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Expert Comment

Chaos, fear, and hegemony: Equality and efficiency in the international order

Piotr Dutkiewicz (2019)

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Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute gGmbH
Französische Straße 23
10117 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 209677900
info@doc-research.org

Chaos, fear, and hegemony: Equality and efficiency in the international order

Piotr Dutkiewicz

The main argument of this short paper asserts that, after a protracted period of significant turbulence in political and economic international order tied to complex processes combining a decline of power of an old hegemon, a systemic crisis of liberalism, and the rise of new centres of domination, a new multi-hegemonic international system is on the horizon that will bring macro-regional equity and a new round of economic efficiency. The sections of this paper follow three interlocked hypotheses:

I contend, first, that the currently chaotic international order is a consequence of a) unresolved structural contradictions that are providing dynamism to the system while increasing its anarchic nature and b) the declining role of the dominant hegemonic power and its main ideological legitimisation (liberalism and neo-liberalism).

Second, I argue that the outcome of these contradictions is a systemic fear that has become a stimulus for transformation. I further suggest that – unlike previously, when fear was acting as an expedient but *ad hoc* political tool – it has now become the *de facto* essence of politics. Fear provides the impetus and reason for politics, substituting other sources of legitimisation of power such as democracy, justice, and the common good.

Third, in conclusion, I posit that reactions to this fear manifest as re-inventing hegemonies at the regional and global levels, involving state and non-state actors with powerful consequences for the national state and reconfiguration of the global international order.

The five contradictions of the world system

Hegemony versus multipolarity

The first contradiction is a fundamental one: **hegemony vs. multipolarity**, which clearly causes the international system to change. The future world order will be partially formed by this struggle. On one side of this struggle is the U.S. and its allies; on the opposing side are the others. The hegemon naturally strives to maintain its hegemony (note that we are not performing a moral or ethical assessment of this process). The hegemon always seeks to maintain hegemony to secure better life conditions, a clearer future, and greater stability for its citizens and allies; therefore, hegemon or hegemony cannot be labelled morally or ethically wrong. The problem is that maintaining the hegemony is nearly impossible in the current world order, hence why hegemony must engage in a contradiction with multipolarity, which is represented by the others. Evidently, the dichotomy of 'we versus others' will shape the coming years of the world order.

Globalisation versus identity politics

The second contradiction shaping our future is **globalisation (universalisation) vs. identity politics** (i.e., autonomisation of identities, which may lead to the radicalisation of identities). One of the main characteristics of globalisation is the universalisation of norms, culture, behaviour, institutions, management systems, and commodification of social relations. The main idea of globalisation is to make – by imposing a high degree of universalisation – the economic system smoother and more efficient. By having one pattern of governance, rather than dealing with specific patterns regionally or globally, allows for one solution instead of myriad solutions; this approach is much simpler and more efficient. Therefore, universalisation is a key element of the present stage of globalisation.

At the same time, people do not like to lose their identity, nor their culture, customs, religion, or history. Therefore, the reaction to universalisation is identity politics, manifesting in different forms: religious identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, and so on.

Identity politics is not new, but we are entering a novel phase of this process in which politics depend on multiple actors' expression of identity. These identity groups are ballooning, pressing on the state to deliver what they think are their rights. These are groups, political parties, or social movements rooted in culture, religion, social class or caste, dialect, disability, education, ethnicity, language, nationality, sex, gender identity, generation, occupation, profession, race, political party affiliation, sexual orientation, settlement, urban and rural habitation, or veteran status.

In other words, new (narrowly represented) identity politics are emerging in place of larger socially based interest groups. Because the state cannot react to every identity group's interests, some of these groups have begun radicalising. They think, "If I cannot get what I want, I should be more vocal, more radical, because then the state will listen and react."

Therefore, the next grand struggle is that between identity politics and universalisation, which will have consequences for state policies and state behaviour: the weaker the state, the more it will likely react to identity politics. The state is no longer reacting to generally defined social needs; the state is addressing the needs of rather narrow identity groups, which alters the dynamics of state-to-citizen interaction.

Wealth versus poverty

The third contradiction is **wealth vs. poverty**. Some basic facts from the World Bank indicate that out of an estimated 7.4 billion people on earth, 1.1 billion live below the poverty line, equal to less than \$1.25 per day; another 2.7 billion live on less than \$2 per day. In other words, roughly 40% of our planet lives under the poverty level. This point is well exemplified in French economist Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. His main point is that capital tends to reproduce itself.

