Expert Comment

Hegemony: A conceptual and theoretical analysis

Brian C. Schmidt (2018)
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This paper provides a conceptual and theoretical analysis of the concept of hegemony in the field of International Relations. Although the concept of hegemony is frequently employed in the literature, it is quite apparent that different meanings are attributed to it. This is not necessarily surprising because the field itself is divided into different theoretical perspectives that offer contrasting accounts of key concepts, including hegemony.

The main section of the paper examines how different theoretical approaches in the field, such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, as well as neo-Gramscianism and the English School, comprehend the concept of hegemony. Based on a thorough review of the literature, I argue that there is a fundamental division between, on the one hand, hegemony as overwhelming power and, on the other hand, the exercise of some form of leadership. This distinction certainly characterises the different accounts of hegemony provided by realism and liberalism.

Key words: hegemony, international relations theory, realism, liberalism, neo-Gramscianism, English School, power, leadership
“The meaning of hegemony is often in the eyes of the beholder” (Jesse et al., 2012, p. 7).

“As we can see, then, the concept of hegemony appears not as a singular theory, but as a term used in contrasting ways in world politics” (Worth, 2015, p. 16).

“The present state of the ‘hegemony debate’ is, to say the least, confusing” (Clark, 2009, p. 24).

The aim of this paper is to provide some conceptual and theoretical clarity on the diverse manner in which the field of International Relations (IR) understands the concept of hegemony. Although the concept of hegemony is frequently employed in IR literature, it is quite apparent that different meanings are attributed to it. This is not necessarily surprising because the field itself is divided into different theoretical perspectives that offer contrasting accounts of key concepts, including hegemony.¹ Thus it is basically impossible to deal with the concept of hegemony in the abstract without linking it to specific schools of thought such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Nevertheless, I begin the article by providing some generic definitions of hegemony.

In this brief section, I aim to establish that two main ideas can be distilled from the various definitions of hegemony. The first is the notion that hegemony entails overwhelming or preponderant material power. The second is the idea that hegemony involves the exercise of some form of leadership, including domination, over others. The two notions of overwhelming power and the exercise of leadership are, in turn, carried over

¹ Not only do the different schools of thought in IR offer their own views of hegemony, but the field also has its own specific theories of hegemony such as hegemonic stability theory (Kindleberger 1973, Lake 1993, Gilpin 2001), hegemonic decline (Gilpin 1981, Keohane 1984, Kennedy 1987, Layne 1993) and hegemonic transition (Organski 1968, Modelski 1987).
to the discussion of how hegemony is conceptualised by the different schools of thought in IR.

The second section of this article examines how different theoretical approaches in the field comprehend the concept of hegemony. Here I focus primarily on the two main rival theories of realism and liberalism. I will argue that the fundamental division between, on the one hand, hegemony as overwhelming power and, on the other hand, the exercise of leadership, characterises the different accounts of hegemony provided by realism and liberalism. After discussing realist and liberal theories of hegemony, I move on to consider how neo-Gramscians, constructivists, and members of the English School grasp the concept of hegemony. In the conclusion, I summarise some of the findings that emerge from a review of the literature.

**On hegemony**

According to *Oxford Bibliographies*, “hegemony comes from the Greek word hēgémonia, which means leadership and rule. In international relations, hegemony refers to the ability of an actor with overwhelming capability to shape the international system through both coercive and non-coercive means” (Norrlof, 2015). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hegemony in the following manner: “leadership, predominance, preponderance; especially the leadership or predominant authority of one state of a confederacy or union over others.”

