

How, if at all, Does Hierarchy Exist Both in the Theory and Practice of IR?

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JOHN IKONOMIDIS, JUN 11 2019

Theories of International Politics are believed to be “objective” in terms of their content and how they present the interactions between actors, yet ultimately prove to be “blinders that constrain what we see- and do not see” (Lake, 2016:1112). Overall, different theoretical perspectives hold the ability to portray the existence of some form of hierarchy, a method of differentiation and classification of the actors involved within each theoretical context, that reveal manifold ways in which the international political realm (IPR) is shaped – or how it ought to be shaped and governed. Hierarchy however entails some form of authority or hegemony over others – exercised for “someone and for some purpose” (Lake, 2016:1115) – and thus an investigation of the analytical focus and rationale of theories that dominate the discourse of International Relations (IR) is required to display the different ways in which hierarchy is framed. This essay will initially introduce the theories of Neorealism and its sub-theory of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), whilst also drawing on neo-Gramscian theory (NGT) to demonstrate how hierarchy is presented and represented within these theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, a postcolonial/non-Eurocentric analysis will be utilised to expose the ways in which such theories portray a Eurocentric perspective of the world, and ultimately reaffirm a hierarchical structure that elevates the West over other societies, creating a ‘civilizational order’ within the discourse of IR (Hobson, 2007;2012). A recurring theme within this essay will be to contest the presence of a ranking order between the actors involved within the global political sphere and deem it problematic. To conclude, recommendations will be provided on how the discourse can move forward, embracing an impartial and inclusive future, and envisaging a transformation through the incorporation of Eastern agency and specifically, emphasising the need for ‘interstitiality’ within the practice of International Relations (Mann, 1986).

A neorealist (NR) conception of world politics depicts the IPR through “some sort of systems theory” that captures the persistent continuities and repetitions of political phenomena (Waltz, 1979:79). Anarchy, the ordering principle of the international system, is considered “mutually exclusive” to hierarchy, discarding the possibility that any form of hierarchy or forms of subordination exist within the international system, given the absence of agents with “system-wide authority” (Waltz, 1979:114-16, 88). Despite such prescriptions, Waltz (1979:89) questions the viability of a system lacking a dominant figure and suggests that an “orderer” must exist to ensure that the system remains ‘organised’, conveying an important contradiction that neorealism is faced with: despite all states abiding by the notion of ‘self-help’, prioritising their survival and appearing to be equal (Waltz, 1988), a state or a number of states are needed to perform the role of ‘global vigilantes’, ensuring that some form of hierarchy is present within the international system. In addition, the international global structure is recognised to have an “inherent selection process” (Waltz, 1979: 92-3), whereby states who conform to accepted and successful practices are predicted to rise to the top. One must question the origin of certain proposed selection processes and the conformation towards specific practices, as such notions enforce that hierarchical structures do exist within global politics. NR abides to the notion of ‘great power politics’, and as such ‘Great powers’ hold large stakes within the system but also appear to “act for its sake” (Waltz, 1979:195), conveying that certain states acquire a ‘managerial role’ and are responsible for the “hierarchic administration” that is present within the IPR (Donnelly, 2000:97-8). Such powers ensure that other states ‘conform’ to the normative practices of the IPR. This depicts how great powers guarantee their preservation of authority and hegemony over others within the international system: through arrogating themselves “the function of exercising supreme control over affairs” (Schwarzenberger, 1951:113) and ensuring that power-based inequalities remain rooted within the very essence of the IPR (Tucker, 1977).