Piketty's book was followed by OXFAM International's (2017) Poverty Report, prepared for the conference in Davos. The report revealed "that eight men own the same wealth as the [3.6 billion people]" (p. 1) who comprise the poorest half of humanity. This is not shocking in moral or ethical terms, but rather with respect to the potential socioeconomic consequences.

Some effects of this growing inequality include the following:

1. The influence of democracy: we generally believe that one vote corresponds to one person, but it is becoming increasingly clear that today's democratic theatre is morphing into 'one dollar = one vote'.
2. Tax avoidance: the super-rich are avoiding taxes because they can hold their profits in tax havens. This is an important point; paying taxes is vital to maintaining countries' social stability, which then transforms those taxes into social and security benefits.
3. Global control over the labour market: we are in the midst of a struggle to achieve a minimum hourly wage in most countries, including North America. Statistics show that 300m people are working without minimum payment guarantees. This is a manipulation of wages on a global scale, not just a manipulation of politics.

In summary, an ongoing commodification of democracy will lead to the end of the myth of the liberal order. This is dangerous for those who live in this myth, both in terms of having some influence on politics and in the belief that their vote means something.

The state versus the market

The fourth contradiction is an old one, between **the state and the market**. Economists and politicians take a sinusoidal approach towards this issue: how the state and the market are cooperating (or not) and what the relations between them should look like; whether the state should spearhead development or the market should be responsible for development—in other words, whether the state should be in charge of our well-being or the market should create conditions for our well-being.

This contradiction is sinusoidal because some claim, following the Keynesian way, that the state should lead the market. The biggest projects of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, such as capitalist interventionism (the New Deal), socialism, and fascism, were quite similar in how the state subordinated the market. Then we had the 1970s and 1980s, when the neoliberal economic order began to dominate and the market served as the main stimulus for development and wealth creation. In fact, neither of these models lived up to expectations. The crisis in 2007–2008 showed that neither the market nor the state alone could deliver on their promises.

The problem is that if we would like the state to cooperate with the market, we need the state to be relatively strong, which is not the case. States cannot withstand the pressure of globalisation; they are becoming progressively weaker. A wave of neoliberalism has led to the privatisation of many state-run services, including core state functions such as security. What, then, is the role of the state in protecting our interests as citizens?

This debate between the market and the state is not solely about economic forces – it's about the shape of the future of our political system. We are being transformed into consumers and are no longer needed as citizens – because as citizens, we would like to make our own choices, not have choices imposed on us by the market.

Power versus politics

The fifth contradiction, which follows the previous one, is **power vs. politics**. We agree with Zygmunt Bauman's thesis that 'power' is in the process of being separated from politics. Power represents the ability to fix things, to deliver, to make things happen. Politics involves selecting choices for 'power' – or in terms of public administration, an executive power – to be implemented. Politics is about whether we need a school or a swimming pool, whether we need to spend more on the army or schools or hospitals. Then those priorities are 'transferred' a via parliamentary process to the executive power, whose task is to implement them. So there is a link between politics and power: politics comes first, power comes later.

Now this system is collapsing because there is less and less power in the hands of the state. Due to the privatisation of many state functions coupled with globalisation (i.e., internationalisation), certain state prerogatives are located elsewhere, beyond the national state. Capital is mostly outside the control of national states; as such, power is outside the national state as well. The capacity of the state is therefore changing, but the state cannot cooperate with the market the way the market would expect it to because the state has no way of meeting 'capital expectations'. Therefore, the market is more dependent on external forces than on those in the national state. As a result of these processes, power and politics are separating nearly to the point that they are living independent lives.

Fear as a substitute for politics

Now I can elaborate upon the second part of my hypothesis. In this section, I will argue that the consequence of the abovementioned contradictions is an emergence of a systemic fear: we fear that we are no longer subjects of most processes at all levels of governance. The main point is 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 an impetus and reason for politics, replacing other sources of legitimisation of power such as democracy, justice, and

the common good. In other words, *fear as politics* has a *transformational capacity* to change politics, norms, and institutions.

I contend that, rather than simply seeing the most recent exercise of ‘politics of fear’ (e.g., Donald Trump’s trade restrictions, increased migration, or terrorism), our contemporary moment is distinguished by the emergence of ‘fear as politics’. If we accept Bauman’s (2013) proposition that “politics is the ability to decide which things are to be done and given priority” (p. 189), then three conclusions follow:

- Fear provides key input to the ‘ability to decide’, as politicians use fear as a necessary pre-condition to decisions (e.g., “We have to do that because of immigrants, Muslims, etc.”).
- Fear provides selection criteria ‘for things to be done’. For instance, instead of environment or education policy, priorities would include fear-driven topics such as security, migration, or race relations.
- Fear contributes to the contents of ‘things to be done’ (e.g., if we fear immigrants, then the content of the immigration policy will be quite restrictive to newcomers).