Here we can already see how the definition of hegemony embodies the twin propositions of overwhelming power (capabilities) and the exercise of leadership. The latter attribute of hegemony is pronounced in the definition provided by *The International Studies Encyclopedia*: “The concept of hegemony refers to international leadership by one political subject, be it the state or a ‘historical bloc’ of particular social groupings, whereby the reproduction of dominance involves the enrollment of other, weaker, less powerful
parties (states/classes) constituted by varying degrees of consensus, persuasion and, consequently, political legitimacy.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines hegemony as “the position of being the strongest and most powerful and therefore able to control others.” This definition accentuates the notion of hegemony as encompassing overwhelming power while at the same time assuming that this automatically entails the ability of the hegemon to exercise leverage, or control, over others. In this manner, hegemony involves a relationship between actors, whether it be people or states. This relational aspect of hegemony, as we will see, is important for those who conceptualise hegemony as the exercise of some form of leadership. This leadership can be consensual or dominating, but the important point is the notion that hegemony entails a relationship between a preponderant state or social group and others.

Ian Clark (2011, pp. 18-19), following Howard Lentner (2006), argues that the hegemony debate revolves largely around two principal meanings: domination and leadership. As we will see in the next section, those who emphasise domination largely associate hegemony with preponderant material capabilities while those who emphasise the leadership dimension argue that this is an insufficient basis for understanding the concept of hegemony.

**Realism and hegemony**

There is no monolithic theory of realism; instead, there is a diverse family of realist theories (Dunne and Schmidt, 2017, pp. 101-115). Nevertheless, despite some exceptions, realists generally define hegemony in terms of first, overwhelming power, and second, the ability to use this power to dominate others.

At the end of the day, however, the predominant tendency among realists is to equate hegemony with overwhelming material power. Yet simply equating hegemony with
a preponderance of power is problematic because power is also a contested term.\textsuperscript{2} This has not stopped realists from labelling the most powerful state in the international system as the hegemon. Here, the hegemon is identified as the state that possesses vastly superior material capabilities including military, economic and, sometimes, diplomatic or soft power.

Power, according to this view, is synonymous with capabilities, and the capabilities of a state represent nothing more than the sum total of a number of loosely identified national attributes including “size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence” (Waltz, 1979, p. 131).

Because realists believe that violent conflict is always a possibility in the anarchical international system, military power is considered the most important foundation of hegemony. Barry Posen, for example, argues that the United States’ command of the commons – command of the sea, space, and air – provides the military foundation of US hegemony (2003, pp. 5-46). For Posen, the military foundation of US hegemony is deeply entrenched and therefore likely to last for the near future.

Closely connected to the notion that hegemony entails the concentration of material capabilities in one state is the related idea that this preponderant state is able to dominate all of the subordinate states (Levy and Thompson, 2005). John Mearsheimer, for example, defines a hegemon as a “state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system”. He adds, “no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it.” Hegemony, for Mearsheimer “means domination of the system, which is usually interpreted to mean the entire world (2001, p. 41).”

\textsuperscript{2} For a good overview of the concept of power in IR, see (Schmidt 2005 and Baldwin 2013).
With this definition, we can begin to see how hegemony is conceptualised less as an attribute of a single state and more a property of what is termed the international system. This is clearly apparent in the work of Robert Gilpin, who considers hegemony to be a particular structure that has periodically characterised the international system. For Gilpin, a hegemonic structure exists when “a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system.” This is essentially an imperial type of structure that is less anarchical and more hierarchical. Gilpin explains that “this type of system has, in fact, been most prevalent, at least until modern times, and scholars of international relations have detected a propensity for every international system to evolve in the direction of a universal empire” (1981, p. 29).

Christopher Layne largely concurs with Gilpin and argues that “hegemony is about structural change, because if one state achieves hegemony, the system ceases to be anarchic and becomes hierarchic” (2006, p. 4). Layne, who is a neoclassical realist, posits that there are four features of hegemony. First, and most importantly, is that it entails hard power. Like Mearsheimer, Layne argues that hegemons have the most powerful military. They also possess economic supremacy to support their preeminent military capabilities. Second, hegemony is about the dominant power’s ambitions; namely, “a hegemon acts self-interestedly to create a stable international order that will safeguard its security and its economic and ideological interests.” Third, “hegemony is about polarity,” because if one state (the hegemon) has more power than anyone else, the system is by definition unipolar. Finally, “hegemony is about will.” Layne writes, “not only must a hegemon possess overwhelming power, it must purposefully exercise that power to impose order on the international system” (Ibid).

