

## CLASHING IDEAS IN A CONSTANTLY CHANGING WORLD

DAVID LEITNER, PHD

### Abstract

This paper discusses the role of ideas in political theory and practice. Politics has often been delineated by the research perspective taken, realist, liberal, constructivist, rational choice, etc. While each of these tries to differentiate itself from the other by examining specific aspects and influences on the political milieu, they are united by the sharing and acceptance of ideas.

Politics, regardless of the perspective, have been based on actions motivated by some idea. These shared ideas are not relegated to a specific civilization, culture or identity. Nor are they only attached to the systemic, state, or individual levels of research. Sharing these ideas is not dependent upon the distribution of material power on any level.

The ebb and flow of history does not revolve solely around the material power of states. Nor is it exclusively the purview of institutions. And it is not based entirely on identity or anarchy. Instead it is about ideas and how those ideas are translated into actions. From the rise and fall of empires and the crusades through the Renaissance and Reformation, the American and French Revolutions, Socialism, Communism, Fascism, Democracy, the Cold War, Fundamentalism and many of the revolutions we are experiencing today, ideas, and the many perspectives and ideologies on those ideas, have been the motivation for interstate, state and substate groups' formations and interactions.

Ideas seem to be even more relevant today as technology and education have given the masses greater access and participation in the creation and assertion of the place for ideas in world politics.

This paper argues, admittedly from a neo-classical realist perspective, that ideas act as a separate influence on political relations. It suggests that ideas, rather than being a separate level to research, are part and parcel to all levels and streams of political interaction and thought. It is, essentially, shared ideas that allow individual, state and systemic actors to create relationships and relations, interact with each other, gain support and garner the energy necessary for an idea to be influential enough to materialize as action.

Understanding the role of ideas allows us to better analyze the ramifications of systemic, subsystemic, national and local change. It is possible, by examining ideas as the motivation for change, to identify primary conflict lines; the leaders and followers within a conflict; the different structures that have formed; and how these conflicts have led some to protect the status-quo while others seek to revise it at all levels. As the influence and role of ideas is better understood it may have significant impact on strategic planning as well as future research.

## Introduction

What are we humans but the ideas rolling around in our head? These ideas that bounce, collide, and bang off each other – sometimes creating spectacular explosions and other times the sweetest music of harmony and rhythm. These ideas create the pattern and schema, the hierarchy and pyramid, the influence and motivation that drive us, guide us, and ultimately define us to the world. The realization of these ideas begets action or inaction in the relations we have in any grouping from the nuclear family to Transnational Ideological Networks (TINS), from the smallest grouping to the most well organized associational setting, whether known or unknown.<sup>1</sup>

What is interesting about these relations is they define each group to the world. They demonstrate and influence perspectives on the many ideas taken for granted or held dear. They are how any unitary actor show others who they are, who they want to be, why it is important to them, and – perhaps most important – to what lengths they are willing to go to see an idea reach fruition.

The energy and resources brought to the expression of an idea through relations demonstrates and defines for the world the dedication to an idea and the influence of that idea in each actor's internal ideational struggle. This is not only true for each person (since we all struggle every day with influential ideas and our basic needs), but it is also true for every group, formal or otherwise. Boundaries are not always relevant – the world's interactions are made up of constant struggles over competing ideas.

As a young researcher it is clear to me that I am only touching upon the tip of the iceberg in researching the topic of ideas, power and influence. On the one hand, I have no doubt that most of what I write here is not new, if anything it is a rehashing of the theories and thoughts that have already been gone over with a fine toothed comb. On the other, this work seeks to examine the role of ideas as power. In so doing, it argues a re-evaluation of the basis for power and proposes a balance-of-ideas (or perhaps a clashing-of-ideas) approach that may be able to accommodate most of the predominant theoretical paradigms.

As a result, this work challenges theoreticians and researchers of politics and strategy (both domestic and international) to rethink how they analyze and address the topics of their field. You might be asking, what is the connection between ideas, politics, and strategy? There are two reasons. First, the study of politics has often been delineated by the perspective of the researcher. As a result, several predominant theoretical models have coalesced. Each of these models is based on the primacy of a fundamental concept. For example, in realism, material power and the resulting influence have been used to explain action; in neo-liberalism, institutions and the resulting domestic politics (as well as international politics resulting from institutions) have been used to examine political action; and in constructivism, culture and identity and other social constructs explain such action. For those who study politics as rational choice, individual influences are of lesser consequence, while the psychological models seek to limit the influence of the rational options in research. The flaw in this division is the failure to recognize that these streams of thought are intertwined and mutually supportive of each other.

If we examine this list we find that there is a synthesis – each pair functioning as a helix – in the study of politics: neo-realism and neo-liberalism, neo-classical realism and constructivism, rational choice and psychological model, etc. The glue holding these theoretical paradigms together seems to be the influence of “ideas” on political interaction. Historically, ideas have played an integral role in accumulating power, the creation of institutions and the formation of cultures and identities with the resulting political action. Ideas function as a means of understanding rational choice and the psychological influence on political thought and action.

The use of a neo-classical realist approach seemed the most logical, since it enables the synthesis of realist and other theoretical paradigms. This allowed for the examination into a unifying paradigm that might, hopefully, address the perspectives of the predominant frameworks - which are either too rigid in their form and structure or too undefinable to act as the guide for this work.

Second, strategy, policy and decision making are often influenced by the ideational hierarchy that stands behind the available choices and the psychological influences inherent to strategic analysis and decision.

