



**On the measure of power and  
the power of measure in  
International Relations**

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## CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
On the measure of power and the power of measure in International Relations	5
1. The impossible measure of power	6
Power: dispositional, relational and multidimensional	6
Influence and legitimacy	8
An initial conclusion	9
2. The performative and reflexive aspects of power	10
What does power do?	11
Looping effects of power analysis	12
Conclusion	14
References	16

**ABSTRACT**

Power is a central concept in theories of International Relations. Its explanatory role shows in such a key concept as the 'balance of power' which predicts that allied groups of states will tend to balance their respective powers. But it also plays an important role for understanding the outcome of conflicts, since here 'power' has often been likened to a 'cause': getting someone else to do what he/she would not have otherwise done. Knowing power distributions therefore is said to explain state behaviour and the outcome of their interaction. Such power analysis must assume the measurability of power. Unfortunately, as this Working Paper argues, such measure is of no avail, not because we have not yet thought enough about it, but because it is not possible. There are two main reasons. First, because of the missing fungibility of power resources, no standard of measure can be established. And secondly, for understanding power phenomena and the very value of such resources in the first place, we need to analyse legitimacy, which is, however, not reducible to any objective measure. Still, since power as a measurable fact appears crucial in the language and bargaining of international politics, measures of power are agreed to and constructed as a social fact: diplomats must agree first on what counts before they can start counting. The second part of the paper therefore moves the analysis of power away from the illusion of an objective measure to the political battle over defining the criteria of power, which in turn has political effects. In other words, besides understanding what power means, one has also to assess what its understanding, if shared, does. Being tied to the idea of responsibility in our political discourse ('ought implies can'), the act attributing power to actors asks them to justify their action or non-action: it 'empowers' certain actions. The paper illustrates such interactive effects by discussing the present debate about US power, showing the way we conceive power, if it becomes shared, implies and legitimates particular foreign policy action.

## INTRODUCTION

### On the measure of power and the power of measure in International Relations<sup>1</sup>

In his largely forgotten inaugural lecture, entitled ‘Vom Mass der Macht’ [On the measure of power], delivered at the University of Zürich in 1969, the late Prof. Daniel Frei defined the measurement of power as fundamental for International Relations. For if we had a common scale for power, countries would no longer need to ‘measure up’ on the battlefield. Measuring power contributes to peace, the implicit normative goal of the discipline. Or in his provocative statement: ‘Wäre ein Konsens über den Machtbegriff und das Mass der Macht vorhanden, so wäre der Friede kein Problem mehr’ [If there were a consensus on the concept of power and its measurement, peace would cease to be a problem].<sup>2</sup>

In his prescient lecture, Frei invited his colleagues to respond to this call, not necessarily by producing such a consensus, which would be beyond their reach, but by studying empirically where and when it might have been obtained, as well as by theorising which conditions would be most conducive to its creation. Frei therefore apparently defined two core concerns of the discipline of international relations: the concept and measurement of power, and their relation

and interaction with the practices of world politics.

But unfortunately, the subtlety of his argument was lost on the discipline. Frei had insisted that power is all a matter of perception and not objectively measurable. According to him, the best we could hope for is to find proxies for power, some form of power status symbols, on which world actors could agree. As he said, ‘[d]as Problem des internationalen Friedens ist im Grunde eine Art *Sprachproblem*’ [ultimately, the problem of international peace boils down to a kind of language problem].<sup>3</sup> The discipline nonetheless pursued its quest for an objective measure of power as the basis for interacting with the world of practitioners. By doing so – and this is the theme of my paper – it misconceived and hence misused the concept of power. It is a story of no little irony, and arguably tragedy, in which a discipline born out of a central focus on power has been able to avoid a thorough conceptual analysis of power, thus repeating known pitfalls and suggesting a degree of certainty in giving advice where there is none.