Within the realist literature on hegemony, there is a tendency to conflate hegemony with unipolarity. Unipolar systems are by definition those with only one predominant state. As William Wohlforth explains “unipolarity is a structure in which one state’s capabilities
are too great to be counterbalanced.” According to Wohlforth, “once capabilities are so concentrated, a structure arises that is fundamentally distinct from either multipolarity (a structure comprising three or more especially powerful states) or bipolarity (a structure produced when two states are substantially more powerful than all others)” (1999, p. 9).

While both multipolar and bipolar systems are typically characterised by active counterbalancing, unipolar systems, according to Wohlforth, do not exhibit any counterbalancing. In fact, the presence of a unipolar or hegemonic power is an indication that, contrary to realist balance-of-power theory, balancing has actually failed to take place. Brooks and Wohlforth explain that “the balancing constraint may well work on the leading state up to a threshold of hegemony or unipolarity.” They continue “once a state passes this threshold, however, the causal arrows reverse: the stronger the leading state is and the more entrenched its dominance, the more improbable and thus less constraining counterbalancing dynamics are” (2008, p. 48).

Those who equate hegemony with unipolarity are basically accentuating the overwhelming material power dimension of the hegemon and ignoring, or discounting, the wilful exercise of leadership component of the concept. According to this formula, hegemony and unipolarity are basically synonymous with preponderant material power. A state with vastly superior material capabilities is both the hegemon and the unipolar power.

Many theorists who do not adhere to realist theory reject this formula. Instead, these theorists make a distinction between hegemony and unipolarity; they are different concepts. As Cornelia Beyer explains, “‘Hegemony’ implies more than just having preponderant material capabilities at one’s disposal; additional factors also play a role, such as the capacity to exercise power based on material capabilities, and ‘soft power’ or ideological power, meaning the capability to change others’ behaviour by influencing their belief system, their way of thinking, and even their rationality” (2009, p. 413).
According to this alternative formulation, “polarity is a description of the distribution of power across the system, while hegemony is the outcome of an active attempt to create and sustain a set of rules” (Fettweis, 2017, p. 432).” Thus, whereas unipolarity is marked by an international system with one predominant power, hegemony entails the active exercise of some form of leadership to achieve certain ends. According to this conceptualisation, it is certainly possible to have a unipolar system without anyone exercising hegemony. In this case, there would be a unipolar power that nevertheless fails to exercise any leadership or influence over the subordinate states in the international system (Wilkinson, 1999, pp. 141-172).

The realist variant of hegemonic stability theory does make an attempt to marry the dual components of hegemony: preponderant power and the exercise of leadership. David Lake in fact argues that the theory of hegemonic stability is not a single theory, but a research programme composed of two, analytically distinct theories: leadership theory and hegemony theory (1993, p. 460). The starting point of hegemonic stability theory is the presence of a single dominant state. According to Robert Keohane, the theory of hegemonic stability “defines hegemony as preponderance of material resources.” He identifies four sets of resources: “hegemonic powers must have control over raw materials, control over sources of capital, control over markets, and competitive advantages in the production of highly valued goods” (1984, p. 32).

In addition to preponderant power, hegemonic stability theory asserts that one of the roles of the hegemon, especially liberal hegemons such as Great Britain in the 19th century and the United States in the later part of the 20th century, is to ensure international order by creating international institutions and norms that facilitate international cooperation.

Hegemonic stability theory is basically a realist prescription of how to achieve international stability in an anarchical international system. As Gilpin explains, “according
to the theory of hegemonic stability as set forth initially by Charles Kindleberger an open and liberal world economy requires the existence of a hegemonic or dominant power” (Gilpin, 1987, p. 72). The hegemon, according to this theory, provides public goods out of self-interest to achieve an open, liberal economic order. The creation of regimes, “defined as sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations,” is a function of the presence of a hegemon who is willing to act in a collectively beneficial manner (Krasner, 1983, p. 2).

