

Review - Rethinking Hegemony

Written by Tom Chodor

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TOM CHODOR, SEP 14 2015

Rethinking Hegemony

By Owen Worth

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

In a world of rising powers, declining superpowers, economic breakdown and crises of democracy, theories of hegemony have become fashionable, as scholars ponder the nature of global politics in the 21st century. And yet, as Owen Worth points out in his new book *Rethinking Hegemony*, many scholars 'lack a clear understanding of the term when engaging with it' (xvii) leaving students 'bombarded with a variety of different applications and understandings of the term, but without clarity of the term being put across' (171). Accordingly, Worth sets out to provide some clarity on the issue by examining how hegemony has evolved in historical and theoretical terms, so that it can better inform analysis in the current context. This is certainly a laudable goal, and one which the book largely lives up to, though not without some problems along the way.

The book is divided into two parts, with the first (Chapters 1-4) dedicated to revisiting the theory and history of hegemony, while the second (Chapters 5-8) attempts to rethink the current global context through a hegemonic framework.

Rethinking Hegemony

Worth begins by offering a minimal definition of hegemony as a 'relationship between the dominant and the dominated...that is central to the fabric of power within global politics' (17). The nature of this relationship, however, is a matter of dispute, with Worth identifying two main strands of analysis: a 'statist' approach associated with orthodox IR which stresses the coercive aspects of the relationship, embodied in the hegemony of a leading state; and an 'ideological' approach associated with neo-Gramscian accounts which stress the role of ideas and consent in hegemonic power.

To determine which of these strands offers a more convincing account of hegemony, Worth turns to history, with Chapters 2 and 3 examining the evolution of political systems in Europe from Ancient Greece to the current international system. These chapters lead Worth to conclude that historically at least, hegemony has operated more along Gramscian lines; whilst hegemonic orders have been promoted by a state (or other forms of political organisation), they have also relied on ideology to secure consent, from religion in the era of the Holy Roman Empire to liberalism during *Pax Americana*. With this in mind, Worth elaborates a Gramscian framework of hegemony in Chapter 4, derived largely from Robert Cox's work on world orders. Here, a hegemonic world order is understood as a 'fit' between material capabilities, ideas and institutions, meaning coercive state power needs to be complemented by ideas and institutions to generate consent (Cox 1981: 139). As Worth notes, this framework has spawned a neo-Gramscian school of IR, which includes the work of scholars such as Stephen Gill, Mark Rupert, Adam Morton, William Robinson amongst others.

While praising their contributions, Worth nevertheless suggests that neo-Gramscian scholarship is characterised by 'a lack of clarity over just how a hegemonic order is conceived, contested and maintained globally' (84). This, he claims, leads to three issues. Firstly, there is an ambiguity over the departure point of a hegemonic project. Are

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hegemonic projects promoted by the most powerful state? Or are they the work of intellectuals promoting ideologies at the international level? Worth points to the neoliberal world order, claiming it is unclear whether it is an expression of American or neoliberal hegemony. Secondly, how exactly is hegemony constructed between leading and subaltern classes? As Worth rightly points out, Gramscian IR scholarship has often focused on processes of intra-elite consensus formation, rather than on how dominant classes secure their rule, both domestically and globally. Finally, how do we account for the great diversity of forms of state and capitalism within what is supposed to be a neoliberal hegemonic world order?

While these are valid criticisms, they stem more from how Cox's work has been applied by others, rather than shortcomings with the work itself. On the question of departure points, Cox is clear that hegemonic orders emerge from a national base: 'in the beginning, a world hegemony is an outward expression of the internal (national) hegemony established by a dominant social class' (Cox 1983: 171). More specifically, world orders emerge from changes in the mode of production, which generate new social forces, which may in turn construct new forms of state – embodied in historic blocs – in order to secure their hegemony (Cox 1981: 138). Such blocs are usually constructed in the most powerful states, which will subsequently attempt to refashion the international system in their own image, constructing a new 'world order' (Cox 1983: 171). Importantly, the 'state' is understood here in a Gramscian way, as the 'integral state' namely political society (the machinery of government) + civil society (ostensibly 'private' institutions like the media, the Church, voluntary organisations, etc), which together comprise 'the entire complex of theoretical and practical activity with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent over those whom it rules' (Gramsci 1971: 244). This also extends to world orders, which Cox stresses are not merely 'political' structures comprised of (narrowly understood) states:

hegemony at the international level is thus not merely an order amongst states. It's an order within a world economy with a dominant mode of production which penetrates into all countries and links into other subordinate modes of production. It is also a complex of international social relationships which connect the social classes of the different countries. World hegemony is describable as a social structure, and economic structure and a political structure; and it cannot be simply one of those things but must be all three (Cox 1983: 171-2).

