

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Protean power: a second look

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### Abstract

This paper restates the central point of *Protean Power*, pushes the analysis forward by engaging each of the commentators, and concludes by underlining the importance of uncertainty and potentialities and mapping some of the areas that need further attention.

**Keywords:** control power; protean power; uncertainty; potentiality

Son of Poseidon, Proteus had the enviable gift of telling the future. This made him a precious target. But Proteus valued his freedom. When approached, he evaded his stalkers by changing his shape. Protean power is shape-changing power.

Replying to attentive and sympathetic critics is an experience every author savors. Having pushed our rickety little boat toward the middle of the river, it is thrilling to watch as it takes its own course, tossed back and forth by different currents, hopefully making it to the river's first bend, and perhaps all the way to the ocean we call human knowledge. And even if it does not, it is exciting to have one's ideas discussed by others.

The intent of *Protean Power (PP)* is not to replace established notions of control power. Rather, the central aim of the book is to explore political potentialities through the variable relations between protean and control power operating in domains of risk and uncertainty. *PP* is an invitation to rethink what we thought we fully understood but did not. Uninterested in battling windmills *PP* does not have any ambition to build a new house for the study of international relations. Instead, it gives a little nudge to open the windows in the home we have to let in a fresh breeze. *PP* is an invitation to 'rethink', not a push to 'remake'.<sup>1</sup>

Truth be told, this is a difficult moment for me. My dear friend, co-author, co-editor, and former student, Lucia Seybert, died in March 2018, a few weeks after Cambridge University Press rushed the first copy to her bedside. She had fought a long and difficult illness with enormous grace and courage. This book

<sup>1</sup>In the preface, we write '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' Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, xvii.

became life-affirming, at times perhaps even life-sustaining, work as Lucia was confronting a series of indescribable health challenges and treatment routines. During the last 2 years of her life, the two of us scheduled our bursts of work for those brief periods when she was able to concentrate, uninterrupted by gut wrenching medical procedures. Lucia lived for her two little boys, the other members of her family, and for this book. Without ever having to spell it out, we both understood that *PP* was an island of emotional sustenance and intellectual engagement while every fiber of her soul and body battled a cruel illness valiantly until the very end. With great sadness, I dedicate this essay to Lucia, confident that she would agree with its general spirit though probably not with all of its specific arguments.

## Background

*PP* had its origin in the financial crisis of 2008 which caught me, like most others, unprepared. Since the crisis left my colleagues specializing in questions of international political economy curiously silent, I immersed myself in some of the literature on risk and uncertainty. Together with Stephen Nelson, I wrote three papers on finance.<sup>2</sup> We argued that political economists had drunk the economists' Kool Aid of a risk-only world, analyzed trenchantly in this symposium by George DeMartino and Ilene Grabel.<sup>3</sup> The field of international political economy simply lacked the conceptual tools to deal with the uncertainties revealed by the most important economic event in more than half a century.

Sensing that the discussion of uncertainty and risk in finance pointed to a bigger point about power, my intuition led me to search out literatures and debates outside of the Hobbesian framework of control power and its assumption of a risk-only world. Eventually, I ended up in film studies with its more fluid conception of cultural power. Early on, Stephen Nelson, then a research assistant, provided me with a superb summary of some of the film literature. Eventually, Lucia and I joined forces while I was writing what seemed like a paper on the American movie industry. That manuscript ballooned beyond article-size to become two different papers, one on power, the other on the film industry.<sup>4</sup> Our repeated attempts at convincing the reviewers of various journals about the value of our approach ended in abysmal failure. An edited book thus became our default option.<sup>5</sup> Especially prepared for this symposium, [Table 1](#) gives a schematic summary of *PP*'s 12 empirical case studies.

Many important contributions resonating with our argument had to be left out of *PP* for reasons of space (Scott 1994). Others we simply had failed to notice or could not include by the time *PP* went to press. They include Arturo Santa-Cruz's inquiry into US hegemony; Jeffrey Friedman's investigation into 'war and chance'; Rodney Bruce Hall's addition of Searle's concept of 'deontic power' to Barnett and Duvall's typology; Friedman *et al.* on forecasting; Christopher Walker's 'sharp' and Heimans and Timms's 'new' power; Mark Cancian's study of 'surprise' in great power conflicts;

<sup>2</sup>Nelson and Katzenstein 2014, Katzenstein and Nelson 2013a, 2013b.

<sup>3</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Seybert *et al.* 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Coinciding with the release of *PP*, an article summarizing some of the main points of the book was finally published by *International Studies Quarterly* in the spring of 2018, the same year and season as the book Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b.

**Table 1.** Control and protean power in selected issue areas

	Control power: acquiescence	Overlay of control and protean power: refusal and improvisation	Protean power: innovation
Human Rights	Requires meaning determinacy, institutional simplicity	Under uncertainty, control power exacerbates crises; <i>PP</i> enhanced	Creative interpretation of rights, acceptance of new actors
LGBT	Top-down diffusion and conditionality introduces regulations and resistance	Control power of norm promoters; local advocates translate norms	Activists engage with IOs/INGOs when states close access
Border Control	Criminals exert more control than state, both exercise control power; not migrants	Migrant and smuggler <i>PP</i> resists state and criminal control power; mutually reinforcing	Individuals exert <i>PP</i> ; survival and crossing tactics
High Tech	Copyrights, patents, bitcoin, and blockchain as commercial opportunities	Desire to enhance knowledge, ensure safety or prevent illegality; different regulators	Discovery of unknown needs, innovation bypasses governments and finance, self-organized
Hydrocarbons	Firms restrict production as punishment or to affect price; restriction of transport	Use of navy to protect liquidity; firm influence on policy; fiscal reliance on oil; negotiations over price, diversification	Trust and relations between firms; flexibility of small producers; disintermediation and redirection of flows
Finance	Standardization and categorization, regulatory capture	Authorized disruptive innovation, indeterminate sovereign debt clauses	Ratings rigged, OCT derivative markets unpredictable with creative adaptation, novel arbitrage strategies
Terrorism	T: spread geographically CT: Invading Afghanistan	T: Embedding terrorists among refugees CT: Building state capacity, adopting alternative policing and surveillance	T: Lone wolves, social media CT: Sow distrust and fear of spies
Film	Hollywood's control by few, lobbying for IP, protection of local markets	Incompleteness of Hollywood's power generates exchanges	National and regional hubs combine resources, global audience taste unpredictable

*(Continued)*

Table 1. (Continued.)