Thus, while continuing the work of Brian Rathbun, who raised many questions about the role of ideas and whether they are proprietary to any one paradigm, this paper also reopens the debate about the link between ideas and power.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I will attempt to show that John Kurt Jacobsen’s suggestion that ideas are only the “hook” for material interests and are only important as supplemental, intervening variables to “interest-based, rational actor models” is incorrect and that these models are, in actuality, one of the ways ideas should be examined as the underlying variable.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this work will try to expand

upon Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis and demonstrate that civilizations not clashing, but the ideas behind those civilizations that are the fundamental source of power and, consequently, conflicts.<sup>4</sup> As John M. Owen notes, "new ideas perpetually arise among elites, and rulers may take active steps to monitor them and the networks that advocate them, modifying and adopting ideas when they can and opposing and suppressing them when they must."<sup>5</sup> This also continues the work of Neil Bradford who stated that

*...in any policy sector certain ideas cohere as frameworks modeling the field of strategic action for decisionmakers. These integrative conceptions specify what is wrong, what can be done, and what technical and political instrumentalities are available to sustain or adapt policies. Such idea systems constitute a policy discourse structuring thought and action over time in particular areas. Policy discourses are neither invented by the state nor dictated by social forces.<sup>6</sup>*

So, this work continues to address the renaissance of ideation with the hope that more theoreticians will jump into the fray and help contend with the role of ideas in political theory and practice – especially in fields like strategy and policy formation.

The third reason to concentrate on the political is that politics<sup>\*</sup> and consequently the strategies that are implemented are interpersonal, inter-organizational, inter-state and inter-group relations based on the continued sharing and conflict of ideas. There is nothing material about politics itself. It is, in fact, one of the only spheres in which the conflict does not require material manifestation in and of itself. While politics has sometimes been described as who gets what, where, when and how, there is nothing to fight over in the

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\* I began this work limiting myself to the influence of ideas on international actions. As time progressed, however, I realized that this examination was impossible without discussing the realm of the political as a whole. As Hans Morgenthau notes, "the essence of international politics is identical with its domestic counterpart...modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place in the domestic and the international spheres." (Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Knopf, 1967), 32.) Since this work seeks to address the "essence" of political action, it must, consequently touch upon the domestic as well. As such, while this paper leans towards international interaction it cannot escape discussing the influence of ideas on the domestic as well.

sphere of the political – no holy sites, no absolute predefined territory associated with a political idea, no economic foundation – but the predominance of the ideas that motivate and establish social order, policy, legitimacy and authority, as well as impact the agenda, interests, preference-setting and the strategies undertaken in and by any given actor at any level of interaction.

As an idea becomes more influential, as it becomes more prominent, well known, well-articulated, and perceived as legitimate and perhaps authoritative, people expend energy, resources and time, with the purpose of actualizing the idea from their perspective. Many do this based on rational cost benefit analyses. Many are influenced by their past – personal, national, cultural, civilizational. Some create or reinforce social groups, values, norms, etc. that support or participate in the ideas actualization. Others institutions. Some seek the necessary material and economic resources seen as necessary for idea actualization. In reality, many actors will mix and match how they interact with ideas and express them.

This actualization process – idea → energy (resources and time) → influence – is repetitive until the idea reaches the limits of its influence. At this point in time there is not enough available energy for the idea to further its influence. The question that this raises is – does the idea have enough available energy to maintain its level of influence? While this process helps acquire material resources and furthers the expression of the idea through institutions, cultures and identities, states and civilizations it must also take into account the present and future influence of other (both new and old) ideas.

So, what role do ideas play in politics and how are these ideas addressed in the theoretical frameworks and paradigms? Is it possible to suggest that ideas, as power, are one the

primary variable in human interaction? If so, what are the ramifications on future political and strategic thought, research and interactions?

This analysis of ideas as power uses a neoclassical realist approach. Neoclassical realism is really abstract value realism, while neo-realism is structural and realism is material. Abstract value means that it uses ideas, though ideas are often considered to be the purview of several other theoretic models, to examine power in politics. I begin with a philosophical debate in search of the elusive definition for power. In so doing I try to demonstrate that ideas are power in politics and that the existing paradigms revolve around this variable. As part of this exploration into power I demonstrate how each idea's primary interest is to both spread beyond the amorphous boundaries between different agents and structures while intensifying its influence on those agents and structures already associated with the idea. All this while seeking to maintain its present status and guard against rival ideas. This will address how conflicts are, essentially, the points of contact between ideas or amongst perspectives on an idea.

After this examination of power I then present a series of real-world examples of idea maturation and relations, both historic and modern, and discuss their effect on political interaction. While many of the examples are from the international arena, I also demonstrate the very real intertwining of politics into everyday human interaction and the role of ideas in every level of society – from the individual to the international. Thus, the concept presented here seeks to demonstrate that ideas are an underlying variable for understanding politics regardless of the theoretical framework or the entity examined. As such, the empirical examples bolster the model presented, representing in-depth research



into ideational influences for each. This allows each example to demonstrate the functional use and role of ideas as power regardless of the theoretical perspective undertaken.

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## Realism and Ideation

While this project began as analysis of ideas in International Relations (IR), time has proven that the subject at hand is politics (or perhaps more appropriately – relations in the political) and strategy. Not, as one might assume, politics as an independent field of study, but as the “the complex or aggregate of relationships of people in society, especially those relationships involving authority or power.”<sup>7</sup> One could make the case that *all* such interactions entail some form of social collaboration. Robert Dahl has argued that without some form of contact, relations cannot exist.<sup>8</sup> The only way a non-relational structure might exist is if everyone, at every level of interaction, is a hermit – an isolationist – or so geographically (and socially) removed from each other that they have no contact.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is important to recognize that, while we are discussing politics, we are not discussing government but rather human interaction. Thus the concepts examined here are applicable to any form of politics – from familial to international.

