational turn”—as well as new versions of constructivism in international relations—are perhaps better called the “relational re-turn” to a position on which power theorists have insisted all along (McCourt 2016; Goddard and Nexon 2016; Fioretos 2011; Best and Walters 2013).

Indebted to Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), Robert Dahl (1957, 202-3) started the modern debate with his definition of power as the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not. He drew a distinction between the base of an actor’s power and the means of employing that base, on the one hand, and differences in the scope of responses elicited as well as the number of comparable

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<sup>2</sup> The same general answer, but without explicit mention of power, was suggested by Ted Hopf in his exchange with John Gaddis about the Cold War’s peaceful end. Hopf and Gaddis 1993.

respondents, on the other. For the purpose of comparing the power of actors, Dahl (1957, 206) insisted, we need to focus primarily *not* on the actions of A, but on the *responses* of B; the base and means of power, though important, do not provide us with a comparison of the power of actors. This relational view of power forms the shared premise of a vigorous and prolonged debate about three different faces of control power, understood in behavioral, institutional, and structural terms (see Dahl 1957; Bachrach and Baratz 1962; 1963; Lukes 2006a; 2006b). Ultimately, the “faces of power” debate centers on where, and how, to draw a distinction between “free action and action shaped by the action of others” (Hayward 1998, 3; 2000, 1-39).

Building on and adapting different aspects of Michel Foucault’s writings, theorists of power—including those focusing on international relations—broadened the context for tracking the effects of power (Digeser 1992; Barnett and Duvall 2005; Neumann and Sending 2010; Aalberts 2012; Reed 2013; Krasner 2013). Drawing on Foucault in their important article on power, Barnett and Duvall (2005, 55-57), for example, deepened and widened the understanding of what we term “control power.” They highlighted the importance of discursive power effects that generate power asymmetries by producing subjects in diffuse social relations—constituting basic categories of classification such as “civilized,” “democratic,” or “Western.” Foucault’s analysis is subject- rather than actor-centric. Power controls through the production of everyday mechanisms of discipline. It also constitutes 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.<sup>3</sup> This Foucaudian reading (Foucault 1977, 1982) informs Barnett and Duvall’s “fourth face” of power.

We do not dismiss the importance of Foucault for an understanding of control power. But our argument pays special attention to Foucault’s late writings on emerging and spontaneous power effects. Here, Clarissa Hayward’s (1998, 12; 2000) analysis proves especially fruitful for our purposes. She argues that power’s mechanisms are best conceived, not as instruments that powerful actors use, but as social boundaries. “Power defines fields of possibility” (Hayward and Lukes 2008, 10,14,16; Hayward 1998, 12; 2000). Laws, rules, norms, customs, identities, and social standards constitute such boundaries. They

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<sup>3</sup> 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 two reviews of recent writings on “relationalism” and the “practice turn” and historical institutionalism, see, respectively, McCourt 2016 and Fioretos 2011.

enable and constrain action, including by the most powerful. Actors can change the shape and direction of power through practices that result from both structured fields of possibility and actor endowments (see also Hayward and Lukes 2008, 10,14,16; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014).

Conceived as social boundaries and endowments, power defines what is possible for self and other. To inquire into the workings of power, we should not only ask, “how is power distributed” as we seek to distinguish between conditions of power and powerlessness. We should also ask, “how do power’s mechanisms define the (im)possible, the (im)probable, the natural, the normal” (Hayward 1998, 16)? The mutability of asymmetries in power do not only constrain and control. They also empower—by defining the field of what is possible (Hayward 1998, 20-21).

## Control and Protean Power

Power is an elusive concept. No single framework can “claim to have found the essence of power” (Haugaard 2010, 420). Instead, each partial conceptualization provides some important insights about key aspects of power.<sup>4</sup> 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 (Hagström and Jerdén 2014, 350; Haugaard 2010, 424-26).

As a first step, we distinguish between two situations. When the context and the experience of power are marked either by risk or by uncertainty, control and protean power collapse into an ideal typical distinction (Table 1).

**Table 1: Control and Protean Power – Basic Comparison**

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<sup>4</sup> Berenskoetter (2007, 2, 13-14) insists that international relations and the social sciences lack a fully articulated, general theory of power—that is, one that integrates analysis across all existing power concepts and theoretical, as well as meta-theoretical, domains. We agree. But we do not believe that such a general theory is possible: the concept of power depends on the theoretical context in which it is deployed, as Guzzini (2016b) argues.

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Of all the theorists of power, Robert Dahl (1957, 206-7, 10) is the most explicit about the close affinity between control power and risk. He argues that the probability of an event occurring with, as compared to without, the exercise of power provides an indispensable way of comparing the power of different actors. 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” (Dahl 1957, 214).

Many decades after the quantum revolution in physics, Dahl’s appeal to the laws of nature remained Newtonian. He expressed it in classical notions of probability. Half a century later, we see no indication that conventional views of international politics have changed—even though now may be a good time for international-relations scholarship to wake up from its “deep Newtonian slumber” (Kavalski 2012). 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 (see Wendt 2015).

The incalculable provides the context and experience of what we call protean power. Protean power 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 a context that is often experienced as profoundly unpredictable. This type of power cannot be harnessed consciously. Emerging in specific moments, it is a creatively generated shift in accepted problem solving that circulates across different sites of political life.

Protean power has generative effects on its context. The actors involved often cannot anticipate these effects. Thus, protean power bypasses attempts to exert control. The processes underlying the two power types may co-occur, and converge. But their relation to actors’ 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.

In our understanding, the unexpected plays an integral role in 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 we often use risk and

uncertainty as synonyms. 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.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this confusion, we should distinguish clearly between the concepts of risk and uncertainty. Both, as well as the difference between the two, are critical for the analysis of power and of unexpected change.<sup>6</sup>

The questionable translation of Max Weber’s analysis into English has worsened this terminological confusion. A widely accepted view holds that Weber’s definition of power refers only to the world of risk—power as the likelihood of achieving one’s will, while overcoming the resistance of others. This stems from a problematic, and theoretically constricting, translation of the capacious German concept of *Chance*. That term has two valid translations: one as probabilistic risk (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*), the other as possibilistic uncertainty (*Möglichkeit*) (Weber 1925, 28).<sup>7</sup> Following Weber, we hold that power operates in the world of risk *and* uncertainty. Weber’s conceptualization of power thus invites us to look at control power in terms of processes that connect capabilities with effects in relations that penetrate and diffuse. It also points us toward protean power in terms of agilities that create and circulate.

Weber is not the only one to observe that actors accomplish their objectives *over* others in dominating relations (*potestas*), as well as *with* others in enabling relations (*potentia*).<sup>8</sup> Many political theorists of

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<sup>5</sup> See also O’Malley 2004.