I will pursue my argument by demonstrating these two main types of misuse, one with regard to the measurement of power, and the other correspondingly in conceiving the relationship between power and politics. In the first part, a classic conceptual analysis will be presented to show that a general ‘overall power’ analysis, so typical of balance of power explanations, is inevitably flawed precisely because power itself is not objectively measurable. The second part will introduce a more constructivist conceptual analysis which aims at understanding how the use and definition of central concepts in our political discourse not only help us un-

<sup>1</sup> This is a written version of my inaugural lecture (Professors installationsförlesning) delivered on 13 November 2006 at Uppsala University. It relies heavily on my research and studies, also verbatim, on which I had worked at the time, in particular Guzzini 2005, 2006. A Swedish version was published as ‘Maktens mått och mätandets makt’, in Sverker Gustavsson, Jörgen Hermansson and Barry Holmström, eds, *Statsvetare ifrågasätter: Uppsalamiljön vid tiden för professorsskiftet den 31 mars 2008*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 170 (2008), pp. 268-282.

<sup>2</sup> Frei 1969, 646.

<sup>3</sup> Frei 1969, 651.

derstand political reality, but positively interact with it. Here, I find power analyses in International Relations wanting, since they do not include this 'performative' component in their analysis and thereby miss one of the most immediate links between research and practice.

## I. THE IMPOSSIBLE MEASURE OF POWER

Frei invited us to study the conditions for the creation of a consensus around proxies of power as a way to inform policy-makers in their difficult endeavour. This assumes a clear and subtle distinction between the levels of observation and action. The observer searches for these conditions and can make inferences about certain ways of seeing them realised. This lifts the analysis into a long-term perspective and always sees even positive results as contingent on the ongoing common understanding of this shared measure of power. If there is to be balance of power politics, then it has to be the result of a shared and common understanding of power, which diplomacy would need to create with care. Neither before Frei nor later was that to be the main tendency in the discipline. Here, most of the approaches followed Morgenthau's early lead to look over the shoulder of the practitioner in writing theories. By adopting the perspective of the actor, the theorist would be able to clean and optimise his or her theoretical instruments to obtain greater oversight and make better decisions. For such an approach, the measure of power is hardly just contingent on a shared practical understanding around proxies. It must be truly measurable in that very objective sense that Frei said was impossible. Here it is not diplomacy which makes balance

of power policies possible by creating proxies for the impossible measure of power, but the inevitable fact of the balance of power whose most precise analysis authoritatively informs diplomacy. Politics derives not from the social construction of power, but from the necessities of power.

The first part of this paper will show that, despite all attempts, such an objective measure of power, necessary for balance of power theories, is of no avail, not because we have not yet thought enough about it, but because it is not possible. I will present the argument in two steps: first by showing that because of the missing fungibility<sup>4</sup> of power resources no standard of measure can be established; and secondly, that to understand power phenomena and the very value of such resources in the first place, an analysis of legitimacy is needed which is not reducible to any objective measure.

### **Power: dispositional, relational and multidimensional**

The very idea of polarity assumes an overall concept of power in which different resources can be consistently aggregated. It moreover assumes that resources as such are not just the 'best we have', but indeed sufficient to predict or understand outcomes. Criticism of such assumptions is legendary, and I will only briefly rehearse it here.<sup>5</sup>

The difficult relationship between power understood as resources and power as control over outcomes has proved an evergreen de-

<sup>4</sup> The term 'fungibility' refers to the idea of movable goods that can be freely placed and replaced by others of the same class. It stands for the capacity of mutual substitution and hence universal applicability or 'convertibility' in contrast to context specificity.

<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive treatment, see in particular Baldwin 1989, Guzzini 1993, 2000b, Baldwin 2002.

bate in IR.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, power analysis is most interested in the control of outcomes, not resources as such. Yet, defining power in terms of control over outcomes produces an obvious risk of circularity.<sup>7</sup> Hence, mainstream power analysis goes back to resources and basically stipulates its link to control over outcomes in probabilistic terms. The underlying idea of causality with regard to the outcome is kept.