While this seems to suggest that all political research paradigms are principally constructivist, the argument I am trying to make is that these relations, and the interactions studied in such research, are the interplay of ideas. And that “ideas” are power in the purest sense of the word. Not ideas have power. Ideas are, in and of themselves, power in politics. Consequently, the research paradigms are not constructivist but realist at their core. As such, it could be suggested that when researchers examine politics they are examining the relations between two or more powers and how those powers affect and effect actions.<sup>10</sup>

## No Monopoly on Ideas

A constructivist perspective in the application of theory is, however, generally assumed when discussing the role of ideas in politics. This is inherently problematic. Ideas are not the sole purview of the constructivist paradigm.<sup>11</sup>

Constructivist frameworks, however, use ideational outputs for the analysis of policy and interaction. In essence, the constructivist paradigm seeks to explain why countries do what they do from a social construct perspective. When constructivists address the issue of political interaction they examine norms, morals, identity, culture and other social constructs as the ideational outputs to explain politics.<sup>12</sup> Basically they look at the social influences on political action and how those influences have shaped decision-making, preference setting and setting agendas for whatever actor is examined.

In contrast, other perspectives seek and use institutional variables to determine or explain political actions, looking to the supra and sub-state institutions, interest groups, and domestic politics to explain the impetus for interaction in the political arena.<sup>13</sup> Those who apply psychological models examine affect and cognitive models and their influence on politics. Yet other models are cost-benefit based, seeking a rational explanation for human interaction.

Some researchers have argued that realists must accept this partitioning and any research that crosses into ideational and institutional explanations is no longer realist.<sup>14</sup> This division, however, is inherently problematic because it seeks to appropriate the use of an analytic tool while disregarding the means by which it is used. Brian Rathbun argues that the use of these tools by neo-realists and neoclassical realists are not *post hoc* attempts to cover up

outcomes that fail to meet theoretical expectations. Instead, he suggests that they are used to demonstrate how states respond when policymakers fail to act as the system demands.<sup>15</sup>

If we accept this argument then realists (classical, neo, and neoclassical) are not only permitted to use these analytic tools, but it is incumbent upon them to do so. For neo-realists, this allows them to demonstrate how ideational and institutional outputs have interfered in systemic influences on political interaction. For neoclassical realists, domestic politics and ideation can be used to examine the accumulation of power through self-help and the resulting changes in influence and interests.<sup>16</sup>

This argument for the use of ideational outputs in demonstrating paradigm validity is, however, not enough. Constructivists, like Alexander Wendt, also seek a monopoly on ideational inputs.<sup>17</sup> While ideational outputs – like norms, values, morals, identity and institutions – can be used by realists, but tend to be the purview of constructivists and neo-liberals, ideational inputs do not belong to any specific theoretic framework. For instance, Wendt was correct in suggesting that Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory was ideational at its core, since it was not systemically focused but rather social because it included "perception" as an inherent variable of the neorealist analytic framework.<sup>18</sup> Similar arguments can be made for Walt's balance-of-power theory and Randall Schweller's balance-of-interest theory.<sup>19</sup> It can also be made for neo-liberal institutional theories, as well as rational choice and other theories. Thus, while Wendt was correct in identifying the ideational construct in Walt's work (namely perception), he was incorrect in his assumption that ideational inputs, ideas and their subsequent ideological subgroupings (i.e. that which perception interprets and leads to expression or action), are solely constructivist. On the contrary, ideation inputs are not only the basis for constructivist research, but the basis for

most other theoretic frameworks as well. Thus, rather than presenting a Kuhnian paradigm shift, this paper is seeking to combine the different frameworks and show that together they demonstrate far more than alone.<sup>20</sup>

## Relations – The Expression of Power

While the above argument raises questions about the constructivist claim to ideational inputs, it does nothing to respond to Wendt and others' argument that a social construct – relations – seems to be the basis for politics.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, every paradigm is based on a central theme and examines relations through the lens of that theme. Looking from the social construct perspective these themes are all relations-based and therefore constructivist.<sup>22</sup> For realists the theme is power relations, for neo-liberals it is institutional relations and for constructivists it is ideational output relations, etc. While this appears to contradict the argument being made here, it actually allows for the demonstration that ideation, and the relations that derive from it, are universal and are universally researched.

If we accept that politics is, by definition, relational then we need look no further than Hans Morgenthau to realize that the realist perspective on political (as opposed to military) power refers to “mutual relations of control among holders of public authority, and between the latter and the people at large.”<sup>23</sup> What is this public authority but those agents and structures that represent influential ideas? While this argument is suggestive of Max Weber or Robert Dahl's “relations” – expressed in terms of power wielder/power receiver – Morgenthau and others, like Michael Foucault, argue that power is not wielded but is *expressed* as relations, with power functioning at every level and type of interaction.<sup>24</sup> Steven Lukes furthers this argument by noting that all social interaction involves power because *ideas* are the basis for language and action.<sup>25</sup> In other words, relations are the

expression of power at, and between, the systemic, state and man levels of interaction.<sup>26</sup>

This argument for relations as expressions of power is further demarcated by Morgenthau's suggestion that power is the interest of the political sphere and that since "politics, as an autonomous sphere, has no intrinsic object of interest; it is literally lacking in any concrete 'interest' except the pursuit of power."<sup>27</sup> Thus, in politics, power is expressed through relations in which the interest is the pursuit of more power or in words better suited to this work – in politics, ideas are expressed through the expenditure of energy in which the interest is the pursuit of the idea.