	Control power: acquiescence	Overlay of control and protean power: refusal and improvisation	Protean power: innovation
Arms Control	Voting rules, institutional blockage, state capacity	Changing debates, venue selection, content, and compliance	Small states partner with NGOs, new venues, mobilization, shifting norms
Environment	Kyoto Protocol's carbon offset	Private regulators consulted in intergovernmental talks, private standards used	Non-state actors develop expertise and create standards, voluntary carbon market

Sidney Tarrow's examination of dualities of 'infrastructural power' in America; Michael Beckley's net resource model of power; David Edelstein's argument about the cooperation-inducing aspects of long-time horizons and uncertainty<sup>6</sup>; Rainer Forst's analysis of justifications as 'noumenal power'; Robin Hogarth, Tomás Lejarra, and Emre Soyer's specification of 'kind' and 'wicked' learning environments; Patchen Markell's inquiry into 'momentary power'; Giulio Gallarotti's 'power curse'; Erik Jones's 'elusive power'; Ian Shapiro and Sonu Bedi's analysis of 'political contingency'; and Guillermo O'Donnell's and Philippe Schmitter's reflections on uncertainty and democratic transitions.<sup>7</sup> This symposium is part of an ongoing conversation about one of the core constructs in international relations, political science, and the social sciences.

### Debating protean power

Truth in advertising compels me to acknowledge at the outset that in this symposium *PP* is blessed with six deeply probing and thought-provoking commentaries offered by Jacques Hymans (the energetic force behind this symposium – for which I am enormously grateful), Emanuel Adler, George DeMartino and Ilene Grabel, Stefano Guzzini, Benoît Pelopidas, and Michael Zürn. Some of them came to this assignment fresh (Hymans, DeMartino and Grabel, and Pelopidas); others had commented on *PP* during a roundtable discussion convened at the 2018 meeting of the International Studies Association (Adler and Zürn); and the leading theorist of power in international relations (Guzzini) had been an immensely important critic of some versions of *PP*'s all too numerous theoretical draft chapters.

<sup>6</sup>Edelstein 2017. Edelstein curiously fails to mention, let alone engage critically, Doran's 1991, 25–30, 95–100; 1999; 2003 contrary argument.

<sup>7</sup>Santa-Cruz 2019, Friedman 2019, Hall 2018, Friedman *et al.* 2018, Walker 2018, National Endowment 2017, Heimans and Timms 2018, Cancian 2018, Tarrow 2018, Beckley 2018a, 2018b, Edelstein 2017, Forst 2015a, 2015b, Hogarth *et al.* 2015, Markell 2014, Gallarotti 2009, Jones 2009, Shapiro and Bedi 2007, O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 3–5.

I organize my remarks in the venerable tradition of American court proceedings and report a mixed verdict. Two counts of guilty as charged; two hung juries; and four acquittals. I end with reporting three unexpected gifts.

### ***Guilty as charged***

*PP* is an exercise of empirically driven, theoretically agnostic, constitutive theorizing, as Guzzini aptly observes at the outset of his essay.<sup>8</sup> The conceptual move of *PP* has two ambitions: recognizing a politics that has been systematically blocked out of our vision by the very categories we rely on; and providing numerous and diverse illustrations of how to analyze that kind of politics. Since its case studies are no more than initial probes, *PP* self-consciously avoids premature theoretical closure. *PP*'s argument reaches out to the field of political theory only in the book's concluding chapter, reminding its readers that it is restating an old argument, not making a new one.<sup>9</sup> What Hans Morgenthau is reported to have said about methods rings true for *PP*'s skeptical view of pure theory and its inclination to 'splitting', by making various theoretically intriguing conceptual differentiations: 'always sharpening its tools, never cutting anything'.

Conceptual 'lumping' risks making mistakes by conflating things that should be kept apart. Guzzini insists correctly that *PP*'s lumping strategy pays a price for occasionally overburdening the concept of protean power.<sup>10</sup> The limits of control power are due not only to *PP* effects but also the open system ontology that informs *PP*. By failing to draw that distinction clearly throughout, the book's ontology risks at time being retranslated as explanatory cause. This can overburden *PP* analysis. Future work should avoid such mixing of the stating of ontological assumption and the tracking of explanatory cause by a more careful differentiation between the two. This would have the added benefit, as Guzzini argues, of drawing a clearer distinction between a theory of action and a theory of domination.<sup>11</sup> Such clarity is important because, as Guzzini notes accurately, *PP* is invested in broadening narrower notions of efficient causal explanations to incorporate broader notions of causal explication.