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Examining HST similarly posits a hierarchical dimension of global politics, considering the inherent inequalities, contradictions and subtle forms of Western bias that reveal its Eurocentric core which promotes the continuity of Western-led hierarchical structures within the practice of IR. Whilst HST differs to neorealism in that it prescribes to a liberal economic ideology, the presence of a "stabiliser" to provide the basis of a market for goods, flow of capital and a 'rebound' mechanism if the system is "frozen in panic" (Kindleberger, 1981: 247) remains a constant. States holding superior material capabilities are bound to 'rank higher' than less endowed states. Hegemonic 'stabilisers' must therefore exist to safeguard and to "guarantee the provision of the collective goods" (Gilpin, 1987:74), by which other states can 'free-ride' to reach the same heights of economic burgeon at the expense of the Hegemon- who willingly sacrifices his interests for the collective flourishing of the system. Furthermore, free-riding nations are believed to gain from the diffusion of advanced technologies from the hegemon, which enables them to follow similar developmental paths that have proven beneficial to previous generations, and as such stimulates "the colonised peoples to learn its ways" (Gilpin, 1981:176). Notably, Gilpin (1987) advocates that hegemony without a commitment to the liberal values could likely lead to the formation of imperial systems that impose restrictions on less powerful states, or worse, periods of instability and conflict.

A deeper investigation to reveal how such narratives elude their apparent "universalist and ideologically un-biased principles" and ultimately adhere to a bias towards "western principles" (Hobson, 2012:186) is essential. Such theories are founded upon an "already hierarchical conception of world politics" (Hobson, 2014: 558) that is based upon Eurocentric norms that have precluded the formations and establishment of such theoretical underpinnings. The notion of an 'orderer' or a 'stabiliser' within the International system creates the impression that hegemonies, namely Western 'developed' states, are perceived to be "far-sighted" to stand above others and the "competitive fray of world politics" (Hobson, 2007:95); such a positional advantage would enable Western states to advise and assist other states in implementing 'forward-looking' policies adhering to liberal collective ideals (HST) and the assurance of their survival (NR). Abiding to the imitation of Western societies and norms creates a hierarchical structure within the practice of IR as only a myopic linear perspective of state interaction and development is presented as the most appropriate. Accordingly, the notion of "helping other states" and carving out their trajectories, whilst assuming 'managerial roles' within the IPR directly relates to the western civilising mission captured in the 18th and 19th centuries (Hobson, 2012:198) and enforce a diachronic reproduction of patterns of domination within different historical contexts. The universalist narratives and actions of the hegemonies exist to elevate the West within the centre of all interactions and propose ways in which American hegemonic supremacy can be safeguarded, due to its "perceived decline" (Hobson: 2012:194). Strikingly, HST and NR invoke a "two-step Eurocentric big-bang theory of world politics" (Hobson, 2012:186), whereby an underlying assumption that European capitalist states, without any assistance, climbed to the heights of modernisation through their own 'logic of immanence', and are now faced with the challenges of providing public goods to the rest of the world (Hobson, 2007; 2012). Hobson (2002:9-13), furthers this perspective through his notion of 'tempocentrism', accusing Waltz of taking Western imperialism for granted, as he allows all actors and structures to diachronically be perverted within "isomorphic and transhistorical properties." These theoretical perspectives attempt to subtly mask the existence of hierarchical structures within global politics, and proclaim that what is good for the West applies to the rest of the world, while what is bad for the West is equally bad for the rest (Hobson, 2012), legitimising predisposed hierarchical structures that are uplifted from theory, into the practice of IR.

NGT reveals hierarchical hegemonic structures within world orders, as it attempts to discern the ontological components that have advanced the promotion of American liberal ideology and question the structures that hold it together and extend the power of a transnational bourgeoisie class (Van der Pijl,1984). Hegemony is thus understood as the domination of a global economic order that holds the ability to penetrate all countries and connect with other forms of "subordinate production" (Cox, 1987:137), whilst viewed as an "ideological cloaking device" that masks the exploitative forces of capital (Hobson, 2000:128-130). Furthermore, Cox (1987:134) suggests that powerful states are only those which have "undergone a profound social and economic revolution," conveying that hierarchy within the IPR is structured in that states that have embraced capitalism could only become hegemonic entities and rise to the top. Capitalism within a Neo-Gramscian context, can be likened to HST and NR, considering that the socio-economic institutions formed under capitalism, in addition to the culture and technological advancements within a national hegemony, become "patterns for emulation abroad" (Cox, 1987:137). The prospects for overthrowing a 'hegemonic culture' can only be found in the places where "an historic bloc can be founded"- only within societies

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that have fully incorporated a capitalist mode of production- namely Western states, whilst Eastern states are relegated to the periphery, and are deemed to be 'passive bearers' (Hobson, 2000). Ultimately, in describing periods of hegemony, Cox (1987) portrays a linear picture of the creation of hegemonic structures, considering that he places emphasis on the rise and decline of the British and American empires and how they performed the role of a 'breeding ground' for the rise of counter-hegemonic movements, which has the effect of "naturalising both Western domination and Western Imperialism" (Hobson, 2012:243-4).

