

## **POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: SEARCHING FOR A NEW THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR POWER ANALYSIS\***

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In the first article of this series we have introduced the debates on the ontology of power and the ways in which these debates have influenced the theoretical divisions in International Relations (IR). In this second article we will present the main epistemological approaches of the different paradigms, leading to controversies on the mechanisms involved in the activation of power and its dimensions.

### ***Mechanisms of Power: different theoretical approaches***

Our first step is to address the questions "how *power* is activated" and "how *power* proceeds once it is activated". Scholars of diverse backgrounds proposed different approaches to answer those questions, leading us to the possibility of dealing with the controversies around the epistemology of power.

According to the realist tradition, as explained previously, the regular way by which actors operate to assert control over the others and the system is *coercion*. Through the manipulation of material resources (either via *sanctions* or *inducements*), an actor could generate changes in the other's actor conduct even in contrary of their interests. As main representatives of the neo-realist paradigm, Waltz and Mearsheimer went one step forward when they affirmed that the distribution of military capabilities constitutes the best measurable expression of *power*; and consequently, that the display of alterations in capabilities is what explains the main changes in decision-making.

However, most of the neo-realists tend to accept another way to activate power that is based on the concept of *socialization*. Although renowned for being "mentioned" by Waltz himself, the concept is in fact developed by other scholars, among them Ikenberry and Kupchan, who move large away from Waltz. They explain the mechanisms and conditions of socialization using the neorealist scheme but, unlike Waltz, Ikenberry and Kupchan incorporate the "normative" element as "*a different aspect of power*" which guides the state's behavior.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they assume a pseudo-liberal perspective on the role of specific agents (elites) in providing systemic change, undermining the unitary actor assumption and thus abandoning the structuralist approach that neo-realists have usually adopted.

Ikenberry and Kupchan seek to describe how *hegemonic powers* have a tendency to activate *processes of socialization*, through which secondary countries internalize the norms of the *hegemon*. According to them,

socialization occurs primarily when countries suffer the fragmentation of internal coalitions (especially after wars and political crisis), stimulating certain elites to embrace the norms that the *hegemon* is articulating. If the receptivity and realignment of the elites is linked with coercive power, norms could be consolidated as well as the policies in line with them (albeit this order may vary depending on whether the socialization is carried through *normative persuasion*, *external inducement* or *internal reconstruction*).<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that this is a “one-player” argument; the authors say little about “real” cases - where there are many candidates to hegemony and the *socialization processes* are “in competition”. This appears as a very interesting research agenda for the future.

The eighties and nineties developed other interesting realist approaches who explore ideational elements in power analysis. One of them is the Krasner's approach on *institutional power*, which consists of a “metapower” that has indirect control over outcomes by changing the setting of the confrontation.<sup>4</sup> Baldwin went also in that direction by embedding what he called *the paradox of unrealized power*, in which the will of using the power is a resource by itself.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Walt's theory about the *balance of threat* adds *aggressive intentions* as a main variable, what makes power not a function of material resources but of inter-subjective factors.<sup>6</sup> The three went clearly beyond neorealist assumptions.

Of course the incorporation of normative elements to analyze power relationships did not only emerge in the realist tradition, but also in the liberal one, the natural candidate. The most famous liberal twist came recently from Nye's *soft power* concept.<sup>7</sup> Accepting *coercion* and *inducement* as two relevant forms of displaying power, Nye suggests *co-opting* as “a third dimension of power” which affects behavior without being commanded through threats or payments, but through *attracting* with indirect resources (such as values, culture and policies). This “soft” version of *power*, argues the prestigious scholar, becomes crucial in a global information era in which “*winning hearts and minds*” matters more and more; an era in which *hard power* and *soft power* are required to be connected (in what he calls *smart power*) in order to enable the legitimate use of power, as the war in Irak showed to the United States.

Is not casual that Nye writes from a (North)American perspective in a period of time in which their legitimacy was so questioned; anyhow, his concept was rapidly attributed to other situations. Despite the popularity of Nye's scheme, the theoretical contribution is still weak. As Guzzini argued years before, it is clear that “*power alone is not what we are looking for*”<sup>8</sup>- what is lacking is an approach that could address the causal mechanisms of the different types of power and could identify their devices once they are activated.

Guzzini himself will provide an answer to that challenge, by recommending the separation of the two types of power *structural power* and *interactionist power* in two different concepts: *governance* and *power*.<sup>9</sup> Citing economical-rationalist terms, this new dyadic conceptualization examines the interactions between systemic rules (market constraints) and the decisions of the agents (strategic behaviors), in a *power analysis*. As a constructivist, Guzzini sustains that in this (inter-subjective) relationship of power, the actors change interests and identities, stressing the value of *legitimate power (authority)* in enabling “*a widening realm of possible (in political action)*”.<sup>10</sup> Despite Guzzini paved the way to other constructivist approaches<sup>11</sup>, he still leaves us with the confusion

between the two different stages of the argumentative chain: the first one based on the *agent-structured* distinction, and the second one on the *material-ideal* division.

Barnett and Duvall would release us from that confusion by presenting their *taxonomy of four dimensions of power*.<sup>12</sup> It combines the two variables presented above with different names; on one side, the *expression of the power* (actor's interactions vs. structural constitution), and on the other side the *specificity of the power relations* (direct connection vs. diffuse relation).<sup>13</sup> The analytic combination leads us to four types in which power operates: *compulsory*, *institutional*, *structural* and *productive*. Therefore, while in a simultaneous power analysis, one side would explain what is "possible" (closer to the *Compulsory* corner), the other one would explain what is "legitimate-desirable" (closer to the *Productive* corner).<sup>14</sup>

Once this has been approached, the next challenge consists of transferring these theoretical understanding to a methodological scheme for power analysis in IR. This will be addressed on the next and last part of the series.

1 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great power Politics* (NYC: Norton, 2001); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. (NYC: McGraw-Hill, 1979)

2 John G. Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and hegemonic power", *International Organization* 44, No3 (Summer 1990), p. 284.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 290-291

4 Stephen D. Krasner, "Regimes and the Limits of Realism: Regimes as Autonomous Variables", *International Organization* 36 (Spring 1982), 497-510

5 David A. Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power* (NYC: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

6 Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987)

7 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power- The Means to Success in World Politics*.

8 Stefano Guzzini, "Structural power: the limits of neorealist power analysis", *International Organization* 47, No3 (Summer 1993), p.478.

9 *Ibid.*, p.471.

10 Stefano Guzzini, "Structural power: the limits of neorealist power analysis", p.477.

11 In that sense, Hurd presents a similar conclusion to pose legitimacy as an ordering principle at IR, building also on Weber's approach at the beginning. Another concept that might be reminded in constructivist literature is Risse's "*normative power*", that although lacks the "material side", it contributed to highlight the devices of the "logic of truth-seeking arguing" (considered as "the power of the better argument").

12 Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "*Power in International Politics*", 48-57.

13 Although is true that Barnett-Duvall do not present this as hard power vs. soft power, with the examples given it is possible to infer that applies a similar logic.

14 *Ibid.*, p.44.

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