

Protean Power

Exploring the Uncertain and Unexpected in World Politics

Mainstream international relations continues to assume that the world is governed by calculable risk based on estimates of power, despite repeatedly being surprised by unexpected change. This groundbreaking work departs from existing definitions of power that focus on the actors' evolving ability to exercise control in situations of calculable risk. It introduces the concept of "protean power," which focuses on the actors' agility as they adapt to situations of uncertainty. *Protean Power* uses twelve real-world case studies to examine how the dynamics of protean and control power can be tracked in the relations among different state and non-state actors, operating in diverse sites, stretching from local to global, in both times of relative normalcy and moments of crisis. Katzenstein and Seybert argue for a new approach to international relations, where the inclusion of protean power in our analytical models helps in accounting for unforeseen changes in world politics. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

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Protean Power

*Exploring the Uncertain and Unexpected
in World Politics*

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For
Lucia
and
Livia, Michal, Darian, and Leon

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Preface

In large lecture halls and small seminars, students ask the hard questions. Why do big changes so often catch their teachers unprepared? Why did the Cold War end (peacefully)? Why did the world economy come so close to falling off the cliff in 2008? Why did the Arab Spring of 2011 represent such surprise, hope, and disappointment? Policymakers have strong intuitions but no clear answers. For example, Roger Altman, former Deputy Secretary of Treasury under President Bill Clinton, writes that on all major economic questions “unpredictability may be the new normal.”¹ The US National Defense University posted an opening for a new job in 2016. It aims at training leaders who can “operate and creatively think in an unpredictable and complex world.” In writing this book we seek to provide better answers for our students. We follow Stanley Hoffmann, always a teacher’s teacher, who studied power “so as to understand the enemy, not so as better to be able to exert it.”²

Confronted with the probing questions of their students and the strong intuitions of policy practitioners, scholars of world politics offer unsatisfactory answers, typically issued with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. When pressed, they sound unconvincing, perhaps even to themselves, while claiming that momentous changes are just small data points in a very large universe of events. Alternatively, they concede that the causes of unexpected, large-scale change are exogenous to their theories of world politics, a fancy acknowledgment of the obvious: they are often blindsided by the unexpected.

Greek mythology offers a way out. The first-born of Poseidon, legend has it, Proteus, was able to tell the future, once captured. Preferring freedom, Proteus changed his shape as soon as he was seen. Inconstant with his affections in Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Proteus entered the world of English letters half a century before Hobbes wrote his masterful analysis of the all-powerful *Leviathan*. This book’s cover

¹ Altman 2016. ² Grimes 2015.

summarizes its central point: Proteus and Leviathan, together, help us understand better the unexpected in world politics.

This book extends an invitation to scholars and practitioners of power in 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. But it adds depth of understanding and a fuller explication of how power arises, operates, and dissipates in situations that are both risky and uncertain.

Protean power is the name we give to the results of actions by agile actors who are coping with the uncertainty that bedevils and frustrates a multitude of Leviathans exercising control under assumed conditions of risk. In contrast to relatively predictable control power, protean power stems from processes that are “versatile” or “tending and able to change frequently and easily.”³ Protean power emerges in uncertain contexts often experienced as such, when previous performance does not provide a reliable foundation for future moves. Although protean power follows from intentional actions, the outcomes of those actions are unforeseen and unforeseeable at the outset. Rather than emerging as a competing force, protean power is often closely related to and co-evolves with control power.

Power has causal impact in world politics. But power is also an outcome that needs to be explained. Protean power responds to and deepens unanticipated change, and is often a response to crises that catch everyone by surprise. Creative moves and their power effects can alter basic rules of the game and 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 an attribute of control power. Often, control and protean power processes unfold in variegated and complex relationships that are difficult to disentangle empirically. Nothing about protean power is inevitable; all of it is unpredictable. Its signature in world politics is real. Scholars of world politics have missed it largely because they have not looked.⁴ The blinders limiting the analysis of power are both individual and institutional. When we presented our work at the 2016 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association,

³ *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*.

⁴ 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.

the menu of available keywords to characterize our paper included an entry for “risk”; “uncertainty” was not an option.

The dynamics of protean and control power can be tracked in the relations among different state and non-state actors, operating in diverse sites, stretching from local to global, both in times of relative normalcy and moments of crisis. Since crises offer compelling illustrations for the relevance of protean power, we use them here in two brief sketches to elaborate on our central point in different empirical domains and across different levels of analysis.