Such factors need to be taken into consideration as NGT, similarly to the 'orthodox' perspectives of HST and NR, depicts a global hierarchy that is constructed, defined and maintained through a Eurocentric dialect. The theory is based on providing criticisms and revealing ways in which Western socio-economic forces come to dominate global structures, yet similar to HST and NR, works within the Eurocentric 'logic of immanence' in that it places central focus on the rise of the West and defines hegemony through a "provincial reading of Western hegemony" (Hobson, 2012:243-4). In addition, whilst placing focus on the rise and decline of the British and American empires, the West is represented as "the subject of globalisation" while the East is viewed as its "passive object" (Hobson, 2012:247), allowing no room for the exposition of how Eastern agency and Eastern societies in particular have played a fundamental part in the creation and sustainability of Western-centred global hierarchical structures. Arguably, NGT therefore "ahistorically rationalises the rise of the West" and the manifold ways through which it "universalises its power over the East" (Hobson, 2012:23)- deducting the theory's ability to challenge and question global power structures and instead, attempts to convey the continuities in which Western global hegemony is naturalised and preserved. The prospects of overthrowing hegemonic structures also need to be problematised, considering that it denies the "possibility of autonomous development" in the East (Hobson, 2007:96), whilst disregarding the possibilities of counter-hegemonic movements in the East due to their inferior socio-economic and political national hegemonies, and renders a Third-World anti-Western movement as futile. Ultimately, NGT is entrenched within a "Westphalian straitjacket" (Hobson, 2007:93) that allows for subtle forms of racist hierarchies and racism to prevail and penetrate the world, which renders the practice of IR as Eurocentric: initially in terms of the theory's obsession with the process of global capitalist production and its hegemonic properties, and conclusively regarding the theory's fixation that hierarchical changes within the practice of IR can only occur within a Western context.

Moving forward therefore to the re-conceptualisation of an inclusive and non-Eurocentric discourse of IR requires the construction of a "post-racist IR" (Hobson, 2007:103), where the centrality of Western agency is questioned, and the incorporation of Eastern agency be an ingenuity. Whilst Sajed and Inayatullah (2016) maintain that hierarchical structures that favour the West must exist in the IPR for one to expose and condemn the ways in which Western imperialism and neo-colonial practices have shaped and corrupted societies throughout the world, the task of pushing for ontological diversity and a hierarchical modification lie in the creation of "intersections between East and West" (Hobson, 2007:107). For that would overcome a major concern that is overlooked by HST, NR and neo-Gramscian Theory: the monolithic assumption that we can only envisage the possibility of Eastern Agency if it challenges Western hegemony and defeats it (Hobson, 2007). The incorporation of Eastern agents working between Western structures rather than within them expose the "contradictions and double standards" (Hobson, 2007: 107) that the West has abided to and naturalised, whilst also promoting the "dialogues and dialectics of civilisations" (Hobson, 2007:111) to reveal the perplex ways in which the East and West have diachronically co-constituted each other within different historical contexts.

To conclude, through the examination of NR, HST and NGT, it is evident that such theoretical perspectives, despite their differences, are governed by Western principles and construct hierarchy so that the West remains as the core analytical entity within the discourse of IR. Robert Cox (1986:207) rightly asserted that "theory is always made for someone and for some purpose"- theories that are primarily constructed in the West and reflect subtle ways of domination of the West over the rest. They fail to incorporate the intimate ways in which East and West have performed a symbiotic relationship over vast periods of time, and how the West has not hierarchically structured the IPR through its own 'logic of immanence' (Hobson, 2007;2012). Engaging in ways that reveal and unmask how the discourse of IR is hierarchically structured to elevate the West is required, to break down the invisible structures that divides not only the world of academia, but the world of inter-state conflict.

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