<sup>6</sup> For reasons of space, we exclude here a further discussion of known unknowns or operational uncertainty, and of unknown unknowns or epistemic uncertainty. On the issue of ambiguity of risk and uncertainty, see Best 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Although we develop it in a different direction than he does, we are indebted on this point to Felix Berenskoetter’s (2007, 21 fn4) important observation. 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).

<sup>8</sup> We prefer here the concept of domination over institutional position for the simple reason that institutional complexes provide niches for protean power dynamics, and because of the indeterminacy of meaning that inheres in all attempts to specify firmly institutional position and rules. Alexander Wendt (2001, 1029; see also Seabrooke 2007, 373), for example, points out that “the Rational Design framework (Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal 2001; Koremenos 2005) seems to treat the nature of uncertainty as unproblematic and ends up with a conceptualization that effectively reduces it to risk.”



power, such as Aristotle and Arendt, expand the analysis of power beyond actual capabilities to include actors' potentials, subject and object, doer and being done to. For Aristotle, whether and how power remains a potential capacity waiting to be actualized (*energeia*) depends on the context. It is through actualization or "being-at-work" that the self creates potentiality (Frank 2005, 45-53). There exists, then, a dynamic and reciprocal relationship within each person between her actuality and potentiality. Protean power is one such ongoing potentiality. It is always ready for actualization in the in-between spaces of an always shared world. For Arendt (1998, 175, 178-79, 186, 189-90, 194, 199, 200, 205-06, 220), the power of speech is the starting point for an individual who has the courage to reveal herself in the public realm. Power is not static. It cannot be stored. It emerges as the actualization of a potentiality when people act in concert through speech and action. Power is thus revealed and exhausted in the performance of bringing people together. Machiavelli (1998), Butler (1997), and many other theorists have developed related lines of argument (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, chp. 13).

How do actors facing risk and uncertainty choose their practices (Douglas 1990; 1994)? Risk-based models of power-as-control assume that they are playing the odds. Unfortunately, no plausible answers exist to the question of which prior beliefs are chosen and why. Actors can also turn to imagined futures of the possible and impossible, something international-relations scholarship tends to overlook. Hence most actors cope and muddle through, typically informed by standards of reasonableness rather than rationality. The assumption of rational decision making may of course be correct for some individuals and situations, for example, American traders on Wall Street or American defense officials in the Pentagon. But what about Japanese traders in Tokyo or Japanese defense officials in the Self-Defense Forces? They do not differ from Americans because they adhere to inherently irrational beliefs. Instead, differences in institutional and intellectual settings suggest distinctive engagements with the theory and practice of arbitrage and coercion. They underline how much conceptual redefinition, extension, and ambiguity can occur in different settings (Katzenstein 1996; Miyazaki 2013). To insist that the mix of risk and uncertainty will always and everywhere yield the same probability calculation does not help us to better understand power dynamics in the domain of the unexpected. It seems more sensible to let go of the notion of invariant, omnipresent, rational probability calculations and to acknowledge the existence of variable standards of reasonableness under conditions of risk and uncertainty. Control and protean

power thus are brought into one analytical perspective as they make crises normal and endogenous to world politics rather than abnormal and exogenous.<sup>9</sup>

The theoretical shift in perspective required to explain the surprises assumed away by rationalist models is that power is not only a cause of empirical patterns but also their effect. Table 2 captures the connection between practices and power outcomes by depicting two dimensions: attributes of the underlying context, and actor experiences.<sup>10</sup> The coexistence and coevolution of control and protean power does not occur along a simple continuum. Instead, the four cells in the table, populated by characteristic political practices, are produced by the interaction of the two dimensions. As such, they reflect both the degree to which complete knowledge or ignorance of probabilities prevails, and the degree to which actors seek it in the first place. We acknowledge that empirically, in the depth of a crisis for example, the effect of actor experience and context attributes on political practices, and therefore types of power, may not be readily distinguishable. Some inferences, however, can be drawn in principle, especially in retrospect. Both dimensions thus have their place in this framework.

**Table 2: Context, Experience, and Power**

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Each of the political practices captured in the four cells generates power dynamics that feed back to uncertainty and risk depicted along the two dimensions. The context- and experience-altering impact captured by the arrows in Table 2 thus makes control or protean power the effects of diverse political practices. Affirmation, in the top left cell, is the recognition by actors that capabilities can be amassed and deliberately deployed to exercise power. From the perspective of those subject to such power, affirmation may take the form of acquiescence or compliance in the context of predictable risks. In the

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<sup>9</sup> Our insistence on the importance of the relationship between protean and control power resembles that of Digeser's (1992, 991) characterization of the relationship between existing approaches to power's three faces and its fourth, Foucauldian one. It "does not displace the other faces of power, but provides a different level of analysis." It also resonates with Dell's (1986) view of the compatibility between circular causality at the level of family system and of linear control systems in particular family subsystems.

<sup>10</sup> We thank Stefano Guzzini for pushing us to clarify this point.

end, as the short arrows show, it enhances the utility of probability calculations concerning future outcomes; reliance on established power templates reinforces the risk-based nature of the world and is experienced by actors as such. This is the domain of control power. The discipline of international relations is replete with examples of authors assuming, mistakenly, that this is the only world in which politics unfolds.

Our analysis highlights the existence of two other worlds captured by the other three cells in Table 2. Depicted in the bottom right cell, for example, innovation is a response to a second, fundamentally uncertain world. It generates protean power, shifting the goalpost for exercising control in the process and necessitating still more agility in the future. Protean power, then, is the effect of innovation that generates further uncertainty and at the same time underscores the futility of control power. Finally, we can also find ourselves in a third world that mixes risk and uncertainty. During an emergent crisis, actors operate in the top right cell: uncertainty has made probability calculations impossible, though actors do not realize it. This is the root of the disorienting nature of most crises. Actors assume that “old ways” still apply, when the ground has already shifted to make unexpected outcomes possible. When they discover that familiar solutions no longer work, they are compelled to improvise to stay afloat in increasingly unstable and uncertain contexts. Conversely, as previously earth-shattering solutions evolve into best practices and risk replaces uncertainty, actors’ assumptions of pervasive uncertainty may persist. Actors continue to make decisions affecting their immediate environment only, refusing attempts at risk-based decision making, without any desire for controlling others directly. The shortcomings of control power experienced by actors generate room for surprising solutions, while success transforms protean power into control power. This is captured by the bottom left cell.

The four cells in Table 2 exemplify but do not exhaust the range of practices available. In our labeling, we focus on the particular practices that relate actor experience and context attributes to power manifestations, and on the degree to which the latter reinforce or undermine the different constellations of risk and uncertainty. Power as either cause *or* effect is not coterminous with political practice, a common mistake that invites the spinning of tautologies. Instead, power is analytically separate from practice, as it affects the experience and context of risk and uncertainty. Illustrated by the two large arrows, innovation—the response to the immediate experience of uncertainty in an uncertain world—generates protean power and thus exacerbates further the uncertain conditions from which it arose. This is why we find it impossible to link protean power to specific attributes or capabilities and instead highlight its agile nature, which jettisons any semblance of regularity.