This is, however, at odds with two characteristics of the concept of power: power is both dispositional and relational. First, as Peter Morriss has persuasively argued, power is neither a thing (or property, or resource), nor an event (which shows itself only if realised in an outcome), but an ability: a capacity to effect a certain action.<sup>8</sup> Dispositions translate into effects only under specific conditions. For instance, an effervescent tablet has the disposition to dissolve rapidly in water; it needs a liquid like water to realise that disposition. Secondly, in a social context, such a disposition is understood in a relational way; in other words, the conditions under which dispositions can be translated into effects are dependent on social relations: on the particular identities and interests of the actors in the interaction, as well as on the context in which the interaction takes place. This can be illustrated through the widely used Weberian understanding of power, where power refers to the capacity to get others to do something they would not have otherwise done. For understanding such power, one needs to know the preferences and value systems of the actors involved at the time of the en-

counter.<sup>9</sup> To use an extreme example: killing a person who wants to commit suicide at all costs is usually not understood as an instance of power.<sup>10</sup> Power does not reside in a resource but stems from the particular relation in which abilities are actualised. Hence, in order to find out whether a certain action (not just the possession of the resource) indeed realises an instance of social power, the distribution of resources says little independent of the specific conditions which apply to the social relations at hand. Power is relation- and situation-specific.

Moreover, power is a multidimensional phenomenon. This is linked to the fact that power in political relations cannot be thought in terms of an analogy with money in economic exchange, either in practice or in theory. Whereas different preferences and different markets can be gauged through the fungibility of money, which also allows the observer to reduce this multiplicity on a single aggregate scale, no such scale exists for power in real world politics.<sup>11</sup> While (in monetarised economies) money is the real world measure of wealth, there is no equivalent currency with which to measure power. This is not merely a theoretical problem that could be resolved through some conceptual work:<sup>12</sup> it derives from the different status in practice. As a result, there is no overarching issue structure, as suggested by polarity analysis. Also, abilities might not transfer from one issue area to

<sup>6</sup> For such a classical statement, see Keohane and Nye 1977.

<sup>7</sup> This has not, of course, been lost on realists. See, for example, Mearsheimer 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Morriss 1987, 19.

<sup>9</sup> As well known, Steven Lukes also includes a third dimension of power in which this very value system is affected so that no visible conflict arises. See Lukes 1974.

<sup>10</sup> This example originated with Bachrach and Baratz (1970, 20-1).

<sup>11</sup> The locus classicus for this argument is Aron 1962, Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> This is Waltz's insufficient and late reply to Aron in Waltz 1990.

another (or the effect cannot be controlled for). The multidimensional character of power goes hand in hand with an issue-specific vision of world politics. It also means that attempts to construct a more general theory of linkage are doomed from the start: such a theory of linkage would assume that we indeed had a measure which would allow us to move from one issue area to another, a measure whose very absence, however, is the reason why we have different issue-areas to start with.<sup>13</sup> Hence, as Baldwin already showed a long time ago, a single international power structure relies either on the assumption of a single dominant issue area or on a high fungibility of power resources. Since both are of no avail, it 'is time to recognize that the notion of a single overall international power structure unrelated to any particular issue is based on a concept of power that is virtually meaningless.'<sup>14</sup>

There have been different reactions towards the finding that a measure of power is both crucially needed for realist explanations, and yet unavailable. Although realists are usually committed to neglecting or downplaying these difficulties,<sup>15</sup> some have contributed to the debate by rethinking the role of power even if it cannot be measured<sup>16</sup> by accepting that issue-specificity applies to world politics,<sup>17</sup> or by arguing that the problem of fungibility is not as big as assumed,<sup>18</sup> yet without ever really answering Aron's and Baldwin's critiques.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This is the circle which can be found in Keohane and Nye's work. See Keohane and Nye 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Baldwin 1989, 167.