Choosing a global rather than an international perspective, Pelopidas focuses on the possibility of unrepeatable, catastrophes for humanity, such as global thermo-nuclear war or large-scale environmental disaster – extreme versions of DeMartino and Grabel's cruel  $N=1$  domains.<sup>12</sup> For those domains, he argues, the concept of *PP* opens up a space for thinking about humanity's most basic material vulnerabilities under conditions of radical uncertainty, including the possibility of human and civilizational extinction. But Pelopidas also criticizes *PP* for introducing a 'survivability bias', that conceals from our vision the path to extinction via the unthinkable: omniscidal nuclear war and civilizational collapse.<sup>13</sup> On this point *PP* is guilty as charged.

<sup>8</sup>Guzzini 2020.

<sup>9</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 282–97.

<sup>10</sup>Guzzini 2020, in section: 'Protean power: from causal agency to constitutive process'.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, in section: 'Operational vs. Radical Uncertainty'.

<sup>13</sup>Pelopidas 2020, in section: 'Not controlling and not knowing: Protean power as an antidote to overconfidence?'

**Hung jury**

Most students of world politics emulate the ‘scientific standard’ economists assert they are setting. DeMartino’s and Grabel’s reflections on *PP* come from the perspective of a discipline that has banished the concept of uncertainty. From their heterodox vantage point economic theory and policy is trapped by ‘epistemic arrogance and the control fantasies of social planners’.<sup>14</sup> Their quote of Adam Smith’s ridicule of economists recalls Leo Tolstoy’s equally cutting remark about a celebrated military strategist: ‘In the failure of that war he did not see the slightest evidence of the weakness of his theory. On the contrary, the whole failure was to his thinking entirely due to the departures made from his theory’.<sup>15</sup> DeMartino and Grabel refer approvingly to Hirschman who opposed ‘isms’ of all sorts and favored ‘perpetual localized experimentation’.<sup>16</sup> One notable example of this experimentation is the productive incoherence of the governance regime of global finance emerging after the 2008 financial crisis, analyzed in Grabel’s prize-winning book.<sup>17</sup>

The main criticism of DeMartino and Grabel focuses on the distinction that *PP* draws between operational and radical uncertainty, between a potentially knowable uncertainty due to complexity and uncertainty which is not susceptible to any form of calculation. In agreeing with *PP* that, from the perspective of agents who must act, in practice this distinction is often immaterial, they introduce the productive distinction between ‘reparable’ and ‘irreparable’ ignorance. This adds the practically relevant time frame for action to the distinction between operational and radical uncertainty. In their words ‘the temporal element is key’.<sup>18</sup> Uncertainty due to reparable ignorance can be dealt with in practically relevant time frames; uncertainty due to irreparable ignorance cannot. Echoing Adler, the gist of this intervention is to greatly enhance the domain of incalculable uncertainty and *PP* effects and shrink that of calculable risk and control power.<sup>19</sup>

I worry about a sleight of hand here.<sup>20</sup> First, what is useful and needed knowledge for one may not be for another. Economists and statisticians at one of the world’s largest reinsurance companies, Munich Re, make a living shifting the boundary between operational and radical uncertainty so that they can start pricing new products or stop pricing old ones. For them the distinction between two kinds of uncertainty is useful knowledge. For migrants seeking to traverse hostile territories and having to make quick life-and-death decisions it is often useless knowledge. The judgment of what is and is not useful knowledge is situationally specific.

Second, what DeMartino and Grabel call the cruel conundrum of  $N = 1$  domains – the knowledge needed in choosing how to act can only be achieved by making the

<sup>14</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, at the start of section: ‘Uncertainty, Protean Power, and Economic Theory’.

<sup>15</sup>Tolstoy 2004, 729, quoted in Kirshner 2015.

<sup>16</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, in section: ‘Uncertainty, Protean Power, and Economic Theory’.

<sup>17</sup>Grabel 2017.

<sup>18</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, in section: ‘Operational vs. Radical Uncertainty’.

<sup>19</sup>Adler 2020, in his Introduction.

<sup>20</sup>Noelle Bridgen helped me think through this point. She warns that the distinction between reparable and irreparable ignorance offers a purely agential account that steers attention away from protean power effects.

choice<sup>21</sup> – does not eliminate confidence derived from Bayesian updating. Asking herself whether the berries are food or poison, the hiker who is lost in the woods may be able to draw on relevant prior knowledge – the berries she ate yesterday, when she was also lost, did not kill her – to inform her choice. There are situations in which knowledge is necessarily too late. And there are situations in which information updating may help. It depends on the situation.

Third, confronted with radical uncertainty migrants at times put their fortunes in the hands of God and experience the situation – as do, on occasion, terrorists – as one of certainty.<sup>22</sup> The advantages of clarity of exposition of ‘either-or’ binary choices, like operational and radical uncertainty or reparable and irreparable ignorance, easily gets tripped up by layered realities of ‘both-and’ that migrants (and other agents) face when they confront different kinds of uncertainties along their routes. Still, the coding of the migrant case in Table 13.2<sup>23</sup> should be corrected, as DeMartino and Grabel insist, to include both operational and radical uncertainty, thus bringing the table in line with repeated discussions of the migrant case in the text.<sup>24</sup>

Guzzini ends his essay with important and inconclusive reflections on the relation between power theorizing and foreign policy practice. His analysis points to the difficulties of coupling the two as tightly as the theorist may wish. He concludes that ‘the ontological, explanatory and practical domain of power analysis do not easily meet’.<sup>25</sup> While this sounds right to me, my intellectual sensibility favors modesty in searching for loose couplings. For now, *PP* plays the role of jester at the Court of Convention of control power analysis. Acknowledging explicitly, as this symposium does, the very existence of theoretical pluralism is a desirable first step in a world that reassigns the roles of kings and clowns in different acts of an unfolding play. Informed by that pluralism, scenario thinking about alternative worlds is a helpful second step that is preferable to explanations and predictions based on the assumption of control power operating in the closed system of a risk-only world.