Accordingly, the current neoliberal world order can be understood as resulting from changes in the mode of production in the US during the 1970s, which gave rise to transnationally oriented social forces. These refashioned the American state into a neoliberal state, and then sought to restructure the world order accordingly. This process was not confined to 'political' structures like the World Bank or the IMF, but also involved struggles in global civil society sites such as the World Economic Forum or the Trilateral Commission. The world order thus represents both American hegemony – in that the US has been at the forefront of its construction – and a neoliberal one – in that social forces not necessarily connected with the US government (from economists to investment bankers) have promoted neoliberal ideologies to win consent for it amongst the policymaking elites. Worth is correct that Gramscians have often neglected analysis of how these elites then elicit consent from their domestic subordinate classes, although there has been some research into how neoliberal hegemony has been translated from the global to the local in places such as the US (Rupert 2000), Poland (Shields 2012) and Latin America (Chodor 2015). Nevertheless, Worth's point is a valid one, and the introduction of insights from cultural and literary studies, particularly the work of Stuart Hall, is a welcome move that fleshes out the processes of constructing consent.

Finally, Worth's point about diversity in the neoliberal world order is well made, and his introduction of the work of Henri Lefebvre to account for the 'variegated' nature of neoliberalism adds nuance to analyses of this diversity. Such nuance, however, can already be found in Cox's work, where he makes clear that a hegemonic project will spread unevenly across the globe, as it will need to be embedded in each particular context to garner consent. This is especially so in the periphery, with Cox arguing that 'an expansive hegemony impacts on peripheral countries as passive revolution,' meaning they 'try to incorporate the elements from the hegemonic model without disturbing old power structures' (Cox 1983: 171). Cox's *Production, Power and World Order* (1987) outlines this diversity in the *Pax Americana* order in great detail, examining the differences between the Western European welfare state, the American 'neoliberal' state and the developmental state in the periphery. That's not to say that 'variegated neoliberalism' doesn't offer useful insights, but Worth's claim that Cox cannot account for such variation is not strictly the case. Thus, while there is always room for critical engagement and refinement, at times Worth's critique seems a

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bit overstated, and it is not clear just how 'rethought' the hegemonic framework needs to be. Nevertheless, with the revised framework in mind, the second half of the book proceeds to re-examine key global issues: neoliberal hegemony post-2008, the rise of China and the BRICS, regionalism, and the potential for counter-hegemonic politics.

Rethinking Global Politics

The chapters on neoliberal hegemony (5) and counter-hegemonic politics (8) are really two sides of the same coin, in that they explore the current configuration of hegemonic power and the potential challenges to it in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Chapter 5 outlines the origins of neoliberalism as a hegemonic project – including the usual suspects of Thatcher, Reagan and Pinochet – as well as its globalisation following the end of the Cold War and evolution into the 'Third Way,' though no mention is made of the Third Way's passive revolution role that allowed neoliberalism to finally become hegemonic. The chapter's main contribution is the examination of neoliberalism since the GFC, with Worth outlining how neoliberals have managed to deepen their project by converting austerity into a 'common sense' of our time, accepted as a necessary price to pay for the return of growth and prosperity. Here, it would have been interesting to see Worth consider the extent to which neoliberalism remains hegemonic in the wake of the crisis. Clearly, there is no clear-cut alternative to the current order. And yet, the emergence of far right and far left groups, coupled with a generalised rage against the current political and economic system do not lend themselves to a consensual order. Perhaps, Gramsci's concept of 'organic crisis' would have been useful here, understood as a situation where:

the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. it is no longer "leading" but only "dominant," exercising coercive force alone...[when] the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously...the crisis consist precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear (Gramsci 1971: 275-6).