<sup>15</sup> Waltz 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Wohlforth 1993, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Buzan, Jones et al. 1993.

<sup>18</sup> See the debate between Art and Baldwin: Art 1999a, 1999b, Baldwin 1999.

<sup>19</sup> For a general re-assessment, see Guzzini 2004.

## Influence and legitimacy

Critiques might retort that, even though resources might not be fungible, if one tops the world ranking in everything, that is, in unipolarity, some polarity analysis is still possible. Although couched in terms of overall polarity, this argument then goes down from the systemic level of international relations to the level of state policies and the assessment of their influence. But I would still maintain that the previous damning critique applies even to the present situation, where one particular state allegedly outshines everyone else. Unipolarity is not a working proxy for power in International Relations. For the sake of illustration, let me refer to Wohlforth's recent reference study on unipolarity. He does acknowledge the difficulty of having a single issue area, and hence bases his assessment on the 'decisive preponderance in *all* the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological and geopolitical.'<sup>20</sup> There are several difficulties with this assessment.

Such a unipolarity analysis still tends to concentrate on mere material resources for assessing power. But the nature of international society affects the respective value of abilities, their resources and the relevant issue areas.<sup>21</sup> This is an old idea, running from Wolfers through Keohane/Nye and the English School to constructivism-inspired approaches.<sup>22</sup> It simply means that, in a context of international relations which can no longer be satisfactorily described as Hobbesian in most respects, but which has aspects of a society of states and a transnational world of societies [transnationale Weltgesellschaft],<sup>23</sup> power

<sup>20</sup> Wohlforth 1999, 7 (original emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> This is the way Barry Buzan modifies classical polarity analysis in Buzan 2004.

<sup>22</sup> See respectively Wolfers 1962, Keohane and Nye 1977, Wendt 1999.



must be thought of in quite different ways at the same time. It is not obvious that US (or any other) military resources are usable against friends in the same way as against enemies. The important implication is that they then no longer qualify as unconditional sources of 'power' in those relations in the first place. As a result, the allegedly self-evident assessment of US unipolarity is lost. Stressing the multidimensional character of power, Nye rejects the label of unipolarity for the present world.<sup>24</sup> Sticking to his power approach derived from Weberian sociology, Michael Mann includes economic power, in which the US does not have a clear lead, as well as political and ideological power on which he finds the present US fundamentally wanting.<sup>25</sup> Focusing directly on the concept of power, Christian Reus-Smit argues that, to understand power correctly today, it needs to be conceived as relational not possessive, primarily ideational not material, intersubjective not subjective, and social not non-social. And again he finds the US falling short in most of these areas.<sup>26</sup>

At this stage, not just more ideational resources, but the phenomenon of 'legitimacy' enters the argument. And with legitimacy, traditional analysis of power and influence become murky, since legitimacy is notoriously not just a function of actor resources,<sup>27</sup> let alone material ones.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, at this point the whole attempt to understand international or-

der or governance merely in terms of power resource distribution becomes visibly flawed. Such an approach assumes that, by aggregating instances of influence in particular social interactions, one can obtain a comprehensive picture of authority relations in the international system. As Robert Dahl argued in his famous study, to find out *Who governs?*, we only need to analyse who wins in particularly salient bargains, and then aggregate those winners.<sup>29</sup> His definition of power (getting someone else to do what he/she would not have otherwise done) is clearly influenced by Max Weber's definition. And yet this is to forget that Max Weber had himself warned against such a power concept which he declared it to be 'amorphous' and useless for a social theory that wishes to understand the political aspect of social relations.<sup>30</sup> Instead, for Weber, for this we need to look at *Herrschaft*, not *Macht*, and to understand the different types of governance on the basis of the different claims to legitimation upon which they can rely. And not only is authority therefore not reducible to the control of resources alone: its legitimacy component changes the very value of those resources. Legitimacy allows an economy of resources, whereas their persistent use deflates their value; some resources are allowed to be used, others are used only at a high cost. The most powerful police is the one which does not need to shoot, or indeed, does not need to carry arms in the first place. Just counting who has most guns misses this point.

