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Symbolic Agency and the Politics of Focal Points

The role of norms in international politics is one of the most thoroughly misunderstood relationships in contemporary theories of international relations. This is unfortunate because it is also one of the most rapidly expanding areas of political contestation. A diverse array of actors, from transnational human rights networks, to ethnic militias and religious terrorists are strategically deploying normative discourses of rights, ethics, and values in the arena of symbolic politics. Battles are being waged, not only with guns and missiles, but also with words and ideas. All of which begs the question: *what accounts for the genesis and power of these normative frameworks?*

Theorists of international relations currently lack the necessary tools to answer this question. Rational choice theory and social constructivism both suffer from congenital blind spots that render them incapable of explaining the dynamics of symbolic politics. It is only through a synthesis of these perspectives that a new theory of strategic discursive agency can be developed that explains both the genesis, and the power, of normative discursive formulations. This theory will build on previous work by scholars who have conceptualized norms as symbolic "focal points" that represent game theoretic equilibria. I will argue that focal points should be re-conceptualized as sites of political contestation. Focal points (or "norms") are not mere background conditions for game theoretic analysis. Rather, they are actively contested and deployed by strategic actors, in the symbolic arena of political discourse, in an attempt to alter the structure of the game to their advantage.

BACKGROUND

Rational Choice Theory

In the past few decades, rational choice theory has emerged as the dominant explanatory framework for much of the political science discipline. By pre-supposing the existence of rational, purposive agents who seek to maximize their individual utility, rational choice approaches have made possible a systematic and rigorous analysis of political events that has greatly advanced our understanding of phenomena as diverse as legislative voting patterns, multilateral trade negotiations, and international warfare. However, rational choice theorists seem to have consistently suffered from a congenital blind spot when it comes to issues of values and norms. Within the game theory literature, areas of "common knowledge" are generally posited as the background conditions that structure a given game, but those variables are almost always treated as exogenous to the situation being studied. No theories are offered for how those background conditions (norms, values, etc.) are created or altered. This leaves such theories completely incapable of explaining the symbolic and discursive activities that are so central to the strategies of contemporary political actors.

Social Constructivism

This explanatory void, among others, fueled the rise of the primary alternative to rational choice theory: social constructivism. This framework took the questions surrounding the roles of norms, values, and identities head-on. Social constructivists argue that actors and their environments are mutually constitutive (Wendt 1999). Beliefs and interests are not exogenous variables, as game theoretic accounts tend to assume. Rather, they are constructed and defined by the social structures in which actors operate (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). According to

constructivists, a given society produces certain "norms" – beliefs, values, rules, etc. – which come to be shared by members of that society through a process of socialization and internalization (Risse and Sikkink 1999; Finnemore 1996). However, this causal mechanism creates significant difficulties for the constructivist account. By defining norms as systems of shared beliefs, constructivism blinds itself to the vigorous constestations that surround the meanings of norms, even among members of the same society. This conceptual move erases the heterogeneity that characterizes the beliefs and values of nearly all large social groups. Furthermore, constructivism's reliance on socialization as its primary causal mechanism forces constructivist theorists to posit long timeframes for the deep "internalization" that is required for norms to exercise their effects. This leaves constructivism incapable of explaining the rapid shifts in societal beliefs and values that have characterized the emergence of ethnic conflicts, and the successes of activists in the human rights arena.

Methodologically, most work within the constructivist framework has also suffered from a simplistic conflation of external discourse and internal beliefs. For instance, Risse and Ropp attempt to show that governments targeted by activist campaigns have changed their views on human rights, by pointing to substantial shifts in the rhetoric that emanates from leaders within those governments (1999, 254). They argue that because certain leaders ceased challenging the validity of the norms, we can safely infer that the norm was internalized. However, it strains credulity to suppose that leaders would be so naïve as to simply 'speak their minds' in arenas of public discourse. In fact, in the case studies Risse and Ropp review, the leaders only stopped making such arguments after they ceased to be effective at quelling their domestic constituencies. Moreover, leaders that used the rhetoric of human rights, but then backtracked to earlier harsher rhetoric, faced severe consequences domestically and abroad (Risse and Ropp

1999, 255-256). It therefore seems far more plausible to construct a story in which the discursive changes and their stability are linked to anticipatory decisions by self-interested actors.