In its relationship to uncertainty and risk, we can compare control power to a game of billiards with its discrete movements. There is room for strategy, but there is no question about the rules, closely linked to laws of motion in physics, that govern a player's decisions and constrain their execution. By contrast, protean power resembles a game of interactive fluidity, like tennis. It is about "being in the right place, at the right time" in a way that extends well beyond coincidence. For the world's leading physicist of tennis, Howard Brody, there was nothing flighty about the game. Yet, he would have acknowledged that individual ball control, motivation, mutual weakness recognition, and interaction with the spectators produced enough uncertainty to make the exact score unpredictable (*Economist* 2015). Such is the world of protean power, moving past simplified equations of force.

Even though an actor may be too weak to exercise "power over" (understood here as actual capability) the human or non-human world, she may nonetheless be sufficiently empowered to have "power to" (understood here as the capacity to actualize potentialities) navigate in that world successfully (Pansardi 2011; Göhler 2009). One way of illustrating the operation of protean power is to focus on the effects of human action without design. Under conditions of uncertainty, it is not necessarily strategic actions but their emerging byproducts that create the most consequential effects (Dallas 2014). It is clear that actors *want* to do something in response to the uncertainty that surrounds them. What *should* be done, however, is typically unknown. Actors do their best, guessing and coping, uninformed by calculable probabilities and unknown determinants of success or failure. Once their actions have resulted in outcomes, ascribed power effects are linked to specific actors who are seen as having caused the outcomes. Who wins is therefore determined through traceable (*ex post*) but not predictable (*ex ante*) assessments. We thus gain a deeper understanding of the fragility and limits of control power, not a handbook of how to beat *fortuna* at her game. Table 2 is a useful reminder that the two kinds of power are both analytically distinct and empirically related. Uncertainty makes control power fragile, tugs our conceptualization toward protean power dynamics, and sets the stage for the co-evolution of both power types.

## Power Practices, Risk, Uncertainty and Complexity

Uncertainty permeates the life of individuals all over the world. Yet, it cuts against the grain of institutional and organized life in the twenty-first century. International-relations scholarship reacts strongly to the second fact but disregards the first. Our risk-based thinking expresses a deep desire for and faith in control (Eidinow 2011, 158; Scott 1998, 321-22). This may explain why, in the analysis of

international relations, “uncertainty” is often either conflated with “risk” or neglected altogether. To make matters even more confusing, some of the main research traditions in international relations define the terms differently (Rathbun 2007). The misleading affinity between the two concepts is most problematic when a neglect of uncertainty turns risk calculations into “fictional expectations” and “visions” of a future that is actually unforeseeable (Beckert 2016; Berenskoetter 2011, 648). Assuming regular and incremental change, we are prone to rely on accounts that privilege control power even though they are commonly derailed by actor agility and unexpected creative effects in the circulation of protean power.

Figure 1 identifies affirmation, refusal, improvisation, and innovation as illustrations of four practices that arise from the interaction between the two dimensions introduced previously in Table 2: attributes of the underlying context (risky or uncertain) and actor experience (as risky or uncertain) of the surrounding context. The two endpoints of the spectrum that links affirmation to control and innovation to protean power characterize situations where the experiences of actors and the context in which they operate coincide to create contrasting worlds of unambiguous risk and radical uncertainty. In the first case, these practices generate risk-based control power; in the second, we see uncertainty in the underlying context and actor experience, generating protean power through innovation. In between, we describe a range of practices that stem from the fact that actor experiences and context attributes do not match. This results in different types of interaction between protean and control power.

### **Figure 1: Risk and Uncertainty, Power Type, and Political Practice\***

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Figure 1 shares the premise of virtually all power theories: power relations cannot be analyzed by assuming the existence of actors in isolation. Since the control power wedge reaches deep into the domain of uncertainty and the protean power wedge deep into the domain of risk, the characteristic practices are not tightly wedded to the two kinds of power. Control-producing practices are a possible response under uncertainty where they lead to indeterminacy. Through disregard of new variables that occur outside of the established probability calculations, such practices affect future power potentialities, and we label them as refusal. Conversely, innovation is a possible response in the domain

of risk, leading perhaps to anticipated gains or shocking reversals. There exists, however, an important difference here. Affirmation facilitating the diffusion of control power operates directly. In less direct ways, refusal, improvisation, and innovation can trigger with increasing intensity a circulation of protean power. Rather than focusing on narrow power effects in dyadic relations, this conceptualization highlights the broader context and actors' experiences. Depending on the balance between protean and control power, knowledge can dismantle or build up social conformity by freeing or disciplining multitudes of individuals or organizations at the micro level and entire populations at the macro level. In short, this article highlights fluid power relations that can show up in unexpected places.<sup>11</sup>

Reading Figure 1 from left to right traces different configurations of control and protean power. Despite the figure's simplified one-dimensional depiction of the categories, it seeks to convey the fluidity of real-life situations that oscillate between risk and uncertainty as a result of particular actions taken by actors, whose immediate experiences of context matter a great deal. On one end, *affirmation* is a response associated primarily with control power. We know that control power has worked if "actor B" gives in to "actor A," regardless of the reasons for such behavior: pluralist competition (Dahl 1957), limited alternatives (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963), the structural shaping of what is considered desirable or normal (Bially-Mattern 2005; Lukes 2006a, 2006b), or persuasive and admirable traits or practices (Nye 2011). In principle, one can access probabilities of outcomes surrounding control and develop expectations about the behavior and likelihood of success by those who exercise power and those who submit to it. Actors respond to these calculations and amass resources that they believe will allow them to prevail in well-defined competitive settings. As a result, for the present argument, *affirmation* characterizes situations in which experience and context meet in the domain of risk-generating practices that reinforce the underlying assumptions.

In more direct contact with the world of risk than with that of uncertainty, *refusal* challenges rather than dismisses underlying probabilities. It can take the form of outright resistance, captured by images of heroic street action. Often, however, it takes more mundane forms. James Scott, for example, gives a rich account of the hidden transcripts that help to constitute refusal practices of power relations. He argues that hidden transcripts are "a condition of practical resistance, rather than a substitute for it. . . .

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<sup>11</sup> Control and protean power analysis differ in their understanding of causation. While efficient causes are linked to clear effects of control power, protean power analysis relies, in addition, on constitutive causation, indicated in Figure 2.1 by two vertical arrows representing a response to uncertainty deepened further by innovation.

Under the appropriate conditions the accumulation of petty acts can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche” (Scott 1990, 191-92). Similarly, Hayek’s concept of spontaneous ordering entails refusal and creative circumvention by individual or collective actors endowed with tacit knowledge (Hayek 1973, 46). This can recreate or fundamentally change the exercise of control power. Power begets refusal that focuses on the immediate enemy and small zones of autonomy more than on long-term and perhaps utopian dreams (Foucault 1982; 2007, 357; Lipschutz 2007, 239-41; Neumann and Sending 2010, 24-25, 159-60). Explication of such fluid situations depends on the particular position occupied by each actor (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 11) and is reflected in the sense-making practices that test the limits of control. Such practices can lead to refusal through diversion and the choice of alternatives.

