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Expert Comment

(Re)inventing hegemonies

Piotr Dutkiewicz (2018)

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(Re)inventing hegemonies

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The argument

This short paper proposes a sketch of a fivefold argument that forms the background and structure of the new DOC project '(Re) inventing hegemonies', which took off this year. Primarily, I argue that the 'traditional' approach – which suggests that currently the main line of international confrontation is between 'West' and 'East' – is too simplistic, as new poles/subjects of global power, like non-state actors that are assuming new global roles, are rising and are not necessarily located within nation-states.

First of all, some non-state actors – such as big multinational corporations, media conglomerates, INGOs, or certain international institutions – are becoming as powerful as many states; furthermore, new poles of global power are reshaping the current global hierarchy into regionally based conglomerates of power holders with regionally based 'hegemonic states' with their own centre–periphery dynamics and hierarchies.

Secondly, the dynamism of the global system is generated by its main systemic/structural contradictions. These involve global social, economic, and political forces, which as a result of their internal struggles (for instance between capital and labour, poor and wealthy) create new global social, institutional, and economic realities.

Thirdly, this ongoing process of global re-regionalisation is generated by complex, multiple, mutually causal forces, both material and ideational. It is not enough to look at the state as the main driver of the hegemonic process since it is related to both state and capital, and in addition extends to elite behaviour, as well as ideas, values, norms, regulatory

frameworks, and the policies they produce and defend. It is these various forces which – only in combination – legitimise structural hierarchies in contemporary world politics.

Fourthly, I propose that the general inability of those in power to rule justly and efficiently, as well as their painful realisation of the limits of their power vis-à-vis a few key players and challenges they face, is producing a widespread ‘fear effect’ among the global elite. I argue, that fear, rather than acting as an expedient but ad hoc political *tool*, has become the *de facto* essence of politics. Fear now provides the impetus and reason for politics, replacing other sources for the legitimation of power, such as democracy, justice, and the common good. In short, the argument is that fear as politics has a transformational capacity to change politics, norms, and institutions. As hegemony is about both gaining and also – potentially – losing power, *fear* becomes the main motivation for state and non-state actors to succeed in a race for different kinds of hegemonies.

Fifthly, I argue that the ‘renewed global/regional order’ (as sketched above) is creating/empowering a new set of state and non-state actors which aim to legitimatise – globally and regionally – rule by dominant power(s) that stabilise, normalise, and justify global structural inequalities. In other words, they re-create and re-invent new hegemonies.

The causal relationships of these five components of the re-creation of global and regional order are quite complex but begin from the notion of incoming multipolarity – or economically speaking, convergence – which is triggering a new wave of competition that spells a re-invention of hegemony. This occurs through use of new strategies of domination and subordination, for example control of ‘big data’, control of social media control, hybrid war, global agenda setting, and global policy advice. This is leading to new global and regional hierarchies or ‘hegemonies’.

The rest beyond the West

In 2017 Vladimir Popov and I co-edited a book titled *Mapping a New World Order: The Rest beyond the West*. In this book, we abandoned the cliché about the division of the world between two poles, the East and the West with the East fighting the West. This concept of world order was called ‘the West versus the rest’, a phrase that has recently been quite popular in the media. However, we believe that this formula no longer reflects global realities. Hence, we don’t speak about the rest ‘versus the West’, but rather ‘beyond the West’. If you look at the statistics, you will see an interesting picture of the world economy.

As available data strongly suggest, there is a certain level of economic convergence between most developed countries and some East and South Asian states – as measured by their GDP – in contrast to GDP divergence between OECD countries and Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. This suggests that there is a high probability of successful catch-up development for some and further peripheralisation for others. Thus, a reorganised future global hierarchy of wealth and power may resemble a network of a few hegemons – core states – which will re-create differently subordinated layers of peripheries around them. There may be also a reversal of fortunes for countries like China or India, and in that case, Beverly Silver may be right in saying “in the early twenty-first century, there is no ‘catching up’ with the core locations but instead another reconfiguration of the hierarchy of wealth among non-core locations”.

Structural contradictions of the global order

Painting the contours of the future world order, I suggest a methodology based on the dialectical method of inquiry, which involves the study of an action, its reaction, and its outcome – or thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. This idea is not new. It was proposed by Hegel and later developed by Joachim Fichte to the point of practical implementation in social inquiry.