FOCAL POINTS

Schelling (1960) argued that most conflicts are actually bargaining situations that can be modeled as mixed-motive coordination games (see Fig. 1). In these games, the players have divergent preferences about where coordination should occur, but they all prefer any point of coordination to none at all. However, all non-trivial coordination games have multiple equilibria. Faced with such indeterminacy, Schelling argued that rational players will attempt to choose a move that is so obvious that they can be reasonably sure that the other players will choose it as well. He calls such obvious choices "focal points." Focal points are principles that provide rallying points around which people can mobilize and coordinate (Kreps 1990).

Several theorists have appropriated this concept to explain patterns of social activity that seem to conform to unenforced rules of conduct. For instance, Bernheim (1994) and Klotz (1995) have argued that social norms can be productively conceptualized as focal points that function to guide interactions between actors. Similarly, Garrett and Weingast (1993) have shown that focal points can serve to alleviate the collective action problems that are inherent in the creation and maintenance of international institutions. Moreover, Ferejohn (1991) has claimed that the salience of certain equilibria rather than others will be defined by shared cultural norms that provide the interpretative backdrop against which such evaluations are made.

These accounts elucidate vital aspects of the role played by norms in the international political arena. However, they remain insufficient because they ignore the asymmetric relations of power that inevitably characterize the creation and propagation of social norms. For the most

	C1	C2
R1	4, 3	0, 0
R2	0, 0	3,4

Figure 1: Mixed-Motive Coordination Game

part, the genesis of such norms has been left completely untheorized. The few explanations that have been proposed have been devoid of any mention of conflict or agency: norms either float autonomously above political and social interactions (Klotz 1995), or they arise naturally from the underlying distribution of preferences within a given society (Bernheim 1994). Either way, the standard theory of focal points serves to de-politicize the discursive acts by which norms are constructed and the power-laden processes by which they achieve dominance.

A particularly striking example of this trend is the recent development of "evolutionary" game theoretic models that seek to explain patterns of social behavior. Young argues that most social institutions were not willed into being (1998, 4). Instead, they are the result of "common expectations" that arise gradually "through the accumulation of precedent" (Young 1998, 117). In response to the argument that institutions are the result of purposeful actions by individuals, Young claims that while "major players" may occasionally matter, for the most part they are "minor relative to the scale of the social institution" (1998, 145). This assertion seems dangerously ahistorical, given the numerous well-documented instances of both formal and informal institutions being willfully constructed by individuals (examples include the IMF, the UN, the weekend, property rights, human rights, animal rights, currency standards, and numerous fashion trends). Unsurprisingly, Young does not attempt to provide any evidence for this claim. In fact, it seems to be nothing more that an artifact of his spurious assumptions. At

the beginning of his analysis he assumes a lack of agency, and low and behold, after pages and pages of high tech calculations, a lack of agency comes out at the other end.

However, I intend to argue that contrary to the assumptions of most game theoretic formulations, norms (or "focal points") do not arise of their own volition. A focal point only comes to be seen as "obvious" because the situation has been framed so as to make it seem obvious. While cultural symbols may be shared by the members of a given society, the meanings that are attributed to those symbols will inevitably be diverse and contested (Johnson 2000). Analogies, precedents, linguistic choices, and symbolic constructions all allow the stage to be set in such a way as to make certain options more prominent than others. It is through such symbolic framing and reframing that strategic actors seek to gain discursive leverage over focal point selection.

It is important to note that such reframing need not necessarily operate through changing people's beliefs. Strategies that seek to directly change the beliefs of and individual or group fall under the heading of "persuasion." This is accomplished through the provision of new information that seeks to change actors' opinions about the situation in which they find themselves and the likely consequences of the actions they are considering. In game theoretic terms, persuasion changes the payoff structure of the game by influencing a player's evaluation of the possible outcomes and their relative merits (see Fig. 2).

