

## **Power: A Temporal View**

Daniel W. Drezner  
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy  
Tufts University  
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### **Abstract**

International relations scholars are certain about two facts: power is the defining concept of the discipline, and there is no consensus within the discipline about what the concept means. This is a problematic state of affairs for scholarly and policy reasons. This paper argues that the problem with concepts of power in international relations theory is that most scholars freight their analysis with hidden assumptions about the relationship between power and time. Temporality is an essential component of political analysis, but it is rarely discussed explicitly in international relations theory. There are two key presumptions about time that fundamentally affect how scholars think about power in world politics. First, scholars are rarely explicit in defining the time horizon of their key causal processes. This matters because longer the time horizon, the more expansive their definition and operationalization of power must be. Second, there is considerable variation of beliefs about the temporal returns to power: does exercising power generate positive or negative feedback effects over time? Illuminating these hidden assumptions could help to clarify the root of paradigmatic disagreements about international politics. It will also generate more momentum in theory-building and theory testing.

## Introduction

The state of international relations theory is parlous. The dearth of ambitious theorizing has been so obvious that it has sparked its own literature on the subject in recent years (Sylvester 2007; Jackson and Nexon 2009, 2013; Lake 2011, 2013; Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Nau 2011; Colgan 2016; Kristensen 2016; Jahn 2016; Levine and McCourt 2018). While contentious, this debate has produced three areas of agreement. First, despite claims that Big Theory is dead, the major paradigms still dominate graduate school pedagogy (Colgan (2016) and citation patterns in the field (Kristensen 2018). Second, there is consensus that over time there has been “less and less inter-theoretic debates cross paradigms” and that “pieces engaging in solely in theoretical development are now largely rare (Dunne, Hansen, and Wright 2013, 406).” Third, the thrust of recent research has narrowed its scope to smaller and more precise questions. That narrowing can take the form of a focus on microfoundations (Oatley 2011), middle-range theory (Lake 2011, 2013), analytic eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010), a turn towards practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011), or a focus on case studies (George and Bennett 2005). The combined effect of these trends is theoretical fragmentation.

Without denying the merits of middle-range approaches, this fragmentation hampers our understanding of world politics. Consider the conceptual definitions of power in the discipline. International relations scholars do not agree about much, but they are certain about two facts: power is the defining concept of the discipline, and there is no consensus about what that concept means. This dissensus over the basic underpinnings of international relations is problematic in the extreme. David Lake (2011, 472-3), one of the biggest proponents of abandoning grand theorizing, argues that, “To enhance understanding, we need to be able to communicate across theoretical traditions, compare assumptions, and interpret findings.... we need a lexicon that allows translation across theories.” If there is no inter-paradigmatic agreement about the concept of power, however, Lake’s notion of progress is a chimera. The centrality of power to the discipline is uncontested. Is it possible, however, for scholars operating in different paradigms to agree on what they are talking about?

This paper attempts to reconceptualize the role that power plays in international relations theory. I argue that the underlying source of disputed concepts of power is that most scholars freight their analysis with hidden assumptions about time. There are two key presumptions about time that fundamentally affect how scholars think about power. First, scholars are rarely explicit in defining the *temporal scope of key causal processes* in their area of inquiry. This matters because the longer the time horizon, the more expansive the definition and operationalization of power must be. Second, there is considerable variation of beliefs about the *temporal returns* to

power. Does the exercise or accumulation of power in the present generate positive or negative feedback effects over time? Illuminating these hidden assumptions will help to clarify the root of paradigmatic disagreements about international politics. It will also allow for more progress in theory-building, enable more inter-paradigmatic debate, and suggest key empirical questions for future research.

This paper is divided into five sections. The next section briefly discusses the state of the power literature and why a conceptual rethink is needed. The third section considers the ways in which an explicitly temporal perspective affects how one should think about power. The fourth section applies this perspective to the major international relations paradigms, relying on the canonical texts in each paradigm to demonstrate their assumptions about power and time. The final section summarizes and concludes.

### **Power and international relations theory**

The centrality of power to the study of politics cannot be disputed. In their classic work *Power and Society*, Harold Laswell and Abraham Kaplan (1950, p. 75) state: “The concept of power is perhaps the most fundamental in the whole of political science; the political process is the shaping, distribution, and exercise of power.” Hans Morgenthau (1948, p. 31) wrote in *Politics Among Nations* that, “International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.” Most introductory textbooks on political science start with a discussion about power (Roskin, Cord, Medeiros, and Jones 2015; Hague, Harrop, and McCormack 2017). So do many introductory textbooks to international relations (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2016; Nau 2017).

The role of power has been stressed in international relations even more than other fields of political science. This dates back to Thucydides, who posited that the rise of Athenian power was the ultimate cause of the Peloponnesian War. Other classical texts ranging from Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* to Ibn Khaldûn’s *Muqaddimah* to Machiavelli’s *The Prince* focus even more on the centrality of power. During the interwar period, E.H. Carr (1939) excoriated his colleagues for failing to think about how the different dimensions of power affect state behavior far more than international law. In the wake of these classical texts, international relations theorists from Waltz (1979) to Keohane (1984) to Wendt (1999) to Mearsheimer (2001) have emphasized power’s preeminence in world politics. Even international relations scholars who have questioned the assumption of anarchy (Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 625) nonetheless agree that the international system is “deeply implicated with power.”

Power may be the central concept of the discipline, but scholars cannot agree on how to define or measure it. The most widely-cited definition in political science is Robert Dahl’s (1957, 202-3) “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would otherwise not do.” Most scholars, however, cite Dahl’s definition only to critique it. Almost immediately after Dahl offered his definition of power, scholars and theorists layered on additional dimensions to

the term. Depending on whom one reads, there are three or four different faces of power (Lukes 2005; Digeser 1992). More than forty years ago, Robert Gilpin (1975, p. 25) lamented that the “number and array of definitions should be an embarrassment to political scientists.” Six years later Gilpin (1981, p. 13) wrote, “The concept of power is one of the most troublesome in the field of international relations and, more generally, political science.”