Key policy areas such as migration (Huysmans, 2006), safety and security (Furedi, 2008), the labour market (Blachflower & Shadforth, 2009), development (OXFAM International, 2017), race (e.g., Ionide, 2015), democracy (Sleeper, 2016), international relations (Taras, 2015), the environment (Ritter & Borenstein, 2016), and health and well-being are now fear-driven – either through attempts to address fear or by using it to legitimise further empowerment of elites.

State and non-state actors' responses: Re-hegemonisation of world politics

In this last section, I argue that within an environment characterised by a high level of uncertainty and fear of the future, there is demand (at both the economic and social levels) for more stability and predictability at any cost. These two qualities are conditions *sine qua non* for smooth market operations, security, and planning at any level of governance, be it for state or non-state actors. One potential solution for these actors is to re-invent local, regional, and global hegemonies to provide at least some control over domestic and external affairs.

So, the next question is “How can hegemony be established and sustained in world politics today?”

Hegemony: What is it?

Hegemony combines (a) concentrated control of material resources; (b) leadership in setting societal rules; and (c) mindsets that convince people that the dominant power rules in their interests. Essentially, hegemony involves legitimacy, whereby the dominated embrace their domination.

Where does world hegemony lie?

Different theories offer distinct propositions regarding the kinds of dominant power that can achieve hegemony in world politics. Jan A. Scholte (2018) suggested a useful taxonomy of theoretical approaches to study hegemony, which is reproduced below. For instance, liberalist and realist theories of international relations suggest that hegemony lies with a dominant state. In this case, a particular territorial government controls an abundance of material resources, sponsors international regimes, and promotes values and visions that hold deep appeal beyond its borders. These approaches usually identify Britain and the U.S.

as hegemonic states of the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. Many liberals and realists have also pondered whether China is destined to be the next hegemonic state.

By contrast, neo-Gramscian theories locate world hegemony within global capitalism and a transnational capitalist class. From this perspective, dominant rule-making power for the world order lies with surplus accumulation and its main agents, such as multinational corporations, core states (the G7/G20), global governance institutions, and orthodox think tanks.

In poststructuralist theories, hegemony in world politics resides within a ruling knowledge frame (variously called a 'discourse' or an 'episteme'). In this conception, supreme power in world society lies with a certain language and consciousness. Poststructuralists often identify Enlightenment rationality as the hegemonic knowledge regime of modernity, as produced through science, education, mass communications, and so on.

In post-colonialist theories, hegemony in world politics is a question of embracing (or counter-hegemonically resisting) the dominance of Western imperialism and associated social hierarchies of class, gender, geography, race, religion, and sexuality. Imperial hegemony classically operated through colonial rule by one state over external territories. Nowadays, neo-colonial rule occurs through 'independent' states in tandem with outside forces such as donor governments, multilateral institutions, and nongovernmental organisations.

In sum, multiple readings of hegemony in world politics are available. As Brian Schmidt (2019) pointed out, hegemony is a multifaceted and complex concept that means different things to different scholars. However, some common themes emerged from Schmidt's (2019) 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.” Schmidt (2019) underscored that “Realist theories of hegemony are notorious for their tendency to conflate hegemony with overwhelming material power”. Thus the propensity to equate unipolarity with hegemony, thereby setting aside issues of leadership and the types of relations that make one unit subordinate to another. Aspects of hegemony have been well-covered by liberal theories of hegemonic stability (i.e., Ikenberry) with a key focus on why and how a successful hegemon can foster liberal economic order. Liberal hegemony, according to liberals, rests more on consensus than on coercion. According to liberal theorists, the form and character of leadership exercised by the hegemon makes all the difference in the world.

How is world hegemony practiced?

In addition to elaborating on different conceptions of hegemony in world politics, there are various techniques that hegemonic forces can deploy to secure their legitimised rule. How is world hegemony constructed and sustained? And by what means can counter-hegemonic forces contest it?

Rather than assemble a long and disjointed list of specific tools, perhaps one can helpfully distinguish several broad categories of (counter-)hegemonic practices in world politics. A fourfold typology, developed by Jan A. Scholte – and presented below - (2019), of material, discursive, institutional, and performative techniques can be helpful in this regard. Distinctions – as Scholte proposed - can be drawn for analytical convenience, of course; the four aspects tend to overlap in concrete actions.