Hegemonic stability theory, according to Keohane, “holds that hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a single country, are most conducive to the development of strong international regimes whose rules are relatively precise and well obeyed” (1980, p. 132). The functioning of a liberal, open economic order is contingent upon the existence of a hegemon who is willing to exercise the necessary leadership to maintain the system.

The liberal variant of hegemonic stability theory underscores the importance of a hegemon in establishing a liberal economic order. As Gilpin explains, hegemonic stability theory “argues that a particular type of international economic order, a liberal one, could not flourish and reach its full development other than in the presence of such as hegemonic power” (1987, p. 72). When the power of the hegemon begins to erode, hegemonic stability theory predicts that there will be a corresponding weakening of the liberal economic order. According to the theory, “the decline of hegemonic structures of power can be expected to presage a decline in the strength of corresponding international economic regimes” (Keohane, 1980, p. 132). This is a point that many liberal critics of hegemonic stability theory contest. Keohane, for example, believes that cooperation and the perpetuation of international regimes are certainly possible once a hegemon inevitably
begins to decline. Hegemony is extremely helpful in the establishment of international regimes, but is not necessary for their maintenance once they are created.

**Liberalism and hegemony**

Most liberal theories of hegemony accentuate the particular type of leadership that is exercised by the hegemon. Liberals do not completely discount the importance of preponderant material power, but they argue that this alone is insufficient for understanding the concept of hegemony. Liberal theorists are, for the most part, interested in the mechanisms and processes through which hegemony is exercised. This is also the case with other schools of thought including constructivism, neo-Gramscianism, and the English School.

In his influential work, *After Hegemony*, liberal theorist Robert Keohane made a distinction between the “basic force model” and the “force activation model” of hegemony. Building on the work of James G. March, Keohane defined the basic force model of hegemony as the possession of unrivalled tangible measures of power, and the force activation model as encompassing both abundant power capabilities and the will to exercise leadership.

Keohane dismisses the realist uni-dimensional understanding of hegemony as preponderant material power for the latter force activation model that emphasises both the possession of unrivalled capabilities and the willingness to exercise leadership. Hegemony, according to Keohane, “is defined as a situation in which one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so” (1984, p. 34). By exercising leadership in this manner, hegemony is established less by domination and more by consent. The latter, for liberals, is a more enduring and robust

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3 This is the entire premise of Keohane’s argument in *After Hegemony*. 
form of hegemony. This is why Keohane is dismissive of realists who simply equate hegemony with material predominance.

Hegemony, for Keohane, “is related in complex ways to cooperation and to institutions such as international regimes.” He argues that “the hegemon plays a distinctive role, providing partners with leadership in return for deference; but unlike an imperial power. It cannot make and enforce rules without a certain degree of consent from other states” (Ibid, p. 46).

Keohane’s account of hegemony is closely tied to the subfield of political economy where hegemony most often refers less to brute power and domination and more to consensus and political leadership. This is certainly the view of those who subscribe to liberal conceptions of hegemony. Liberal hegemony, according to John Ikenberry, “refers to rule and regime-based order created by a leading state.” He continues that “like empire, it is a form of hierarchical order – but in contrast, it is infused with liberal characteristics” (2011, p. 70).

Ikenberry argues that there are three institutional features of liberal hegemony: Firstly, “the leading state sponsors and operates within a system of negotiated rules and institutions”; secondly, “the lead state provides some array of public goods”; and thirdly, “the hegemonic order provides channels and networks for reciprocal communication and influence” (Ibid, p. 71-72). According to Ikenberry, “in a liberal hegemonic order, order is also established and maintained through the exercise of power by the leading state, but power is used to create a system of rule that weaker and secondary states agree to join” (Ibid, p. 74). Unlike hierarchically organised political orders based on command, whereby “superordinate and subordinate relations are established between the leading state and weaker and secondary political entities that are arrayed around it,” liberal hegemonic order “relies on shared interests and the rule of law” (Ibid, p. 55, 61).
Ikenberry argues that liberal hegemonic order is based on consensus and is characterised by a high degree of constitutionalism: “that is, state power is embedded in a system of rules and institutions that restrain and circumscribe its exercise. States enter international order out of enlightened self-interest, engaging in self-restraint and binding themselves to agreed-upon rules and institutions. In this way, order is based on consent” (Ibid, p. 61).