The trouble has only gotten worse since then. Many of the pioneering works on this subject – Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations* (at least seven editions), Dahl’s *Modern Political Analysis* (at least six editions), Lukes’ *Power: A Radical View* (two editions) – have muddied the waters further. The authors of these iconic texts have either revised them multiple times or published follow-on work that altered their conceptual definitions. Joseph Nye has written about soft power (Nye 2004), smart power (Nye 2009), and sharp power (Nye 2018). The most recent text to survey this ground, David Baldwin’s *Power and International Relations* (2016), devotes much of its heft to relitigating the scope of Dahl’s definition.

The adjectives that precede the noun “power” in speak to the degree of conceptual confusion: hard power, soft power, smart power, sharp power, network power, social power, ideational power, discursive power, productive power, symbolic power, structural power, relational power – the list is endless. To infer that power suffers from some conceptual fuzziness seems like an understatement. Some scholars go even further, arguing that a single definition of the term is impossible. The most widely cited international relations article on the topic in this century (Barnett and Duvall 2005, p. 41) asserts that, “power works in various forms and has various expressions that cannot be captured by a single formulation.” There are serious scholarly debates about whether it will ever be possible to create a common conception (Guzzini 2005, 2009; Pansardi 2012). This problem has been compounded by the enormous gap between theoretical debates about power and concrete efforts to operationalize it. Guzzini (2005, p. 502) correctly diagnoses the power literature when he warns, “faced with the difficulty of pinning down a concept, scholars decide to go for its more easily operationalizable aspects but they thereby incur the risk of neglecting its more significant aspects.”

Having a central concept so poorly defined is a problematic state of affairs for the discipline. The practical need for a better conceptual and empirical understanding of power should be obvious. Even with a plethora of different definitions, the United States was commonly perceived to be the most powerful actor in the world for generations. In the decade since the 2008 financial crisis, however, there have been an extraordinary series of debates about the rejiggered distribution of power. Scholars and commentators have fiercely debated the relative power of the United States and China. Some argued that the 2008 financial crisis did not dislodge the United States as the most powerful actor in the world (Drezner 2014; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016); others argued that it is now China (Subramanian 2011; Kirshner 2014). Public opinion polling shows that ordinary citizens are as divided as experts about these questions. Pew Global Attitude surveys show that public perceptions about relative economic power fluctuated considerably in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Wike, Poushter and Zainulbhai 2016).

Similarly, scholars and policymakers are split on Russia's relative power (Mead 2014; Ikenberry 2014).

The empirical disputes discussed above only revolve around the traditional great powers. Introducing non-state actors complicates the debate even further. Some (Schweller 2011) have argued that the nature of power itself has diffused so rapidly that no actor or concert of actors can credibly wield authority anymore. For much of this century, policy analysts have argued that international authority has been dissipating to a world of "apolarity" or "nonpolarity" (Ferguson 2004; Haass 2008). Bruce Jentleson (2012, p. 141) believes that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, power is "diffused and diluted" more than in the recent past. Moisés Naím (2013, p. 158) argues that, "the very exercise of state power is no longer what it used to be."

Conceptual confusion and empirical uncertainty are problematic for practitioners as well as scholars (Strange 1987, p. 551-52). In theory, if rational actors shared the same assessments of relative power, the likelihood of violent conflict would be dramatically reduced (Fearon 1995; Guzzini 2009). In a world where the very term lacks consensus, disagreements about perceived power can spill over into real-world disputes.

### **A temporal perspective on power**

Is there a way out of this conceptual tangle? I believe that there is. The problem with most takes on the subject is that they fail to think seriously about the relationship between power and time. Temporality is an essential component of political analysis, but it is rarely discussed explicitly in international relations scholarship.<sup>1</sup> A nascent literature has recently emerged on time's role in international relations theory (Hutchings 2007; Hom and Steele 2010; McIntosh 2015; Edelstein 2017; Hom 2018). Most mainstream international relations scholarship, when it explicitly discusses time at all, focuses far more on how time affects interest rather than power. Axelrod (1984) suggest that temporal preferences for a long shadow of the future will foster greater cooperation in mixed-motive games. Fearon (1998) suggests that the shadow of the future can increase the intensity of bargaining in the present. Edelstein (2017) echoes Fearon in warning that the more great powers care about the future, the less likely they will cooperate with each other. Toft (2006) argues that variation in national valuations of the future is one predictor for the likelihood of conflict.

Christopher McIntosh (2015, p. 466) cogently observes that a hidden source of fragmentation within international relations theory is implicit assumptions that different paradigms make about time: "Each set of approaches in IR – be they statistical, critical, rational, or otherwise – resolve issues of time and temporality largely for themselves rather than treating it as a separate issue that affects IR scholarship as a whole.... All scholars, regardless of method or question, inevitably address time in their work, and thus are implicitly offering a conception and approach

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<sup>1</sup> To consider one superficial data point, Waltz (1979), Keohane (1984), and Wendt (1999) all have substantive index entries for "power" in their most widely-cited texts. None of them have a single entry for "time."

to time.” Simply put, implicit assumptions about time and temporality act as constraints about how theorists explicitly think about the concept of power.

What are the key temporal assumptions that would affect a political scientist’s concept of power? The most direct assumption a theorist can make is about temporal scope. What is the duration of time for a theory’s key causal processes to take effect? Does the theory stress fast-acting or slow-moving political dynamics? Are the causal processes aimed at affecting a critical decision-making moment or a longer duration? Marxism, for example, offers a theory of history that ostensibly covers millennia. Open economy politics, on the other hand, takes as given so many aspects of the international environment that its explanatory power focuses on a much smaller time frame (Lake 2011; Oatley 2011). Almost by definition, “middle-range theories” examine smaller time apertures in their explanatory domain.

The time horizon matters by constraining or multiplying the kinds of power that actors can apply to a particular situation. Rodney Bruce Hall (1997, p. 594) notes, “[Analysts] must apprehend a *situationally specific or historically contingent structure of coconstituted identities and interests* before they can apprehend what constitutes a power resource in a given context.” Foucauldian analyses of power acknowledge that there is a distinction between “day-to-day” actions and practices and the deeper background conditions that shape preferences – which obviously take longer to form (Digeser 1992; Solomon and Steele 2017). When time horizons are short and causal processes are fast-acting – i.e., in moments of crisis – the fungibility of resources is constrained. The types of power that can be brought to bear are sharply constricted. While each pillar of power is important over the long run, the ability to quickly convert the power of ideas into the force of arms or the use of treasure is difficult at best in the short run (Baldwin 2016). This is not to say that non-material sources of power cannot be deployed in a coercive manner; think of U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson railing about the “court of world opinion” in a televised confrontation with his Soviet counterpart during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In a crisis situation, however, some sources of influence are, at best, adjuncts to more proximate sources of influence. Certain components of power are simply less fungible (Art 1996). Processes of power that are intended to reconstitute identities or worldviews are less likely to kick in when the time horizon is short.