### **An initial conclusion**

In this first part I have discussed two reasons which make a measurement of power difficult. The characteristics of power as

<sup>23</sup> Czempel 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Nye 2004.

<sup>25</sup> For his general approach, see Mann 1986. For this particular argument, see Mann 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Reus-Smit 2004.

<sup>27</sup> For a recent discussion of this issue, see also Clark 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in one school of thought, power is the opposite to violence. See Arendt 1969. The most powerful police is the one which does not need to shoot. In such an Arendtian understanding, power is connected to the capacity to create things in common. See Arendt 1986 [1970].

<sup>29</sup> Dahl 1961.

<sup>30</sup> Weber 1980 [1921-22], 28-29.

being relational and multidimensional imply that no standard of value comparable to money can be established. Politics cannot be simplified in a way similar to neo-classical economics, as Frei clearly anticipated when he categorically rejected the possibility that a medium of exchange comparable to money could be devised in political relations through which all power conflicts could be settled.<sup>31</sup> And yet, polarity and balance of power analysis – two of the most common and influential types of security analysis in International Relations – rely implicitly on a concept of power which requires this unattainable quality. Indeed, even when looking for proxies like unipolarity, realist analysis usually tends to assume the same measurable power. But such proxies have to be understood in the context of a social environment in which status is attributed to them. There power requires the analysis of legitimacy, which further undermines the objectivist bias of existing power analysis.

In its perpetually renewed quest to turn practical maxims of 18-19th century European diplomacy into the scientific laws of a US social science,<sup>32</sup> realist explanations are torn between accepting the complexity of power, thus leaving behind the possibility of predictive science, or, for the sake of that science, being forced to assume a measure of power which is, however, of no avail. For despite the fact that power cannot be ‘precisely quantified’, as Hedley Bull concedes, ‘the conception of overall power is one we cannot do without’, to quote his disarmingly honest words.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Frei 1969, 653-4.

<sup>32</sup> This is my definition of the realist tradition. See Guzzini 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Bull 1977, 113-114.

## 2. THE PERFORMATIVE AND REFLEXIVE ASPECTS OF POWER

But who cannot ‘do without’? The fact that there is no measure of power has posed perhaps more problems to the (realist) observer than to the (realist) diplomat. Whereas the former are still looking out for a measure that would help fix systemic analysis,<sup>34</sup> the latter meet those observers who do not deduce power in any objective way, but understand it from the way the practitioners understand it. Since we miss a measure of power, practitioners have to rely on secondary indicators and read power from events. Events do not determine a certain vision of power, as the above mentioned indeterminacy and hence the circularity of such argument shows. Still, since power as a measurable fact appears crucial in the language and bargaining of international politics, measures of power are agreed to and constructed as a social fact: diplomats must agree first on what counts before they can start counting.<sup>35</sup> This moves the analysis of power away from the illusion of an objective measure to the political battle over defining the criteria of power, which in turn has political effects. Concepts of power are not merely external tools with which to understand international politics, they intervene in it, for some concepts, such as power, play a special role in our political discourse. This means that, besides understanding what they *mean*, their analysis has to assess what they *do*.<sup>36</sup> This moves the analysis onto constructivist ground since it is interested in how knowledge reflexively interacts with the social world.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Mearsheimer 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Guzzini 1998, 231.

<sup>36</sup> For the following and for a more detailed account of this turn in conceptual analysis as applied to power, see Guzzini 2005.

<sup>37</sup> For such an understanding of constructivism, see Adler 1997, 2002; Guzzini 2000a.