In essence, a grand bargain is made between the hegemonic state and the secondary states to create a liberal hegemonic order. The latter willingly agree to participate within the order and the dominant state agrees to place limits on the exercise of its power (Ikenberry, 2002, p. 215). The power that is exercised by the hegemon is based on the rule of law. In this manner, Ikenberry argues that “political authority within the order flows from its legal-constitutional foundation rather than from power capabilities.” Thus, “in this situation, hegemony is manifest essentially as rule-based leadership” (2001, p. 83). This, in turn, helps to legitimate hegemonic liberal order. Gilpin argues that “hegemony or leadership is based on a general belief in its legitimacy at the same time that it is constrained by the need to maintain it; other states accept the rule of the hegemon because of its prestige and status in the international political system” (1987, p. 73). For Ikenberry, the maintenance of liberal international order, as well as its legitimacy, is contingent upon the hegemon abiding by the rules and institutions that it helped to create in the first place.

In addition to the exercise of hegemonic power via rules and institutions, which is the foundation of liberal hegemonic order, John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan argue that there are two other ways, besides for outright imperial domination, by which a hegemonic state can exercise power and gain the acquiescence of other states. The first way is by “manipulating material incentives” in such a way that acquiescence is gained through coercion. The second way is by “altering the substantive beliefs of leaders in other
nations.” Ikenberry and Kupchan explain that “hegemonic control emerges when foreign elites buy into the hegemon’s vision of international order and accept it as their own – that is, when they internalise the norms and value orientations espoused by the hegemon and accept its normative claims about the nature of the international system” (1990, p. 285). They identify this second way as exercising power through socialisation. As they put it, “power is thus exercised through a process of socialization in which the norms and value orientations of leaders in secondary states change and more closely reflect those of the dominant state” (Ibid, p. 285).

Unlike coercive forms of hegemony that rely solely on the hegemon’s preponderant material resources and ability to coerce others, hegemony through socialisation enables the hegemon to get others to acquiesce without the use of coercive power. In this manner, hegemony is achieved more cheaply as other states voluntarily agree to comply with the hegemon on the basis of shared interests and a sense of legitimacy. Ikenberry and Kupchan “conceptualize socialization as a process of learning in which norms and ideals are transmitted from one party to another.” In relation to hegemonic power, they “conceptualize it as the process through which national leaders internalize the norms and value orientations espoused by the hegemon and, as a consequence, become socialized into the community formed by the hegemon and other nations accepting its leadership position” (Ibid, p. 289).

**Neo-Gramscianism, Constructivism, the English School, and hegemony**

The neo-Gramscian approach to hegemony also accepts the view that hegemony is about more than just raw material power and domination. For Robert Cox, one of the leading neo-Gramscians, “dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony.” According to Cox, the concept of hegemony “is based on a coherent conjunction or fit between a configuration of material power, the prevalent
collective image of world order (including certain norms) and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality” (1981, p. 139).

Cox combines material power, ideas, and institutions into a comprehensive theory of hegemony. Drawing directly from the work of Antonio Gramsci, Cox argues that hegemony incorporates two elements: force and consent. Thus for Cox, hegemony cannot be reduced to pure material domination. Hegemony, for Cox, “means dominance of a particular kind where the dominant state creates an order based ideologically on a broad measure of consent, functioning according to general principles that in fact ensure the continuing supremacy of the leading state or states and leading social classes but at the same time offer some measure or prospect of satisfaction to the less powerful” (1987, p. 7).

While conceding that a dominant state is a necessary component of hegemony, Cox, and Marxists more generally, including neo-Gramscians, underline the importance of social forces that are shaped by production relations. As Owen Worth writes, hegemony, in Gramsci’s terms, “appears as the result of a class struggle between the dominant and the ‘subaltern’ classes in society, whereby the former win over the ‘hearts and minds’ of the latter through the pursuit of consent” (2015, p. 66).