The longer the time horizon, however, the less important the fungibility constraints. Forms of Foucauldian power shape the distribution of hard power resources. Soft power can be used to defuse potential crises before they ever emerge. As the fungibility of resources increases, so does the ability for preferences and identities to change. “Facts on the ground” are more plastic. David Baldwin (2016, p. 72) states explicitly that “*time* is crucial with respect to determining the fungibility of resources,” in that time increases the liquidity of power. As will be discussed in the next section, Robert Cox’s (1981) distinction between “problem-solving theory” and “critical theory” is useful to consider on this point. In the short term, when power is less fungible, scholars are better off relying on problem-solving theory. Critical theory only becomes useful if the time horizon is long enough for different sources of power to become fungible. This parallels the way to think about power. “Problem-solving power” are the forms of influence that

can be brought to bear in a crisis. “Critical power” are the forms of power that can be used to transform all that is assumed to be given during a crisis period.

A proper conception of power is a function of the corresponding time horizon of interest. The longer the time horizon, the more expansive the definition must be. Indeed, in international politics, the very ability to have a long time horizon is in and of itself a source of power. Actors with longer shadows of the future can invest more variegated sources of power. Actors with shorter shadows of the future will care less about the arenas of power that will not benefit them in the short run. This is one reason why rising hegemony are more likely to invest in the global public goods necessary to create an international order – and why fading hegemony will underinvest in those same goods (Gilpin 1981; Edelstein 2017). Rising hegemony can afford a longer shadow of the future; fading hegemony become consumed by crises and care less about the long-term benefits of investing in the rules of the global rules of the game.

The second hidden assumption included in most international relations theory involves the temporal returns to power. It is useful to compare and contrast disciplinary perspectives on temporal and spatial returns to power. Most international relations scholars share a common assumption about the spatial decay of power – the further the physical distance between a conflict and an actor’s borders, the weaker their ability to influence outcomes. Kenneth Boulding (1963) dubbed this a “loss of strength gradient.” Even in an era of globalization, most scholars maintain that the loss-of-strength gradient exists (Mearsheimer 2001; Porter 2015). All significant international relations paradigms implicitly or explicitly presume a negative relationship between distance and power.

International relations scholars do not share a common assumption about the temporal returns to power. Indeed, this is true of political science more generally. Some classic research on power holds contradictory opinions on this question. In the span of a single page, for example, Bachrach and Baratz (1963, p. 637) state that “power may be lessened when it is successfully exercised” but also that power and influence are “often mutually reinforcing.”

Numerous political theories presume a significant temporal decay for exercises of power. Much of the social sciences presume that the effects of actions today fade over time; it would be understandable to extend that assumption to actions designed to exercise power. With some forms of power, however, the reverse can be true; a wider time horizon has the capacity to generate a multiplier effect on the current exercise of power. Scholars who stress path dependence and historical institutionalism (Pierson 2000, 2004; Fieretos 2011) note that actions at time (t) can constrict choice at time (t + 1). This is also at the core of the “second face of power,” in which institutions and agendas constrict the range of possible choices that any actor can make (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). This emphasis on time’s narrow arrow is not unique to historical institutionalists. Conservative political theorists like Edmund Burke empower the past with considerable authority, arguing that history reveals which political arrangements are enduring.

There is considerable debate about how widespread path-dependent phenomena are in politics. Some scholars (Pierson 2000, 2004) believe that increasing returns dynamics are actually more prevalent in politics than in markets. Most scholars who believe in increasing returns to power focus on norms and institutions as the causal pathway. Because institutions are sticky, the increasing returns to institutionalization and “lock in” are manifestly clear. Other international relations theorists (Gilpin 1981; Wohlforth 1999) argue that a unipolar world – a natural outcome of increasing returns dynamics in world politics – is the most stable systemic outcome. If these dynamics are present, path dependence and increasing returns generate powerful feedback effects on the exercise of power. Indeed, if path dependent properties exist, the influence of power *increases* over time. There is temporal strengthening rather than temporal decay. As Paul Pierson (2000, p. 259) suggests, “positive feedback over time simultaneously increases power asymmetries and renders power relations less visible.”