However, Riker (1996) has observed that rhetors rarely engage in activities that would fall under the strict definition of persuasion. This is largely a result of the ineffectiveness of such a strategy. Beliefs tend to not be terribly susceptible to direct challenge. Instead, successful rhetors selectively highlight alternative aspects of the situation. As Riker argues, "the rhetor seeks to change not the auditor's position on a particular dimension, but rather the mix of

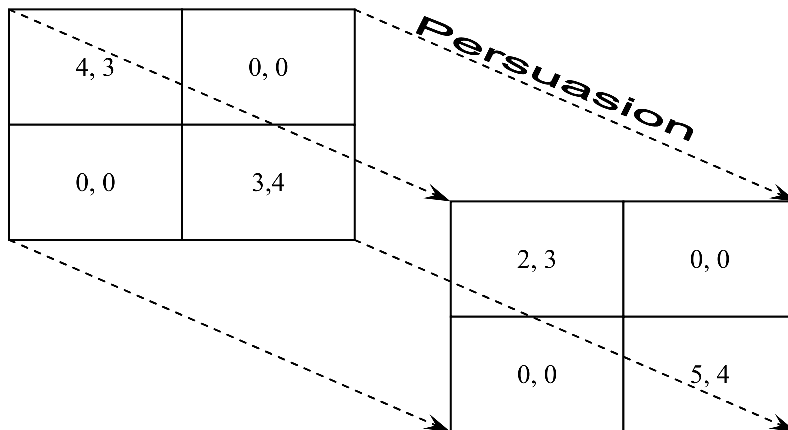

Figure 2: Persuasion

dimensions deemed relevant" (1996, 129). Moreover, Kahneman and Tversky (2000) have shown experimentally that simply by framing the same problem in a different way, they can consistently elicit divergent responses from decision-makers. Thus, the 'facts' of the situation need not be altered in order to induce a player to change her move. Rather, the primary causal mechanism is based on the process of symbolic reframing (see Fig. 3). A strategic actor deploys focal points, not by changing a player's preferences, but by framing the issue so as to highlight the salience of certain moves rather than others.

Moreover, while the techniques of manipulation may be symbolic, the effects can be quite material. The selection of a particular focal point as a locus for coordination can have enormous distributional consequences (Knight 1992). The norms that achieve dominance in a society can determine patterns of wealth accumulation, political freedoms, and even who lives and who dies. We should therefore not be surprised to find certain individuals putting large amounts of time and effort into discursive political acts that on the surface seem to be 'merely' symbolic. Life and death issues are decided because 'mere' symbolic deployments have allowed actors to frame the situation in a particular way. Thus, focal points (or "norms") are not exogenous factors that simply fade into the background, as game theorists tend to assume.

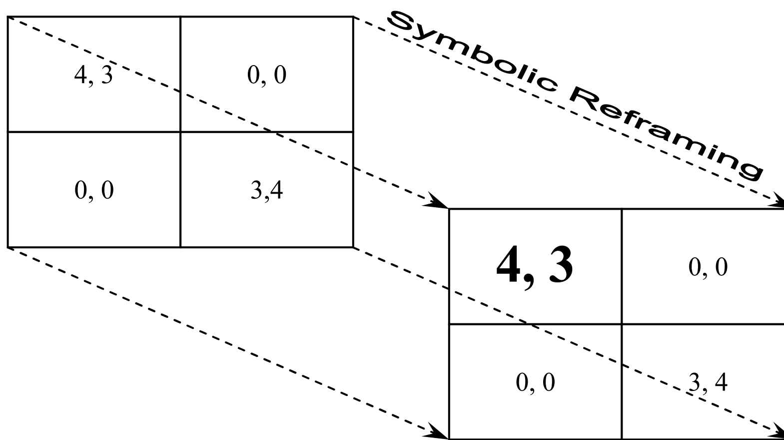

Figure 3: Symbolic Reframing

Rather, they are active sites of contestation and negotiation. Symbolic norms are deployed strategically by self-interested actors in order to structure the game to their advantage, by rendering "obvious" points of coordination that they find favorable.

Furthermore, these contestations frequently occur within a framework of asymmetric power relations. This aspect of the issue has been largely ignored within the game theory literature. While many have argued that information asymmetries are a critical aspect of certain bargaining situations (e.g. Akerlof 1970) this dimension fails to fully explicate the nature of power relations involved. My argument will be that equally important (if not more so) are what I call *communication asymmetries*.