For Cox, “the problem of hegemony arises at the three levels of (1) the social relations of production; (2) the social formation; and (3) the structure of world order” (1982, p. 42). He argues that hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms can exist at each of the three levels. Of the three levels, Cox argues that hegemony at the world order level is most complex because it incorporates both of the other levels.

Dominance alone, Cox argues, is an insufficient basis of hegemony at the world order level. For in addition to the regulation of interstate violence, which hegemonic stability theory attributes to the presence of a dominant state, Cox argues that a hegemonic conception of world order is also founded on a “globally conceived civil society,
i.e., a mode of production of a global extent which brings about links among the social classes of different countries” (Ibid, p. 45). In this sense, it is universalist and not based solely on the parochial interests of a single dominant state. This, for Cox, is the meaning of hegemony; “the temporary universalization in thought of a particular power structure, conceived not as domination but as the necessary order of nature” (Ibid, p. 38).

According to Cox, there are three conditions that make hegemony at the world order level possible: “(1) a globally dominant mode of production; (2) a dominant state (or conceivably dominant group of states acting in concert) which maintains and facilitates the expansion of that mode of production; and (3) a normative and institutional component which lays down general rules of behavior for states and the forces of civil society that act across state boundaries – rules which are also supportive of the dominant mode of production” (Ibid, p. 45).

By conceptualising hegemony as a fit between material power, ideas, and institutions, it is difficult, if not impossible, to privilege one set of factors over another. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that international institutions and the process of institutionalisation are key components of the neo-Gramscian conception of hegemony even while admitting, as Cox does, that hegemony cannot be reduced to the institutional dimension. In similarity to liberal conceptions of hegemony, Cox argues that international institutions help to mitigate conflict and reduce the necessity of resorting to force. Crucially, while international institutions embody the material interests of the hegemon, they also, according to Cox, perform an ideological function in that they help to legitimate the norms of world order. By casting its interests as universal, rather than parochial, the hegemon is more likely to get secondary states to acquiesce to the existing order and accept it as legitimate. This is what Gramsci meant by hegemony.

By recognising that there is a close connection between institutionalisation and hegemony, Cox underlines the importance of ideology in helping to maintain consent with
minimum recourse to force. Institutions, as well as formal international organisations, are, for Cox, a key anchor of the hegemon’s ruling strategy. Cox identifies five features of an international organisation that express its hegemonic role: “(1) they embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; (2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; (3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt the elites from the peripheral countries; and (5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas” (1983, p. 172). As important as institutions are for Cox, he argues that hegemony cannot be reduced to the institutional dimension. Institutions are only one pillar of a hegemonic order and need to be considered together with material capabilities and ideas.

By emphasising the role of ideas, and recognising that the social world is composed of both material and ideational forces, social constructivist conceptions of hegemony are not dissimilar to those put forward by Cox and neo-Gramscians. Constructivists, however, are more inclined to emphasise the ideational aspects of hegemony over the material. While most constructivists admire Cox’s adoption of Gramsci, one of the critiques of Cox is that, in the end, he does not sufficiently privilege the ideational component of hegemony.

According to Ted Hopf, Cox’s account, even while conceding the ideological dimension of institutionalisation, is still too materialistic in the sense that ideas continue to be a manifestation of the dominant power’s political-economic interests. Yet for Hopf, the importance of Gramsci’s conception of hegemony is that it helps us understand why the masses go along with and accept a given order (2013, pp. 317-354). Thus it is not just the ideology of elites that matter, but also how dominant ideas percolate downward and become taken for granted by the broader public. This is what Gramsci meant by “common sense”.