Brought about through *improvisation and innovation* in an uncertain world, protean power dynamics make it impossible to anticipate which choices and practices will lead to which outcomes. Nor is that the objective. The fog clears only in hindsight, when we look back to identify how actors, deemed successful, have navigated the fluid environment surrounding them. Knowledge is not only expressed in individual actors’ calculated intentions and ensuing practices. It is also embodied in networks that react to acts of individual or social creativity and imagination and bottom-up, unexpected, and contingent effects. Patrick Jackson reminds us that contingency breeds agency (Jackson 2006, 33), and nothing is more contingent than an uncertain world. The circulation of protean power operates through improvisation and innovation by actors that can engage and transform those involved. In the words of Emmanuel Adler (2008, 203), power lies in offering previously unavailable modes of consciousness that “break new social ground.”

Reading Figure 1 from top to bottom connects practices to power effects and underlying constellations of context and experience. Protean power starts with individual agents reacting to uncertainty but then multiplies the unknowns, not only for specific individual experiences but also for the broader context and future potentialities. Power dynamics often cut across different levels of analysis connecting individuals to states, markets, corporations, movements, and regional organizations. The “level of analysis problem” in international relations turns out to be not only a problem but also a defining characteristic of protean power dynamics.

The boundary between uncertainty and risk, control and protean power is unavoidably porous and often difficult to discern empirically. While reflecting on his life in finance as head of Goldman Sachs and in politics as Secretary of the Treasury under President Clinton, Robert Rubin mused. “Luck or skill? We’ll

never know . . . it seemed indispensable to be lucky, but it wasn't so bad to be smart either, if you could arrange both" (Weisberg 1998; Tetlock and Gardner 2015, 142-43). Rubin echoes a theme that has been prominent throughout the ages (Eidinow 2011; Frank 2016). It agrees with the strong note of caution with which Tetlock and Gardner conclude their study of forecasting. "We frequently pass through phases of history riddled with irreducible uncertainty—phases in which luck trumps skill" (Tetlock and Gardner 2015, 272). In those times, we should have the humility to accept that the dynamics of power can easily produce unpredictable practices and outcomes (McCloskey 1991, 35-36). Put differently, we should be prepared to accept a world in which protean power plays an important part.

### **International-Relations Scholarship's Exclusive Focus on Risk and Control**

Important strands of international-relations scholarship have followed the intellectual ascendance of economics. These approaches focus attention largely on the putatively controllable world of risk, while largely neglecting the uncontrollable world of uncertainty. In doing so, they train our sight only on control power; they sideline protean power and fail to analyze the unpredictable. For example, in her authoritative and sophisticated analysis of risk-taking in international politics, Rose McDermott writes that risk inheres in any situation in which uncertainty exists (McDermott 1998, 3-5, 30; Mitzen and Schweller 2011).<sup>12</sup> Combining risk and uncertainty, she identifies underlying mechanisms of risk propensity that occur under conditions of "high" uncertainty. While it is impossible to scale the magnitude of uncertainty, it is possible to distinguish between two different kinds of uncertainty. Known unknowns create operational uncertainty, which, given more or better knowledge and information, may transform into calculable risk. However, this is far from a panacea: in situations of operational uncertainty, more or better knowledge or information, as in the squeezing of a balloon, simply pushes radical uncertainty into some other, unrecognized part of the political context. Unknown unknowns are unknowable and cannot be converted to risk. Although she does not make the distinction between the two kinds of unknowns, McDermott acknowledges the importance of operational unknowns. She writes (McDermott 1998, 5; Gartzke 1999, 567), "most complex choices fall under the framework of judgment under uncertainty and decision making under risk because it is impossible to predict the characteristics of many different variables simultaneously in advance, especially when they may have unknown

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<sup>12</sup> We would like to thank Professor McDermott for reading and agreeing with the substance of an earlier draft of this paragraph.



interaction effects. Even the nature of many of the critical variables may be unknown beforehand.” Yet, in line with current practice of international-relations scholarship, McDermott puts aside the problem of uncertainty as she further develops and applies prospect theory. She thus makes invisible the practice-driven, protean power-generating actor responses to such uncertainty. The present framework insists on the need for completeness, rather than narrow selectiveness, in studying world politics; it offers means of considering approaches focusing on risk-based control power alongside those tracing protean improvisation and innovation in the face of uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> We track this omission below in brief reviews of important recent writings on security and political economy.

### Security Studies

The invention and the destructiveness of nuclear weapons epitomize the quest for control. The core idea of nuclear deterrence is “the threat that leaves something to chance.” Based on the previously noted mistranslation of Weber, “chance” here is understood to describe risk rather than risk and uncertainty. Possible protean power effects are thus rendered invisible. Articulated and developed by Thomas Schelling in the 1950s and 1960s, a risk-based understanding of chance has had a pervasive influence on the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence for the last half century.<sup>14</sup> The idea is based on Schelling’s highly creative conceptual move that reduces uncontrollable uncertainty to manageable risk, and thus from a problem to a solution for the issuing of credible nuclear threats. For Schelling, uncontrollable, accidental factors feed seamlessly into an escalation of controlled, competitive risk-taking. Accidents, in this theory, are drawn from a known probability distribution that is said to increase as each party draws closer to the brink. In Schelling’s theory, nuclear accidents do not exist. For accidents do not cause nuclear war; decisions do. Accidents are reduced to decisions to manage risk in a particular manner. They are no more than appendixes of rational decisions. And decisions are constrained by the logic that deterrence theory articulates. Schelling does not allow the theoretical possibility of accidental nuclear use or nuclear accidents to impose any limits on risk-based deterrence models. In this reading, “the threat that leaves something to chance” is so only in terms of probabilities

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<sup>13</sup> Some readers of this article have insisted that point estimates can be given with different confidence intervals. But it is difficult to see how confidence intervals could be specified in the realm of unknown unknowns. Furthermore, as a matter of research practice, scholars of international relations treat confidence intervals strictly as a methodological issue. If there are instances in which scholars have probed the political content of confidence intervals, they must be very few. We do not know of any.

<sup>14</sup> This discussion of Schelling draws on the important papers by Pelopidas (2016; 2015).

transforming nuclear weapons into means of control, wielded by actors with select attributes, rather than creating room for unanticipated challenges to existing rules of interaction. It squeezes out of the model unacknowledged, unfathomable unknowns, contingencies, and indeterminacies (Schlosser 2013). Establishing the power of full control over “the ultimate weapon” upholds the claim that the theory explains the uncontrollable. Probabilistic and possibilistic thinking are not interactive and co-evolving but fuse into a double mask. By transforming, in one theoretical move, uncontrollable uncertainty into manageable risk, Schelling offers a compelling theory of control power.<sup>15</sup> With the elaboration of the concept of an organizational Doomsday Machine, subsequent scholarship on nuclear deterrence has taken this approach to its (il)logical extreme (Rhodes 1989, 156).