We have identified at least five systemic contradictions within the global political economy that are defining a 'new global reality'. These contradictions are not new; they have existed for almost as long as the market system began to dominate social relations. They guaranteed the dynamism of the system, its movement, and its change; in a way they are the 'battery' of the system but – as they cannot be positively addressed by those in power – they are making the world system even more hierarchical, anarchic, ungovernable, chaotic, and definitely less predictable. What is new about those contradictions is that the technological, social, and economic environment in which they function has dramatically changed in the last 20-30 years, thus exacerbating their effects.

1. Hegemony vs multipolarity

The first contradiction is a fundamental one. It is the 'hegemony versus multipolarity' contradiction, which obviously causes the international system to change. The future international world order will be somehow formed by the end of this struggle. As we are beginning to see a new wave of strong competition, there is the US and its allies on one side of this struggle and on the other side, there are the others: China, Russia, India, the Middle East, etc. The hegemon, naturally, strives to maintain its hegemony. I am far from giving a moral or ethical valuation of that process. The hegemon always wants to maintain hegemony in order to secure better life conditions, a clearer future, and better stability for its citizens. So hegemony or hegemony as such cannot be called morally or ethically wrong. The problem is that maintaining hegemony is almost impossible in the current world order, and therefore the current hegemony has to engage in a confrontation with the multipolarity represented by 'the others'.

2. Globalisation vs identity politics

The second contradiction shaping our future is that of 'globalisation (i.e., universalisation) versus identity politics', or in other words, the autonomisation of identities, which may lead to the radicalisation of identity-based demands. One of the main characteristics of globalisation is the universalisation of norms, culture, behaviour, institutions, systems of management, and the commodification of social relations. Therefore, universalisation is one of the key elements in the current stage of globalisation. At the same time, people do not like to lose their own identity, their own culture, customs, religion, or history. Therefore, the reaction to universalisation is identity politics, emerging in different forms.

Identity politics are not new, but we are entering a new phase in which the politics becomes dependent on identity. Politics react more and more to identity struggles such as class struggles, cultural struggles, and gender struggles. Certain groups form political parties or social movements that can be based on culture, religion, social class or caste, culture, dialect, disability, education, ethnicity, language, nationality, sex, gender, generation, occupation, profession, race, political party affiliation, sexual orientation, settlement, urban or rural habitation, or veteran status, and use them to meet their interests. That is a normal political process but the intensity of self-righteousness and the scale of expectations combined with an inability to satisfactorily address them makes societies more divided, fragmented, and incoherent.

3. Wealth vs poverty

A few basic facts from the World Bank that show that out of an estimated 7.4 billion people on earth, 1.1 billion people live below the poverty level, which is below \$1.25 a day; another 2.7 billion people live on less than \$2 a day. This means that about 40% of the global population lives below the poverty level. This point is demonstrated in French economist Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. His main point is that capital

tends to reproduce itself. This is not a new idea; Marx also spoke about this. But Piketty shows that there is a certain oligarchisation of capital, which means that inherited capital has a tendency to grow exponentially and at the expense of other social groups.

Piketty's book was followed by an Oxfam report (2017), prepared for the conference in Davos. The report shows that eight men possess the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people making up the poorest half of humanity. This is shocking, not in moral or ethical terms, but in terms of its possible socio-economic consequences.

Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz's position is that "People everywhere sense that it is morally wrong. We sense that it cannot be justified. We sense that it is dividing our societies and undermining our democracies. [...] But even if one didn't care about these effects, there are further reasons to fight inequality. It is self-defeating: it undermines our economies" (2014). The consequences of this increasing inequality include – among other things – the following:

(a) The influence on democracy. Usually we think that one vote corresponds to one person, but now it's increasingly clear that the democratic theatre is changing into 'one dollar = one vote'. We have witnessed two of the most expensive elections in the history of humanity. As Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler showed in their book *Capital as Power*, capital is becoming a political power.

(b) Tax avoidance. The superrich avoid taxes because they are capable of keeping their profits in tax havens. This is an important point because paying taxes is vital to maintaining social stability in countries which then turn those taxes into social and security benefits. If taxes are not being paid, this means that those aspects of state protection will inevitably be diminished.

(c) Global control over the labour market. There is a huge struggle for minimum payment per hour in most countries, including in North America. Statistics show that 3 billion people work without minimum payment guarantees. This is manipulation of wages on a global scale, not only manipulation of politics.