The ongoing instability in eastern Ukraine serves as background for a first thought experiment. Risk-based, control-power arguments focus on causal stories showing what actors set out to accomplish and whether they succeeded as well as how and why. They seek to answer questions such as: who sparked the conflict and what were these actors trying to achieve? How effective was the two sides’ framing of their respective claims to legitimacy? What was the extent of Russia’s involvement at various points in time? But they also ask questions about the diffusion of control power in Europe. What is the impact on the security of states along the European Union’s periphery? How is Russia’s position in the former Soviet Union and its satellites affected? Implicitly or explicitly, such questions emphasize control power’s operation through compulsion and the constraints of institutions, structures, and discourses.⁵

Plausible though they are, all these lines of inquiry are incomplete in disregarding how actors improvise as they face unknown unknowns and how improvised approaches actualize power potentialities and create new ones that we label protean. In fact, there is as much guessing as there is prediction, including worst-case scenario thinking that can drive actors away from experimentation and into war. Introducing uncertainty as a relevant context and experience and incorporating protean power dynamics suggests different questions. What specific actions or behaviors changed the rules of the game and produced unexpected outcomes? How did they coincide with broader processes enabling power potentialities that escalated into uncontrollable crisis? To what extent were actors aware of the underlying uncertainty, and did they abandon established ways of coping as a result? In post-transition, post-Orange Revolution Ukrainian politics, the rules governing order and defining power hierarchies became extraordinarily fluid. Prisoners became prime ministers, prime ministers prisoners. Improvisation and innovation, but also affirmation and refusal by Ukrainian residents of annexed Crimea, became the new normal. In the midst of the turmoil surrounding suspected

⁵ Barnett and Duvall 2005.

Russian troop presence in the contested eastern region of Ukraine, commanders of separatist militias justified their reason for existence by means that brought down a civilian jetliner flying at high altitude changing everyone's exposure to uncertainty.⁶ On the ground, an elderly woman carrying a hen from Ukraine to newly separate Crimea over the heavily guarded border left a customs officer speechless when she declared the bird her pet, not poultry violating an export restriction.⁷ Protean power allows agile actors to handle the uncertain.

Our second sketch examines power dynamics operating across different levels of analysis. For decades the Mediterranean has been a path for migrants to Europe. The issue gained sudden urgency when in 2015 refugees from the Syrian civil war began streaming in unprecedented numbers across EU borders. The control power differential between the countries receiving them and the individuals flooding in could not have been greater. One side possessed economic wealth, relative stability, and political clout in the form of immigration regulations, border police and, later, barbed wire fences. These tools and institutions of control were met by refugees of all ages and backgrounds who often lacked travel documentation and personal belongings. Their actual capabilities to *power over* the hurdles they were meeting was non-existent. And yet the relentlessness with which they progressed, their determination in walking, for example, from Budapest to the Austrian border when train connections were severed, reveals potential capacities and a *power to do* something. The radical uncertainty this created led to still further improvisation by other actors. Lacking control power themselves, many ordinary Europeans not only facilitated the improvising moves by Syrian migrants but devised innovative strategies of their own, like developing useful smartphone apps or shuttling stranded refugees across state borders, bypassing state-imposed obstacles and avaricious smugglers.⁸

In terms of power relations it is next to impossible to draw a clear distinction between improvising and innovative refugees and their supporters, on the one hand, and governments seeking to enforce rules and exercising control, on the other. In fact, when faced with uncertainty governments also generate protean power effects at all levels of policy-making and implementation. We refer to this process as the circulation of protean power – *a priori* no specific actor is more likely to wield it or claim to have it. Extraordinary situations can require extraordinary measures. In taking a moral stance and a leap of faith when welcoming a torrent of

⁶ Harding and Luhn 2016. ⁷ Interview with Tetyana Sydorenko, April 2016.

⁸ Dewast and Chaturvedi 2015.

refugees, the German chancellor and the Canadian prime minister were not acting on any expectation of probable gain. Numbers simply could not be known when refugees were still getting off boats, trains and planes. And reactions of the public added another element of uncertainty. Ultimately, any agile actor can produce outcomes that rearrange the playing field in ways that no one could have imagined. Traditional accounts of control power say little about such decentralized, uncoordinated, but highly impactful dynamics.

Ever since James Scott named them, it has become intuitively plausible to highlight the weapons of the weak when tracing how decentralized improvisation and innovation generates protean power.⁹ The core of protean power lies in agility and the circulation of power potentialities rather than specific attributes, like social position or material capabilities and systems of rules so central to the exercise of control power. It may not be their default reaction in predictable environments when the capability to dominate weaker actors is routine business. But despite their large bureaucratic apparatus, governments and international organizations, too, have the capacity to adjust to uncertainty, and on occasion even to embrace it. What matters, we argue, is not only the asymmetric distribution of control power but also the navigational agility and mobilization of power potentials that go hand in hand with protean power effects. Equal in importance to Hobbes, the power theorist of those effects is Machiavelli. As a scientist and rigorous theorist, Hobbes focuses on what power is and what it can cause. As an astute observer of practice, Machiavelli highlights what power does and how it creates effects. Both insights are indispensable for an understanding of the profound interrelation, co-evolution, even co-constitution of control and protean power in the domains of risk and uncertainty.