Schelling’s work has had large consequences, not only for the study of nuclear deterrence but also for the study of war. In the last two decades, students of security studies have developed and tested extensively what is now known as the bargaining model of war. The model offers a risk-based view of war that highlights control power and mostly disregards uncertainty and protean power dynamics.<sup>16</sup> This is made possible by the bargaining model’s first core assumption: the parties to a conflict subscribe to the same understanding of how the world works.<sup>17</sup> This is vital for the model to work. Yet, it is often wildly implausible to believe that parties locked in possibly deadly conflict share the same understanding.<sup>18</sup> Imagination and potentiality of how the world might work, central to protean power analysis, thus escape the attention of the bargaining model. Uncertainty is key in allowing competing models of the world to be sustained. It leads to irreducible and consequential deviations away from

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<sup>15</sup> The term “luck” appears one time in Schelling’s *Strategy of Conflict* (1963); “uncertain” or “uncertainty” ten times; “risk” 102 times. “Chance” is mentioned 75 times but for Schelling is coterminous with risk rather than uncertainty. Pelopidas personal communication 9/3/16; Pelopidas, 2016, 11; Pelopidas 2015, 14, fn 28. Also see our earlier discussion of the meaning of the German term *Chance* in Max Weber.

<sup>16</sup> A number of colleagues have contested this point, suggesting that we talk to game theorists who are developing sophisticated models. This misses the point. For the most part, game theorists are not interested in offering political insights. Scholars of international relations are, and should be; by adopting a risk-only bargaining model of the world, they have imposed serious limits on their analysis of power in world politics.

<sup>17</sup> We thank Jonathan Kirshner for clarifying conversations on this point.

<sup>18</sup> The issue is not whether game theory can account for actors playing different games, holding different preferences, or having different tastes for risk; it is about their causal models of the world. Models of the world can be explanatory, constitutive, or a mixture of both. The bargaining model’s core assumption is restrictive in focusing only on explanatory models. See also Kirshner 2015.

expectations created or implied by risk-based models, thus preventing convergence of views around one model. Based on the implausible assumption of convergence, rationalist models proceed to think about actors with different preferences. If they decide to fight, each side will pay a cost while fighting. These costs open up a range of bargained solutions that both sides should prefer to war. For the bargaining model, the puzzle of war is why the two parties fail to settle within the range of bargained solutions before war breaks out, knowing that war is always inefficient after its outbreak. The answer to the puzzle lies in the existence of imperfections in information and the incentive to misrepresent on the one hand, and the inability to credibly commit to an agreement that prevents war on the other.

The model introduces a second core assumption: updating of information will select out inferior models of the world. But in security affairs, misperceptions, the fog of war, and a host of other factors prevent the emergence of a succession of probability-based, improved models. There exists no urn from which to pull red or white balls; players are colorblind; and there is no way of updating expectations based on the number of balls left in the urn. Instead, there is a lot of bluffing and interpretation. Crises are generators of uncertainty rather than risks with associated probabilities that are known or knowable.<sup>19</sup> In short, on issues of war and peace world politics simply does not offer, as the bargaining model assumes, a sufficiently large number of trials to select out inferior causal models. Even if all actors shared the same model of the world, which they do not, these models would fail. By making strong but implausible assumptions, the bargaining model of war focuses on the calculable directionality of control power and overlooks the creative imagination, or even improvised coping that generates protean power and transforms the surrounding uncertainty further still.

The bargaining model holds that different conclusions about future outcomes are possible, but only because of differences in information—not because of differences in worldviews about the salience of risk and uncertainty. The probability of victory in any conflict and the cost of fighting are assumed to be calculable and subject to known or knowable probabilities by all parties to the conflict. However, disagreements are unavoidable when actors put the same information to work in different worldviews. As is true elsewhere, in world politics rationality takes the form of many situationally specific kinds of reasonableness. And standards of reasonableness differ in worldviews populated by different cosmologies, different historical memories, different conspiracy theories, different emotions, and different moral prescriptions.

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<sup>19</sup> We thank James Davis, who helped clarify our thinking on this point.

For example, during the Cold War, many American analysts and decision makers believed that they had reached an understanding with the Soviet Union about the stability-inducing effects of a robust arms control regime. Russian archives opened after the end of the Cold War revealed a starkly different picture. In the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union had deployed a near-automatic nuclear strike force, which had been decades in the making. Because it was kept totally secret, this doomsday machine lacked the rationality of nuclear deterrence that makes contingent irrationality look rational (Rhodes 1989, 155-202). “The Soviet Union,” writes David Hoffman (2009, 18), “was looking through an entirely different prism than the United States.”<sup>20</sup> Only due to a stroke of luck are we in a position to study this near-calamity today. Conversely, the period of *détente* in the 1970s rested on a bedrock of illusions that U.S. and Soviet decision makers shared about each other. “The superpowers,” writes Eric Grynawski (2014, 13), “were simply wrong; they did not understand each other as well as they thought.” Complete misunderstanding in this instance secured cooperation that accurate information would have stymied. Filtered through different worldviews, shared information can be destructive or constructive. It is not the information but the worldview that drives actors towards war or peace. Worldviews that incorporate constitutive elements of risk/uncertainty and actor experiences can capture protean power dynamics; information models that exclude those elements cannot.

Furthermore, many bargaining models typically suffer from the problem of multiple equilibria—solutions a rational player would not depart from voluntarily. The folk theorem establishes that the existence of multiple equilibria is unavoidable in repeated games with incomplete information and an appropriate discount for future payoffs. More complicated models that include uncertainty do exist. But the practical challenge of building models that can handle non-Gaussian distributions is formidable. In Lance Taylor’s words, “reliably estimating parameters that specify the form of distributions with fat tails is difficult if not impossible—one reason why this approach has not been widely pursued” (Taylor 2010, 120).<sup>21</sup> Put simply, because models that incorporate uncertainty are messy and technically intractable,

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<sup>20</sup> Note that this is not an issue of asymmetric information, of the United States not knowing about the doomsday machine, as the bargaining model holds. In building and concealing the machine, as Hoffman argues correctly, the Soviet Union showed that it was holding to a radically different worldview.

<sup>21</sup> In the future, rigorous modeling efforts may help to broaden the restricted risk-only-no-uncertainty setting in which information-based models have operated so confidently during the last two decades. To date, however, judging by the publications in leading journals of international relations, existing research has not ventured into that territory.

most scholars of international relations who have adopted the bargaining model do not work with them and thus make us overlook the relevance of uncertainty in shaping actor responses in world politics.