1. With material practices, the dominant power in world society deploys economic resources to obtain legitimate rule. These resources can be tangible, such as raw materials, manufacturing industries, and military forces. Money and finances can also have crucial impacts, as evidenced by hegemonic use of the U.S. dollar, bank loans, overseas ‘aid’, and so on. Today, the material aspect of hegemony also involves controlling – and setting rules around – the digital economy of data and images. In

particular, for ‘realists’, the dominant approach is to equate hegemony with overwhelming material power represented by the hegemonic state; this method is focused on the notion and scope of ‘power’. As Schmidt (2019) mused, “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’” (p. 3). Another example of material hegemonic strategies (in combination with the ideational example) is the use (and misuse) of the U.S. dollar as a ‘hegemonic’ (i.e., global or indispensable) currency. Many experts (e.g., Cohen, 2019; Germain, 2019; Helleiner & Kirshner, 2008) continue to see the currency – despite dents in its role in recent decades – as a reliable store of value and domination. As Randal Germain (2019) wrote for this project, the main reasons for such persistence include “the centrality of US financial and stock markets in the global financial system; the role of US multinational firms in international transactions; the global reach of the US alliance system; the paramount political position of the US in international relations; and the central role of the dollar in foreign exchange markets....” (p. 1).

2. With discursive practices, hegemony secures legitimate dominance in world politics through use of language and meaning. Willing subordination, as Scholte noted, is achieved with semantic signifiers (e.g., ‘community’, ‘democracy’, and ‘justice’) that construct the supreme force for good. Similarly, narratives (e.g., of ‘transparency’, ‘development’, and ‘security’) spin positive storylines to legitimise a structure of domination, as do hegemonic accounts of history. In short, hegemonic discourses construct consciousness (‘regimes of truth’) in which the dominated genuinely believe that their domination is a good thing. From this point of view, as Elena Chebankova (2019) wrote, “hegemony is achieved mainly via the ability of a particular civilisation to invoke a positive response to its core values in the rest of the world, to become a metaphysical inspiration, an example to follow, and a rival to envy. In Fichtean terms, it is the ability to produce and advance a specific *Kultur* (culture, ideology, and metaphysical environment) that could have a claim on discursive hegemony, establish a specific ‘regime of truth’, and produce specific knowledge that satisfies public curiosity, ignorance, and doubt.”

3. With institutional practices, hegemonic forces establish and control the organisational apparatuses that generate the rules of legitimised domination. On one hand, these mechanisms include bodies that formulate and administer official rules on local, national, regional, and global scales. On the other hand, world hegemony operates through more informally governing institutions such as civil society organisations, foundations, and think tanks, which figure centrally into the production of ruling discourses.
4. With performative practices, world hegemony is secured through certain behaviours and rituals. For example, states perform their hegemony with flag ceremonies, commemorative monuments, national holidays, and military parades. Finance capital demonstrates its hegemony with clusters of glittering skyscrapers that dominate the centres of global cities. Modern science affirms its hegemony *inter alia* with conference routines, academic prizes, and graduation rites. Counter-hegemony, too, has its performances with street marches, dissident art, and so on.

As suggested earlier, hegemony in world affairs is generally achieved through these four types of practices in combination. Whether hegemony lies with state, capital, knowledge, empire, or whatever, it establishes and sustains itself through a mix of material, discursive, institutional, and performative techniques. None of the four is sufficient by itself. For example, to control rule-making institutions, a hegemonic force needs command of resources, narratives, and rituals. Likewise, deployment of discursive techniques requires economic means, institutional frameworks, and ceremonial presentations.

Conclusions

In summary, my approach can be encapsulated as follows:

1. We are experiencing an unprecedented period of chaos, lack of trust, and declining international norms and international influence.
2. These consequences have followed from highly complex processes combining a decline in power of an old hegemon (U.S./EU), a crisis of liberalism, the rise of new centres of domination, global changes in social structure, and entrance into a new technological age in manufacturing (industry 4.0) and communication.
3. Two years ago, we argued that a new multi-hegemonic international system was on the horizon and would bring some macro-regional equity (e.g., by ushering in new players such as China/India on par with the 'old' hegemons) and a new round of economic efficiency (Popov & Dutkiewicz, 2017). In part, that will be achieved by re-inventing the old and bringing new hegemonic actors (both state and non-state players).
4. I include a word of caution that the new order will create new regional subordinations – and new forms of inequalities by developing its own 'core–periphery relations' – within macro-regional hegemonies.

Piotr Dutkiewicz

Professor of Political Science, Director of the Center for Governance and Public Policy at Carleton University

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