

Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations

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Cox examines the implications of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony for IR. The historic bloc (blocco storico) to Gramsci is decisive, composed as it is of both "structures and superstructures"—the objective and the subjective, respectively. Thus, Cox tells us we find in the bloc "the juxtaposition and reciprocal relationships of the political, ethical, and ideological spheres of activity with the economic sphere." The bloc becomes the instrument of hegemony. Hegemony at the international level extends beyond states. It is an order within the world economy exhibiting a dominant mode of production that penetrates all countries. It also consists of complex social relations, connecting classes among different countries. World hegemony, therefore, consists of mutually reinforcing social, political, and economic structures. One expression and mechanism of world hegemony are international organizations. Prospects for the creation of counter-hegemonic blocks are most likely to be at the national, not the international level.

Some time ago I began reading Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. In these fragments, written in a fascist prison between 1929 and 1935, the former leader of the Italian Communist Party was concerned with the problem of understanding capitalist societies in the 1920s and 1930s, and particularly with the meaning of fascism and the possibilities of building an alternative form of state and society based on the working class. What he had to say centered upon the state, upon the relationship of civil society to the state, and upon the relationship of politics, ethics, and ideology to production. Not surprisingly, Gramsci did not have very much to say directly about international relations. Nevertheless, I found that Gramsci's thinking was helpful in understanding the meaning of international organization with which I was then principally concerned. Particularly useful was his concept of hegemony, but valuable also were several concepts which he had worked out for himself or developed from others. This essay sets forth my understanding of what Gramsci meant by hegemony and these related concepts, and suggests how I think they may be adapted, retaining his essential meaning, to the understanding of problems of world order. It does not purport to be a critical study of Gramsci's political theory but merely a

derivation from it of some ideas useful for a revision of current international relations theory.¹ . . .

Gramsci and Hegemony

Gramsci's concepts were all derived from history—both from his own reflections upon those periods of history which he thought helped to throw an explanatory light upon the present, and from his personal experience of political and social struggle. These included the workers' councils movement of the early 1920s, his participation in the Third International, and his opposition to fascism. Gramsci's ideas have always to be related to his own historical context. Moreover, he was constantly adjusting his concepts to specific historical circumstances. The concepts cannot usefully be considered in abstraction from their applications, for when they are so abstracted different usages of the same concept appear to contain contradictions or ambiguities.² A concept, in Gramsci's thought, is loose and elastic and attains precision only when brought into contact with a particular situation which it helps to explain, a contact which also develops the meaning of the concept. This is the strength of Gramsci's historicism and therein lies its explanatory power.

Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations" in Robert W. Cox and Timothy J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124–41. Reprinted by permission.

The term "historicism" is however, frequently misunderstood and criticized by those who seek a more abstract systematic, universalistic, and non-historical form of knowledge.³

Gramsci geared his thought consistently to the practical purpose of political action. In his prison writings, he always referred to Marxism as "the philosophy of praxis."⁴ Partly at least, one may surmise, it must have been to underline the practical revolutionary purpose of philosophy. Partly too, it would have been to indicate his intention to contribute to a lively developing current of thought, given impetus by Marx but not forever circumscribed by Marx's work. Nothing could be further from his mind than a Marxism which consists in an exegesis of the sacred texts for the purpose of refining a timeless set of categories and concepts.

Origins of the Concepts of Hegemony

There are two main strands leading to the Gramscian idea of hegemony. The first ran from the debates within the Third International concerning the strategy of the Bolshevik Revolution and the creation of a Soviet socialist state, the second from the writings of Machiavelli. In tracing the first strand, some commentators have sought to contrast Gramsci's thought with Lenin's by aligning Gramsci with the idea of a hegemony of the proletariat and Lenin with a dictatorship of the proletariat. Other commentators have underlined their basic agreement.⁵ What is important is that Lenin referred to the Russian proletariat as both a dominant and a directing class, dominance implying dictatorship and direction implying leadership with the consent of allied classes (notably the peasantry). Gramsci, in effect, took over an idea that was current in the circles of the Third International: the workers exercised hegemony over the allied classes and dictatorship over enemy classes. Yet this idea was applied by the Third International only to the working class and expressed the role of the working class in leading an alliance of workers, peasants, and perhaps some other groups potentially supportive of revolutionary change.⁶

Gramsci's originality lies in his giving a twist to this first strand: he began to apply it to the bourgeoisie, to the apparatus or mechanisms of hegemony of the dominant class.⁷ This made it possible for him to distinguish cases in which the bourgeoisie had attained a hegemonic position of leadership over

other classes from those in which it had not. In northern Europe, in the countries where capitalism had first become established, bourgeois hegemony was most complete. It necessarily involved concessions to subordinate classes in return for acquiescence in bourgeois leadership, concessions which could lead ultimately to forms of social democracy which preserve capitalism while making it more acceptable to workers and the petty bourgeoisie. Because their hegemony was firmly entrenched in civil society, the bourgeoisie often did not need to run the state themselves. Landed aristocrats in England, Junkers in Prussia, or a renegade pretender to the mantle of Napoleon I in France, could do it for them so long as these rulers recognized the hegemonic structures of civil society as the basic limits of their political action.

This perception of hegemony led Gramsci to enlarge his definition of the state. When the administrative, executive, and coercive apparatus of government was in effect constrained by the hegemony of the leading class of a whole social formation, it became meaningless to limit the definition of the state to those elements of government. To be meaningful, the notion of the state would also have to include the underpinnings of the political structure in civil society. Gramsci thought of these in concrete historical terms: the church, the educational system, the press, all the institutions which helped to create in people certain modes of behavior and expectations consistent with the hegemonic social order. For example, Gramsci argued that the Masonic lodges in Italy were a bond amongst the government officials who entered into the state machinery after the unification of Italy, and therefore must be considered as part of the state for the purpose of assessing its broader political structure. The hegemony of a dominant class thus bridged the conventional categories of state and civil society, categories which retained a certain analytical usefulness but ceased to correspond to separable entities in reality.

As noted above, the second strand leading to the Gramscian idea of hegemony came all the way from Machiavelli and helps to broaden even further the potential scope of application of the concept. Gramsci had pondered what Machiavelli had written, especially in *The Prince*, concerning the problem of founding a new state. Machiavelli, in the fifteenth century, was concerned with finding the leadership and the supporting social basis for a united Italy; Gramsci, in the twentieth century, with

the leadership and supportive basis for an alternative to fascism. Where Machiavelli looked to the individual prince, Gramsci looked to the modern prince: the revolutionary party engaged in a continuing and developing dialogue with its own base of support. Gramsci took over from Machiavelli the image of power as a centaur: half man, half beast, a necessary combination of consent and coercion.⁸ To the extent that the consensual aspect of power is in the forefront, hegemony prevails. Coercion is always latent but is only applied in marginal, deviant cases. Hegemony is enough to ensure conformity of behavior in most people most of the time. The Machiavellian connection frees the concept of power (and of hegemony as one form of power) from a tie to historically specific social classes and gives it a wider applicability to relations of dominance and subordination, including, as will be suggested below, relations of world order. It does not, however, sever power relations from their social basis (i.e., in the case of world-order relations by making them into relations among states narrowly conceived), but directs attention towards deepening an awareness of this social basis.

War of Movement and War of Position

In thinking through the first strand of his concept of hegemony, Gramsci reflected upon the experiences of the Bolshevik Revolution and sought to determine what lessons might be drawn from it for the task of revolution in western Europe.⁹ He came to the conclusion that the circumstances in western Europe differed greatly from those in Russia. To illustrate the differences in circumstances, and the consequent differences in strategies required, he had recourse to the military analogy of wars of movement and wars of position. The basic difference between Russia and western Europe was in the relative strengths of state and civil society. In Russia, the administrative and coercive apparatus of the state was formidable but proved to be vulnerable, while civil society was undeveloped. A relatively small working class led by a disciplined vanguard was able to overwhelm the state in a war of movement and met no effective resistance from the rest of civil society. The vanguard party could set about founding a new state through a combination of applying coercion against recalcitrant elements and building consent among others. (This analysis was

particularly apposite to the period of the New Economic Policy before coercion began to be applied on a larger scale against the rural population.)