Due to these shortcomings, scholars relying on the bargaining model of war systematically bias political analysis toward the management of risk through control power. One of the original proponents of the bargaining model of war, James Fearon (1995, 392; Kirshner 2000), conflates risk and uncertainty when he writes, “given identical information, truly rational agents should reason to the same conclusion about the probability of one uncertain outcome or another.”<sup>22</sup> This conflation of the two concepts has become deeply engrained in many theoretical extensions and empirical applications of the bargaining model. Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter (2006, 56-59), for example, build their analysis of different strategies of terrorist violence on the bargaining model of war. In doing so, they implausibly assume that terrorists are impelled by the same signaling and commitment logic that states follow. Trafficking in uncertainty, they are not. Matthew Kroenig’s analysis of nuclear bargaining implicitly equates risk with uncertainty (Kroenig 2013, 144-45, 150). He argues that coercive nuclear bargaining and nuclear brinkmanship rest on the manipulation of risk through “anguished” calculations of probabilities in situations of uncertainty and incomplete information. Page Fortna’s (2003, 340-41) analysis of ceasefire agreements is similarly inattentive to the difference between risk and uncertainty. Fortna argues that war is risky since there is always a chance of losing rather than winning; uncertainty can undermine cooperation even when perfect information should yield cooperation automatically. Her empirical analysis relies on statistical models and significance tests that operate entirely in the world of risk (Ziliak and McCloskey 2008). Finally, relying on the language of the bargaining model of war, Debs and Monteiro argue that power shifts can be explained by information problems. Their model “provides specific probabilities for each event. The fact that the deterrer and target are uncertain about each other’s actions is realistic” (Debs and Monteiro 2014, 8, fn 23). In sum, important analyses of nuclear deterrence, terrorist violence, nuclear brinkmanship, ceasefires in civil conflicts, and power shifts either reduce uncertainty to risk or treat the terms as synonyms.<sup>23</sup> This is odd in light of the models’ focus on bargaining that is conducted by specific actors with specific experiences, balancing unique, locally anchored, but broadly influential understandings of reality. Hunches and intuitions may be hard to measure and cannot, by definition, be

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<sup>22</sup> Fearon 1995, 392; Kirshner 2000. Assuming that it is not serving as an escape hatch, the concept of “true rationality” begs the question of the meaning of “rationality.”

<sup>23</sup> The difficulty of distinguishing risk from uncertainty can also be found in the European security literature. See Hammerstad and Boas 2015; Petersen 2011.

systematized into a single model; nevertheless, they play a key role in shaping bargaining outcomes. In their inattentiveness to such dynamics, the authors of existing models differ from Napoleon who, acknowledging risk *and* uncertainty, had strong feelings about his generals. Although many of them were smart, he was partial to the lucky ones.

The problem lies in the realm of theory rather than its application to questions of security (Hironaka 2017). Hedley Bull noticed long ago that the central ideas in Thomas Schelling's work were not derived solely from formal game theory operating in the world of risk; they also represented "an imaginative conceptual exercise" dealing with the problem of uncertainty (Linklater 2000, 66). In contrast to Schelling himself, scholars applying the bargaining model of war have overlooked the centrality of imagination. "In the final analysis," Schelling (1963, 58) writes, "we are dealing with imagination as much as with logic . . . poets may do better than logicians at this game. . . . Logic helps . . . but usually not until imagination has selected some clue to work on." Bypassing the technical virtuosity of formal models of war, Jonathan Mercer (2013, 225) similarly stresses the importance of creativity. Neglecting the importance of creativity, political scientists risk "turning sophisticated political actors into lab rats. . . . They have done so because predicting creativity is difficult and perhaps impossible—if one can predict creativity it cannot be very creative." Imagination and creativity are integral to and constitutive of a world that mixes risk with uncertainty and control with protean power.

#### Political Economy<sup>24</sup>

The analysis of power dynamics is similarly imbalanced in the field of political economy—and for the same reason: Uncertainty no longer exists as a category worthy of analysis. In the 1920s, Heisenberg developed the uncertainty principle in physics at the very moment when Knight and Keynes drew a conceptual distinction between risk and uncertainty in economics. Knight argued that successful entrepreneurs are willing to make investments with uncertain payoffs in the future, for which they can charge a premium. For Keynes, probability is confidence in a conclusion given the evidence in support of that conclusion. Although he did not deny the existence of measurable probabilities in choice situations, Keynes (1948 [1921], 31, 34) principally argued that our tools or evidence are "too limited to make probability calculations: there may be no way of calculating, and/or there is no common unit to measure magnitudes . . . the degree of our rational belief in one conclusion is either equal to, greater than, or less

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<sup>24</sup> Some of the material in this section draws on Katzenstein and Nelson 2013a, 2013b and Nelson and Katzenstein 2014.

than the degree of our belief in another.” Practical men and women, in Keynes’s (1937, 214) view, have no choice but to rely on conventions and similar mechanisms in deciding how to act. Keynes did not see rational agents maximizing their utility; “rather, he emphasized the role of ‘animal spirits’—of daring and ambitious entrepreneurs taking risks and placing bets in an environment characterized by uncertainty: that is, by de facto unknowns and epistemic unknowables” (Kirshner 2009, 532). For better and for worse, entrepreneurial creativity and exuberance or panics showed protean power at work. Uncertainty means that the past is not prologue. Under conditions of uncertainty, there is no basis for agents to settle on what the probability distribution looks like. Often experienced as “turning points,” new narratives signal the obsolescence of the status quo and undermine the conventional wisdom, with profound consequences for how we think about power.

Despite the widespread acceptance of the behavioral turn in economics that challenges the standard rationalist approach, economists generally ignore or dismiss the distinction between risk and uncertainty. The conceptualization of uncertainty and risk that Knight and Keynes advanced in the 1920s has been relegated to the margins of the discipline (Best 2008). Many fields of knowledge have developed techniques “to isolate and domesticate” those aspects of the world subject to risk-based analysis, sidelining the rest. Economics, in particular, writes James Scott (1998, 322), has “incorporated calculable risk while exiling those topics where genuine uncertainty prevails.” Mainstream economists closed rank around the assumption that uncertainty was analytically indistinguishable from risk. In an important textbook, Jack Hirshleifer and John Riley (1992, 10), for example, wrote in the early 1990s that Knight’s distinction is “sterile.” As a result, in the words of George Akerlof and Robert Shiller (2009, 144), “theoretical economists have been struggling . . . to make sense of how people handle such true uncertainty.”