What Hopf attempts to do is provide a “neo-Gramscian constructivist account of hegemony that restores common sense to a more central theoretical role, a role as a
structural variable in world politics, akin to distributions of material power or national identities” (Ibid, p. 318). He identifies this as common-sense constructivism, the aim of which it to bring the masses back into world politics. Hopf argues that hegemonic power is exercised when dominant ideas are embraced by the people in general. Hopf writes that “hegemonic power is maximized to the extent that these ideas become taken for granted by the dominated population.” He explains that “a taken-for-granted truth is one that people assume to be so without questioning its empirical or normative validity” (Ibid, p. 321). The degree to which there is a discursive fit between the ideas propounded by the elites and the “common sense” of the masses is a key indicator of the exercise of hegemony. According to Hopf, “hegemonic power is maximized to the extent that these ideas [those that advance the interests of the dominant classes] become taken for granted by the dominated population” (Ibid).

Qingxin Ken Wang is another constructivist who shifts focus away from the material and ideational interests of the dominant state to the mass public in secondary states. Wang applauds constructivists for the attention they pay to the ideational dimension of hegemony, but argues that too much of the focus has been placed on the ideas of the ruling elites and not enough on mass public opinion. Hegemony, Wang argues, entails more than just gaining the acquiescence of elites in secondary states, but the mass public as well.

According to Wang, constructivists conceptualise hegemony as “a type of hierarchical international order whereby the dominant state in the international system exercises transnational authority over secondary states.” Furthermore, “constructivists believe that hegemony is founded largely on the legitimacy of hegemony in secondary states which entails the dominant state’s manufacturing of a consenting identity for secondary states on the basis of hegemonic ideologies, and the propagation of these hegemonic ideas to secondary state elites” (Wang 2003, p. 101).
While admitting that the emphasis that constructivists place on the ideational dimension of hegemony is a significant improvement over purely materialist accounts, Wang, like Hopf, believes that the mass public’s attitudes toward hegemony deserve serious attention. It is not only elites in secondary states that matter, but also their ability to get their mass publics to accept hegemonic ideas. He finds that a “hegemon’s material and normative powers may help to induce the socialization of the mass public in secondary states with the hegemonic conceptions of world order, state identities, and the underlying ideologies, which in turn may lead to changes in secondary states’ political structures in ways conducive to the maintenance of hegemony” (Ibid, p. 119). This he finds to be the case with respect to the post-war relationship between the United States and Japan.

The English School, or international society approach to international relations, emphasises yet another aspect of hegemony: social recognition. According to this view, hegemony is not equivalent to predominant material power. Neither is it solely an attribute of the dominant state itself. Rather it is, as Ian Clark puts it, “a status bestowed by others, and rests on recognition by them.” Clark defines hegemony as “an institutionalized practice of special rights and responsibilities conferred on a state with the resources to lead” (2009, p. 24).

In reviewing English School literature, Clark finds that there has been a general reluctance among its members to engage with the concept of hegemony. Indeed, the very idea of a hegemonic or hierarchical order has been viewed by the English School as a threat to the existence of a society of states; thus their commitment to equilibrium and the balance of power. Yet given the pre-eminence of the United States since the end of the Cold War, Clark argues that it is necessary for the English School to seriously engage with the concept of hegemony in international relations. He asks whether it is possible for hegemony to be compatible with international order.
Building on the work of Hedley Bull and others, Clark proposes that we consider hegemony an institution of international society. His book *Hegemony in International Society* “is intended as an exploration of the role of international legitimacy in a context, not of equilibrium, but of considerable concentration and preponderance of material power.” Clark’s core claim is “that this is best approached conceptually through hegemony, and theoretically by regarding that hegemony as a putative institution of international society” (2011, p. 5). Clark finds that it is possible for international order to be compatible with a concentration of power in one actor.

Clark is, however, insistent that a distinction be made between primacy, as conceptualised in terms of preponderant material resources, and hegemony as the exercise of some form of legitimate leadership. He is quite clear that primacy and hegemony are different concepts: “hegemony is then an institutionalized practice, legitimated within international society, whereas primacy depicts nothing beyond a distribution of power in which one state enjoys predominance” (Ibid, p. 34).