Such scenario-based forecasts offer the best instruments for negotiating our way in unknown and unknowable worlds that we cannot control. Short of calculable probabilities, Tetlock and Gardner’s work has taught us that the quality of forecasters varies substantially.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, there exists a difference between expert judges who can modify their judgments as they go along without a cost and traders who, once they take a position on a stock, must pay a price if they change their mind at a later date.<sup>27</sup> But judgments in the realm of the uncertain differ. Invoking Isaiah Berlin, Tetlock and Gardner conclude that hedgehogs who focus only on one big thing are worse forecasters than foxes who scan the environment for multiple sources of information while adapting their cognitive grid and emotional intuition.

<sup>21</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, in section: ‘Operational vs. Radical Uncertainty’.

<sup>22</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 30, 195–200.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 279.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 30, 273–74, 278.

<sup>25</sup>Guzzini 2020, last sentence.

<sup>26</sup>Tetlock and Gardner 2015; Friedman 2019, 76, footnote 22.

<sup>27</sup>Harford 2018.

**Acquittal**

Hymans criticizes *PP* for not engaging seriously the rational choice literature. Rational choice is an import from economics rather than a product homegrown by scholars of international relations.<sup>28</sup> In their contribution to this symposium DeMartino and Grabel offer a sustained criticism of rational choice in economics with its assumption of infinitely smart agents, rich information environments and a future that can be modeled probabilistically. ‘The resolution of the uncertainty problem was to deny it – to reduce uncertainty to calculable risk. The goal was to establish the technologies necessary for *time travel* – letting economists see tomorrow, today’.<sup>29</sup> Hymans is certainly correct to point out that some strains of rationalist theorizing which emphasize preference falsification<sup>30</sup> and a ‘global games’ approach<sup>31</sup> suggest that equilibria can be unstable across a range of different settings. This work provides new foundations for models of unpredictable shifts between equilibria. Telling us that one or several rational choice models can cover the range of observations reported by *PP* is one thing. Showing us how, is quite another. Here, as always, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

My hunch is that this pudding will not be served very soon, if ever. Future progress in modeling uncertainty is of course possible as *PP* explicitly notes.<sup>32</sup> But it should be noted also that in the last three decades international relations scholarship has not ventured onto this technically demanding terrain. And game theorists working in this area are theorists with no particular interest or competence in the analysis of politics. Furthermore, rational choice accounts have no answer to why an equilibrium is disturbed, without invoking exogenous shocks or other factors that fall outside of the model. In a risk-only world with common information, endogenously-generated, equilibrium-disturbing shocks are ruled out. This is a weakness that *PP* seeks to remedy by endogenizing change.

The convergence of micro rationality and macro irrationality that, pace Hymans, invalidates the argument of *PP*, occurs in a world assumed to consist only of risk. *PP* makes that point in a sustained critique of two rational choice applications central to the analysis of world politics: deterrence theory and Open Economy Politics.<sup>33</sup> Contra Hymans’ assertion,<sup>34</sup> it is not for lack of trying that economists have been unable to use their risk-only view of the world to model the film industry.<sup>35</sup> Just as in finance, they have been defeated by the ontological and epistemic uncertainties that mark that industry. This is not a wholesale indictment of rational choice approaches. In some domains, such as the life insurance industry, not rife with uncertainty, marked by low levels of complexity, and not requiring us to understand how the processes by which contingent events amplify and possibly transform systems, rationalist-inflected theories are appropriate and can be very useful.

<sup>28</sup>I thank Stephen Nelson for letting me test out some of these ideas with him.

<sup>29</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, in their Introduction.

<sup>30</sup>Kuran 1995.

<sup>31</sup>Morris and Shin 2001.

<sup>32</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 45, footnote 72.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 41–52.

<sup>34</sup>Hymans 2020.

<sup>35</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 216–18.



Furthermore, central to rational choice, the concept of equilibrium is a weak reed on which to build analysis. Both physics and economics access the world through stylized models which permit us to rigorously derive consequences. Even though neo-classical economics has imitated 19<sup>th</sup> century physics,<sup>36</sup> these two disciplines do so by adopting opposing strategies. The concepts of physics have great deductive power whose application is limited by the restricted range of concrete models that link abstract concepts to the world. In contrast, economic concepts have a wide range of application; but they yield deductive results only when located in models with very restricted application.<sup>37</sup> ‘The claims to knowledge we can defend by our impressive scientific successes do not argue for a unified world of universal order, but rather for a dappled world of mottled objects ... The yearning for “the system” is a powerful one; the faith that our world must be rational, well ordered through and through, plays a role where only evidence should matter.’<sup>38</sup> The concept of *PP* breaks with the faith Cartwright invokes. It fits very well into her description of a ‘dappled world’.

Finally, *PP* analysis may suggest sensitivity to costs and opportunities as Hymans suggests; but it does not have to do so. Cost calculations do not occur in a vacuum. They are based on knowledge of the identity of actors. In the calculation of costs and benefits rationalists take those identities as given; analysts of protean and control power dynamics inquire into them empirically as does Phillip Ayoub in his analysis of the LGBT Rights Revolution.<sup>39</sup> For rationalists the identity of actors A and B are given before the game starts. For a relationally conceived analysis of control and *PP*, these identities emerge from playing the game. This is the reason why Adler prefers the concept of ‘trans-action’ to ‘inter-action’; it does not assume internal essences.<sup>40</sup> On this view, the rigidity of a Martin Luther<sup>41</sup> is not pre-given but emerges from the interplay of two kinds of power as experienced by Luther and the context in which he and the Catholic Church engaged each other.