In western Europe, by contrast, civil society, under bourgeois hegemony, was much more fully developed and took manifold forms. A war of movement might conceivably, in conditions of exceptional upheaval, enable a revolutionary vanguard to seize control of the state apparatus; but because of the resiliency of civil society such an exploit would in the long run be doomed to failure. Gramsci described the state in western Europe (by which we should read state in the limited sense of administrative, governmental, and coercive apparatus and not the enlarged concept of the state mentioned above) as "an outer ditch, behind which there stands a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks."

In Russia, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed.¹⁰

Accordingly, Gramsci argued that the war of movement could not be effective against the hegemonic state-societies of western Europe. The alternative strategy is the war of position which slowly builds up the strength of the social foundations of a new state. In western Europe, the struggle had to be won in civil society before an assault on the state could achieve success. Premature attack on the state by a war of movement would only reveal the weakness of the opposition and lead to a reimposition of bourgeois dominance as the institutions of civil society reasserted control.

The strategic implications of this analysis are clear but fraught with difficulties. To build up the basis of an alternative state and society upon the leadership of the working class means creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society and building bridges between workers and other subordinate classes. It means actively building a counterhegemony within an established hegemony while resisting the pressures and temptations to relapse into pursuit of incremental gains for subaltern groups within the framework of bourgeois hegemony. This is the line between war of position as a long-range

revolutionary strategy and social democracy as a policy of making gains within the established order.

Passive Revolution

Not all western European societies were bourgeois hegemonies. Gramsci distinguished between two kinds of societies. One kind had undergone a thorough social revolution and worked out fully its consequences in new modes of production and social relations. England and France were cases that had gone further than most others in this respect. The other kind were societies which had so to speak imported or had thrust upon them aspects of a new order created abroad, without the old order having been displaced. These last were caught up in a dialectic of revolution-restoration which tended to become blocked as neither the new forces nor the old could triumph. In these societies, the new industrial bourgeoisie failed to achieve hegemony. The resulting stalemate with the traditionally dominant social classes created the conditions that Gramsci called "passive revolution," the introduction of changes which did not involve any arousal of popular forces.¹¹

One typical accompaniment to passive revolution in Gramsci's analysis is caesarism: a strong man intervenes to resolve the stalemate between equal and opposed social forces. Gramsci allowed that there were both progressive and reactionary forms of caesarism: progressive when strong rule presides over a more orderly development of a new state, reactionary when it stabilizes existing power. Napoleon I was a case of progressive caesarism, but Napoleon III, the exemplar of reactionary caesarism, was more representative of the kind likely to arise in the course of passive revolution. Gramsci's analysis here is virtually identical with that of Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: the French bourgeoisie, unable to rule directly through their own political parties, were content to develop capitalism under a political regime which had its social basis in the peasantry, an inarticulate and unorganized class whose virtual representative Bonaparte could claim to be.

In late nineteenth-century Italy, the northern industrial bourgeoisie, the class with the most to gain from the unification of Italy, was unable to dominate the peninsula. The basis for the new state became an alliance between the industrial bourgeoisie of the north and the landowners of the

south—an alliance which also provided benefits for petty-bourgeois clients (especially from the south) who staffed the new state bureaucracy and political parties and became the intermediaries between the various population groups and the state. The lack of any sustained and widespread popular participation in the unification movement explained the "passive revolution" character of its outcome. In the aftermath of World War I, worker and peasant occupations of factories and land demonstrated a strength which was considerable enough to threaten yet insufficient to dislodge the existing state.¹² There took place then what Gramsci called a "displacement of the basis of the state" towards the petty bourgeoisie, the only class of nationwide extent, which became the anchor of fascist power. Fascism continued the passive revolution, sustaining the position of the old owner classes yet unable to attract the support of worker or peasant subaltern groups.

Apart from caesarism, the second major feature of passive revolution in Italy Gramsci called *trasformismo*. It was exemplified in Italian politics by Giovanni Giolitti, who sought to bring about the widest possible coalition of interests and who dominated the political scene in the years preceding fascism. For example, he aimed to bring northern industrial workers into a common front with industrialists through a protectionist policy. *Trasformismo* worked to co-opt potential leaders of subaltern social groups. By extension *trasformismo* can serve as a strategy of assimilating and domesticating potentially dangerous ideas by adjusting them to the policies of the dominant coalition and can thereby obstruct the formation of class-based organized opposition to established social and political power. Fascism continued *trasformismo*. Gramsci interprets the fascist state corporatism as an unsuccessful attempt to introduce some of the more advanced industrial practices of American capitalism under the aegis of the old Italian management.

The concept of passive revolution is a counterpart to the concept of hegemony in that it describes the condition of a nonhegemonic society, one in which no dominant class has been able to establish a hegemony in Gramsci's sense of the term. Today this notion of passive revolution, together with its components, caesarism and *trasformismo*, is particularly apposite to industrializing Third World countries.

Historic Bloc (*Blocco Storico*)

Gramsci attributed the source of his notion of the historic bloc (*blocco storico*) to Georges Sorel, though Sorel never used the term or any other in precisely the sense Gramsci gave to it.¹³ Sorel did, however, interpret revolutionary action in terms of social myths through which people engaged in action perceived a confrontation of totalities—in which they saw a new order challenging an established order. In the course of a cataclysmic event, the old order would be overthrown as a whole and the new be freed to unfold.¹⁴ While Gramsci did not share the subjectivism of this vision, he did share the view that state and society together constituted a solid structure and that revolution implied the development within it of another structure strong enough to replace the first. Echoing Marx, he thought this could come about only when the first had exhausted its full potential. Whether dominant or emergent, such a structure is what Gramsci called an historic bloc.

For Sorel, social myth, a powerful form of collective subjectivity, would obstruct reformist tendencies. These might otherwise attract workers away from revolutionary syndicalism into incrementalist trade unionism or reformist party politics. The myth was a weapon in struggle as well as a tool for analysis. For Gramsci, the historic bloc similarly had a revolutionary orientation through its stress on the unity and coherence of sociopolitical orders. It was an intellectual defense against co-optation by *trasformismo*.

The historic bloc is a dialectical concept in the sense that its interacting elements create a larger unity. Gramsci expressed these interacting elements sometimes as the subjective and the objective, sometimes as superstructure and structure.

Structures and superstructures form an “historic bloc.” That is to say the complex contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production.¹⁵

The juxtaposition and reciprocal relationships of the political, ethical, and ideological spheres of activity with the economic sphere avoid reductionism. It avoids reducing everything either to economics (economism) or to ideas (idealism). In Gramsci’s historical materialism (which he was careful to distinguish from what he called “historical

economism” or a narrowly economic interpretation of history), ideas and material conditions are always bound together, mutually influencing one another, and not reducible one to the other. Ideas have to be understood in relation to material circumstances. Material circumstances include both the social relations and the physical means of production. Superstructures of ideology and political organization shape the development of both aspects of production and are shaped by them.

An historic bloc cannot exist without a hegemonic social class. Where the hegemonic class is the dominant class in a country or social formation, the state (in Gramsci’s enlarged concept) maintains cohesion and identity within the bloc through the propagation of a common culture. A new bloc is formed when a subordinate class (e.g., the workers) establishes its hegemony over other subordinate groups (e.g., small farmers, marginals). This process requires intensive dialogue between leaders and followers within the would-be hegemonic class. Gramsci may have concurred in the Leninist idea of a vanguard party which takes upon itself the responsibility for leading an immature working class, but only as an aspect of a war of movement. Because a war-of-position strategy was required in the western countries, as he saw it, the role of the party should be to lead, intensify, and develop dialogue within the working class and between the working class and other subordinate classes which could be brought into alliance with it. The “mass line” as a mobilization technique once developed by the Chinese Communist Party is consistent with Gramsci’s thinking in this respect.