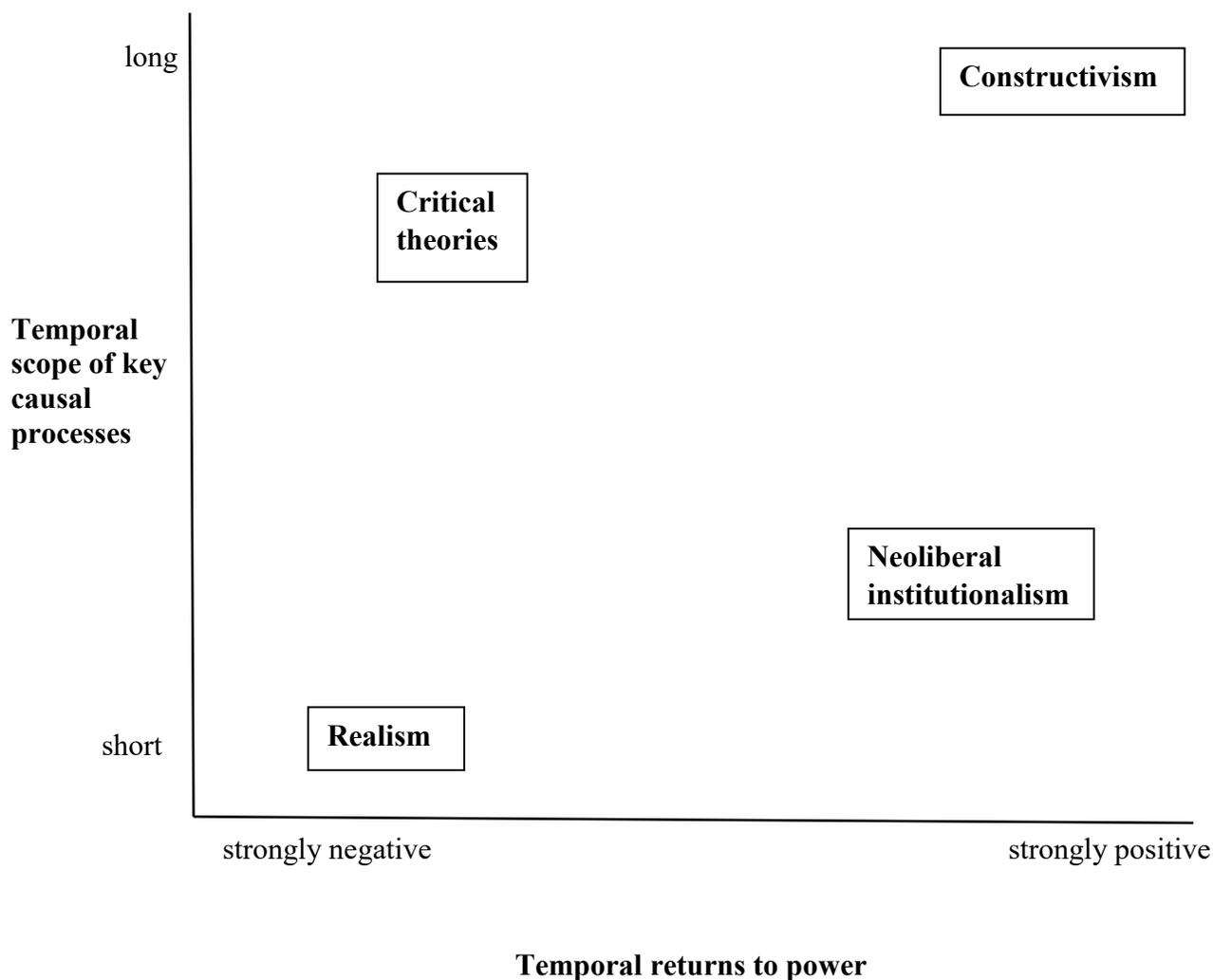
Other scholars believe path dependent phenomena are less pervasive or less common than is commonly perceived (Leibowitz and Margolis 1995; Page 2006). If one thinks about power beyond institutions, it is not obvious that a path dependent logic will apply. Classical scholars from Ibn Khaldûn to Edward Gibbon have argued that power decays over time. Modern scholars of world politics have identified a variety of mechanisms that would cause a reaction to any agglomeration of power. Whether it is the security dilemma, balance-of-power behavior, imperial overstretch, resistance to authoritarian control, or weapons of the weak, there are instances in which the exercise or amassing of power generates negative feedback as well. This is why many scholars argue that, *contra* claims of hegemonic stability theorists, unipolar orders are actually quite fragile (Mearsheimer 2001; Schweller and Pu 2011).

### **Time, power and international relations theory**

If one combines the two implicit assumptions that international relations theorists make about the time and power, a simple typological schema emerges (see Figure 1). Furthermore, one can use this schema to categorize different international relations paradigms. This section reviews each of the major paradigm to demonstrate how their temporal assumptions affect their thinking about power. It does so by looking at the canonical works of each of the major theories to divine their assumptions about time and power. The results suggest that the variation of time horizons and beliefs about power’s feedback effects is at the root of paradigmatic debates about international politics.

FIGURE 1:

**A TEMPORAL TYPOLOGY OF  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PARADIGMS**



Realists tend to focus on fast-acting causal processes. This is necessitated by the structural constraint of anarchy, which necessitates short time horizons. As an ontological given, realists share a Hobbesian definition of anarchy as a state of nature in which life is nasty, brutish, and short. The absence of a legitimate global authority means that the threat or use of force is a constant presence in world politics. States can be wiped out because there is no authority structure to prevent it. For realists, this focuses the mind of actors on survival first and foremost. Waltz (1979, p. 126) states, “only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power.” Gilpin (1984, p. 290-91) explains, “What the realist seeks to

stress is that all... nobl goals will be lost unless one makes provision for one's security in the power struggle among social groups." Mearsheimer (2002, p. 31) explains, "survival is the primary goal of great powers.... Survival dominates other motives because, once a state is conquered, it is unlikely to be in a position to pursue other aims."

Prioritizing survival necessitates a short-term temporal outlook due to the anarchical structure of world politics. There can be no planning for the far future if one's ability to survive in the near future is in question. For realists, the structure of anarchy necessitates a crisis mindset, which mandates short-term thinking.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even realists who do not focus on international security argue that the possibility of not surviving constrains any kind of international cooperation. Grieco (1990, p. 28-29) explains: "states in anarchy must fear for their survival and their independence. According to realists, states in such circumstances worry at the extreme that today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy in war, and this states fear that achievements of joint gains that advantage a friend in the present might produce a more dangerous potential foe in the future." For most realists, the causal processes that matter the most are fast-acting and kinetic, because state survival is never a given. This is why the threat or use of force is paramount in this paradigm (Waltz 1979, p. 113). Even realists that argue fears of war are likely exaggerated also acknowledge that these heightened fears are potent enough to independently affect actor behavior. Van Evera (1999, p. 6) explains, "the structure of power per se is benign and causes rather few wars, but the structure of power as perceived is often malignant and explains a good deal of war."<sup>3</sup>

Another sign of the paradigm's short time horizon is revealed in assessments of the fungibility of power. Some realists have argued that military power plays a role beyond the security realm (Waltz 1979; Art 1996), but most realists presume limited fungibility in their empirical work. Van Evera (1999, p. 8-9), for example, in discussing the causes of war, emphasizes the "fine-grained structure of power." This kind of operationalization allows Van Evera to parse whether certain forms of military power are offensive or defensive in nature, or whether there are first-strike advantages. Similarly, Press (2005, p. 24) argues that the significance of credibility and reputation have been overstated in international relations theory, because "decisionmakers are not interested in abstract measures of national power." He concludes that what matters is an adversary's capacity to execute its threats, which in turn rests on "the specific instruments of military and economic power that will determine whether the threats can be carried out successfully, and at what cost." The short time-horizon of realist theory necessitates an extremely narrow definition of useful power in statecraft, in which most power resources have limited fungibility.

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<sup>2</sup> This is true even though realists claim that their theories explain the regularities of international politics through millennia. All international relations paradigms claim to be able to explain a wide temporal scope. What is salient to our concerns is the time window that theorists use to develop their causal mechanisms about how world politics works.