This is especially relevant given the discussion on potential counter-hegemonic movements in Chapter 8, which Worth groups under the labels of 'progressive internationalism,' 'national populism' and 'religious fundamentalism.' While Worth is right that neither of these positions represent a coherent challenge to neoliberal hegemony – as their projects are either incoherent (progressives), unobtainable (fundamentalists) or often supportive of free markets (populists) – they still challenge important aspects of the neoliberal project, whether consumerism (fundamentalists) or cosmopolitanism (the populists). While these challenges certainly do not add up to a coherent alternative, it is not entirely clear that neoliberalism remains hegemonic, and Gramsci's notion of organic crisis might have been useful in examining this question further.

Questions of counter-hegemony are also taken up in Chapter 6, which outlines the developmental trajectories of the BRICS, while examining the extent to which they can be considered a challenge to the neoliberal project. Worth makes clear that while the BRICS all depart from the Washington Consensus, in the end, their power and prosperity relies on integration with the global economy, and if anything, their cheap labour and resources are key to the sustainability of neoliberalism. In this sense, the BRICS are unlikely to represent a challenge to the neoliberal world order, at least in economic terms, though the potential for conflict over security issues remains, especially with China and Russia.

This is clearly the case, but it would have been intriguing to see Worth consider a couple of points. Firstly, while BRICS elites clearly subscribe to a (broadly defined) neoliberal common sense, they nevertheless come from a variety of non-Western cultural and historical contexts. As these countries become meaningfully involved in the governance of the global economy, how will that historical and cultural baggage impact on this common sense? In other words, is neoliberal ideology compatible with non-Western cultural traditions? Or will they change it substantially, thus opening up potentials for counter-hegemony? Secondly, while the BRICS do not currently challenge neoliberalism, a Gramscian analysis reminds us that hegemony is never secured once and for all, but rather constantly struggled over by competing social forces. Are there social forces within these countries that could change the nature of their states if they gained the upper hand? These could include, for example, the nationalist and security-oriented elements within China which want to take a more confrontational position in the international system, or forces associated with the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa that are attempting to push the

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country's developmental model to the left. Do they, and others, represent potential sources of counter-hegemonic challenges in the future? It would have been interesting to see Worth consider this.

This open-ended nature of hegemonic projects is acknowledged in the chapter on regionalism (7), with Worth pointing out that regional initiatives represent sites for social forces to compete over the nature of hegemonic projects. Here, the book examines the EU and regional architectures in Asia, Africa and Latin America for counter-hegemonic potential. Worth rightfully notes that Latin America – given its experiments with 'post-neoliberal' alternatives – is most promising in this regard. However, these alternatives, and the social forces behind them, are not explored in depth, which is a shame given the growing literature on the topic (see for example: Chodor & McCarthy-Jones 2013, Chodor 2015, Muhr 2013, Riggiozzi 2012, Riggiozzi & Tussie 2012). Nevertheless, the book is right to focus on regionalism, given Cox's suggestion that the most favourable place to begin a counter-hegemonic struggle is at the regional level (Cox 1992: 40-1).

Overall, *Rethinking Hegemony* is an ambitious book that seeks to both add clarity to the concept of hegemony, and utilise it to rethink some of the big issues of global politics in the 21st century. It does a good job on the former, although some of the criticisms of the Gramscian framework are perhaps a bit overstated. On the latter, the book offers a good analysis of neoliberal hegemony, the BRICS, regionalism and counter-hegemonic politics, though perhaps with more space, this analysis could have been developed further in some instances. Nevertheless, the book provides a useful resource for students of International Relations looking to rethink world politics through a more critical lens.

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Tom Chodor is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, Australia. His research interests are in the areas of international political economy, international relations and globalization. In particular, he is interested in the struggles over consent and hegemony within the neoliberal world order, and the transformative possibilities that emerge from such struggles. He is author of *Neoliberal Hegemony and The Pink Tide in Latin America: Breaking Up With TINA?* (Palgrave 2015).