Intellectuals play a key role in the building of an historic bloc. Intellectuals are not a distinct and relatively classless social stratum. Gramsci saw them as organically connected with a social class. They perform the function of developing and sustaining the mental images, technologies, and organizations which bind together the members of a class and of an historic bloc into a common identity. Bourgeois intellectuals did this for a whole society in which the bourgeoisie was hegemonic. The organic intellectuals of the working class would perform a similar role in the creation of a new historic bloc under working-class hegemony within that society. To do this they would have to evolve a clearly distinctive culture, organization, and technique, and do so in constant interaction with the members of the emergent block. Everyone, for Gramsci, is in some part an

intellectual, although only some perform full-time the social function of an intellectual. In this task, the party was, in his conception, a "collective intellectual."

In the movement towards hegemony and the creation of an historic bloc, Gramsci distinguished three levels of consciousness: the economico-corporative, which is aware of the specific interests of a particular group; the solidarity or class consciousness, which extends to a whole social class but remains at a purely economic level; and the hegemonic, which brings the interests of the leading class into harmony with those of subordinate classes and incorporates these other interests into an ideology expressed in universal terms.¹⁶ The movement towards hegemony, Gramsci says, is a "passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures," by which he means passing from the specific interests of a group or class to the building of institutions and elaboration of ideologies. If they reflect a hegemony, these institutions and ideologies will be universal in form, i.e., they will not appear as those of a particular class, and will give some satisfaction to the subordinate groups while not undermining the leadership or vital interests of the hegemonic class.

Hegemony and International Relations

We can now make the transition from what Gramsci said about hegemony and related concepts to the implications of these concepts for international relations. First, however, it is useful to look at what little Gramsci himself had to say about international relations. Let us begin with this passage:

Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations? There can be no doubt that they follow. Any organic innovation in the social structure, through its technical-military expressions, modifies organically absolute and relative relations in the international field too.¹⁷

By "organic" Gramsci meant that which is structural, long-term, or relatively permanent, as opposed to the short-term or "conjunctural." He was saying that basic changes in international power relations or world order, which are observed as changes in the military-strategic and geopolitical balance, can be traced to fundamental changes in social relations.

Gramsci did not in any way bypass the state or diminish its importance. The state remained for him the basic entity in international relations and the place where social conflicts take place—the place also, therefore, where hegemonies of social classes can be built. In these hegemonies of social classes, the particular characteristics of nations combine in unique and original ways. The working class, which might be considered to be international in an abstract sense, nationalizes itself in the process of building its hegemony. The emergence of new worker-led blocs at the national level would, in this line of reasoning, precede any basic restructuring of international relations. However, the state, which remains the primary focus of social struggle and the basic entity of international relations, is the enlarged state which includes its own social basis. This view sets aside a narrow or superficial view of the state which reduces it, for instance, to the foreign-policy bureaucracy or the state's military capabilities.

From his Italian perspective, Gramsci had a keen sense of what we would now call dependency. What happened in Italy he knew was markedly influenced by external powers. At the purely foreign-policy level, great powers have relative freedom to determine their foreign policies in response to domestic interests; smaller powers have less autonomy.¹⁸ The economic life of subordinate nations is penetrated by and intertwined with that of powerful nations. This is further complicated by the existence within countries of structurally diverse regions which have distinctive patterns of relationship to external forces.¹⁹

At an even deeper level, those states which are powerful are precisely those which have undergone a profound social and economic revolution and have most fully worked out the consequences of this revolution in the form of state and of social relations. The French Revolution was the case Gramsci reflected upon, but we can think of the development during the Cold War of U.S. and Soviet power in the same way. These were all nation-based developments which spilled over national boundaries to become internationally expansive phenomena. Other countries have received the impact of these developments in a passive way, an instance of what Gramsci described at the national level as a passive revolution. This effect comes when the impetus to change does not arise out of a "vast local economic

development . . . but is instead the reflection of international developments which transmit their ideological currents to the periphery."²⁰

The group which is the bearer of the new ideas, in such circumstances, is not an indigenous social group which is actively engaged in building a new economic base with a new structure of social relations. It is an intellectual stratum which picks up ideas originating from a prior foreign economic and social revolution. Consequently, the thought of this group takes an idealistic shape ungrounded in a domestic economic development; and its conception of the state takes the form of "a rational absolute."²¹ Gramsci criticized the thought of Benedetto Croce, the dominant figure of the Italian intellectual establishment of his own time, for expressing this kind of distortion.

Hegemony and World Order

Is the Gramscian concept of hegemony applicable at the international or world level? Before attempting to suggest how this might be done, it is well to rule out some usages of the term which are common in international relations studies. Very often "hegemony" is used to mean the dominance of one country over others, thereby tying the usage to a relationship strictly among states. Sometimes "hegemony" is used as a euphemism for imperialism. When Chinese political leaders used to accuse the Soviet Union of "hegemonism," they seem to have had in mind some combination of these two. These meanings differ so much from the Gramscian sense of the term that it is better, for purposes of clarity in this chapter, to use the term "dominance" to replace them.

In applying the concept of hegemony to world order, it becomes important to determine when a period of hegemony begins and when it ends. A period in which a world hegemony has been established can be called hegemonic and one in which dominance of a nonhegemonic kind prevails, nonhegemonic. To illustrate, let us consider the past century and a half as falling into four distinguishable periods, roughly.²² 1845–1875, 1875–1945, 1945–1965, and 1965 to the present.²³

The first period (1845–75) was hegemonic there was a world economy with Britain as its center. Economic doctrines consistent with British supremacy but universal in form—comparative advantage, free

trade, and the gold standard—spread gradually outward from Britain. Coercive strength underwrote this order. Britain held the balance of power in Europe, thereby preventing any challenge to hegemony from a land-based power. Britain ruled supreme at sea and had the capacity to enforce obedience by peripheral countries to the rules of the market.

In the second period (1875–1945), all these features were reversed. Other countries challenged British supremacy. The balance of power in Europe became destabilized, leading to two world wars. Free trade was superseded by protectionism; the gold standard was ultimately abandoned; and the world economy fragmented into economic blocs. This was a nonhegemonic period.

In the third period, following World War II (1945–65), the United States founded a new hegemonic world order similar in basic structure to that dominated by Britain in middle of the nineteenth century but with institutions and doctrines adjusted to a more complex world economy and to national societies more sensitive to the political repercussions of economic crises. Sometime from the later 1960s through the early 1970s it became evident that this US-based world order was no longer working well. During the uncertain times which followed, three possibilities of structural transformation of world order opened up: a reconstruction of hegemony with a broadening of political management on the lines envisaged by the Trilateral Commission; increased fragmentation of the world economy around big-power-centered economic spheres; and the possible assertion of a Third World-based counterhegemony with the concerted demand for the New International Economic Order as a forerunner.

²³ In *Production, Power, and World Order*, three successive structures of world order are substituted for the periodization given above, based on the dialectical relation of production, forms of state, and different configurations of world order. These three structures are: (1) the liberal international economy (1789–1873); (2) the era of rival imperialisms (1873–1945); and (3) the neoliberal world order (post-World War II). See Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 107–109.

On the basis of this tentative notation, it would appear that, historically, to become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception, i.e., not an order in which one state directly exploits others but an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony) could find compatible with their interests. Such an order would hardly be conceived in inter-state terms alone, for this would likely bring to the fore oppositions of state interests. It would most likely give prominence to opportunities for the forces of civil society to operate on the world scale (or on the scale of the sphere within which hegemony prevails). The hegemonic concept of world order is founded not only upon the regulation of inter-state conflict but also upon a globally conceived civil society, i.e., a mode of production of global extent which brings about links among social classes of the countries encompassed by it.