Zürn’s probing comments echo Hymans on the need for greater depth and breadth in *PP*’s analysis. Zürn asks whether ‘the notion of power can be grasped by focusing on any effect of a specific type of response without adding any qualifiers to these effects’.<sup>42</sup> Because *PP* operates with two concepts of power, not one, I have no answer to his question. What I can do is pinpoint the spot where Zürn’s analysis falls back into equating power with control power, thus giving up on *PP*’s central task, the analysis of potentialities through *PP* effects. Doing so, I admit, leaves me feeling the disappointment of a salesman who failed to close a deal. (Happily in this play the salesman lives for another day and the chance for another sale.)

As is explicitly noted, *PP*’s analysis is indebted to Hayward and the late Foucault.<sup>43</sup> The central point of *PP* is not providing another application of a relational concept of

<sup>36</sup>Mirowski 1989.

<sup>37</sup>Cartwright 1999, 4.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 10 and 17.

<sup>39</sup>Ayoub 2018.

<sup>40</sup>Adler 2020, in section: ‘Illusion of Control and Radical Uncertainty’.

<sup>41</sup>Hymans 2020.

<sup>42</sup>Zürn 2020, in section: ‘Power and Directionality’.

<sup>43</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 8–9, 283–87. For the conceptualization advanced in *PP* what mattered was the late Foucault writing after 1977 about power reversals and potentialities, not the typically cited Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*.

power, of which, Zürn rightly insists, there have been several.<sup>44</sup> Instead it is a better understanding of the potentialities concealed by the uncertain and unexpected – a topic left unaddressed in both theoretical and empirical literatures of international relations, and not only in America.

Intentionality and directionality are the two headings under which Zürn develops his argument. He writes that *PP* ‘comes “in an indirect mode of operation”, thus not requiring intentionality’. This is not quite accurate. *PP* argues that agents act according to local and situationally specific intentions, but that the indirect *PP* effects of their actions are often uncertainty-enhancing and system-wide.<sup>45</sup> Hence the upward and downward arrows on the right-hand, Innovation/Uncertainty side of Figure 2.1.<sup>46</sup> In this conceptualization *PP* effects operating in the domain of uncertainty are freed from intentionality aiming at systemic effects; such effects, however, are very much in play in the exercise of control power in the domain of risk.

More important to Zürn is the directionality of power. ‘Directionality is a necessary feature of power. Without directionality, there is no power’, putting some distance between himself and Foucault.<sup>47</sup> Absent directionality, for Zürn the concept of power is widened unduly which is normatively dangerous and analytically self-defeating. *PP* argues differently.<sup>48</sup> Directionality is the mark of control power, circulation that of *PP*. In developing his argument Zürn returns to the familiar concept of control power as the only concept of power and to the world of actuality as the only one worth understanding. *PP* and potentiality are pushed aside.

As an example for his argument Zürn refers to brokers who developed new derivative products in financial markets. He writes that ‘they may have exercised protean power’ to the extent that they achieved their goals, making money or avoiding government regulation. Here is the precise point – ‘they may have exercised protean power’ – the salesman realizes that he lost his sale.<sup>49</sup>

Let me reformulate the same episode in the conceptual language of *PP*. Operating in a world which they experience as risky, the brokers exercised control power in an environment marked by uncertainty. The ensuing crisis resulted in unforeseen *PP* effects. We unconsciously slip back into the familiar language of control power analysis when we assume that *PP* can be ‘exercised’.

Collapsing the distinction between two kinds of power and equating *PP* with the ideas and interests of those exercising control power undermines the central purpose of *PP*. We need two concepts of power to distinguish the effect of (protean) power from the exercise of (control) power. In *PP* the concept of control power is not bound to effects; the concept of *PP* is. If we operate with only one concept of power, we conceal the potentialities that *PP* wants to uncover. *PP* then becomes simply another label for existing ones such as ‘productive’ power.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, relabeling *PP* effects as ‘unintended consequences’, a mark of control power

<sup>44</sup>Zürn 2020, in section: ‘Power and Directionality’.

<sup>45</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 9–16, 29–40.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>47</sup>Zürn 2020, in section: ‘Power and Directionality’.

<sup>48</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 9–16, 29–40.

<sup>49</sup>Zürn 2020, in section: ‘Power and Directionality’.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

analysis, blinds us to *PP* effects that permit us to explore potentialities rooted in the domain of the uncertain.

That domain, however, is alien to many social scientists' understanding of the world. They feel more at home in the certainties of the Newtonian world. Writing in the mid-1950s, for Robert Dahl the classical model provided 'the laws of nature as we understand them'.<sup>51</sup> More than 60 years later, Dahl's dictum remains true for the vast majority of international relations scholars. Yet, no physicist today believes that the classical model is correct. Neither did Hans Morgenthau who insisted that the quantum revolution made it imperative to update our concept of science.<sup>52</sup> *PP* sides with Morgenthau rather than Dahl.<sup>53</sup> The concept of *PP* has an affinity with core concepts of quantum physics: uncertainty, entanglement, locality, 'spooky action at a distance', and, most importantly, potentiality.

Left alone, the salesman pondered why he had failed to close the deal. The obvious answer – customer avoidance of buyer's remorse – merely skims the surface and leaves several questions hanging. Zürn's receptiveness to *PP*, as he writes at the outset of his essay, dates back to a high school forum about nuclear power in the 1970s. This made me think back to my own German high school years, in particular my physics classes. I was taught about gravity only through the lens of the classical model of physics. Space is an empty container through which gravitation diffuses. Objects make the world. The earth moves around the sun because gravity is a force that inheres in bodies. The larger sun controls the movement of the smaller earth because the greater mass exerts more gravity than the smaller mass. I was not taught about gravity in terms of quantum physics. The gravitational field is space itself. It is created by the linking of individual quanta of gravity. Relationships make the world. The earth moves around the sun because gravity is the bending of space–time by a body with mass.