4. The state vs the market

The fourth contradiction is an old one, between the state and the market. Economists and politicians hold a repetitive approach towards the key issues of how the state and the market cooperate (or don't) and what their ideal relationship should be; whether the state should lead in development or whether the market should be responsible for development. We were trying to provide at least a tentative answer to these fundamental questions in our book *Mapping a New World Order: The Rest beyond the West*.¹

5. Power vs politics

The fifth contradiction, which follows on from the previous one, is 'power versus politics'. Power is currently in process of being separated from politics. Power is the ability to fix things, to deliver, to make things happen. Politics is the process of selecting choices for power to implement. Politics is about whether we need a school or a swimming pool, whether we need more spending on the army or on schools or on hospitals. And then those needs are transferred to power structures or executive processes and power tries to implement them. Now this system is clearly collapsing, because there is less and less power in the hands of the state. Because of privatisation and globalisation certain state prerogatives are located elsewhere. Money is located elsewhere. Hence, power lies outside the nation-state.

¹ In short, our book suggests that the solution for the future could be a dual parallel system of the state and the market, where the state plays the role of the corporate insurance company for the nascent productive forces, helping them, in order to maintain their market position withstanding competition.

So, the role of the state is changing, but then the state cannot cooperate with the market the way the market expects it to do. Consequently, the market is more dependent on external forces than on forces located within the nation-state.

The political-economic rationality of *fear*.

As already mentioned, a realisation by regional (and to certain extend global) elites that their 'power' – defined by the ability to secure obedience and 'get things done' – is pretty limited these days, combined with the political experience that power is relatively easy to gain but even easier to lose, creates an atmosphere of overwhelming fear. As I have argued with Daria Kazarinova, fear is increasingly saturating our everyday lives as politicians and political strategists of all ideological stripes are rediscovering that fear is a handy tool in influencing voters (2017).

Our argument, however, is that rather than this simply being the most recent exercise of a 'politics of fear', our contemporary moment is distinguished by the emergence of 'fear as politics'. We argue that rather than fear acting as an expedient but ad hoc political *tool*, it has become the de facto essence of politics. Fear now provides the impetus and reason for politics, replacing other sources of legitimation of power such as democracy, justice, and the common good.

The politics of fear is – as we see it – a three-step process. Firstly, fear has become a projection of the political will aiming to change existing order; that is to say, fear has become the main reason and motive for institutional/social change domestically and internationally. Secondly, fear cements power relations by creating a new 'political dogma', a supra-ideology of sorts that is trans-ideological in spectrum – 'fear' has entered every current ideology from populism to neo-conservatism – and which shapes and restricts social imaginations and political action. Thirdly, fear provides alternative legitimisation for state authority and action by providing justification and a sense of purpose for those in power.

It is quite natural that those in power, who ‘fear the future’, will try to secure their positions (“secure obedience” in Jonathan Nitzan’s [2009] terms), increase their abilities to govern, and make sure that ‘others’ have fewer resources to compete.

(Re)inventing hegemonies

At this point I’ll share a few further ideas on the struggle for regional and global hegemony. The current struggle for hegemony – or to be more precise ‘hegemonies’, as they are located in different economic, political, and social domains – is not only an observable fact; it is an imperative for key regional and global state and non-state actors in order to survive not only intense competition but also to maintain existing hierarchies, inequalities, and structures. Securing hegemonies is in fact an accumulative result of all of the multiple and intertwined processes sketched above.

Hegemony can be defined as legitimated rule by dominant power. It prevails when supreme force governs society ‘top-down’ in ways that affected people positively endorse. It usually embraces both *material assets* (for instance capital, military power, water, and energy), *non-material resources* (such as rules, ideas, norms, and regulations), *leadership* in setting and implementing those rules and – finally – *legitimising mindsets* which convince people that the dominant power rules in their interests.

Jan A. Scholte aptly observed that there are multiple approaches to studying hegemony that may reveal its different features. A statist approach focuses on the state and its action; a Gramscian approach shows hegemony as a process of legitimating the role of capital; post-modernist approaches will focus on knowledge and ideas; post-colonial approaches will tell us more about the role of empire in legitimating social and economic hierarchies. Our research will embrace most of those approaches.

Our project’s goal is, on one hand, to demonstrate current discourse on hegemony: its nature, components, evolution, and actors, both state and non-state; on the other hand,

our goals is to reveal new or renewed hegemonic strategies to increase, maintain, and create hegemony such as a whole range of material and ideational resources including the use of big data, artificial intelligence, ideas, knowledge, and finance.

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