Two issues stand out for our present discussion. First, power is connected in our political discourse to the assignment of responsibility. Moreover, there exists a reflexive ‘looping effect’<sup>38</sup> of power definitions with the shared understandings and hence working of power in international affairs. Both discussions show a different link between power analysis and politics than the one that classic power analyses have been pursuing. Whereas mainstream analysts attempt to create this link through predictions based on balance of power studies – implicitly relying on a concept of power which is of no avail – their very analysis, if it becomes part of a shared understanding, will inform (but not decide) what power means and who has it in world politics. Hence, by not making this reflexive component visible, traditional power analysis overlooks one of the most salient links between ‘power’ and world politics.

### What does power do?

Conceptual analysis in this tradition starts from its use, from the context in which a concept appears and functions. One central characteristic of power is its relationship with responsibility. Such an appeal to responsibility, in turn, calls for justification. ‘For to acknowledge power over others is to implicate oneself in responsibility for certain events and to put oneself in a position where *justification* for the limits placed on others is expected.’<sup>39</sup>

This link with responsibility and justification turns power into a concept which is closely connected to the definition of political agency, or politics *tout court*. The traditional definition of power as getting someone else to do something he/she would not have done

otherwise invokes the idea of counterfactuals. The act of attributing power redefines the boundaries of what can be done. In the usual way we conceive of the term, this links power inextricably to ‘politics’ in the sense of the ‘art of the possible/feasible’. Lukes rightly noticed that Bacharach’s and Baratz’s conceptualisation of power sought to redefine what counts as a political issue. To be ‘political’ means to be potentially changeable; that is, not something natural, objectively given, but something which has the potential to be influenced by political action. In a similar vein, Daniel Frei argues that the concept of power is fundamentally identical to the concept of the ‘political’: in other words, to include something in one’s calculus as a factor of power means to ‘politicise’ it.<sup>40</sup> In other words, attributing power to an issue imports it into the public realm, where action (or non-action) must justify itself.

Conversely, ‘depoliticisation’ happens when by common acceptance no power was involved. In such instances, political action is exempted from further justification and scrutiny. Such depoliticisation can happen, for instance, when what is considered power by one party is simply the outcome of luck for someone else. You do not need to justify your property or action if you were just lucky. If that sounds a bit far-fetched, it is nonetheless how a powerful critique has been mounted against several wide power concepts. The starting point for this discussion is the so-called ‘benefit fallacy’ in power analysis.<sup>41</sup> Nelson Polsby explicitly mentions the case of free riders who may profit from something, but without being able to influence it.<sup>42</sup> Keith Dowding extended the discussion with his

<sup>38</sup> Hacking 1999, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Connolly 1974, 97, original emphasis.

<sup>40</sup> Frei 1969, 647.

<sup>41</sup> Barry 1988 [1987], 315.

<sup>42</sup> Polsby 1980, 208.

refusal to include 'systematic luck' under the concept of power.<sup>43</sup> No power and hence no further politics is involved or needed.<sup>44</sup>

Such a conceptual analysis about what power *does*, that is, a performative analysis of concepts, is not new in IR, in particular with regard to the concept of security. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver have proposed a framework of security analysis around the concept of 'securitization'. According to them, security is to be understood through the effects of it being voiced. It is part of a discourse (for example, 'vital national interests'), which, when successfully mobilised, enables issues to be given a priority for which the use of extraordinary means is justified. In its logical conclusion, 'securitisation' ultimately tends to move decisions out of 'politics' altogether.<sup>45</sup>

### Looping effects of power analysis

A conceptual analysis which focuses on the performative character of some concepts implies a series of reflexive links. A conceptual analysis of power in terms of its meaning is part of the social construction of knowledge; moreover, the definition/assignation of power is itself an exercise of power, or 'political', and hence part of the social construction of

reality. As the following two illustrations will indicate, the very definition of power is a political intervention.

