But Power and Wealth Are Satisfying

A REPLY TO LEMKE AND REED

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The authors of “Power Is Not Satisfaction” (Lemke and Reed 1998 [this issue]) take us to task for suggesting that power transition theory is internally inconsistent. Despite their arguments and empirical analyses, we continue to believe that the theory suffers from important, unresolved conceptual problems. The authors are right that these are not trivial issues because substantial research, including our own, indicates that transition theory contributes importantly to our understanding of the causes of war.

According to the theory, there is a heightened danger of war when a dissatisfied challenger overtakes the dominant state in the international system. We suggested that the theory presents an inconsistent view because it does not clearly identify which states will be dissatisfied or why. On one hand, Organski (1968, 365) says that a hegemon “always benefits disproportionately from any enterprises involving less powerful states, be they friends or foes” (emphasis added). This suggests that all states less powerful than the hegemon will be dissatisfied to a degree—at least if national leaders, like most individuals, resent one party to an enterprise benefiting disproportionately. On the other hand, for a transition to occur, a potential challenger must be growing economically more rapidly than the hegemon. If national leaders value wealth and power, as most seem to do, it is unclear why a state experiencing such success would be dissatisfied.

We did not mean to suggest that this apparent contradiction cannot be resolved, but it has not been yet. Power transition theory is a status inconsistency theory. What such theories have in common is the central assumption that inconsistent placement of an individual along two dimensions is apt to provoke violence. Transition theory identifies power and the benefits conferred by the system as the dimensions relevant for international relations. But to be testable, the theory must specify how the position of states along each of these dimensions is to be assessed—in short, how power and the benefits of the status quo are measured. Until recently, proponents of the theory have failed to do this by default. As early as 1958, Organski suggested in his World Politics
that gross national product was a good index of power (as well as national wealth), but it was more than 30 years later that Kim (1991; Lemke and Reed 1996) proposed that the similarity of a state’s portfolio of alliances to that of the dominant state could be used to gauge the benefits it receives. Werner and Kugler (1996) have used military buildups for the same purpose. Neither measure is unproblematic.

To avoid tautology, the dimensions along which status is assessed must not be inherently related to the behavior to be explained. It is not evident that either the similarity of alliances or military buildups meets this requirement. An arms race is a symptom of conflict as well as a contributing factor to its escalation. Measuring the similarity of a state’s alliances to those of the hegemon is not clearly more promising. States often form alliances against others precisely because they are in conflict. Moreover, Bueno de Mesquita (1981; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992) estimate the power of a state by augmenting its own capabilities with the contributions expected of third parties weighted by the similarity of alliance patterns. By this measure, a state whose alliances are similar to those of the most powerful state in the system also is bound to be powerful. Thus, using the similarity of alliances to gauge the benefits states receive from the system conflates the fundamental dimensions along which states are judged to be either consistently or inconsistently ranked. Transition theorists should avoid using indirect indicators of conflict to assess the benefits a state receives from the international system.

The basic problem is that power transition theory does not identify what benefits the international system provides to states and over which they may fight. It has merely been assumed that the dominant state is able to construct a system that provides it with the most benefits and its allies with greater benefits than other states receive. If wealth and power, as measured by gross national product, are not these benefits, what are they? If they are, why would those whose wealth and power are rapidly growing be dissatisfied? Lemke and Reed (1998) choose the latter horn of the dilemma and suggest that a rapidly growing challenger is dissatisfied because it could have grown even faster. This, however, is asserted, not demonstrated. We know that the faculty member in their analogy could do better than she is under a hostile chair—and is therefore probably dissatisfied—because she receives outside offers. No such direct evidence of satisfaction has been offered for states in the international system. The theory’s proponents need to show that a rising challenger would have grown more rapidly, according to standard economic theory, if it had not been for the influence of the dominant state. Some evidence of how the hegemon thwarted the challenger’s potential would also increase confidence in the theory.

Can we simply assume that the most powerful state is hegemonic and able to construct a system that provides it with disproportionate benefits? The assumption is plausible, but not obviously true. It has been common since the 1960s to argue that a hegemon provides international public goods at a disproportionate cost to itself. A series of articles (e.g., Oneal and Elrod 1989; Oneal and Diehl 1994) on NATO burden sharing shows that there is “a surprising tendency for the ‘exploitation’ of the great by the small” (Olson 1971). Gilpin (1981) and Kennedy (1987) also have argued that dominance carries the seeds of its own destruction because lesser powers are able to free ride. In fact, the other major capitalist states have converged economically on the
United States during the post–World War II era (Maddison 1991), as did the Soviet Union before Brezhnev and China after Mao. Nor is it apparent that a hegemon can benefit disproportionately even in its relations with less developed states. The rates of return earned by British investors from 1870 to 1913 and U.S. multinational corporations from 1950 to 1985 on their foreign investments in less developed regions were no greater than their returns in developed countries. The profitability of British capital located within the empire before World War I was no greater than outside it (Oneal and Oneal 1988). The international capital market, in other words, was efficient; rates of return were not influenced by the power of the hegemony, even vis-à-vis the weakest states or Britain’s own colonies.

Lenin’s ([1916] 1943) understanding of international relations was similar to power transition theory. In *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, he argued that a condominium of great powers was inherently unstable because of the law of uneven development. However the benefits of the international system might be apportioned at one point in time, the distribution would become outmoded as some states subsequently grew more rapidly than others. This would make conflict inevitable. The virtue of Lenin’s theorizing was that he offered a concrete measure of the benefits the great capitalist states derived from the system: the size of their colonial holdings. Power transition theorists need to be as explicit. In addition, they should, like Lenin, be consistent in their expectations of who will be dissatisfied: if the distribution of benefits remains unchanged and a hegemon always profits disproportionately in transactions with other states, “be they friends or foes,” dissatisfaction should be a function of differential growth rates. Nor should the danger of war emanate only from a rising challenger. Any state falling in power should be subject to attack by more powerful states seeking a greater share of the benefits of the system.

Because fundamental conceptual issues remain unresolved, the empirical analyses presented by Lemke and Reed (1998) provide only limited reassurance.

**REFERENCES**