Because power is at the center of its concerns, failing to distinguish between risk and uncertainty is a serious problem in the field of international political economy. As in economics and security studies, uncertainty has either been neglected or conflated with risk, thus making protean power dynamics invisible. Not well known in other parts of the world, the paradigmatic American approach to the study of International Political Economy—“Open Economy Politics” (OEP)—moves entirely in the world of risk. In a paper addressing the effects of uncertainty, Lake and Frieden concede that uncertainty increases in crises and then proceed to argue that risk and uncertainty “are similar enough to be conflated for our purposes” (Lake and Frieden 1989, 6-7). In this way, they and most scholars of international political economy follow the long line of economists who treat the difference between risk and uncertainty as

semantic rather than substantive (Ahlquist 2006; Bernhard and Leblang 2006; Bernhard, Broz, and Clark 2002; Koremenos 2005; Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Mosley 2006; Rosendorff and Milner 2001; Sobel 1999. For dissents without repercussions in OPE, see Blyth 2002, Oatley 2011, and Nelson and Katzenstein 2014).

In OEP, economic actors have clear preference orderings. Interests are deduced from an actor's position in markets. Policies and outcomes are ranked according to how they affect an actor's expected future income stream. Interests are aggregated by institutions, which in turn structure the bargaining that occurs. The main advantage of OEP is its deductive argument about preferences. OEP scholars start with sets of actors who "can be reasonably assumed to share (nearly) identical interests. . . . Deducing interests from economic theory was the essential innovation of OEP" (Lake 2009b, 50; Lake 2009a, 226-27, 230-31.<sup>25</sup> However, it stunts political analysis. Capacity, potential, and creativity—and the processes by which they circulate—are made invisible in a static framework that overlooks protean power dynamics by assuming that the preferences of actors are determined by their structural position (Fairfield 2015).

OEP derives parsimonious theories of politics from sparse economic theory. The flow is from micro to macro in an orderly, linear progression. To simplify analysis, work in the OEP tradition adopts a partial equilibrium analysis by focusing on at most one or two steps in this causal chain and treating the others in reduced form, an analytic simplification that reduces complexity to complication by holding constant many elements that otherwise would make analysis intractable. In principle, however, all partial analyses can be assembled into one integrated whole. Informed by rational expectations theory, OEP thus moves exclusively in the world of risk (Kirshner 2015).

The assumption that interests can be read off the agents' situation in the international division of labor constitutes the "hard core" of the OEP paradigm (Lake 2009a, 231). In OEP, strategic decision making is modeled as unproblematic because analysts do not know how to model uncertainty. OEP relies on a "reductive translation" of uncertainty into risk, especially when the rules of the game are unclear and their future trajectory is pure guesswork (Holzer and Millo 2005, 228). This is an important reason for the "embarrassing" and "dismal" (Cohen 2009, 437) collective performance of the field of political

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<sup>25</sup> OEP rests on two core assumptions: (1) economic policies produce income effects that are driven by an agent's position in the domestic and international division of labor; and (2) economic agents, once they know what they want, make rational decisions as if they know the relevant probability distributions.



economy in the years before the 2008 financial crisis, in the words of one leading scholar. To be sure, OEP specialists were not alone in missing the signs of the gathering storm. It is nonetheless surprising how little scholars of OEP have had to say about the financial crisis in the post-crisis years. With the exception of one review essay on financial market regulation, the subfield's premier journal did not publish a single article on the financial crisis in the five years after the crisis broke in 2007 (Helleiner and Pagliari 2011).<sup>26</sup> This collective silence makes apposite Lawrence Summers' biting criticism of macroeconomics: OEP scholars are unlikely to learn much as long as they wear "the armor of a stochastic pseudo-world before doing battle with evidence from the real one" (Summers 1991, 146). Further, the real world mixes elements of uncertainty and protean power with risk and control power.

Sympathetic to OEP, yet insisting on the autonomy of politics, Gourevitch and Shinn make an important modification to address the limitations of an exclusively risk-based analysis. In their view, OEP's assumptions about the origins of preferences are too arbitrary in ruling out the importance of political autonomy and its corollaries—creativity and potentiality. Structurally induced economic incentives are not determinative on their own. Often, they must yield to the complexities of processes of coalition formation that are driven by an unconstrained politics. "We stress incentives and interests . . . the rules of production do influence behavior. . . . Where we disagree on emphasis is in explaining the origins of those rules (politics for us not . . . the 'autonomous' economy pure and simple)" (Gourevitch and Shinn 2005, 93). The complex politics that Gourevitch and Shinn evoke center on the dynamics of both control and protean power that escapes OEP's reach entirely.

We do not claim here that the bargaining model of war and open economy politics exhausts the field of international-relations scholarship. For example, studies of global value chains, international knowledge creation, and social movements have pointed to conceptions of power that are not restricted exclusively to the concept of control but also incorporate power dynamics operating under conditions of uncertainty (Saxenian 2006; Hertel 2006; Everson and Vos 2009; Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bennett 2014; Dallas 2014). Moreover, some theoretical inquiries are open to the improvisational aspects of protean power (Deutsch 1966). But these are outliers in contemporary scholarship. The norm is to search for the predictable in the world of risk and to remain silent in the face of the unpredictable.

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<sup>26</sup> In personal correspondence (10/2/2016), *International Organization's* then editor, Jon Pevehouse, expressed his astonishment about the total submission of only nine papers during that period: "it is rather surprising that we received so few in that initial period."

## Conclusion

In a disorderly and at times chaotic world, predictive accuracy is unobtainable. Filled with potential for improvisation and innovation, the political world is more unfathomable than notions of control power allow for. Protean power can be creative. It can also be destructive—as in some of the novel products and practices that made the financial industry fall off the cliff in 2008, or in the surge of terrorist violence in recent years. Smart forecasts, prudence, and resilience offer some measure of protection in a world open to a statistically staggering range of possibilities—ones that the human mind meets with a psychological craving for predictability. That craving leaves many political actors and scholars of international relations, in the words of legendary investor Charlie Munger, in the position of “a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest” (Tetlock and Gardner 2015, 146. See also Best 2008, 358-59).

This article’s insistence on a relational approach to the analysis of power confers four advantages. First, it tracks with recent developments in international-relations scholarship.<sup>27</sup> Second, it aligns the analysis of power in international relations more closely to the broader field of power theories. Third, it helps us to better account for dramatic changes in world politics. Approaches that incorporate only risk—and ignore uncertainty—keep change exogenous. Attention to protean power, however, opens up the possibility of treating processes of transformation as endogenous.<sup>28</sup> Finally, as Richard Bookstaber (2017, 17-19) shows, the unexpected in world politics is linked to “emergent” phenomena, not to human intentions; to “ergodic” processes in which probabilities are forever shifting; to the “computational irreducibility” of a complex world; and to the ineluctability of “radical uncertainty” with unknowable probabilities. These four processes are pervasive in world politics (see also Daipha 2013).