This argument for politics as an autonomous relational sphere, in which power is the only interest, is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche. Both Nietzsche and Morgenthau argue for a force whose interest is non-materialistic, intangible power.<sup>28</sup> For Morgenthau power is not defined by material form alone. While material power may be part of a relationship, and pursuit of material interests may be part of the motivation for action, they are not power itself.<sup>29</sup> Neither is power garnered solely to promote interests – an instrumentalist take on power.<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche suggests that force will tend towards a constant increase and that relation is inherent to force.<sup>31</sup> Both note that every force and sphere will try to expand until modulated through relations with others.<sup>32</sup>

This seems to imply that every sphere has an interest and that the interest of every force in the sphere will always be to expand within the sphere. As Morgenthau notes, material wealth is the primary interest of economics and, within the economic sphere, the value of material wealth is the ideational basis of power. Forces in this sphere understand power as the ideas and consequent actions that lead to the accumulation, or maintaining, of material wealth. As such, they will seek to accumulate material wealth at the expense of other

forces. Furthermore, the economic sphere will seek to accumulate its perspective on what makes one powerful at the expense of other spheres (politics, education, military, etc.). In other words, politics – as a sphere – will try to expand its influence, while the sphere's relations and relations within the sphere will determine the limits of power and the ability to express that power as interests through relations.<sup>33</sup>

This is reminiscent of the recurring arguments regarding agent-structure models in sociological theory. These models generally argue that interacting agents establish or are born into unique structures and that, while the agents act on and through the structures, the structures also act on the agents. In so doing they question if social structures determine an agent's behavior or if the individual agent does.<sup>34</sup> If we consider Nietzsche's forces agents and Morgenthau's spheres the structures, then we may be able to show that the forces interact through the limits of the structure, thus defining the perspectives on the structure. In so doing these agents are influenced by the structural demands based on that interest.

This is not enough, however, to demonstrate that relations are inherently expressions of power. The relations between and within each sphere are important if we are to understand how ideas are power.

## Clashing Ideas

In order to address the topic of ideas as power, I first need to explain the influence of ideas on political actions.

## Ideas

Using the term "ideas" is, however, problematic. For this work "ideas" should not be directly associated with the Kantian, and consequently Wilsonian, *ideals* that are consistently

pursued but, by definition, may not be attainable.<sup>35</sup> Nor are they the Platonic “forms” or Descartes’ understanding of knowledge as any idea that seems clear in the head.<sup>36</sup>

Without entering an in-depth philosophical debate about ideas and knowledge, for the purpose of this work “ideas” can be either *a priori* or experiential. Ideas are, essentially, the mental fruit of cogitation, perception or a combination of these. This derives from David Hume’s Fork, which suggests that that sound ideas derive from “the faculty of the *understanding* – or reason” and that “there are two types: (1) involving relations of ideas; or (2) involving matters of fact.”<sup>37</sup> Relations of ideas (or relation between ideas) are “discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe” while matters of fact are impressions that derive from objects or circumstances that have physical existence.<sup>38</sup>

As such, in the context of this work, and especially relating to power, ideas can be based on either experience or imagination, but must be grounded in some form of reasoning. They cannot be simple ideas of fancy. This does not, however, negate Wilsonian ideals as ideas, since these too can be explained and expressed through reason and operations of thought.

This is, however, not enough. While perhaps sufficient from a philosophical standpoint, this definition of ideas does not have a medium through which it may be examined or understood. Herein lays power.

If ideas interact and consequently create spheres that relate with each other, then for an idea to act as a variable it must have expression beyond its primary agent. These expressions may eventually lead to ideational outputs like norms and values, institutions,



interest groups and also how material resources coalesce and are eventually utilized. This is why energy is expended.

Basing the variable energy on a loose understanding from the laws of energy conservation as applied in physics – energy is a property of entities, which can be transferred between these entities via fundamental interactions (relations in a system that evolve over time but do not appear to be reducible to more basic links between the entities) which can be converted in form but not created or destroyed. Basically energy is a measurable use of a resource between two actors in a relationship over a given period of time where the relationship has been broken down into its basic actors and their links.

Interestingly, while the example above seems to point to the individual as the sole actor vis-à-vis ideas, they are not constrained to any level of analysis. In fact, while it is via individuals that ideas are shared, supported, and contradicted, this does not deny the role of systemic and state actors as unitary in their relations. On the contrary, it is exactly these relations that demonstrate the influence of an idea. Thus, while introduction of an idea requires an ideational originator, ideas may be supported by, accumulate energy, and also seek to influence and be influenced by sub-state, state, national, or international actors.

But what are the fundamental interactions? These relations are of extreme import if we are to argue for energy as the intermediate variable as the primary focus of research and decision making today. These interactions seem to be quite simplistic – positive, negative, co-option, and irrelevance. This last interaction occurs when two ideas interact only to find there is nothing substantive to the connection.

Thus, if actor “A” expends energy in an attempt to spread an idea, actor “B” may decide to act positively towards it (fully, partially or through some negotiation) and participate as part of the resources that energize the idea. Actor “B” may act negatively towards it – contradict the idea, resist its influence or even try to break down its influence. “B” can also co-opt the idea to create a façade or use the idea in ways other than intended.

Contrary to Huntington’s suggestion of geographic limitations for civilizations, ideas may not be delineated by a geographic region, but rather ability to spread.<sup>39</sup> John Owen makes this argument far better than I in his work *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010*. Owen argues that Transnational Ideological Networks (TINs) function as extremely influential forces that cross national boundaries during times of ideological struggle and that new ideas can only rise during “normal” times.<sup>40</sup> While I concur, and Owen proves quite well, that substate groups – especially elites – will join forces with ideologically similar groups from outside their structure during, he fails to recognize that ideology is a perspective on an idea and the influence of the idea in its totality has significant impact on the ability of sub-groups to garner both intra-structural and exo-structural support. This has, thanks to technological breakthroughs, become easier in modern times, but the spread of ideas is not a modern phenomenon. People have been sharing ideas beyond their geographic location for quite some time. Ideas have been shared and progressed through maturation despite geographic, civilizational, cultural and national divides.