<sup>3</sup> See also Krasner (1978), p. 15-16.

Realists also share a belief in the temporal decay of power. To be sure, realist scholars ranging from Morgenthau (1948) to Mearsheimer (2001) believe that states are incentivized to be power-maximizers. Even scholars who stress the maximization of security concur that the accumulation of power capabilities gives governments greater latitude of choice (Waltz 1979, pp. 194-5). At the same time, realists posit an array of causal mechanisms that generate negative feedback effects as an actor attempts to acquire more power. Gilpin (1981, chapter four), for example, details an array of negative feedback mechanisms that catch up to a hegemonic power: the diffusion of technological innovations from the lead economy to the rest of the world, the growth advantages that come from free-riding off of hegemonic protection, and the waning appetite for investments in protection. All of these factors conspire to mean that “in time the costs of protection of the status quo rise faster than the economic benefits of the status quo (Gilpin 1981, p. 169).”

Realists posit that the security dilemma generate powerful negative feedbacks to any actor that accumulates more power. John Herz (1950, p. 157) first articulated the security dilemma as a negative effect on actors acquiring more power and influence: “[States] are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.” The most important negative feedback mechanism for realists, however, comes through the balance of power. Waltz (1979, pp. 116-127) stresses balance-of-power politics as the one international political theory, arguing that the desire to survive will lead states to choose balancing over bandwagoning almost every time. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 45) echoes this formulation. Walt (1987, p. 18) states, “the belief that states form alliances in order to prevent stronger powers from dominating them lies at the heart of traditional balance of power theory.” Randall Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu (2011, pp. 45-6) observe that balancing behavior is considered to be a system-maintaining function in a multipolar world.<sup>4</sup>

The tragedy, according to realists, is that the pursuit of power is both necessary and self-defeating. Power cannot be denied through abnegation in the international realm, an idea that Herz (1951, p. 173) declares is “bound to fail.” Nonetheless, the pursuit of greater capabilities causes other actors to react with strategies that trigger escalating costs to the accumulation of power. As Waltz (1990, p. 743) concludes:

Recurrently in modern history one great power or another has looked as though it might become dangerously strong. Each time, an opposing coalition formed, if belatedly, and turned the expansive state back. The lesson would seem to be clear: in international politics, success leads to failure. *The excessive accumulation of power by one state or coalition of states elicits the opposition of others* (my italics).

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<sup>4</sup> Schweller and Pu (2011), p. 45-6

The sum effect of realism's temporal assumptions is that the accumulation of power is both an absolute imperative that nonetheless creates powerful and immediate negative feedback effects.

The liberal paradigm's assumptions about time differ from realism. Liberal institutionalists argue that the structure of anarchy does not constrain states to the narrow time horizon that realists stress. Much as the Lockean take on the state of nature was more sanguine than the Hobbesian one, modern liberal scholars presume that actors are likely to value the future as well as the present. Robert Keohane (1984, p. 75 and 82) explicitly notes that in international politics, "for cooperation to take place, of course, future rewards must be valued" and that in world politics, "states rarely disappear." Similarly, Kenneth Oye (1986, p. 12) stresses the importance of the shadow of the future: "The distinction between cases in which similar transactions among parties are unlikely to be repeated and cases in which the expectation of future interaction can influence decisions in the present is fundamental to the emergence of cooperation among egotists." Liberals assume a longer time horizon than realists, in order to make a theoretical case for why cooperation can emerge under anarchy.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, however, the liberal paradigm does not presume a time horizon as long as more constructivist approaches. The reliance on game theory to model international interactions is one indicator (Snidal 1985). Iterated games permit the prospect of a longer time horizon, but they are also limited in their ability to change the structure of the situation. They are, to use Jackson and Nexon's (1999) typology, "substantialist" models in which ontologically given actors cannot change. It is difficult for these models to introduce new actors, and it is next to impossible to introduce new strategic options. With so much of these models remaining fixed and frozen, their temporal scope for causal processes is limited.

A modest time horizon is also assumed in Keohane and Nye's (1978) *Power and Interdependence*. A key aspect of their description of complex interdependence is that the fungibility of power is restricted; power resources are limited to specific issue areas. They explicitly acknowledge that military power dominates economic power in the security realm, but also note that military power is of limited utility at best in arenas outside the security sphere. In their follow-up assessment (Keohane and Nye 1987, p. 730), they write: "The key point was not that interdependence made power obsolete – far from it – but that patterns of interdependence and patterns of potential power resources in a given issue area are closely related."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Keohane (1984, pp. 178-9) points out that domestic interests force governments to adopt a more short-term view in thinking about foreign policy. Liberals do posit a longer time horizon than realists, but at the same time assume a time horizon that is short enough for power resources to lack fungibility.

Where the liberal paradigm breaks strongly with realism is in its assumptions about the temporal returns to power. Realists hypothesize that the accumulation of power almost always generates

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<sup>5</sup> Some scholars break down this assumption by issue area, arguing that time horizons can be shorter in the security arena than in political economy. See Lipson (1984) on this point, as well as Axelrod and Keohane (1986).

<sup>6</sup> See also Keohane (1984), p. 40.

negative feedback effects. Neoliberal institutionalists clearly believe that power, properly institutionalized, can yield increasing returns over time (Keohane 1984, p. 24). G. John Ikenberry (2011, p. 105) expresses the institutionalist assumption about how power can yield long-run returns in his stylized explanation of the liberal international order's origins: "When a state is sufficiently powerful to shape the organization of international relations, rules and institutions can serve quite useful purposes, becoming tools for managing international hierarchy. In the broadest sense, rules and institutions provide the leading state with instruments of political control. They are useful in shaping and entrenching a favorable international environment."

For liberals, institutions are the mechanism through which actors can amass more power without triggering negative feedback. Because institutions are difficult to create in the international system, their mere existence helps to serve as a focal point for key actors (Keohane 1984; Martin 1992; Ikenberry 2000). They also function as an arena of contestation, but any bargaining is taking place under rules designed by the great powers to preserve their preferences (Goldstein 1993). International institutions function like Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) second face of power; once created, they devalue and delimit other possible outcomes.