In Newtonian physics gravity controls. In quantum physics gravity (like *PP*) is an observable effect in space–time (or social) context.<sup>54</sup> For conventional views of power, this defies common sense and is hard to accept. For *PP* forces us to let go of the conventional notion that all kinds of power are exercised. The powerful grip of this convention is probably rooted in the outdated, Dahlian misconception of the laws of nature. Should we perhaps heed the call to 'waking IR up from its deep Newtonian slumber'?<sup>55</sup> Should we perhaps listen to Nobel-prize winning physicist Richard Feynman for whom the experimentally-confirmed theory of quantum electrodynamics offers a description of Nature that is utterly absurd in terms of our common sense?<sup>56</sup> And should we perhaps, with Rovelli, entertain the possibility that *Reality is not What It Seems*?<sup>57</sup> Why should political scientists not be impelled by the same quest in their analysis of the political world that motivates physicists in theirs of the natural one – to lift just a little the veil of our blurred ignorance to gain a better sense of the fleeting richness and weirdness

<sup>51</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 10, 295.

<sup>52</sup>Morgenthau 1946, 131–45.

<sup>53</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 10, 295–96.

<sup>54</sup>Rovelli 2016, 8–10, 43. I thank Wayne Sandholtz for pointing to the same example as Rovelli.

<sup>55</sup>Kavalski 2012.

<sup>56</sup>Feynman 1985, 10.

<sup>57</sup>Rovelli 2017.

of life?<sup>58</sup> With these questions left unanswered, the disappointed salesman called it a day with the consolation that tomorrow might be another, and perhaps better, one.

Because all concepts and theories are unavoidably grounded in other concepts and meta-theories, subsumption is one of the professoriate's most beloved sports. Adler moves the debate about *PP* onto the terrain of "unspeken" meta-theoretical assumptions about social reality' about which he has written a fundamentally important book.<sup>59</sup> The 'we' Adler invokes in his central question at the outset – 'where do we go from here?' – designates a community of IR theorists as his primary reference group.<sup>60</sup> While I very much enjoy visiting the House of Theory, share a meal with friends and have a good time, it is not where I wish to bed down or take up residence. Before meeting Adler on his favorite turf, it is worth pointing out that *PP*'s analysis and Adler's meta-theoretical reflections align well on six of his eight points if one allows for some differences in terminology: all agents are creative and agile; expectations, imagination and the future matter; power dynamics are grounded in relational processes; control and *PP* are instantiated in practices that have feedback effects on power constellations; power and politics are about the actualization of potentialities; and complexity theory and open systems analysis are well suited to capture *PP* effects.

Contra Adler,<sup>61</sup> *PP* does not privilege epistemology over ontology. The figure which he adapts from *PP* at the end of his essay looks at both risk and uncertainty in analyzing both actor experience (epistemology) and the attributes of the underlying context (ontology). It self-consciously avoids making one or the other dimension primary, offering instead a broad framework to accommodate different styles of theoretical and empirical analysis. The case studies are informed by different theoretical stances as authors explore different matches and mismatches between experience and context. Drawing on Popper (1995) and the 'Copenhagen Interpretation' in quantum mechanics<sup>62</sup>, for Adler, uncertainty is 'not merely epistemological but primarily ontological' due to the indeterminacy of the natural and social world.<sup>63</sup> Disregarding for the moment the escape hatch provided by 'primarily', this is a good argument. There are others. QBism (as in Quantum Bayesianism), for example, is based firmly on experience and subjectivist probabilities. An exponent of the 'Ithaca Interpretation', David Mermin has attempted to reduce the core interpretive puzzles of quantum mechanics to the single one of making sense of quantum probabilities. In this view, physics is not the study of something that is given *a priori*.<sup>64</sup> It is instead a set of methods for surveying and ordering human experience.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>58</sup>Rovelli 2016, 11–12.

<sup>59</sup>Adler 2020, 2019.

<sup>60</sup>Adler 2020, Introduction.

<sup>61</sup>Adler 2020, in the section: 'Illusion of Control and Radical Uncertainty'.

<sup>62</sup>Popper 1995.

<sup>63</sup>Adler 2020, in the section: 'Illusion of Control and Radical Uncertainty'. I thank Emanuel Adler for alerting me to the relevance of Popper's important book for Adler's own argument.

<sup>64</sup>Mermin 1998, McCall 2001.

<sup>65</sup>Mermin 1990, 187.

As is true, I suspect, of Adler, foundational discussions about the primacy of ontology or epistemology, remind me of Dr Dolittle's pushmi-pullyu. Accompanying the good doctor back to England, to earn him some serious money in his circus, one of its two heads was talking while the other one was eating. For all its faults, *PP*'s eclecticism<sup>66</sup> makes it a serious contestant for the Ingenious Table Manner Award. *PP* steers away from overarching claims about the priority of either the talking or the eating head.

Adler sees the domain of risk and control power as a special case which is forever destabilized, if not today then tomorrow, by *PP* effects. He agrees with DeMartino and Grabel that 'all "operational uncertainty" is really "radical uncertainty"'.<sup>67</sup> The meaning of the word 'really' in this bold statement remains opaque. Does the statement describe what the world 'really' is like or what we hold the 'real' world to be like? In either case, the implication of Adler's argument is unambiguous. 'Control power [is] a special case of protean power'.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, *PP* is agnostic about the primacy of control or *PP*. It is not trying to offer a comprehensive, unified social theory of apprehending the world. Instead, it proceeds pragmatically by seeking to describe and explain it. Highlighting the overlooked domain of uncertainty and *PP* effects, *PP*'s theoretical formulation is sufficiently open to make possible compelling analyses of specific political problems in specific political situations. The old adage holds. 'It all depends.'