This supports Morgenthau suggestion that ideas have power, though they do not have enough power to prevail on their own.<sup>41</sup> “[The idea] must...possess viable social foundations and be supported by competing interests.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, while the original idea has

inherent power, its power expands or is constrained by the expression of that power. Once it is presented, an idea seeks predominance through relations. This is reminiscent of Antonio Gramsci's discourse on the need to struggle against the dominant ideas to advance a "new hegemony" of ideas.<sup>43</sup> Or as Owen points out – follows Kuhns perspective on paradigm shifts.<sup>44</sup> Thus, when ideas are shared, forces form with spheres of interests which compete with other spheres and forces, each struggling for prominence. Politics is the sphere in which ideas support each other, conflict, co-opt, or ignore each other as irrelevant.

This, then, is the equivalent to John Locke's perspective on inner reflection – which "provides a clear and distinct idea of active power."<sup>45</sup> Like the influence of the mind upon the human body, the realm of ideas acts as the collective "mind" of individual, national and international action. As an idea matures the energy it accumulates makes actualization of the idea possible.

Thus, ideas gain material power (body), institutions and ideational outputs. Political action, as opposed to expression, results when an idea garners enough energy to contend with more powerfully established ideas. This conflict can lead to an exchange of ideas resulting in changes to the material, institutional and ideational foundations upon which a group, state, or systemic actor is based. Additionally, if the hegemonic ideas resist or seek to constrain an idea, then the agents involved may suffer a conflict that moves from the ideational to the materialistic...resulting in conflicts like revolution or war. If all the ideas find their ideational limits – and consequently material, institutional and social limits – then a status-quo should exist until revision is attempted. Fortunately, new ideas form thus limiting the potential for stagnation as energy is transferred from one idea to another... Thus, while politics may tend towards anarchy and may be in flux as new ideas are presented at the individual levels,

more stable ideational structures that have energy (resources and time), influence, and authority at their disposal tend to be more stable though still open to each of the fundamental interactions both internally and externally.

### **The Constant Struggle**

These new ideas constantly push in search of more influence. At the same time, these same ideas seek to maintain the energy they have.<sup>46</sup> Owen makes the point that “even new ideas that may seem in the abstract unrelated to politics, if not skillfully handled...may develop into principles that are the basis of a regime challenge.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, dominant or even hegemonic ideas may face challenges as new ideas enter the fray.

This is true for all ideas in each sphere and across the spheres. Most ideas, however, do not only push in the sphere for greater influence or to maintain their station, but try to guide the entire sphere’s outward push against other spheres at every level of analysis in search of inter-sphere hegemony.

Thus, while powerful ideas counter powerful ideas, they also come into contact with weaker ideas. It is through idea’s functional interactions, therefore, that man, state and system interact and impact each other. Each idea, from the most insignificant to the grandest, has the potential to spread, mature, and garner energy that leads to further actualization and perhaps hegemony.

This maturation process occurs as ideas lead to informal hierarchies which lead to ideational schema and formality. The end result is an ideational hierarchy which can be examined. But the ideas are all in the mind and expressed through relations. What then is a schema of ideas? It is the personal, institutional and systemic ideational influences on action by unitary

actors. It is the expression of a force or sphere's predominant ideas through relations.

Physical proximity is unimportant and actionable results are not necessarily a given, though the potential exists/is greater the more energy available for idea actualization.

As these forces and spheres interact they influence each other, with the limits of that influence directly proportional to their power. Thus, if one were to examine ideas systemically one would find individual ideations acting as, or joining with, forces, or "agents" or "coalitions" of ideas that have combined, with the different forces intimately influencing each other while seeking to influence the ideas that are the hegemonic power in each sphere. These groups will continually try to expand their power until there is one group that dominates each sphere. At the same time new ideas and forces are constantly pushing upward and grouping together, thus limiting the possibility of absolute ideational hegemony in any sphere or between spheres.<sup>48</sup> Thus, inter and intra-spherical relations are the play of power that defines foundational principles for formal and informal groups, states, institutions, cultures, societies, identities, beliefs and civilizations.

## **Maturation**

The examination of ideational input's development and influence leaves one open to some of the greater philosophical debates – what comes first cogitation, perception or action and what separates humans from animals.<sup>49</sup> By necessity, I am forgoing these debates here to concentrate on how ideas develop, propagate, are expressed and influence forces and spheres, how those spheres coalesce, how they interact as a group, and how they interact with each other.

The maturation process of ideas is not time limited. Nor are they bounded by scope except through interaction with other forces that limit their expansion. Thus the maturation

process for some may be extremely quick while others may take time. Some may remain at the individual level while others rise to influence institutional, national or international actions.

## Ideational Influence on Strategic Decisions

Moving away from the theoretical, let us take a brief look at the causative nature of ideas and the impact on strategic decisions while addressing the different analytic perspectives that could be used to examine and explain these actions. As noted above, any actor, from any level of analysis, can support an idea. As an idea spreads the existing ideas will try to absorb, influence, contain, or negate it. This is especially true when discussing forceful regime change.<sup>50</sup> Through these relations – which are expressions of the idea's inherent and acquired power – the idea is either able to mature or dies in infancy or adolescence.\*

Rather than take modern examples of this process, I propose to demonstrate this process with a brief examination of the American Revolution and American Neutrality in the French Revolutionary Wars.