Institutions generate path-dependent limits on the range of possible outcomes in the future; as Barnett and Duvall (2005, p. 52) phrase it, "Long-standing institutions represent frozen configurations of privilege and bias that continue to shape the future choices of actors." This characterization sounds normatively distinct but positively identical to rational choice scholar William Riker's (1980, p. 445) rational-choice description of institutions as "congealed tastes."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Lake (2013, p. 575) argues that international institutions condition how bargaining takes place in world politics, structuring the possible range of outcomes. If less powerful actors accept the bargain and participate in shared decision-making, it confers even greater legitimacy on these institutions. This, in turn, makes the exercise of hegemonic power easier. Deudney and Ikenberry (1999, p. 186) note that this legitimacy is enhanced if international institutions engage with a wide variety of actors: "This in turn reduces the tendency for subordinate powers to resist and, correspondingly, diminishes the need for the hegemon to exercise coercion." For neoliberals, the ability of institutions to activate the second and third faces of power makes them a force multiplier.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to the standard realist critique, liberal scholars are quite aware of the role that power plays in the creation of institutions. Keohane (1984, p. 71-72) notes the significance of both relative power and path dependence in explaining the long-run effect of international regimes: "Regimes can be more or less 'imposed'; that is, decisions to join them can be more or less constrained by powerful actors... the importance of prior constraints, and of the inequalities of power that lie behind them, reminds us that the results of voluntary bargaining will not necessarily be entirely benign." Similarly, Ikenberry (2011, p. 98) argues, "the more the leading

<sup>7</sup> For another domestic parallel, see Moe (1990).

<sup>8</sup> On the third face of power in particular, see Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990) and Ikenberry (2011), chapter three.

state is capable of dominating and abandoning weaker states, the more that weaker states will care about restraints on its exercise of power – and the more they are likely to make some concessions to obtain the restraint and commitment.”<sup>9</sup>

Where realists and liberals disagree is on the returns to institutionalized power over time. As previously noted, realists believe in negative or decreasing returns and regard institutions as epiphenomenal to state power (Mearsheimer 1994/95). Liberals believe that the successful creation of international institutions generates increasing returns for the creators. The processes that liberals stress – focal points, transaction costs, legitimation, credible commitment – are all predicated on the preservation of institutions over time. These regimes help to lock in both policy preferences and the legal distributions of power. Furthermore, the components of liberalism create further increasing returns through mutual complementarities. It is easier for democratic regimes to credibly commit to international regimes; it is also easier for economically interdependent states to want supranational institutions to govern the externalities of cross-border trade and exchange (Ikenberry 2011). As Deudney and Ikenberry (1999, p. 195) note, “The overall liberal order is a complex composite in which these elements interact and mutually reinforce each other. It is the overall pattern of these elements and their interaction that constitute the structure of the liberal political order; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Liberals who focus on complex interdependence also rely on positive feedback effects. Rogowski (1989) posits that globalization rewards those sectors who benefit the most from liberalization, empowering them at the expense of less productive sectors. Over time, that increases the power of those groups with a vested interest in openness. Hathaway (1998) observes a similar positive feedback effect on how trade liberalization affects the policy preferences of tradable sectors. David Grewal (2003, p. 91), in discussing the regulation of globalization, notes that coordinated policy “progressively eliminates the alternatives over which free choice among standards can effectively be exercised.” These kind of dynamics are consistent with a logic of positive returns to power.

Another way in which liberals believe in the temporal expansion of power is through the concept of “soft power.” As Nye (2004) defines it, soft power is the product of several components, including the execution of wise policies. For Nye, successful policies beget even more attractive forms of power, getting others to want what the actor wants. This is in sharp contrast to realism’s balance-of-power dynamic. Furthermore, Nye (2011, p. 21) argues that soft power can build off of hard power capabilities. Soft power has a multiplier effect in Nye’s rubric, extending the temporal reach of hard power: “the resources often associated with hard power behavior can also produce soft power behavior depending on the context and how they are used. Command power can create resources that in turn can create soft power at a later phase—for example, institutions that will provide soft power resources in the future.” All of the liberal

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<sup>9</sup> Liberals are also aware that a powerful state’s ability to credibly commit is simply another source of power. See Ikenberry (2011), p. 99.

paradigm's explications of power either implicitly or explicitly assume increasing returns and an increasing temporal reach of power exercised today.

The constructivist paradigm is explicit about the duration of its primary causal processes. In comparison to both the realist and neoliberal paradigms, it presumes a much longer scope of time under examination. This is largely because constructivists focus on social processes that require a long time to change. As Wendt (1999) notes repeatedly in *Social Theory of International Politics*, concepts like culture, norms, interest, and identity possess powerful inertial properties. Constructivists like Wendt simultaneously argue that change in socially constructed variables is possible but also difficult and slow-moving.<sup>10</sup> "Constructivism de-naturalizes the status quo," Guzzini (2005, p. 516) explains; therefore, "The concept of power is not only put into a political context, but in a further contextualization is also placed in a wider historical one." The transition from a Hobbesian culture of anarchy to a Lockean culture, for example, took centuries (Wendt 1999, p. 279). It is therefore not surprising that constructivists are likely to use a longer temporal aperture when defining their scope of analysis.

Indeed, Wendt (1999, p. 367) is explicit about constructivism's need for a longer time horizon in comparison to "rationalist" approaches like realism and neoliberalism:

Rationalist models would be most useful when it is plausible to expect that identities and interests will not change over the course of an interaction, and constructivist models would be most useful when we have reason to think they will change. Since change is more likely the longer our time frame, this suggests a temporal division of labor: rationalism for today and tomorrow, constructivism for the *longue durée*.