This concept is best introduced by way of an example from Schelling. He asks us to imagine two people playing a mixed-motive coordination game in which they each have two available moves: *black* and *red*. If they both choose *black*, player #1 gets five dollars and player #2 gets ten dollars. If they both choose *red* player #1 gets ten dollars and player #2 gets five dollars. If they fail to coordinate they get nothing (see Fig. 4). However, the players are not allowed to communicate with each other in any way. Clearly, this game has multiple equilibria. Now, imagine that a third party had the ability to send a message to both players. In this

	Red	Black
Red	10, 5	0, 0
Black	0, 0	5, 10

Figure 4: Mixed-Motive Coordination Game

situation, such a person could exert enormous influence (Schelling 1960, 66, 301-302). If she were to make a suggestion about where the players should coordinate, that suggestion would be almost irresistible. Both players would assume that the other would attempt to coordinate on that suggestion. The third party's choice would very quickly become the "obvious" choice. Moreover, this analogy could be extended to any number of players (Fig. 5). If a communication monopolist were to shout "red!" it would not much matter that many of the players wanted to play black. A communication monopolist could convince a hundred people just as easily as she could convince two, as long as she alone had access to the media of communication.

This may in fact be a surprisingly accurate model of many social interactions. While communication is not expressly forbidden in most circumstances, it is simply not possible (or at least it is prohibitively costly) for everyone in a large society to talk to everyone else about all the issues on which they need to coordinate (Milgrom, North, and Weingast 1990). However, a person who could broadcast her suggestions for coordination to large numbers of people simultaneously could guide their behavior in much the same way that the communication monopolist was able to guide the moves of the players. Given that communication with each other is an untenable strategy, the people listening to the broadcast might be inclined to use it as a framework for coordination. We would therefore expect an actor with superior access to the

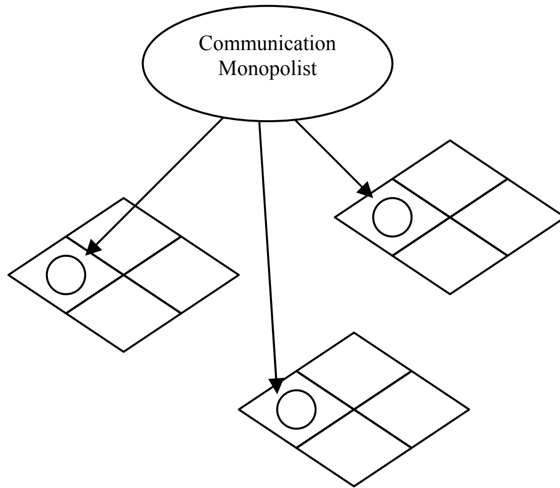

Figure 5: Focal point deployment by a communication monopolist

networks of discourse to have an enormous advantage in the deployment of symbolic focal points.

Furthermore, the discussion above indicates that the tactics of focal point deployment could be far more subtle than simple commands. The communication monopolist need not shout, “Choose red!” She could instead say, “Isn’t the eye more naturally drawn to bright colors?” We could call this the strategic deployment of a *focal principle*, a symbolic device that frames the issue so as to highlight a particular focal point for coordination. The ‘bright is better’ principle leads players to see *red* as the obvious choice (and to conclude that others will see it as obvious), without explicitly commanding anything.

Of course, the situation in the real world is far more complicated. It is extremely rare for a single person to have a complete monopoly over the networks of discourse. Rather, multiple actors are simultaneously seeking to deploy different focal points via divergent focal principles. Instead of a single communication monopolist, we have several *communication competitors* (Fig 6). So, after the first communication competitor deployed the ‘bright is better’ focal principle, a second party could choose to broadcast the message that, “Most people perceive strength and

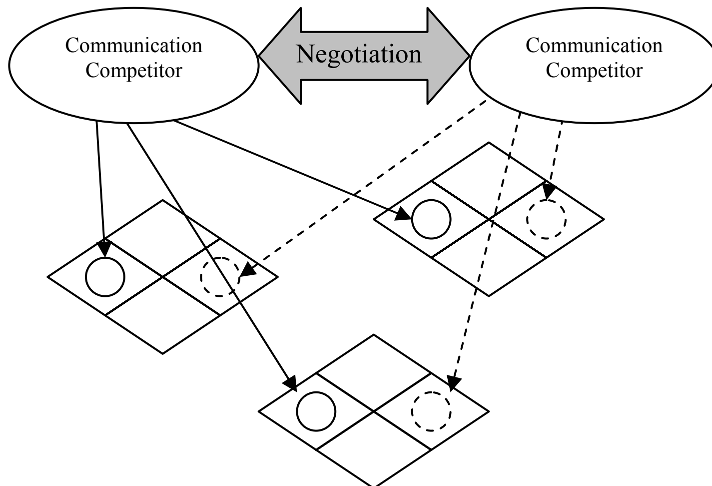

Figure 6: Focal point deployment by communication competitors

security in dark colors." At that moment the discursive arena would become an active site of contestation, in which actors would seek to gain advantage through the symbolic deployment of norms and principles that make salient those points of coordination they find favorable. Moreover, we would expect that those with more communicative power would be more likely to prevail in such contests.