This reflexive feature of power has been at the origin of some of the newer power conceptualisations in IR. It does, for instance, help to account for two components in Susan Strange's concept of structural power.<sup>46</sup> First, Strange created this concept in the context of a perceived US decline. The incapacity of the US to maintain the fixed exchange rate system or to manage the international economy better found justification in a perceived decline in power. In other words, the US government may have been willing, but was no longer able, to uphold the monetary system. Strange tried to argue that this had less to do with declining power than with shifting interests unconnected to power. In this argument, her concept of structural power does two things. First it casts a wider net that encompasses areas in which the US is not seen to be declining. As a result, the US has to justify its actions with means other than the 'excuse' of a lack of power. Secondly, Strange's concept of structural power also includes non-intentional effects. Whether the Fed intended to hurt anyone is less important than the fact that it did. By making actors also aware of the unintended consequences of their actions, they are being asked to take this into account next time. They become potentially vulnerable to the question of why, being now aware of the consequences, action had not changed. Having a broader concept of power requires more issues to be factored into political decisions and actions, exactly as in Connolly's analysis.

Similarly, in the recent controversy over the significance of soft and hard (coercive)

<sup>43</sup> Dowding 1991, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Although scepticism about the links between power and benefits is warranted, it seems reductive not to allow for a conceptual apparatus which can account for systematic benefits in terms other than 'systematic luck'. By reducing a systematic bias to a question of luck, this approach leaves out of the picture the daily practices of agents that help to reproduce the very system and positions from which these advantages were derived. Making it conscious raises questions of responsibility, and finally also issues of political choice. For this reason, perhaps, Keith Dowding now rephrases his approach and explicitly includes systematic luck in power analysis, though still not calling it power. See Dowding 1996, 94ff.

<sup>45</sup> Wæver 1995, Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998. See also Huysmans 1998.

<sup>46</sup> Strange 1987, 1988.

power, deciding what power really means has obvious political implications. And yet this present debate turns this relationship between power and responsibility on its head: the power-holder no longer downplays its power to keep aloof of criticism, but heavily insists in its power-thus-responsibility so as to justify its worldwide interventionism. If it were true that the US enjoys very great power and superiority, then it is only natural that it assumes a greater responsibility for international affairs. Insisting on the special power of the US triggers and justifies a disposition for action. US primacy means that it has different functions and duties (responsibilities) than other states. From there, the final step to a right or even duty to undertake unilateral and possibly pre-emptive interventions is not far removed. Its role as the world's policeman is no longer a choice, but actually a requirement of the system.<sup>47</sup> Being compelled to play the world leader means, in turn, that the rules which apply to everyone else cannot always apply to the US. The US becomes an actor of a different sort: its special duties exempt it from the general norms. This is the basis of its tendency to US 'exemptionalism', where rules apply to all others but itself.<sup>48</sup>

The political implications are clear. The more observers stress the unprecedented power of the US, the more they mobilise the political discourse of agency and responsibility, tying it to the US and the US alone, and the more they can exempt US action from criticism, since such action responds to the 'objective' (power) circumstances of our time.<sup>49</sup> This argument can become even stronger. Having an interpretation of power

that raised the US to the pinnacle as the only country able to do anything, even if it should fail, suggests that it did the right thing in responding to its special duty. There is no way to question this logic. If order has not yet been found, given the unprecedented (read: military) power position of the US, the only way forward is to do more of the same and let the US try to fix it again, being the only game in town. The logic is a kind of Microsoft theory of security: the problem is not that there is too much Windows, but that there is still not enough.