It is commonly and casually asserted that constructivists do not prioritize power in their theories (Baldwin 2016, p. 144-45; Adler 2013, p. 125; Berenskoetter 2007, p. 22). This is something of a misnomer. Wendt may not provide a comprehensive definition of power, but he makes it clear that power politics exists in constructivist social processes. Power is shot through the content and trajectory of any social construction. Wendt (1999, p. 342) says explicitly, "a powerful state engaging in prosocial policies will have more impact on the identities of weak states than vice-versa." Hurd (1999, p. 402) notes, "It is well known that the process of internalizing community norms is rife with considerations of power, both in determining what norms exist in the community and which norms a particular actor might latch on to." This is consistent with later constructivist work that emphasizes the power politics at work behind identity formation and norm diffusion. Goddard and Nexon (2016, p. 6-8) argue that "norms, rules, and other favorite topics of liberals and constructivists are not 'alternatives' to a power-political model of global politics. They are means, medium, subjects, and objects in the struggle for influence." They

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<sup>10</sup> On the stickiness of ideas and interests, See Wendt (1999), p. 134 and 255; on the stickiness of beliefs, see Wendt (1999), p. 163. Rational choice scholars would agree with the time required for change in these institutions. See, for example, Roland (2008).

conclude, “actors in global politics deploy norms and meanings to influence the behavior of others, and often in ways to serve power-political ends.”<sup>11</sup>

For constructivists, the focus on norms reveals the paradigm’s assumptions about the power of path dependence and the path dependence of power in world politics. A great deal of constructivist research has concentrated on the emergence and diffusion of norms and how those norms constitute and reconstitute actor identities (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 894) put it, “Norm shifts are to the ideational theorist what changes in the balance of power are to the realist.” Their canonical description of how norms diffuse is premised on an increasing returns logic. In their model, a “cascade effect” occurs when a critical mass of actors embraces the adherence of a new norm, leading to a tipping point of rapid acceptance. In their final phase, actors pledge fealty to a norm even if they do not completely believe it, in order to maintain their status and identity as “responsible” actors. They conclude that norm diffusion is an example of “strategic social construction” in which actors rationally deploy norms to reconfigure preferences and identities (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 888). When successful, the globalization of a norm does not generate balancing norms – indeed, the very definition of the “logic of appropriateness” is that actors do not want to be viewed as inappropriate. As March and Olsen (2004) note, a powerful logic of appropriateness means that “rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate.”

Over time, norms become so ingrained in actor beliefs and identities that they go unchallenged. As the third face of power kicks in (Lukes 2005), they become legitimated. Constructivists explicitly acknowledge that these kinds of identity formation are durable and long-lasting. Wendt (1999, p. 255) notes that “the more deeply shared ideas are internalized – the more they “matter” – the stickier the structure they constitute will be.” Hurd (1999, p. 388) concurs: “Legitimacy as a device of social control has long-run efficiency advantages over coercion in reducing some kinds of enforcement costs.” Even scholars who have explored resistance to norms acknowledge that as they spread widely and deeply, viable opposition strategies become more and more constrained (Cloward 2014; Dixon 2017).

Constructivists are more catholic than realists in their evaluation of which actors possess the power to be successful norm entrepreneurs. As Hurd (2005, p. 524) suggests, “actors with little material power may have leverage in the symbolic field against those with greater material capabilities.” Nevertheless, most constructivists acknowledge that power can be an important source of norm legitimation (Hurd 1999). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 906) note, “Norms held by states widely viewed as successful and desirable models are... likely to become prominent and diffuse.” As with Nye’s soft power, actors that are perceived as successful are likely to have even greater success at exporting their norms and values across the world. Like neoliberal institutionalists, constructivists believe that there are positive returns to acquiring normative power.

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<sup>11</sup> See also Hurd (2005).

Critical theorists share the wider time horizon of social constructivists for causal processes. Indeed, Cox (1981, p. 129) defined critical theory in contradistinction to “problem-solving theory” which is “non-historical or ahistorical.”<sup>12</sup> Like social constructivists, critical theorists focus on norms and identities, which take time to be created. Critical theorists also focus on what Barnett and Duvall (2005) label “productive power” – the discourse, social processes, and organization of knowledge that, to them, produces all social meanings. Foucault (1977, p. 27) understands power as imbricated within the collective state of knowledge, which in turn is an exercise of power: “power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge.” Ashley (1984, p. 225) concurs, quoting Pierre Bourdieu as saying, “The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality—in particular, social reality—is a major dimension of political power.” Needless to say, altering these kind of ontological givens takes time – and critical theorists are keenly interested in changing them.<sup>13</sup> Cox (1981, p. 135) gets at this when he notes, “critical theory is conscious of its own relativity but through this consciousness can achieve a broader time-perspective and become less relative than problem-solving theory.”

Critical and constructivist scholarship share a focus on the role that ideas, norms, and identity play in constituting international politics. The difference between the two, however, is their assumption about the temporal returns to power. Most constructivists assume that norms and identities, while social constructions, are also difficult to change. Constructivists have also tended to focus empirically on the formation and diffusion of new norms that become hegemonic in nature. They believe that such norm creation is possible and, once internalized, difficult to transform or challenge (Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Wendt 1999; Checkel 2001). As Hopf (1998, p. 180) notes, “one aspect of constructivist power is the power to reproduce, discipline, and police. When such power is realized, change in world politics is very hard indeed.”

Critical theory recognizes how power informs and structures social relations. In contrast to constructivists, however, they believe that the more powerful the norm, the likelier it will generate critical feedback. Hopf (198, p. 185) notes, “Critical theory’s approach towards identity is rooted in assumptions about power. Critical theorists see power being exercised in every social exchange, and there is always a dominant actor in that exchange. Unmasking these power relations is a large part of critical theory’s substantive agenda.” Critical theorists highlight and problematize hegemonic forms of discourse for precisely this purpose. Keeley (1990, p. 99) explains, “What [critical] analysis does not do, especially by its attitude, is encourage particularly regime-supporting perspectives or prescriptions; if anything, its bias is in favor of resistance.” Their very hegemonic status makes them ripe for resistance (Ashley 1987; Ashley and Walker 1990; Howarth 2010, p. 317). Carstensen and Schmidt (2016, p. 323) explain,

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<sup>12</sup> Cox explicitly labels realism as a problem-solving theory.

<sup>13</sup> Mattern (2005). As will be noted later, where critical theorists disagree is on the precise social structures that need to be changed.

“Ideational structures continually evolve through agents’ unconscious use of them, but will come to be recognized consciously when critics contest them.”

Critical theorists explicitly seek to discursively problematize hegemonic normative structures – and, through that problematization, subvert those privileged power structures. This might sound implausible to more mainstream power theorists, but Ashley (1984, p. 259) explains the critical foundations of an actor’s power rely on a collective acceptance of that social fact:

The power of an actor, and even its status as an agent competent to act, is not in any sense attributable to the inherent qualities or possessions of a given entity. Rather, the power and status of an actor depends on and is limited by the conditions of its recognition within a community as a whole. To have power, an agent must first secure its recognition as an agent capable of having power, and, to do that, it must first demonstrate its competence in terms of the collective and coreflective structures.... Thus, too, the power of an actor always has its limits.