Historically, hegemonies of this kind are founded by powerful states which have undergone a thorough social and economic revolution. The revolution not only modifies the internal economic and political structures of the state in question but also unleashes energies which expand beyond the state's boundaries. A world hegemony is thus in its beginnings an outward expansion of the internal (national) hegemony established by a dominant social class. The economic and social institutions, the culture, the technology associated with this national hegemony become patterns for emulation abroad. Such an expansive hegemony impinges on the more peripheral countries as a passive revolution. These countries have not undergone the same thorough social revolution, nor have their economies developed in the same way, but they try to incorporate elements from the hegemonic model without disturbing old power structures. While peripheral countries may adopt some economic and cultural aspects of the hegemonic core, they are less able to adopt its political models. Just as fascism became the form of passive revolution in the Italy of the interwar period, so various forms of military-bureaucratic regime supervise passive revolution in today's peripheries. In the world-hegemonic model, hegemony is more intense and consistent at the core and more laden with contradictions at the periphery.

Hegemony at the international level is thus not merely an order among states. It is an order within a world economy with a dominant mode of production

which penetrates into all countries and links into other subordinate modes of production. It is also a complex of international social relationships which connect the social classes of the different countries. World hegemony can be described as a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure; and it cannot be simply one of these things but must be all three. World hegemony, furthermore, is expressed in universal norms, institutions, and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behavior for states and for those forces of civil society that act across national boundaries, rules which support the dominant mode of production.

The Mechanisms of Hegemony: International Organizations

One mechanism through which the universal norms of a world hegemony are expressed is the international organization. Indeed, international organization functions as the process through which the institutions of hegemony and its ideology are developed. Among the features of international organization which express its hegemonic role are the following: (1) the institutions 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 legitimize the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt the elites from peripheral countries; and (5) they absorb counterhegemonic ideas.

International institutions embody rules which facilitate the expansion of the dominant economic and social forces but which at the same time permit adjustments to be made by subordinated interests with a minimum of pain. The rules governing world monetary and trade relations are particularly significant. They are framed primarily to promote economic expansion. At the same time they allow for exceptions and derogations to take care of problem situations. They can be revised in the light of changed circumstances. The Bretton Woods institutions provided more safeguards for domestic social concerns like unemployment than did the gold standard, on condition that national policies were consistent with the goal of a liberal world economy. The current system of floating exchange rates also gives scope for national actions while maintaining the principle of a prior commitment to harmonize national policies in the interests of a liberal world economy.

International institutions and rules are generally initiated by the state which establishes the hegemony. At the very least they must have that state's support. The dominant state takes care to secure the acquiescence of other states according to a hierarchy of powers within the inter-state structure of hegemony. Some second-rank countries are consulted first and their support is secured. The consent of at least some of the more peripheral countries is solicited. Formal participation may be weighed in favor of the dominant powers as in the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, or it may be on a one-state-one-vote basis as in most other major international institutions. There is an informal structure of influence reflecting the different levels of real political and economic power which underlies the formal procedures for decisions.

International institutions perform an ideological role as well. They help define policy guidelines for states and legitimate certain institutions and practices at the national level. They reflect orientations favorable to the dominant social and economic forces. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in recommending monetarism, endorsed a dominant consensus of policy thinking in the core countries and strengthened those who were determined to combat inflation this way against others who were more concerned about unemployment. The International Labor Organization, by advocating tripartism, legitimates the social relations evolved in the core countries as the desirable model for emulation.

Elite talent from peripheral countries is co-opted into international institutions in the manner of *trasformismo*. Individuals from peripheral countries, though they may come to international institutions with the idea of working from within to change the system, are condemned to work within the structures of passive revolution. At best they will help transfer elements of "modernization" to the peripheries but only as these are consistent with the interests of established local powers. Hegemony is like a pillow: it absorbs blows and sooner or later the would-be assailant will find it comfortable to rest upon. Only where representation in international institutions is firmly based upon an articulate social and political challenge to hegemony—upon a nascent historic bloc and counterhegemony—could participation pose a real threat. The co-optation of outstanding individuals from the peripheries renders this less likely.

Trasformismo also absorbs potentially counter-hegemonic ideas and makes these ideas consistent with hegemonic doctrine. The notion of self-reliance, for example, began as a challenge to the world economy by advocating endogenously determined autonomous development. The term has now been transformed to mean support by the agencies of the world economy for do-it-yourself welfare programs in the peripheral countries. These programs aim to enable the rural populations to achieve self-sufficiency, to stem the rural exodus to the cities, and to achieve thereby a greater degree of social and political stability amongst populations which the world economy is incapable of integrating. Self-reliance in its transformed meaning becomes complementary to and supportive of hegemonic goals for the world economy.

Thus, one tactic for bringing about change in the structure of world order can be ruled out as a total illusion. There is very little likelihood of a war of movement at the international level through which radicals would seize control of the superstructure of international institutions. Daniel Patrick Moynihan notwithstanding, Third World radicals do not control international institutions.^b Even if they did, they could achieve nothing by it. These superstructures are inadequately connected with any popular political base. They are connected with the national hegemonic classes in the core countries and, through the intermediacy of these classes, have a broader base in these countries. In the peripheries, they connect only with the passive revolution.

The Prospects for Counterhegemony

World orders—to return to Gramsci's statement cited earlier in this essay—are grounded in social relations. A significant structural change in world order is, accordingly, likely to be traceable to some fundamental change in social relations and in the national political orders which correspond to national structures of social relations. In Gramsci's thinking, this would come about with the emergence of a new historic bloc.

^b Moynihan was US ambassador to the UN during the Carter administration. He made speeches deploring that the United States was "in opposition" in the UN, which he represented as being run by a majority of Third World countries. See *New York Times*, January 28, 1976.

We must shift the problem of changing world order back from international institutions to national societies. Gramsci's analysis of Italy is even more valid when applied to the world order; only a war of position can, in the long run, bring about the structural changes, and a war of position involves building up the sociopolitical base for change through the creation of new historic blocs. The national context remains the only place where an historic bloc can be founded, although world-economy and world-political conditions materially influence the prospects for such an enterprise.

The prolonged crisis in the world economy (the beginning of which can be traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s) is propitious for some developments which could lead to a counterhegemonic challenge. In the core countries, those policies which cut into transfer payments to deprive social groups and generate high unemployment open the prospects of a broad alliance of the disadvantaged against the sectors of capital and labor which find common ground in international production and the monopoly-liberal world order. The policy basis for this alliance would most likely be post-Keynesian and neomercantilist. In peripheral countries, some states are vulnerable to revolutionary action, as events from Iran to Central America suggest. Political preparation of the population in sufficient depth may not, however, be able to keep pace with revolutionary opportunity and this diminishes the prospect for a new historic bloc. An effective political organization (Gramsci's modern prince) would be required in order to rally the new working classes generated by international production and build a bridge to peasants and urban marginals. Without this, we can only envisage a process where local political elites, even some which are the product of abortive revolutionary upheavals, would entrench their power within a monopoly-liberal world order. A reconstructed monopoly-liberal hegemony would be quite capable of practicing *trasformismo* by adjusting to many varieties of national institutions and practices, including nationalization of industries. The rhetoric of nationalism and of socialism could then be brought into line with the restoration of passive revolution under new guise in the periphery.

In short, the task of changing world order begins with the long, laborious effort to build new historic blocs within national boundaries.

Notes

This text was first published in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Summer 1983), 162–175. An earlier version was presented to the Panel on Hegemony and International Relations, convened by the caucus for a New Political Science at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, September 1981.

1. For citation here, I refer where possible to Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), hereafter cited as *Selections*. The full critical edition, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), is cited as *Quaderni*.

2. This seems to be the problem underlying Perry Anderson's "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, no. 100 (November 1976–January 1977), which purports to find inconsistencies in Gramsci's use of concepts.