The fall of the Berlin Wall illustrates this difference in approach rather nicely. For Adler, 'it may not have happened at all'.<sup>69</sup> *PP* argues instead that, besides the contingent events on 9 November 1989, East Germany's impending financial insolvency constituted a dramatic weakening of the regime's control power that made the opening of the wall an almost forgone conclusion rather than an indeterminate event.<sup>70</sup> *PP*'s case studies and a century of social science research offer many situations in which politics follows along the experiential and contextual contours of risk without the interference of *PP* effects.

Finally, Guzzini insists that control and *PP* should not be conceptualized as standing in a zero-sum relation.<sup>71</sup> Not so. Precisely because the ideal-typical distinction between the two types of power encourages zero-sum thinking, *PP* put special emphasis on the overlay and interweaving of control and *PP* effects<sup>72</sup> and distinguished very clearly between three worlds: the world of risk and control power, the world of uncertainty and *PP* and the world of risk and uncertainty and control and *PP*.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the 12 case studies provide the empirical material for characterizing different kinds of relations between control and *PP* summarized both in a separate table and discussed in a separate section of the concluding chapter.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Sil and Katzenstein 2010.

<sup>67</sup>Adler 2020, in his Introduction.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., in the section: 'Illusion of Control and Radical Uncertainty'.

<sup>70</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 5.

<sup>71</sup>Guzzini 2020, in section: 'Protean power: from causal agency to constitutive process'.

<sup>72</sup>Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, Figure 2.1, 33, 29–40.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., Table 13.1, 274–76.

On this score, as on the charges leveled by Hymans, Zürn and Adler, in my reading *PP* is not guilty as charged.

### **Unexpected gifts**

In extending the reach of *PP* analysis beyond guilt, hung jury, and acquittal, this symposium also yields three unexpected gifts. Hymans probes the point of agile actors bringing about *PP* effects. Psychologists like Frank Bond characterize psychological flexibility as the ability to pivot quickly and effectively to ‘acceptance and action.’ Noted science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin catches this when she observes that ‘the only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next’. This is in contrast to psychologist Ari Kruglanski’s work on cognitive rigidity and ‘seizing and freezing’.<sup>75</sup> Hymans focuses on the ‘seize and freeze’ camp and thus extends the approach of *PP* to a new empirical domain. Rigidity rather than agility, he argues, is the most plausible response to the experience of radical uncertainty. In seeking to make the unpredictable predictable, psychological effects can reinforce stasis.<sup>76</sup>

Based on his own work, Hymans provides a number of telling examples, imaginatively extending the range of the *PP* concept. His analysis could be enriched even further by including the contextual dimension along with the experiential one. In *PP* epistemology and experience and ontology and context are co-equal. Neither is the ‘essential driver of power’ as DeMartino and Grabel observe perceptively.<sup>77</sup>

Pelopidas writes authoritatively about nuclear war as a possible catastrophe. He also points briefly to the possibility of civilizational collapse in the face of environmental disaster and the potential applicability of *PP* effect analysis for grasping such calamity. Let me briefly elaborate on his point.

At the threshold of what a growing number of earth scientists call the Anthropocene ‘humans have become geological agents’.<sup>78</sup> Human activities have become a great force of nature, enmeshing natural and social processes. ‘Albert Einstein’, John McNeill writes, ‘famously refused to “believe that God plays dice with the world”’. But in the twentieth century, humankind has begun to play dice with the planet, without knowing all the rules of the game’.<sup>79</sup> Human activities are adding new biophysical factors that modify the physical parameters shaping the function of some of Earth’s major systems.<sup>80</sup> Old-style determinism no longer works and neither does the concept of control power. For they do not capture that everything is now simultaneously human and natural and that non-human ‘actants’ (such as microbes and various materials and devices) can fundamentally alter natural and human possibilities.<sup>81</sup> The world is not inert matter moved by predictable,

<sup>75</sup>I would like to thank Rose McDermott for drawing my attention to this distinction and the relevant psychological literature.

<sup>76</sup>Hymans 2020.

<sup>77</sup>DeMartino and Grabel 2020, in section: ‘Control Power, Protean Power: The ontological and epistemic dimensions’.

<sup>78</sup>Harrington 2016, 479, Underdal 2017, 3.

<sup>79</sup>McNeill 2000, 3.

<sup>80</sup>Harrington 2016, 482.

<sup>81</sup>Latour 2014, 11–13, Harrington 2016, 490–91.

physical laws. Instead it is acting with often unpredictable *PP* effects affecting humankind and all other living organisms.

With new uncertainties of various kinds cropping up, past experience of the earth's system no longer serves as a reliable guide for predicting future developments. No place on the earth can any longer be considered as 'natural'. Instead, man-made nature is becoming 'artificial'. Deeply entangled with human practices, the universe is 'undergoing a process of creative becoming' that is beyond human control.<sup>82</sup> Nature is not a pristine, unmoved, and balanced landscape that exists apart from man. Human action is making and remaking everything through *PP* effects, endowing nature with its own agency.