It is the normative component of hegemony that is crucial for Clark, and he believes that the English School is potentially helpful in this regard. Clark draws on the work that the English School, especially Bull, devoted to the institution of the great powers in facilitating international order. The great powers were defined not simply in terms of their material capabilities, but also by the special managerial functions they performed as one of the key institutions of international society. Just as the great powers helped to make anarchy compatible with international society, Clark, by extension, finds this to be true with the institution of hegemony. For Clark, “it is this institutional dimension that marks a clear separation between hegemony and primacy; hegemony is then an institutionalized practice, legitimated within international society, whereas primacy depicts nothing beyond a distribution of power in which one state enjoys predominance” (Ibid, p. 34). It is only by conceptualising hegemony as an institutionalised practice that can, for Clark, help the
English School to overcome its belief that hegemony is incompatible with an anarchical society.

Reasoning by analogy, Clark finds that the institution of hegemony functions in a manner similar to that of the great powers. Just as special roles, functions, responsibilities, and status are bestowed on the great powers, Clark reasons that the same is also true of hegemons. This is one of the reasons he argues that social recognition is a key component of hegemony. The institution of the great powers was not reducible to a set of material assets, but instead rested on a shared normative framework in which others bestowed status and recognition on those who performed a managerial function in international society. Clark explains that “what hegemony adds to primacy then is not just some further supplement to the resources of the leading state, but instead the social capital needed to pursue collective interests” (Ibid, p. 242).

As with the case of the institution of the great powers, Clark argues that legitimacy is a core component of hegemony. Reiterating one of his main points that hegemony cannot be simply assessed in terms of material power alone, Clark argues that it needs to be assessed “just as importantly in terms of the distinctive legitimacy dynamics that come into play between the hegemon and its various constituencies” (Ibid, p. 51). This leads Clark to engage in an extensive examination of international legitimacy, and how it relates to different institutional forms of hegemony.

**Conclusion**

As evidenced by the review of the theoretical literature, hegemony is a multifaceted and complex concept. It means different things to different scholars. Different theories of international relations offer competing conceptions of hegemony. There are, however, some common themes that emerge from the literature review.
There are two principal components of hegemony: preponderant power and the exercise of leadership. Some theories of hegemony simply accentuate the preponderant power component of hegemony while most theories emphasise, in different degrees, both components. Realist theories of hegemony are notorious for their tendency to conflate hegemony with overwhelming material power. Thus the propensity to equate unipolarity with hegemony. A hegemon or unipolar power is simply defined as a state that possesses vastly superior material capabilities. This says very little about the character of the leadership that is exercised by the dominant state. What is missing is the relational aspect of hegemony; instead hegemony is simply a property of the dominant state.

Realist inspired hegemonic stability theory does bring the leadership component of hegemony back into the picture. While the starting point of hegemonic stability theory is the presence of a materially preponderant state, the crux of the theory centers on the leadership function the hegemon provides to establish and maintain an international order. Thus, unlike some realist theories of hegemony, which assume that dominance is the main pattern of behavior, hegemonic stability theory is concerned with the character of the leadership being exercised by the hegemon. This is especially the case with liberal versions of hegemonic stability theory that argue that liberal hegemons exercise a particular form of leadership to ensure an open, liberal economic order. More generally, liberal notions of hegemony argue that the concept is not reducible to material resources. This is why liberal theorists, such as Ikenberry, place so much attention on the leadership functions that successful hegemons fulfill in fostering liberal international order.

Liberal hegemony, according to liberals, rests more on consensus than on coercion. According to liberal theorists, the form and character of the leadership exercised by the hegemon make all the difference in the world. This is a point that most theories of hegemony would agree with.
Neo-Gramscian, constructivist, and English School accounts of hegemony all accentuate the manner in which hegemony is exercised. All agree that hegemony is less an attribute of the hegemon itself and more about the relationship between the hegemon and subordinate actors. This is again another reason why it is argued that hegemony cannot be reduced to material preponderance alone. It might be a necessary factor, but as Cox and others argue, it is not a sufficient condition for understanding the concept of hegemony.

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References