3. On this point see E. P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," in his *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), which represents an historicist position analogous to that of Gramsci's in opposition to the abstract philosophical Marxism of Louis Althusser. For Althusser's position see "Marxism is not Historicism," in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Hen Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1979).

4. It is said that this was to avoid confiscation of his notes by the prison censor, who, if this is true, must have been particularly slow-witted.

5. Christine Buci-Gluckmann, *Gramsci et l'état. Une théorie matérialiste de la philosophie* (Paris: Fayard, 1975), places Gramsci squarely in the Leninist tradition. Hughes Portelli, *Gramsci et le bloc historique* (Paris: Fayard, 1972), and Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *Pour Gramsci* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), both contrast Gramsci with Lenin. Buci-Gluckmann's work seems to me to be more fully thought through. See also Chantal Mouffe and Anne Showstack Sassoon, "Gramsci in France and Italy—A Review of the Literature," *Economy and Society*, 6, 1 (February 1977), 31–68.

6. This notion fitted well with Gramsci's assessment of the situation in Italy in the early 1920s; the working class was by itself too weak to carry the full burden of revolution and could only bring about the founding of a new state by an alliance with the peasantry and some petty bourgeois elements. In fact, Gramsci considered the workers' council movement as a school for leadership of such a coalition and his efforts prior to his imprisonment were directed towards building this coalition.

7. See Buci-Gluckmann, *Gramsci et l'état*, 63.

8. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Norton Critical Edition, edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 49–50; and Gramsci, *Selections*, 169–170.

9. The term “western Europe” refers here to the Britain, France, Germany and Italy of the 1920s and 1930s.

10. Gramsci, *Selections*, 238.

11. Gramsci borrowed the term “passive revolution” from the Neopolitan historian Vincenzo Cuocco (1777–1823), who was active in the early stages of the Risorgimento. In Cuocco’s interpretation, Napoleon’s armies had brought a passive revolution to Italy.

12. Buci-Gluckmann, *Gramsci et l’état*, 121.

13. Gramsci, *Quaderni*, vol. IV, 2632.

14. See Sorel’s discussion of myth and the “Napoleonic battle” in the letter to Daniel Halévy which introduces his *Reflections on Violence*, trans. by T. E. Hulme (New York: Peter Smith, 1941).

15. Gramsci, *Selections*, 366

16. *Ibid.*, 180–195.

17. *Ibid.*, 176.

18. *Ibid.*, 264.

19. *Ibid.*, 182.

20. *Ibid.*, 116.

21. *Ibid.*, 117.

22. The dating is tentative and would have to be refined by enquiry into the structural features proper to each period as well as into factors deemed to constitute the

breaking points between one period and another. These are offered here as mere notations for a revision of historical scholarship to raise some questions about hegemony and its attendant structures and mechanisms.

Imperialism, which has taken different forms in these periods, is a closely related question. In the first, *pax britannica*, although some territories were directly administered, control of colonies seems to have been incidental to rather than necessary for economic expansion. Argentina, a formally independent country, had essentially the same relationship to the British economy as Canada, a former colony. This, as George Lichtheim noted, may be called the phase of “liberal imperialism.” In the second period, the so-called “new imperialism” brought more emphasis on direct political controls. It also saw the growth of capital exports and of the finance capital identified by Lenin as the very essence of imperialism. In the third period, which might be called that of the neoliberal or monopoly-liberal imperialism, the internationalizing of production emerged as the preeminent form, supported also by new forms of finance capital (multinational banks and consortia). There seems little point in trying to define some unchanging essence of imperialism, but it would be useful to describe the structural characteristics of the imperialisms which correspond to successive hegemonic and nonhegemonic world orders.

The Modern World System as a Capitalist World-Economy

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN

Professor Wallerstein outlines key concepts and propositions associated with the capitalist world-system. A present-day Marxist scholar, Wallerstein sees capitalism as best understood as a global, system-wide phenomenon. We like this presentation of his work because it is a formal, succinct statement of his theoretical understanding of capitalist world-economy.

The world in which we are now living, the modern world-system, had its origins in the sixteenth century. This world-system was then located in only a part of the globe, primarily in parts of Europe and the Americas. It expanded over time to cover the whole globe. It is and has always been a *world-economy*. It is and has always been a

capitalist world-economy. We should begin by explaining what these two terms, world-economy and capitalism, denote. It will then be easier to appreciate the historical contours of the modern world-system—its origins, its geography, its temporal development, and its contemporary structural crisis.

Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–41. Reprinted by permission.

What we mean by a world-economy (Braudel's *économie-monde*) is a large geographic zone within which there is a division of labor and hence significant internal exchange of basic or essential goods as well as flows of capital and labor. A defining feature of a world-economy is that it is *not* bounded by a unitary political structure. Rather, there are many political units inside the world-economy, loosely tied together in our modern world-system in an interstate system. And a world-economy contains many cultures and groups—practicing many religions, speaking many languages, differing in their everyday patterns. This does not mean that they do not evolve some common cultural patterns, what we shall be calling a geoculture. It does mean that neither political nor cultural homogeneity is to be expected or found in a world-economy. What unifies the structure most is the division of labor which is constituted within it.

Capitalism is not the mere existence of persons or firms producing for sale on the market with the intention of obtaining a profit. Such persons or firms have existed for thousands of years all across the world. Nor is the existence of persons working for wages sufficient as a definition. Wage-labor has also been known for thousands of years. We are in a capitalist system only when the system gives priority to the *endless* accumulation of capital. Using such a definition, only the modern world-system has been a capitalist system. Endless accumulation is a quite simple concept: it means that people and firms are accumulating capital in order to accumulate still more capital, a process that is continual and endless. If we say that a system "gives priority" to such endless accumulation, it means that there exist structural mechanisms by which those who act with other motivations are penalized in some way, and are eventually eliminated from the social scene, whereas those who act with the appropriate motivations are rewarded and, if successful, enriched.

A world-economy and a capitalist system go together. Since world-economies lack the unifying cement of an overall political structure or a homogeneous culture, what holds them together is the efficacy of the division of labor. And this efficacy is a function of the constantly expanding wealth that a capitalist system provides. Until modern times, the world-economies that had been constructed either fell apart or were transformed *manu militari* into world-empires. Historically, the only world-economy

to have survived for a long time has been the modern world-system, and that is because the capitalist system took root and became consolidated as its defining feature.

Conversely, a capitalist system cannot exist within any framework except that of a world-economy. We shall see that a capitalist system requires a very special relationship between economic producers and the holders of political power. If the latter are too strong, as in a world-empire, their interests will override those of the economic producers, and the endless accumulation of capital will cease to be a priority. Capitalists need a large market (hence mini-systems are too narrow for them) but they also need a multiplicity of states, so that they can gain the advantages of working with states but also can circumvent states hostile to their interests in favor of states friendly to their interests. Only the existence of a multiplicity of states within the overall division of labor assures this possibility.

A capitalist world-economy is a collection of many institutions, the combination of which accounts for its processes, and all of which are intertwined with each other. The basic institutions are the market, or rather the markets; the firms that compete in the markets; the multiple states, within an interstate system; the households; the classes; and the status-groups (to use Weber's term, which some people in recent years have renamed the "identities"). They are all institutions that have been created within the framework of the capitalist world-economy. Of course, such institutions have some similarities to institutions that existed in prior historical systems to which we have given the same or similar names. But using the same name to describe institutions located in different historical systems quite often confuses rather than clarifies analysis. It is better to think of the set of institutions of the modern world-system as contextually specific to it.