### The Rise of Republics – From America to France

If we examine the ideational basis for the American Revolution we will find its sources in the ideas – specifically liberty, republicanism and equality. This love of liberty was partially the

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\* For lack of space – this section was to include a discussion of the Cold War (Capitalism beat Socialism in the sphere of the economic...Did Democracy beat Communism or are these two different *ideological* perspectives on equality in the political?) And also include a different perspective suggesting another way to look at the Cold War as the rise in the influence of the Economic sphere. Owen notes “The more polarized a population, the more do members of one group define the other as the source of society's problems, the elimination of their ideas as the solution; and the less defensible are moderation and neutrality. Thus, polarization limits agents' range of action by altering their preferences: the more ideologically polarized a population, the more do members desire gains for their own ideological group and losses for the other. Actors' choices are path dependent, limited by previous choices made by other actors.” This is all the more true about ideas and how they are used – recent events in Crimea, Syria, Egypt, and India act as modern examples.

outcome of England's "period of 'salutary neglect' which encouraged the growth of self-reliance and love of freedom in its subjects overseas."<sup>51</sup> Thus, the authority of the British Empire in the American colonies came into question.

During the political upheavals of the 1760s and 1770s, leaders of the revolutionary movement, expressed "the political philosophy that would eventually lead to separation" from England.<sup>52</sup> One should remember that the original protest movement, which culminated in the Boston Tea Party, was not about the price of tea, it was about the ideas that permitted British Rule and British Parliamentary rights in the colonies.

The ideas of the American Enlightenment had a strong influence on the actualization of the American Revolution. Among the influential ideas were equality, democracy, liberty, republicanism and tolerance. The influence of these ideas fostered an intellectual environment leading to an ideational clash with the predominant ideas of English colonial rights and the predominant monarchic ideas that dominated much of the world.

Thus, ideas of liberty and equality rose against monarchy, tyranny and classes. As each of these ideas was shared amongst the American colonials ideational forces formed. These ideas were spread and garner greater support and energy through the works like Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," which helped to fuse liberalism and republicanism and other ideas into a hierarchy – an ideational hierarchy.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Thomas Paine's work offered Americans an ideational core that could be energized against the threat of tyranny.<sup>54</sup> At that point, however, the ideas were not influential enough to directly conflict with the pre-existing ideas like monarchy. Not that the American ideas were new unto themselves. Many were co-opted or partially accepted with changes. These changes are what made it possible

for the Thirteen Colonies, as unitary actors, to meet and draft the Declaration of Independence and later the Constitution that ultimately united them.

So, these ideas were further developed and coalesced through the drafting of the American Declaration of Independence. That document set out the ideational basis for action, the revolution, and clearly delineated the sphere to which these ideas were associated, “When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the *political* bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the *powers* of the earth, the separate and *equal* station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them...”<sup>55</sup> In essence the opening statement delineated the sphere as the political and the search for equality. Furthermore, the next section defines the ideas that were influencing the actions – namely the American ideational hierarchy (not a state) of equality, liberty, republicanism, life and the pursuit of happiness versus English (a state) despotism, monarchy and tyranny:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created **equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are **Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness**...laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness...But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute **Despotism**, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to **alter their former Systems of Government**. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute **Tyranny** over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. (Bold added)*



Thus the American Revolution was political action between a systemic actor and sub-systemic actor resulted from the conflicting ideas ultimately expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and an attempt to further procure the energy necessary so successfully challenge the hegemonic ideas of monarchy, despotism and absolute tyranny.

The attempt by these two ideational forces to pursue the actualization of their ideas resulted in a negative relation outcome. At the same time, they also sought out other ideational hierarchies in the realm of the political with whom they could have positive relational outcomes. This is exactly what happened when Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane and Arthur Lee, as representatives of a government that was independent only in name, signed a treaty with representatives of France that established a defensive alliance created to maintain the “liberty, sovereignty and independence absolute and unlimited of the said United States.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, the relations between the French ideational hierarchy (which was monarchical) and the American hierarchy (which was at the time seeking to overthrow monarchy as the predominant idea) had surprisingly positive outcomes and led to a bolstering of the energy at the disposal America’s ideational disposal and the eventual ideational supremacy of the American ideational schema in relation to the British.

An examination of this process shows that ideas which were originally shared through interpersonal relations and public writings coalesced around specific ideas – liberalism, republicanism, liberty, equality and religious tolerance. Through a process of negotiated balancing these forces established an informal and then formal hierarchy of ideas, with some of these ideas being more powerful motivators for action than others. Formal and informal organizations formed around and in support of these ideas. At the same time, some colonials openly sought to counter these ideas, seeking to maintain the status-quo.

The contact between this hierarchy and the English monarchical one happened at, and between, all levels of analysis leading to a negative relational outcome and resulted in conflict.

Thus a powerful ideational hierarchy – namely English perspectives on liberty and representation – that held historic precedent was faced with a new ideational hierarchy. In an attempt to maintain its power base the English hierarchy tried to suppress the American ideas eventually resorting to the use of violence. The American ideational hierarchy, however, was able to expand its influence both internally through the further spread of ideas and inclusion of other ideational forces and through positive relations with other ideational hierarchies – namely the French ideational hierarchy (happens to be monarchical but also had negative relations with the English hierarchy). These positive outcomes led to a clashing of ideas that established American ideational supremacy in the conflict with the English ideational hierarchy.

Clearly an analysis of this process will show the development of material power, institutional influences, and social constructs. An examination of the American Revolution from the realist perspective might examine the balance of material power, the threat perceptions of the actors involved, and their interests. Neo-realists might look at the systemic structure to explain the actions taken. Neo-liberal analyses might address the institutions – informal institutions like the Sons of Liberty and formal ones like the colonial assemblies and the Continental Congresses or the British Parliament and the Monarchy – and their influence on the American Revolution. Social constructs, like the Whigs and the Tories, colonial identities, morals, values and religions might be examined by researchers of

the constructivist vein. And yet, they are also each examining the interplay of ideational power and its influence on interactions.