This analysis diverges sharply from most of the literature in game theory and rational choice. Examinations of coordination games generally focus on situations in which two negotiators stare at each other across a bargaining table. In such a situation, communication is bidirectional and communicative power is roughly equal. However, as indicated in Figure 6, 'negotiation' is only a very small component of what goes on in a situation defined largely by communication asymmetries. Most people cannot even get to the table. They have neither the resources nor the power to force their way into the negotiations. They are at an inherent disadvantage, both because power-holders have superior access to broadcast media, and because power-holders can refuse to listen to their replies. Hence, the norms and principles that come to define their patterns of coordination are not negotiated, they are imposed. Thus, by

incorporating communication asymmetries into the model, we can provide a micro-level causal mechanism to explain the classic observation that dominant principles usually reflect the interests of the powerful.

Communication asymmetries also allow us to explain why, contrary to those who argue that ideas must change beliefs in order for them to create changes in behavior (e.g. Bates, de Figueiredo, and Weingast 1998), it is in fact wholly unnecessary for people to *believe* in focal principles. In order for an idea to exercise influence, people need not believe in its truthfulness, nor need they change their preferences over outcomes. They need only be convinced that most of the other 'players' got the same message they did. The power of the message lies not in its truth, but in its ubiquity.

EMPIRICAL PUZZLES

The power of the theory that has been sketched here lies in its ability to coherently explain phenomena that had remained intractable within previous conceptual frameworks. In the limited space that remains, I will briefly examine two such events: the eradication of Chinese footbinding and the sudden eruption of violence in the former Yugoslavia. These particular examples were chosen, both because the general outlines of the historical events surrounding them are well known and largely undisputed, and because current conceptual frameworks have made it difficult for theorists to offer coherent explanations of the events.

The first empirical puzzle concerns one of the earliest examples of transnational human rights activism: the campaign against Chinese footbinding. Initially, this would seem to be an easy case for the constructivist framework to explain. Chinese footbinding had been practiced for centuries, and the ritual played a central role in the definition of beauty, labor relations,

gender roles, and nationhood. Furthermore, the practice was nearly universal. A study of one region found that 99.2% of girls born prior to 1890 had bound feet (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 64). If there was ever a deeply internalized cultural norm characterized by widely shared and thoroughly socialized beliefs, this would seem to be it. However, constructivism is at a loss to explain the rapid transformation that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. By 1910, only fifteen years after the creation of the first anti-footbinding umbrella organization, the rate of footbinding had plummeted to 19.5%. By 1919, the practice had been almost completely eradicated (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 64). If these beliefs were so deeply embedded in Chinese culture, and so deeply internalized by the Chinese people, how did the patterns of behavior shift so rapidly?

When viewed from the perspective of focal points, the explanation becomes clear. The practice of Chinese footbinding was not the result of norm socialization, it was a behavioral equilibrium in a society-wide coordination game. Parents bound their daughters' feet because otherwise they would be considered unsuitable for marriage. As long as all the other girls had their feet bound, being the odd duck out was the worst possible outcome. The practice changed when the activist campaign successfully re-framed the issue through the symbolic lens of China's national strength. The "anti-footbinding focal point" was promoted as tool of modernization that would allow China to resist foreign incursions. This tactic successfully shifted the behavioral pattern to a new stable equilibrium that proved to be just as self-enforcing as the previous regime. Once none of the other girls were getting their feet bound, having yours bound was the worst possible outcome.

The second empirical puzzle concerns one of the most egregious examples of ethnic violence in recent memory: the conflict between Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia. For

decades, these two groups had lived peacefully side-by-side. They intermarried, they lived together, they even celebrated each other's religious holidays. Shortly before the conflict erupted, most respondents to the national census claimed to primarily identify as "Yugoslav," rather than "Serb" or "Croat." So, how did such rigid identity boundaries come to be drawn between these groups that they would suddenly engage in mass slaughter? The standard account argues that elite manipulation of nationalist sentiments was used to cement the power of political leaders who would otherwise have faced eminent collapse (Fearon and Laitin 2000). However this theory suffers from a lack of a coherent micro-level causal mechanism that could explain why people were willing to follow their leaders into this bloodbath.