As a result, US debates about how best to understand power are not politically innocent. Stressing US soft power and its potential decline, analysts could advocate a much more prudent and varied foreign policy strategy that is sensitive to claims of legitimacy and cultural attraction.<sup>50</sup> Obviously the more observers see this 'special responsibility' or exceptionalism as part of the problem, not the solution, to US security concerns (and international order in general), the more they might be inclined to double-check the alleged unipolarity. Inversely, neo-conservative writers tend to stress strongly US primacy and thereby legitimate e.g. the Bush administration's security doctrine. Their definition of power 'empowers' this policy. And if the international community was eventually to share this assessment, it would actually create a social fact. The neo-conservative understanding of the world would actively change the world, not just respond to it. Here it is hard not to be reminded of the by now (in)famous words of a senior adviser to President George W. Bush, as reported by Ron Suskind. The adviser insisted that people like Suskind were part of the 'reality-based community' which thinks

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Kagan 1998.

<sup>48</sup> Ruggie 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Krauthammer 2002-3.

<sup>50</sup> Nye 2004.



about solutions in terms of the existing reality. 'That is not the way the world works anymore.... We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the critics of unipolarity mentioned so far are concerned and aware of this reflexivity between belief and the social world, that is, the very significant real-world effect that an erroneous definition of power can ultimately have. As Buzan puts it, 'The salient point is ... which interpretation of unipolarity gets accepted within the US – and indeed the other great powers – as the prevailing social fact. It is the accepted social fact that shapes securitization'.<sup>52</sup> And continuous securitization ('hypersecuritization' as Buzan calls it) would indeed change the nature of international society. Such interactive effects between knowledge and social reality are, of course, contingent on the acceptance of such understandings. Power discourse, in being linked to responsibility, is open to both its classical use as a critique of power-holders and to its new twist, where it exempts the especially powerful from norms that are applicable to others.

## CONCLUSION

This paper, based on my own inaugural lecture, used another inaugural lecture from almost forty years ago as a foil, a lecture, now almost entirely forgotten, by the late Prof. Daniel Frei. This was not just done as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the usual fate of such lectures, including the present one. It was also used to show how insights which had accumulated at the time, and had been repeatedly confirmed, could be lost. I should

add too that Prof. Frei would probably not have endorsed the constructivist twist which I presented at the end (his work, among other things, was on perceptions of power and enemy images). And yet I think his concise piece, in making a subtle distinction between the level of action and observation, and in its sense of this measure of power as a social fact, offers a wonderfully brief starting point for thinking about power in International Relations.

I derived two main axes of his argument, namely the discussion about the measure of power and the relationship between such analysis of power and world (power) politics. I argued that two main misuses were attached to this. On the first, I claimed that the quest for an objective measure, one in which different resources could be compared on a scale, is not possible: power in (real world) politics has no equivalent to money in (real world monetarised) economics. We do not know how many inhabitants equal running one of the world's currency, or, to push the argument further, how the economic value of multinational enterprises whose headquarters are located in a particular country can be counted as a resource in the first place. The comparison with money is further challenged the very moment the analysis of power moves to non-material resources and the idea of legitimacy. Assuming that the measure is basically a question of obtaining better data is deluding analysis and practitioner alike and leads to a misuse of power in our analysis. In the second part, I discussed the relationship between power analysis and practical politics. The discipline has been trying hard to derive objectifiable laws from the analysis of power in order to inform diplomacy, which merely misconceives of the link between knowledge and politics. Instead, I took the same starting point as Frei, namely that a common under-

<sup>51</sup> Suskind 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Buzan 2004, 171.

standing of power, possibly created through diplomacy, is needed in the first place to allow balance of power politics to happen (if that was the aim). Yet, I departed in insisting on this reflexive aspect of power analysis: precisely because we do not have a measure of power, even though diplomacy itself has become used to relying on one, the definition of power becomes part and parcel of politics itself, not just a means for its description. Being tied to the idea of responsibility in our political discourse, attributing power to actors asks them to justify their action or non-action: it 'empowers' certain actions. I illustrated such interactive effects with different types of power concepts, including the present debate about US power, in which the way we conceive power, if it becomes shared, implies and legitimates particular foreign policy action. It is in this reflexive mode that I have analysed the power politics of power analysis.

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