Beyond these initial steps, we hope for the intellectual engagement and future work of other scholars who undoubtedly will improve, modify, or reject the line of argument that we have developed here. Over time, perhaps, shifting our thinking about power as a core concept in international-relations scholarship may also filter into public discourse (Epstein 2011; Goddard 2010). The unpredictability of

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<sup>27</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>28</sup> This lifts a heavy burden of proof, carried and largely evaded, from the shoulders of most scholars of international relations; their risk-only analysis of control power faces enormous difficulties in accounting for dramatic changes in world politics.

events trumps notions of coherence and control. Since the end of World War II, “the most important events in the international system . . . went largely unpredicted and even unspeculated about as possibilities” (Dienstag 2009, 171). Ambitious attempts to refashion the world are bound to fail. We need to think about power less in terms of police controlling an unruly world and more in terms of innovators creating new options and firefighters containing disasters. We badly need a broader concept of power to provide us with improved vision and more resilience in the face of the unpredicted and unpredictable. The 9/11 attack on the United States, and what some have called the “assault” on America by tens of thousands of children migrating illegally in the summer of 2014 (Brigden 2016), serve as two simple reminders of one basic fact: Until we stop focusing only on control power and begin to recognize also the role of protean power, unfolding events in world politics will continue to outpace our ability to understand and cope with them.

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**Table 1: Control and Protean Power – Basic Comparison**

|  | <b>Control power</b>   | <b>Protean power</b>   |
|--|--|--|
| <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   |

**Table 2: Context, Experience, and Power**

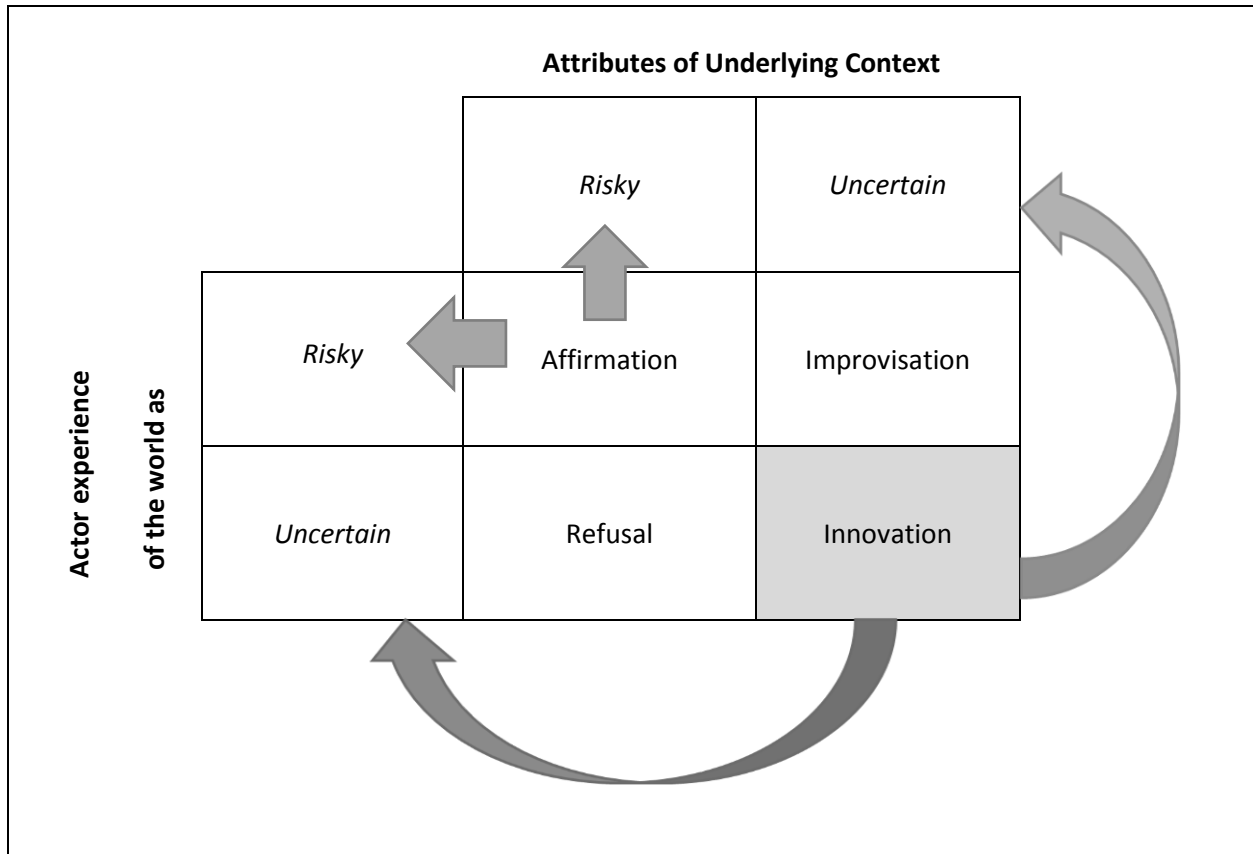
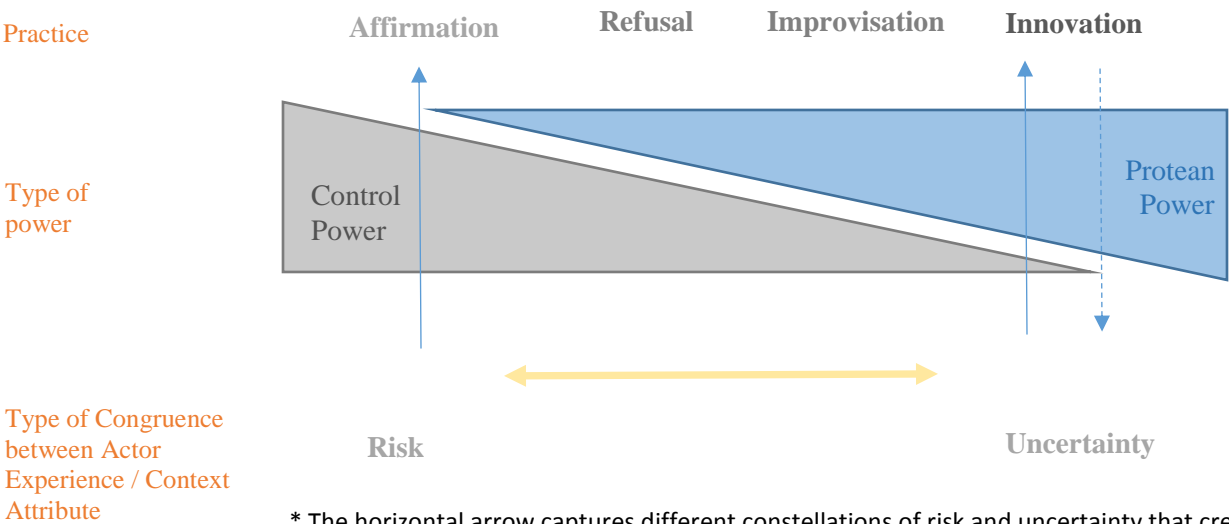


Figure 1: Risk and Uncertainty, Power Type, and Political Practice\*



\* The horizontal arrow captures different constellations of risk and uncertainty that create various relations between protean and control power. In the interest of simplicity of presentation Figure 1 does not capture in further detail mismatches between context and experience, depicted in Table 2.