Let us start with markets, since these are normally considered the essential feature of a capitalist system. A market is both a concrete local structure in which individuals or firms sell and buy goods, and a virtual institution across space where the same kind of exchange occurs. How large and wide-spread any virtual market is depends on the realistic alternatives that sellers and buyers have at a given time. In principle, in a capitalist world-economy the virtual market exists in the world-economy as a whole. But as we shall see, there are often interferences with

these boundaries, creating narrower and more “protected” markets. There are of course separate virtual markets for all commodities as well as for capital and different kinds of labor. But over time, there can also be said to exist a single virtual world market for all the factors of production combined, despite all the barriers that exist to its free functioning. One can think of this complete virtual market as a magnet for all producers and buyers, whose pull is a constant political factor in the decision-making of everyone—the states, the firms, the households, the classes, and the status-groups (or identities). This complete virtual world market is a reality in that it influences all decision making, but it never functions fully and freely (that is, without interference). The totally free market functions as an ideology, a myth, and a constraining influence, but never as a day-to-day reality.

One of the reasons it is not a day-to-day reality is that a totally free market, were it ever to exist, would make impossible the endless accumulation of capital. This may seem a paradox because it is surely true that capitalism cannot function without markets, and it is also true that capitalists regularly say that they favor free markets. But capitalists in fact need not totally free markets but rather markets that are only partially free. The reason is clear. Suppose there really existed a world market in which all the factors of production were totally free, as our textbooks in economics usually define this—that is, one in which the factors flowed without restriction, in which there were a very large number of buyers and a very large number of sellers, and in which there was perfect information (meaning that all sellers and all buyers knew the exact state of all costs of production). In such a perfect market, it would always be possible for the buyers to bargain down the sellers to an absolutely minuscule level of profit (let us think of it as a penny), and this low level of profit would make the capitalist game entirely uninteresting to producers, removing the basic social underpinnings of such a system.

What sellers always prefer is a monopoly, for then they can create a relatively wide margin between the costs of production and the sales price, and thus realize high rates of profit. Of course, perfect monopolies are extremely difficult to create, and rare, but quasi-monopolies are not. What one needs most of all is the support of the machinery of a relatively strong state, one which can enforce a quasi-monopoly. There are many ways of doing this.

One of the most fundamental is the system of patents which reserves rights in an “invention” for a specified number of years. This is what basically makes “new” products the most expensive for consumers and the most profitable for their producers. Of course, patents are often violated and in any case they eventually expire, but by and large they protect a quasi-monopoly for a time. Even so, production protected by patents usually remains only a quasi-monopoly, since there may be other similar products on the market that are not covered by the patent. This is why the normal situation for so-called leading products (that is, products that are both new and have an important share of the overall world market for commodities) is an oligopoly rather than an absolute monopoly. Oligopolies are however good enough to realize the desired high rate of profits, especially since the various firms often collude to minimize price competition.

Patents are not the only way in which states can create quasi-monopolies. State restrictions on imports and exports (so-called protectionist measures) are another. State subsidies and tax benefits are a third. The ability of strong states to use their muscle to prevent weaker states from creating counter-protectionist measures is still another. The role of the states as large-scale buyers of certain products willing to pay excessive prices is still another. Finally, regulations which impose a burden on producers may be relatively easy to absorb by large producers but crippling to smaller producers, an asymmetry which results in the elimination of the smaller producers from the market and thus increases the degree of oligopoly. The modalities by which states interfere with the virtual market are so extensive that they constitute a fundamental factor in determining prices and profits. Without such interferences, the capitalist system could not thrive and therefore could not survive.

Nonetheless, there are two inbuilt anti-monopolistic features in a capitalist world-economy. First of all, one producer’s monopolistic advantage is another producer’s loss. The losers will of course struggle politically to remove the advantages of the winners. They can do this by political struggle within the states where the monopolistic producers are located, appealing to doctrines of a free market and offering support to political leaders inclined to end a particular monopolistic advantage. Or they do this by persuading other states to defy the world market

monopoly by using their state power to sustain competitive producers. Both methods are used. Therefore, over time, every quasi-monopoly is undone by the entry of further producers into the market.

Quasi-monopolies are thus self-liquidating. But they last long enough (say thirty years) to ensure considerable accumulation of capital by those who control the quasi-monopolies. When a quasi-monopoly does cease to exist, the large accumulators of capital simply move their capital to new leading products or whole new leading industries. The result is a cycle of leading products. Leading products have moderately short lives, but they are constantly succeeded by other leading industries. Thus the game continues. As for the once-leading industries past their prime, they become more and more “competitive,” that is, less and less profitable. We see this pattern in action all the time.

Firms are the main actors in the market. Firms are normally the competitors of other firms operating in the same virtual market. They are also in conflict with those firms from whom they purchase inputs and those firms to which they sell their products. Fierce intercapitalist rivalry is the name of the game. And only the strongest and the most agile survive. One must remember that bankruptcy, or absorption by a more powerful firm, is the daily bread of capitalist enterprises. Not all capitalist entrepreneurs succeed in accumulating capital. Far from it. If they all succeeded, each would be likely to obtain very little capital. So, the repeated “failures” of firms not only weed out the weak competitors but are a condition *sine qua non* of the endless accumulation of capital. That is what explains the constant process of the concentration of capital.

To be sure, there is a downside to the growth of firms, either horizontally (in the same product), vertically (in the different steps in the chain of production), or what might be thought of as orthogonally (into other products not closely related). Size brings down costs through so-called economies of scale. But size adds costs of administration and coordination, and multiplies the risks of managerial inefficiencies. As a result of this contradiction, there has been a repeated zigzag process of firms getting larger and then getting smaller. But it has not at all been a simple up-and-down cycle. Rather, worldwide there has been a secular increase in the size of firms, the whole historical process taking the form of a ratchet, two steps up then one step back, continuously. The

size of firms also has direct political implications. Large size gives firms more political clout but also makes them more vulnerable to political assault—by their competitors, their employees, and their consumers. But here too the bottom line is an upward ratchet, toward more political influence over time.

The axial division of labor of a capitalist world-economy divides production into core-like products and peripheral products. Core-periphery is a relational concept. What we mean by core-periphery is the degree of profitability of the production processes. Since profitability is directly related to the degree of monopolization, what we essentially mean by core-like production processes is those that are controlled by quasi-monopolies. Peripheral processes are then those that are truly competitive. When exchange occurs, competitive products are in a weak position and quasi-monopolized products are in a strong position. As a result, there is a constant flow of surplus-value from the producers of peripheral products to the producers of core-like products. This has been called unequal exchange.

To be sure, unequal exchange is not the only way of moving accumulated capital from politically weak regions to politically strong regions. There is also plunder, often used extensively during the early days of incorporating new regions into the world-economy (consider, for example, the conquistadores and gold in the Americas). But plunder is self-liquidating. It is a case of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. Still, since the consequences are middle-term and the advantages short-term, there still exists much plunder in the modern world-system, although we are often “scandalized” when we learn of it. When Enron goes bankrupt, after procedures that have moved enormous sums into the hands of a few managers, that is in fact plunder. When “privatizations” of erstwhile state property lead to its being garnered by mafia-like businessmen who quickly leave the country with destroyed enterprises in their wake, that is plunder. Self-liquidating, yes, but only after much damage has been done to the world’s productive system, and indeed to the health of the capitalist world-economy.

Since quasi-monopolies depend on the patronage of strong states, they are largely located—juridically, physically, and in terms of ownership—within such states. There is therefore a geographical consequence of the core-peripheral relationship. Core-like processes tend to group themselves in a few states and to constitute the bulk of the production activity in such states.

Peripheral processes tend to be scattered among a large number of states and to constitute the bulk of the production activity in these states. Thus, for shorthand purposes we can talk of core states and peripheral states, so long as we remember that we are really talking of a relationship between production processes. Some states have a near even mix of core-like and peripheral products. We may call them semiperipheral states. They have, as we shall see, special political properties. It is however not meaningful to speak of semiperipheral production processes.