For Peter Katzenstein this project started at Cornell University, Ithaca, in spring 2008 when the financial crisis became evident to all who cared to look. Since he remembered that the last financial crisis had led to disastrous consequences for his native Germany, Europe and the world, he sensed that this one, too, would have momentous consequences. A series of co-authored papers (with Stephen Nelson) helped him to grapple with the normalcy of crisis in the world of finance and the concept of Knightian uncertainty – learning to his delight that Frank Knight developed this important idea in his 1916 Cornell dissertation. Following a vague hunch, PK also started research on the American film industry – aware that in the early twentieth century Ithaca was an important production center of America's movie industry. As in finance, in film America looms very

⁹ Scott 1985.

large while lacking any sense of exercising control over unpredictable markets. Furthermore, since Hobbesian control power is of little help in making sense of the dynamics of popular culture, he saw an opening for learning more about technologies of constraint and mobility operating in fluid cultural fields.¹⁰ Stephen Nelson's initial bibliography provided an excellent start. A colleague and leading scholar of the film industry, Aida Hozic, became a source of inspiration, advice and support. PK published his preliminary ideas on power as an epilogue in a book that some of his former students had put together.¹¹

The initial draft paper on the movie industry grew as it went through many iterations. Lucia Seybert became its second author and, eventually, this book's second editor and co-author of five chapters. Her earliest political memories were formed during the surprisingly non-violent dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Later, in studying the less-than-uniform spread of international norms, many of them in the context of the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, she learned not to take even the most likely of outcomes for granted. A separate course of unexpected events drove her to appreciate uncertainty not necessarily as an obstacle and not inevitably as an opportunity but as a fact of life. At one stage, PK teased her for noticing protean power even when pouring a glass of milk.

With such a wide-angle lens, the initial draft paper soon became ever more unwieldy. It eventually dawned on us that we were writing not one paper but two – an empirical one on film and a theoretical one on power. Sensing that we were onto something, a few years later we decided to reconceive these two papers as the nucleus of a book. In book format we could elaborate and deepen our theoretical argument beyond what a journal article could accommodate. And with the help of others we could extend the empirical reach of our argument into a substantial number of important political domains. After innumerable drafts, this book has temporarily found its final shape. Since social science disciplines are partly defined by unending disagreements about their core constructs – capital in economics, status in sociology, and value in anthropology come to mind – this inquiry into the nature of power is only one chapter of a never-ending story in the analysis of politics that is bound to be superseded soon by other and hopefully better ones.

We could not have completed this project successfully without our collaborators, friends and colleagues – many of them with close connections to Cornell. In three workshops they constantly pushed us to rethink our half-baked ideas. The collaborative process of joint discovery and

¹⁰ Greenblatt 1990: 225. ¹¹ Katzenstein 2014.

clarification was scholarship at its very best, exhilarating, illuminating, and joyful – we hope not just for the two of us.

We received useful suggestions, criticisms, encouragements, and careful comments from many colleagues. Most of our readers were letting us know that versions of the initial paper were, at best, producing smoke (in the form of hot air); they concluded that there was no fire. Many asked why we were introducing still another concept of power. The conventional one after all had served pretty well for centuries. And many recent ones were faddish diversions that added heat rather than light to scholarly discussions. We recall, then with consternation, now with amusement, the time when one sympathetic critic and close friend made liberal use of the track-change function to help us clear an early draft paper of its underbrush and, with the best of intentions, trimmed away everything we wanted to say about protean power. Several years later we took comfort, when another colleague, a specialist on Aristotle no less, having listened to the core argument, reacted by simply nodding her head and saying “of course.” We knew then that the finish line was in sight.

We have no interest in starting a school of thought or articulating a unifying theory of power. Instead, we are locating with this book a vantage point that permits us to recognize connections previously concealed by deeply engrained habits of thought that leave too many of us simply dumbfounded and speechless when the unexpected happens.

We are deeply in debt to Stefano Guzzini for his lengthy and penetrating comments on several drafts of Chapters 2 and 3; Aida Hozic and Stephen Nelson for their never-ending, important pointers and encouragement, offered from very different vantage points; and David Lake for his sympathetically critical commentaries and generous tutoring on some of the finer details of an approach to international political economy that he favors and we criticize in Chapter 2.

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Yoffie, and the participants of panels at the Annual Meetings of the International Studies Association (2013, 2016) and the American Political Science Association (2014–2016), the Foresight Lecture Fireside Chat at the University of Potsdam, and seminars hosted by the BGIE unit of the Harvard Business School, the International Relations section of the Science Center Berlin, the London School of Economics, the Max-Planck Institute in Cologne, the Cornell Government Department IR Faculty Seminar, Columbia University, the University of Queensland and Leiden University.

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PK dedicates this book to Lucia who has met the unfathomable uncertainties of her life with incomparable courage and grace. LS dedicates this book to Livia Antalova and Michal Daniel, who have her back in all uncertainty, and to Darian and Leon, who it is all for.

Peter Katzenstein
Ithaca, August 2017

Lucia Seybert
Washington DC, August 2017