The outcome of these ideational relations was the rise of the American ideational hierarchy and a lessening of the British hierarchy's influence in the sphere of the political – it no longer had as much available energy having transferred some of its resources to the newly established United States. While this is interesting in and of itself, this change had significant influence on the American hierarchy and was accompanied by new pressures through both internal and external relations that resulted in ideational conflicts within the new state and led to modifications of the US ideational hierarchy or perhaps the influence of ideas that led to action. The Neutrality decision by America's first President – George Washington – regarding the French Revolutionary Wars can help shed light on this continued influence of ideas on political action.

### **Washington, the French Revolution and the Neutrality Decision:**

“By abandoning English constitutionalism and creating a new republic based on the rights of the individual, the North Americans introduced a new force in the world.”<sup>57</sup> These ideas quickly spread (as ideas that have “adequate concrete expression” will often do) crossing oceans and furthering the expression these ideas in the sphere of the political. The outcome of relations represented a “complete reversal of a principle. Until then, a king who ruled by the grace of God had been the center around which everything turned. Now the idea emerged that power should come from below...”<sup>58</sup> The relations between these ideational

hierarchies resulted in physical action (the American Revolutionary War)<sup>\*</sup>, the influence of the revolutionary *ideas* spreading and eventually the French Revolution.<sup>59</sup>

What is interesting about the French Revolution, however, is not that its influential ideas was similar to the American one during the American Revolution, but that the American interaction the French revolutionary hierarchy was neutral despite that supposed similarity. An analysis that compares these two ideational hierarchies at this point in their relations will show, however, that the American hierarchy was quite dissimilar to that of the French.

While analyses might examine historical precedent, systemic motivations, institutional pressures and complex social relations, they are all examining the power relationship between two ideational forces in the sphere of politics. Neither of these ideational schema has garnered enough power to rise to hegemony in the international political sphere. From the European perspective, in fact, the hegemonic idea of the political sphere at this time was still monarchical rule.

As such, one would think that an ideational hierarchy that expanded its power under the guidance of republican liberal ideas in relations with the monarchical hierarchy would support another ideational hierarchy trying to do the same. And yet, the opposite is true. Ideas constantly seek to expand their power – just as the French assistance in the American Revolution also affected the relations between French – English ideational hierarchies. At this point, however, the American hierarchy had moved from a negative relation to a neutral or perhaps even positive one with the English. At the same time, the French

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<sup>\*</sup> On a side note – the use of the term Revolution in this sense seems inaccurate since this seems more like a civil war that sought the creation of a new polity. Perhaps the revolution was ideational – with new ideas being the revolutionary aspect of the war.

hierarchy faced negative relations with several of the powerful ideational hierarchies in the sphere.

In addition to the ideational struggle between these hierarchies, the hegemonic ideas of the American hierarchy were having negative relations with internal forces that were gaining power – specifically federalism.<sup>60</sup> Thus the Democrat-Republican forces were losing influence in the American sphere of the political to the Federalist ideas. Interestingly, and of some significance, is that the Federalist forces were also influenced by, and had a positive relationship with, ideas from the economic sphere, which increased the energy available for actualization of these ideas and expanded their influence. This demonstrates that relations need not be relegated to a specific sphere. Ideas can have relations across spherical boundaries just as they can physical or electronic ones.<sup>61</sup>

The result of these internal relations was change in the predominant ideas influencing American action. The new American schema was no longer compatible with the French revolutionary ideational hierarchy. As a consequence of these changing ideas the American and British hierarchies were able to find positive relational outcomes and the American and French revolutionary hierarchy's relations were neutral.

### **Civilizations and Beyond**

As the above analyses demonstrate, ideas are not limited to relations within a specific sphere. They also spread beyond geographic borders. While this does not entirely contradict Huntington's theory of clashing civilizations, it does give us pause to rethink the examination of civilizations and culture.<sup>62</sup>

The examination of civilizational ideation Huntington unknowingly undertakes does much to demonstrate the flow of ideas and their influence on political actions. His suggestions regarding the potential for a unified civilization are correct, though he fails to acknowledge the ideational basis for his argument.<sup>63</sup> In essence, much of Huntington's work is an examination of ideational expression in the post-Cold War world.

As Huntington noted, however, the state still seems to be the predominant actor in the international arena.<sup>64</sup> As such, it is impossible to ignore the civilizational clashes that states have participated in – and that these are not limited to the post-Cold War era. Thus the only way for a civilization to participate independently in international interactions, and not by proxy of states, is to be a state representing an entire civilization.

What the above arguments seem to suggest is that these civilizational clashes are, at their core, a clashing of ideas. Like the Green Movement, the Occupy Movement or the Palestinian National aspirations, ideas spread beyond geographic borders but may not have the influence or energy to take all the necessary action for actualization. That does not, however, eliminate the pressure these ideas have on actions. Thus, what Huntington has shown is the potential power of an idea that has geographic unity.

Imagine for a moment if everyone who supported the “environmental” movements were living relatively close geographically. As a result of this geographic proximity, there is a higher likelihood that the ideas behind the movement would have greater available energy for actualization of the ideas. Consequently, the ideas would find expression in the physical institutions, social constructs and use of resources in this region, thus leading to a more influence with a greater likelihood of instigating state and international interactions. This does not limit the idea to one state. On the contrary, if the region has multiple unitary

actors which are all significantly influenced by an idea or set of ideas the greater their ability to disseminate the ideas amongst actors at different levels of action, including the system as a whole.

This region is not dissimilar to Huntington's civilizations or the influence of Owen's TINs.