Since, as we have seen, quasi-monopolies exhaust themselves, what is a core-like process today will become a peripheral process tomorrow. The economic history of the modern world-system is replete with the shift, or downgrading, of products, first to semiperipheral countries, and then to peripheral ones. If circa 1800 the production of textiles was possibly the preeminent core-like production process, by 2000 it was manifestly one of the least profitable peripheral production processes. In 1800 these textiles were produced primarily in a very few countries (notably England and some other countries of northwestern Europe); in 2000 textiles were produced in virtually every part of the world-system, especially cheap textiles. The process has been repeated with many other products. Think of steel, or automobiles, or even computers. This kind of shift has no effect on the structure of the system itself. In 2000 there were other core-like processes (e.g. aircraft production or genetic engineering) which were concentrated in a few countries. There have always been new core-like processes to replace those which become more competitive and then move out of the states in which they were originally located.

The role of each state is very different vis-à-vis productive processes depending on the mix of core-peripheral processes within it. The strong states, which contain a disproportionate share of core-like processes, tend to emphasize their role of protecting the quasi-monopolies of the core-like processes. The very weak states, which contain a disproportionate share of peripheral production processes, are usually unable to do very much to affect the axial division of labor, and in effect are largely forced to accept the lot that has been given them.

The semiperipheral states which have a relatively even mix of production processes find

themselves in the most difficult situation. Under pressure from core states and putting pressure on peripheral states, their major concern is to keep themselves from slipping into the periphery and to do what they can to advance themselves toward the core. Neither is easy, and both require considerable state interference with the world market. These semiperipheral states are the ones that put forward most aggressively and most publicly so-called protectionist policies. They hope thereby to "protect" their production processes from the competition of stronger firms outside, while trying to improve the efficiency of the firms inside so as to compete better in the world market. They are eager recipients of the relocation of erstwhile leading products, which they define these days as achieving "economic development." In this effort, their competition comes not from the core states but from other semiperipheral states, equally eager to be the recipients of relocation which cannot go to all the eager aspirants simultaneously and to the same degree. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, some obvious countries to be labeled semiperipheral are South Korea, Brazil, and India—countries with strong enterprises that export products (for example steel, automobiles, pharmaceuticals) to peripheral zones, but that also regularly relate to core zones as importers of more "advanced" products.

The normal evolution of the leading industries—the slow dissolution of the quasi-monopolies—is what accounts for the cyclical rhythms of the world-economy. A major leading industry will be a major stimulus to the expansion of the world-economy and will result in considerable accumulation of capital. But it also normally leads to more extensive employment in the world-economy, higher wage-levels, and a general sense of relative prosperity. As more and more firms enter the market of the erstwhile quasi-monopoly, there will be "overproduction" (that is, too much production for the real effective demand at a given time) and consequently increased price competition (because of the demand squeeze), thus lowering the rates of profit. At some point, a buildup of unsold products results, and consequently a slowdown in further production.

When this happens, we tend to see a reversal of the cyclical curve of the world-economy. We talk of stagnation or recession in the world-economy. Rates of unemployment rise worldwide. Producers seek to reduce costs in order to maintain their share of the

world market. One of the mechanisms is relocation of the production processes to zones that have historically lower wages, that is, to semiperipheral countries. This shift puts pressure on the wage levels in the processes still remaining in core zones, and wages there tend to become lower as well. Effective demand which was at first lacking because of overproduction now becomes lacking because of a reduction in earnings of the consumers. In such a situation, not all producers necessarily lose out. There is obviously acutely increased competition among the diluted oligopoly that is now engaged in these production processes. They fight each other furiously, usually with the aid of their state machineries. Some states and some producers succeed in “exporting unemployment” from one core state to the others. Systemically, there is contraction, but certain core states and especially certain semiperipheral states may seem to be doing quite well.

The process we have been describing—expansion of the world-economy when there are quasi-monopolistic leading industries and contraction in the world-economy when there is a lowering of the intensity of quasi-monopoly—can be drawn as an up-and-down curve of so-called A-(expansion) and B-(stagnation) phases. A cycle consisting of an A-phase followed by a B-phase is sometimes referred to as a Kondratieff cycle, after the economist who described this phenomenon with clarity in the beginning of the twentieth century. Kondratieff cycles have up to now been more or less fifty to sixty years in length. Their exact length depends on the political measures taken by the states to avert a B-phase, and especially the measures to achieve recuperation from a B-phase on the basis of new leading industries that can stimulate a new A-phase.

A Kondratieff cycle, when it ends, never returns the situation to where it was at the beginning of the cycle. That is because what is done in the B-phase in order to get out of it and return to an A-phase changes in some important way the parameters of the world-system. The changes that solve the immediate (or short-run) problem of inadequate expansion of the world-economy (an essential element in maintaining the possibility of the endless accumulation of capital) restore a middle-run equilibrium but begin to create problems for the structure in the long run. The result is what we may call a secular trend. A secular trend should be thought of as a curve whose abscissa (or x-axis) records time and

whose ordinate (or y-axis) measures a phenomenon by recording the proportion of some group that has a certain characteristic. If over time the percentage is moving upward in an overall linear fashion, it means by definition (since the ordinate is in percentages) that at some point it cannot continue to do so. We call this reaching the asymptote, or 100 percent point. No characteristic can be ascribed to more than 100 percent of any group. This means that as we solve the middle-run problems by moving up on the curve, we will eventually run into the long-run problem of approaching the asymptote.

Let us suggest one example of how this works in a capitalist world-economy. One of the problems we noted in the Kondratieff cycles is that at a certain point major production processes become less profitable, and these processes begin to relocate in order to reduce costs. Meanwhile, there is increasing unemployment in core zones, and this affects global effective demand. Individual firms reduce their costs, but the collectivity of firms finds it more difficult to find sufficient customers. One way to restore a sufficient level of world effective demand is to increase the pay levels of ordinary workers in core zones, something which has frequently occurred at the latter end of Kondratieff B-periods. This thereby creates the kind of effective demand that is necessary to provide sufficient customers for new leading products. But of course higher pay levels may mean lesser profits for the entrepreneurs. At a world level this can be compensated for by expanding the pool of wage workers elsewhere in the world, who are willing to work at a lower level of wages. This can be done by drawing new persons into the wage-labor pool, for whom the lower wage represents in fact an increase in real income. But of course every time one draws “new” persons into the wage-labor pool, one reduces the number of persons remaining outside the wage-labor pool. There will come a time when the pool is diminished to the point where it no longer exists effectively. We are reaching the asymptote. We shall return to this issue in the last chapter when we discuss the structural crisis of the twenty-first century.

Obviously, a capitalist system requires that there be workers who provide the labor for the productive processes. It is often said that these laborers are proletarians, that is, wage-workers who have no alternative means of support (because they are landless and without monetary or property reserves). This is not quite accurate. For one thing, it is unrealistic to think

of workers as isolated individuals. Almost all workers are linked to other persons in household structures that normally group together persons of both sexes and of different age-levels. Many, perhaps most, of these household structures can be called families, but family ties are not necessarily the only mode by which households can be held together. Households often have common residences, but in fact less frequently than one thinks.

A typical household consists of three to ten persons who, over a long period (say thirty years or so), pool multiple sources of income in order to survive collectively. Households are not usually egalitarian structures internally nor are they unchanging structures (persons are born and die, enter or leave households, and in any case grow older and thus tend to alter their economic role). What distinguishes a household structure is some form of obligation to provide income for the group and to share in the consumption resulting from this income. Households are quite different from clans or tribes or other quite large and extended entities, which often share obligations of mutual security and identity but do not regularly share income. Or if there exist such large entities which are income-pooling, they are dysfunctional for the capitalist system.

We first must look at what the term "income" covers. There are in fact generically five kinds of income in the modern world-system. And almost all households seek and obtain all five kinds, although in different proportions (which turns out to be very important). One obvious form is wage-income, by which is meant payment (usually in money form) by persons outside the household for work of a member of the household that is performed outside the household in some production process. Wage-income may be occasional or regular. It may be payment by time employed or by work accomplished (piece-work). Wage-income has the advantage to the employer that it is "flexible" (that is, continued work is a function of the employer's need), although the trade union, other forms of syndical action by workers, and state legislation have often limited employers' flexibility in many ways. Still, employers are almost never obligated to provide lifetime support to particular workers. Conversely, this system has the disadvantage to the employer that when more workers are needed, they may not be readily available for employment, especially if the economy is expanding. That is, in a system of wage-labor, the

employer is trading not being required to pay workers in periods when they are not needed for the guarantee that the workers are available when they are needed.