Analysis from the perspective of focal points allows us to fill in this gap. This was simply a shift from one behavioral equilibrium to another, sparked by the symbolic reframing of the situation into dichotomous identity categories. Most of the people involved did not necessarily believe that the elite description of the situation was true. In fact, case study evidence indicates that most people in Yugoslavia initially reacted to the elite exhortations with extreme skepticism (Bates, de Figueiredo, and Weingast 1998, 611). Thus, power of the message came not from its truth, but from its ubiquity. Everyone knew that everyone else was hearing the same thing. Therefore, once a small number of people were convinced that the situation was such that violence was the "obvious" move, the dynamic became self-enforcing. When even a small number of people are willing to kill you because of their perception of your identity, that identity very quickly becomes a salient focal point for you, whether it was before or not. Once antagonistic identities had been successfully constructed as a social fact, violence was the only logical move available to individuals who found themselves caught in the web of symbolic boundaries.

CONCLUSION

It therefore seems, based on these initial 'empirical probes,' that focal point analysis has a lot to offer to the study of international relations. Contestations over the symbolic framing of issues and situations appear to play a pivotal role in the strategic struggle for power and influence in the arena of discursive politics. Moreover, current theoretical frameworks generally either ignore these issues, or render them incoherent by reducing them to the internalization of beliefs. Theorists of international relations are thus desperately in need of new tools with which to analyze such phenomena. Concepts such as focal point, focal principle, and communication asymmetry are useful because they provide a form of explanatory leverage that was previously unavailable.

The next obvious step in such a project would seem to be the development of a theory of focal point shifts. How are we to account for changes in the loci of coordination at particular moments in time? Given the framework sketched above, at least two causal mechanisms are immediately plausible: shifts in power and shifts in interests. The first mechanism would focus on changes in the ability of certain groups or individuals to disseminate focal principles to large numbers of people. For instance, one would imagine that the rise of a dictator or the emergence of a transnational activist network would lead to shifts in the focal points that achieved dominance at a particular historical moment. The second mechanism would focus on changes in the messages that those in positions of power found it advantageous to broadcast. For instance, one could argue that after 9/11 President Bush sought to promote new focal points because his interests (as he perceived them) had fundamentally changed. A similar explanation may be possible for the shift in elite exhortations in the former Yugoslavia shortly before the outbreak of

ethnic cleansing. In both cases, the holders of communicative power remained the same, but their perceived interests changed dramatically.

A third causal mechanism also seems initially plausible: shifts in ideas. However, the articulation of this mechanism may be more complicated because in many instances ideas that are perceived as new have actually been around for quite some time. In such instances, one would want to explain why, given that the idea had existed before, it came to be widely disseminated at one particular time and not another. Such an explanation would probably fall back onto one of the first two causal mechanisms. It seems likely that the idea came to be broadcast either because a new group rose to power or because the interests of an already existing group of power-holders changed.

Of course, some ideas are genuinely new. Keynesianism was not available as a focal principle before the 1930s because it had not yet been invented. However, even within the category of genuinely new ideas, in some cases their emergence may be endogenous to shifts in power or interests. The idea of territorial sovereignty, for instance, was not constructed in a conceptual vacuum. Those who created it did so because they had an interest in the establishment of inviolable national borders. Therefore, if we wanted to explain why this idea emerged at one particular time and not another, we would once again have to resort to a mechanism based on shifts in power or interests. Thus, in order for idea shifts to stand alone as an independent causal mechanism, the ideas would not only have to be new, they would also have to be invented by a process that functioned in isolation from the arenas of symbolic political struggle in which those ideas would come to be deployed. In such situations, the emergence of new ideas would require consideration as a separate independent variable in examinations of focal point change.

With these causal mechanisms in hand, it should be possible to then select cases for analysis so as to maximize variation in the independent variables (i.e. power, interests, and ideas). In order to avoid selecting on the dependent variable, these cases would also have to include instances of focal point stability in addition to instances of focal point change. Through such an analysis, I hope to examine the conditions under which focal points change and thereby develop a theory of symbolic agency that could explain shifts in patterns of coordinated behavior on the basis of strategic deployments of discursive frames in a context of asymmetrical communication.

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