Pelopidas is right on target in arguing that existing international relations scholarship ignores these *PP* effects and the possibility of civilizational collapse in the face of environmental disasters of unimaginable scope and scale. Between 2011 and 2015 the three leading IR journals published virtually no articles on conventionally understood, non-catastrophic environmental issues.<sup>83</sup> Attended by scholars from all over the world, the 2015 annual meeting of the International Studies Association featured 1250 panels; only one paper title mentioned the Anthropocene explicitly.<sup>84</sup> And even though they ranked climate change as the most important issue facing the world, only 2.4% of about 4000 international relations scholars listed the environment as their main area of research.<sup>85</sup>

Culled from *PP*'s concluding chapter, the concepts of imagination, humility, and responsibility, provide the building blocks for Pelopidas's important extension of the analysis of *PP* effects. Pelopidas and *PP* agree that overconfidence in controllability and predictability is unwarranted. Analyzing, however, the unpredictable is not a plea for accepting ignorance in the study of global and international relations as part of the social sciences. As Kuran argues, 'the goal of all science ... should be to explain the explicable, predict the predictable, and equally important, separate the knowable from the unknowable'.<sup>86</sup> Pelopidas extends this line of argument when he insists on our broader scholarly responsibility when confronting catastrophes.<sup>87</sup> In so doing he helpfully pushes the analysis of *PP* even deeper into the field of political theory than the book's concluding chapter managed to do.

Finally, Adler's complexification of *PP*'s Figure 1.1 is also an unexpected gift.<sup>88</sup> A close cousin of *PP*'s conceptualization, it replaces the two categories of risk and uncertainty with four categories (meta-stability, volatility, illusion of control, and no illusion of control) and adds two practices to the four identified in *PP*. It thus bends that figure creatively around Adler's own tree and his interest in

<sup>82</sup>Harrington 2016, 488.

<sup>83</sup>Underdal 2017, 170. 0% in *International Organization*, 0.3% in *International Studies Quarterly*, and 1.6% in the *European Journal of International Relations*. It is a safe assumption that the catastrophic possibilities that Pelopidas focuses on are a tiny proportion of these very small numbers.

<sup>84</sup>I thank Colin Chia for his assistance in generating these figures.

<sup>85</sup>Harrington 2016, 486–87.

<sup>86</sup>Kuran 1995, 1534.

<sup>87</sup>Pelopidas 2020, in section: 'Scholarly responsibility at the end of the world(s)'.

<sup>88</sup>Adler 2020, in section: 'Epistemological Uncertainty and Protean Power'. Figure 1 is in Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 13.



collective learning.<sup>89</sup> Nothing pleases me more than seeing *PP*'s core idea adapted usefully to a field of inquiry well outside of its main line of vision.

## Conclusion

This symposium signals a notable shift away from the mixture of outright hostility, sheer bewilderment, and critical skepticism that met *PP*'s argument when we circulated some of the well over 100 drafts of the theoretical chapters we wrote over the years. Then, most of our colleagues rejected *PP* as a harmful or superfluous neologism. The election of Donald Trump has given the book's central claim a bit more credibility. At least some of our colleagues appear to accept that sometimes the unfathomable does indeed happen.

There will be no end to debates about a foundational concept such as power. This symposium has raised many issues. Many more lurk in the shadows, including the role of Bayesian statistics for the analysis of risk and uncertainty; the precise relation between control and *PP* (co-existence and co-evolution, or co-constitution); a richer and more satisfying development of the concepts of experience and reasonableness; and the implications of *PP* analysis for political resilience and scholarly practice.

*PP* analysis offers a chance to re-examine an important assumption, common among scholars of world politics, the social sciences, and the public at large: our increasing control over the world we inhabit. Devotees of big data, for example, predict that machine learning may soon be able to predict the future evolution of chaotic systems thus improving weather and earthquake forecasting, the monitoring of cardiac arrhythmias, solar storms, or the monitoring of neuronal firing patterns. In the words of chaos theorist Holger Kantz, 'The machine-learning technique is almost as good as knowing the truth'.<sup>90</sup> Similar hopes (and fears) also motivate burgeoning research programs in the social sciences and international relations. In the political, economic, and social world, however, such gains in knowledge, predictability, and control simply push the unpredictable into new domains while concentrating and amplifying it in the process.<sup>91</sup> The power dynamics analyzed in *PP* will not disappear in the era of big data and artificial intelligence. Advances in knowledge always create the potential for *PP* effects in unexpected places and with unexpected results.

*PP* speaks to a world of potentialities that all too often escapes our dulled imagination. Robert Musil believed that our sense 'for what is real' (*Wirklichkeitssinn*) is matched by our sense 'for what is possible' (*Möglichkeitssinn*).<sup>92</sup> As was true of Robert Kennedy, many political actors let a sense of the possible guide them in their actions: 'Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not'.<sup>93</sup> The pull of the world of potentialities on the world of reality is strong. America's favorite realist, Henry Kissinger, agrees. In the

<sup>89</sup> Adler 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Wolchover 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 39, 41, 297, Taleb 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Musil 1953, 12. I thank James Conran for alerting me to Musil's observation.

<sup>93</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/robert\\_kennedy\\_745915](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/robert_kennedy_745915).



formation of foreign policy ‘everything depends ... on some conception of the future’.<sup>94</sup>

*PP* points to a question left deliberately unanswered. Control power evokes the image of a well-manicured garden, *PP* that of a wild jungle. Which of the two is the normal condition of life? Does the jungle intrude on the garden or does the garden control the jungle? Readers of *PP* will come to their own implicit or explicit conclusion as have the authors in this symposium. I believe this is one of those questions we all wrestle with even if we choose not to answer it.

Most books try to nail down an argument and shut the door. *PP* is a different kind of book. It opens a window, invites the reader to look anew, sense the breeze, listen to a different tune, hopefully yield to the urge of taking an unfamiliar hop or two, and perhaps to start over. To the frequently posed question – ‘how was this possible?’ – the concept of *PP* offers fresh answers that open up new perspectives on world politics.

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<sup>94</sup>Noonan 2019.

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