While the states in the region may have similar fundamental principles, based on mutually supportive ideas, they may not be the same fundamental principles. Within this group there is a hierarchy of ideas which continually seeks expression, while each idea continually seeks to either maintain or challenge the internal and external status-quo. This is because the influence of these ideas on structures that are geographically close may be greater than on those distanced from the region.

Nonetheless, and despite Huntington's suggestion to the contrary, civilizations are not the largest possible cohesive unit. Ideas are. It is because of shared ideas that, for instance, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant woman might be found in a liberal US college wearing a keffiyeh and protesting in support of the Palestinian National Movement. It is why the Occupy movement, the Environmental movement, Human Rights and other ideas have found formal or informal expression internationally, despite civilizational, cultural, societal or national borders. It is why states that are in the midst of a legal, military, social, cultural, religious or political disagreement will nonetheless lend aid in the face of natural disasters – like Israeli aid to Turkish Earthquake victims in October 2011 despite the political friction between the countries.<sup>65</sup> It is also why some actors will continue to support one another despite differing interest or policies as in the case of the United States and Israel.

Furthermore, while Huntington seeks to suggest that modern civilizations are somehow different from historic ones, ideas are not limited to the post-Cold War and the rise of

internet communication.<sup>66</sup> Newspapers, books, periodicals, manuscripts, letters, word of mouth and other forms have been used to spread ideas throughout history. This is historically why some agents, structures, people, states, cultures, beliefs, societies, and civilizations have censored ideas running counter to their core forces – when deemed necessary burning books, blocking the internet and even excommunicating, detaining or killing ideational dissenters.

Ideas, then, are the building block of civilizational clashes, just as they are of interstate, domestic and interpersonal ones. How then can a fragmented analysis of these clashes, as well as the interplay of ideas with positive, neutral, adopted or negotiated outcomes, help to further our understanding of political relations? Point in fact, they cannot.

### **Towards a Macro-political Paradigm**

Up to this point, much of the recent political research has been “micro-political.” In essence, researchers, using a specific theoretical framework, have sought to explain ideational outputs. As a result of paradigmatic flux, researchers have attempted time and again to determine the motivations for international interactions, their limitations and influences on them including material, institutional, societal and other constructs.

What these paradigms have failed to do is take a macro-political view of domestic and international interaction. This is, in some ways, what Morgenthau argued in suggesting that power...

*provides the link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood. It sets politics as an autonomous **sphere of action** and understanding apart from other spheres, such as economics (understood in terms of interest defined as wealth), ethics, aesthetics, or religion. Without such a concept a theory of politics,*



*domestic or international, would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and nonpolitical facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systematic order to the political sphere.”<sup>67</sup>*

As such, it seems like a macro-political analysis, the “research of the political,” should begin by defining and examining the sphere relations analyzed (i.e. politics and religion) or the internal ideational relations within a sphere being analyzed (i.e. the ideational hierarchy of US politics). It should acknowledge that any research or strategy using one specific paradigm is by definition limiting and instead seek a multi-paradigmatic approach in examining politics. It should accept Morgenthau’s argument that “the essence of international politics is identical with its domestic counterpart...modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place in the domestic and the international” and incorporate the domestic in explaining the international – and vice-versa.<sup>68</sup> It should also move beyond the Kuhnian perspective on scientific research to recognize that paradigm changes are not necessarily an absolute annulment of the previous paradigm but a refinement that furthers our overall knowledge of human interaction. In so doing, research of the macro-political may better help explain some of the basic questions of politics.

## **Conclusions**

This essay proposes a rethinking of the use of ideas in political and strategic analysis. In so doing it proposes a clash-of-ideas model that allows for the incorporation of the different theoretical paradigms as a macro-political theoretical framework. This hopefully lays the groundwork for the examination of political interaction from a wider perspective than has been done in the past.

We have also tried to show that while actors may have access to resources, it is only influence of ideas on these resources and the expenditure of time that can lead to action. And ideas act as the glue at and between the different levels of human interaction. The interplay of ideas can lead to acceptance, rejection, co-opting or disregard in relations between actors, agents and structures, and between structures. This is why ideas are power. They represent the current and prism through which we are capable of perceiving, analyzing and understanding interactions and action.

So, power is an idea that causes an actor to refrain from, begin to, or continue to take part in actions that expend energy, in the form of resources and time, generally within the framework of some interaction or structure be it, values, principles, rational choices, material, psychological, institutional, ideological or norms centered for the purpose of maintaining or actualizing the idea.

This means that power is causative. It has an effect. That effect is the expenditure of energy. The limits or HOW to use the energy is defined by ideology, norms, values, etc. The means used in the expenditure of energy (as defined by the limits to resources and time) result in actions which are both quantifiable and qualitative in nature and can be examined as such.

As I noted in the beginning of this paper, I have no doubt that most of what I have written is not new, if anything it is a rehashing of the theories and thoughts that have already been gone over with a fine toothed comb. My hope is that this rehashing helps lead to questions that eventually move towards a more unified theory of politics; perhaps one that acknowledges ideas as power in the sphere of the political and challenges theoreticians and researchers of politics and strategy (both domestic and international) to rethink how they analyze and address the topics of their field.

While continuing the work of Brian Rathbun,<sup>69</sup> John Kurt Jacobsen,<sup>70</sup> Samuel Huntington,<sup>71</sup> Neil Bradford,<sup>72</sup> and John Owen,<sup>73</sup> I have also tried to show that the expression of an idea can be examined through the different analytic paradigms mentioned and through many we have not. The bottom line is that through all these different perspectives we further our knowledge of the overall sphere of politics, the influence of each idea, its place in any given agent or structure's hierarchy, the sphere or spheres it influences and that influence it, the forces at play - those agents and structures who have interacted, or chosen not to interact, with the idea - as well as those who seek to use the idea for their own ends.

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## Endnotes

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