Critical theory believes that through the act of criticism itself, previously accepted power structures can be disrupted and refashioned. One could say that critical theorists engage in “ideational *realpolitik*”; they focus on those power structures that are viewed as hegemonic and create discursive coalitions of the willing to resist them. As Keeley (1990, p. 97) observes, resistance actors possess a range of stratagems to resist these structures, including “developing alternative analyses, invoking discourses against their holders, linking issues, creating or hindering the creation of alternative networks, and labelling themselves and their opponents.”

If constructivists emphasize the social construction of identity, then critical theorists emphasize the dialectic between construction and deconstruction. Cox (1981, p. 144) explains, “one must beware of ignoring the principle of dialectic by over-emphasizing the power and coherence of a structure, even a very dominant one. Where a structure is hegemonic, critical theory leads one to look for a counter-structure, even a latent one, by seeking out possible bases of support and elements of cohesion.” A dialectical process implies that if a thesis becomes too dominant, it triggers the creation of its own counter-thesis.

The heterogeneity of critical theory comes from which part of the discourse is deemed the most hegemonic and therefore worthy of subversion. Feminist IR scholars, for example, focus on exposing heretofore accepted forms of gendered power (Tickner 1992). When feminists highlight the gendered state of international relations, for example, they are trying to subvert it in the process. Tickner (2005, p. 4) explains, “Much of feminist scholarship is both transdisciplinary and avowedly political; with the goal of bringing about change, it has explored and sought to understand the unequal gender hierarchies, as well as other hierarchies of power, which exist in all societies.” She goes on to stress that empirical feminist scholarship aims at exposing previously unobserved power hierarchies with the idea that such exposure makes them more likely to erode (Moon 1997; Chin 1998). The root of critical scholarship is that questioning privileged discourse is one way to denaturalize legitimate forms of authority (Krebs and Jackson

2007). All critical theorists share a desire to challenge privileged forms of power; their area of disagreement is which dimension is the truly hegemonic one.

### **Where do we go from here?**

This paper has argued that an underlying source of disagreement about the concept of power in world politics are the hidden assumptions about time made by the different paradigms. Some paradigms – realism and neoliberal institutionalism – focus on causal processes that are of limited temporal scope. This narrows the kinds of power that might affect actor behavior and reduces the fungibility of existing resources. Other paradigms – constructivist and critical approaches – look at causal and constitutive processes that require a wider time horizon. This concomitantly opens theoretical possibilities for alternative kinds of power to be exercised.

The other power question on which international relations scholars diverge is whether they believe that there are positive or negative returns to power over time. Some approaches – realism and critical theory – view the accumulation of power as self-defeating. Actors that amass power inexorably trigger their own resistance. This resistance can come from balancing coalitions or from critical deconstruction of hegemonic forms of discourse. Other approaches – neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism – implicitly presume increasing returns to power. Hegemonic actors can enjoy increasing returns to power through legitimation. Enshrining power in institutions or norms can cause other actors to bandwagon rather than balance, leading to stable orders.

What does this typology of international relations theory gain us? Further research is required, of course, but at this juncture it is worth considering a few important takeaways. The most direct conclusion to draw is that all the major paradigms in international relations take the dynamics of power seriously. A stylized fact of the discipline is that realism is *the* paradigm that privileges power as a key causal driver in its models; this paper suggests that stylized fact is wrong. Other paradigms clearly privilege power in their causal processes. They do so in ways, however, that diverge from the realist assumptions of limited temporal scope and negative returns to power. Another conclusion to draw is that some paradigms have more in common than has been previously understood. Most mainstream international relations scholarship notes how both realist and liberal perspectives are rationalist while constructivist approaches are reflexivist. Looking at their approaches to power and time, however, one can see the common affinity between realist and critical perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the liberal and constructivist approaches to global order share a common perspective on how power can generate positive returns.

A related observation is that most international relations theories have simplistic, monotonic assumptions about the relationship between power and time. For realists and critical theorists, there is a negative relationship between power and time; for liberals and constructivists, a logic

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<sup>14</sup> This has been infrequently observed in prior work on critical theory. See Keeley (1990), p. 99, and Hopf (1998), p. 185.

of increasing returns dominates. Very few international relations theorists consider the possibility of more contingent or more complex relationships between power and time. Future theoretical work should focus more on the conditions under which actors trigger increasing returns to power. This work should also build on past scholarship that recognizes non-monotonic relationships between power and time. Both Ibn Khaldûn and Gilpin (1981), for example, assume a parabolic relationship between power and time. More critical forms of scholarship (Hom and Steele 2010; Solomon and Steele 2017) also have suggested more complex temporal effects from shifts in power.

A related consideration is that hidden temporal assumptions can stack the deck in empirical work towards one's preferred theory. A shorter time horizon makes it harder to observe constructivist power processes at work, for example. A longer time horizon might cause scholars to overlook microprocesses that trigger path-dependent outcomes. Excessive attention to temporally specific causal processes can blind a researcher to the possibility that there are substitutable causal processes at work (Most and Starr 1984). This insight also offers a cautionary warning about the turn to middle-range theories and processes. Lake (2013, p. 574) suggests that 'good' theory tightly links the entire causal chain of action. The preference for tight causal links over substitutable or macrohistorical processes, however, can create blind spots for slower-moving sources of causal change. Focusing on narrow time horizons privileges middle-range theories like open economy politics over more ambitious paradigms (Oatley 2011). And even Lake (2013, p. 575) acknowledges that if actor preferences and identities change, it "shakes the foundations of [open economy politics], threatening to topple the entire superstructure." The temporal link between paradigmatic assumptions and methodological approaches makes it far too easy to exclude rival explanations (Pepinsky 2014).

Asking different paradigms to share common assumptions about time horizons is unrealistic. Fortunately, it is also unnecessary. This paper suggests there is a common research question on which paradigms will generate disparate predictions: the returns to power over time. Even as scholars quarrel over the precise definitions and operationalizations of power, they can recognize the divergence of their predictions about the effects of amassing power. This offers researchers the opportunity to empirically test differing predictions about the effect of power in international relations. This, in and of itself, will neither resolve the conceptual definitions of power nor lead to theoretical synthesis. It might, however, promote more inter-paradigmatic debate and forge a consensus on the next conceptual steps to take.

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