A second obvious source of household income is subsistence activity. We usually define this type of work too narrowly, taking it to mean only the efforts of rural persons to grow food and produce necessities for their own consumption without passing through a market. This is indeed a form of subsistence production, and this kind of work has of course been on a sharp decline in the modern world-system, which is why we often say that subsistence production is disappearing. By using such a narrow definition, we are however neglecting the numerous ways in which subsistence activity is actually increasing in the modern world. When someone cooks a meal or washes dishes at home, this is subsistence production. When a homeowner assembles furniture bought from a store, this is subsistence production. And when a professional uses a computer to send an e-mail which, in an earlier day, a (paid) secretary would have typed, he or she is engaged in subsistence production. Subsistence production is a large part of household income today in the most economically wealthy zones of the capitalist world-economy.

A third kind of household income we might generically call petty commodity production. A petty commodity is defined as a product produced within the confines of the household but sold for cash on a wider market. Obviously, this sort of production continues to be very widespread in the poorer zones of the world-economy but is not totally absent anywhere. In richer zones we often call it free-lancing. This kind of activity involves not only the marketing of produced goods (including of course intellectual goods) but also petty marketing. When a small boy sells on the street cigarettes or matches one by one to consumers who cannot afford to buy them in the normal quantity that is packaged, this boy is engaged in petty-commodity production, the production activity being simply the disassembly of the larger package and its transport to the street market.

A fourth kind of income is what we can generically call rent. Rent can be drawn from some major capital investment (offering urban apartments for rent, or rooms within apartments) or from locational advantage (collecting a toll on a private bridge) or from capital ownership (clipping coupons on bonds,

earning interest on a savings account). What makes it rent is that it is ownership and not work of any kind that makes possible the income.

Finally, there is a fifth kind of income, which in the modern world we call transfer payments. These may be defined as income that comes to an individual by virtue of a defined obligation of someone else to provide this income. The transfer payments may come from persons close to the household, as when gifts or loans are given from one generation to the other at the time of birth, marriage, or death. Such transfer payments between households may be made on the basis of reciprocity (which in theory ensures no extra income over a lifetime but tends to smooth out liquidity needs). Or transfer payments may occur through the efforts of the state (in which case one's own money may simply be returning at a different moment in time), or through an insurance scheme (in which one may in the end benefit or lose), or through redistribution from one economic class to another.

As soon as we think about it, we all are familiar with the income-pooling that goes on in households. Picture a middle-class American family, in which the adult male has a job (and perhaps moonlights at a second), the adult female is a caterer operating out of her home, the teenage son has a paper route, and the twelve-year-old daughter babysits. Add in perhaps the grandmother who draws a widow's pension and who also occasionally babysits for a small child, and the room above the garage that is rented out. Or picture the working-class Mexican household in which the adult male has migrated to the United States illegally and is sending home money, the adult female is cultivating a plot at home, the teenage girl is working as a domestic (paid in money and in kind) in a wealthy Mexican's home, and the subteen boy is peddling small items in the town market after school (or instead of school). Each of us can elaborate many more such combinations.

In actual practice, few households are without all five kinds of income. But one should notice right away that the persons within the household who tend to provide the income may correlate with sex or age categories. That is to say, many of these tasks are gender- and age-defined. Wage-labor was for a long time largely considered the province of males between the ages of fourteen or eighteen to sixty or sixty-five. Subsistence and petty-commodity

production have been for the most part defined as the province of adult women and of children and the aged. State transfer income has been largely linked to wage earning, except for certain transfers relating to child rearing. Much political activity of the last hundred years has been aimed at overcoming the gender specificity of these definitions.

As we have already noted, the relative importance of the various forms of income in particular households has varied widely. Let us distinguish two major varieties: the household where wage-income accounts for 50 percent or more of the total lifetime income, and the household where it accounts for less. Let us call the former a "proletarian household" (because it seems to be heavily dependent on wage-income, which is what the term proletarian is supposed to invoke); and let us then call the latter a "semiproletarian household" (because there is doubtless at least some wage-income for most members of it). If we do this, we can see that an employer has an advantage in employing those wage-laborers who are in a semiproletarian household. Whenever wage-labor constitutes a substantial component of household income, there is necessarily a floor for how much the wage-earner can be paid. It must be an amount that represents at least a proportionate share of the reproduction costs of the household. This is what we can think of as an *absolute* minimum wage. If, however, the wage-earner is ensconced in a household that is only semiproletarian, the wage-earner can be paid a wage *below* the absolute minimum wage, without necessarily endangering the survival of the household. The difference can be made up by additional income provided from other sources and usually by other members of the household. What we see happening in such cases is that the other producers of income in the household are in effect transferring surplus-value to the employer of the wage-earner over and above whatever surplus-value the wage-earner himself is transferring, by permitting the employer to pay less than the absolute minimum wage.

It follows that in a capitalist system employers would in general prefer to employ wage-workers coming from semiproletarian households. There are however two pressures working in the other direction. One is the pressure of the wage-workers themselves who seek to be "proletarianized," because that in effect means being better paid. And one is the contradictory pressure on the employers themselves.

Against their individual need to lower wages, there is their collective longer-term need to have a large enough effective demand in the world-economy to sustain the market for their products. So over time, as a result of these two very different pressures, there is a slow increase in the number of households that are proletarianized. Nonetheless, this description of the long-term trend is contrary to the traditional social science picture that capitalism as a system requires primarily proletarians as workers. If this were so, it would be difficult to explain why, after four to five hundred years, the proportion of proletarian workers is not much higher than it is. Rather than think of proletarianization as a capitalist necessity, it would be more useful to think of it as a locus of struggle, whose outcome has been a slow if steady increase, a secular trend moving toward its asymptote.

There are classes in a capitalist system, since there are clearly persons who are differently located in the economic system with different levels of income who have differing interests. For example, it is obviously in the interest of workers to seek an increase in their wages, and it is equally obviously in the interest of employers to resist these increases, at least in general. But, as we have just seen, wage-workers are ensconced in households. It makes no sense to think of the workers belonging to one class and other members of their household to another. It is obviously households, not individuals, that are located within classes. Individuals who wish to be class-mobile often find that they must withdraw from the households in which they are located and locate themselves in other households, in order to achieve such an objective. This is not easy but it is by no means impossible.

Classes however are not the only groups within which households locate themselves. They are also members of status-groups or identities. (If one calls them status-groups, one is emphasizing how they are perceived by others, a sort of objective criterion. If one calls them identities, one is emphasizing how they perceive themselves, a sort of subjective criterion. But under one name or the other, they are an institutional reality of the modern world-system.) Status-groups or identities are ascribed labels, since we are born into them, or at least we usually think we are born into them. It is on the whole rather difficult to join such groups voluntarily, although not impossible. These status-groups or identities are the numerous "peoples" of which all of us are members—nations, races, ethnic groups, religious

communities, but also genders and categories of sexual preferences. Most of these categories are often alleged to be anachronistic leftovers of pre-modern times. This is quite wrong as a premise. Membership in status-groups or identities is very much a part of modernity. Far from dying out, they are actually growing in importance as the logic of a capitalist system unfolds further and consumes us more and more intensively.

If we argue that households locate themselves in a class, and all their members share this location, is this equally true of status-groups or identities? There does exist an enormous pressure within households to maintain a common identity, to be part of a single status-group or identity. This pressure is felt first of all by persons who are marrying and who are required, or at least pressured, to look within the status-group or identity for a partner. But obviously, the constant movement of individuals within the modern world-system plus the normative pressures to ignore status-group or identity membership in favor of meritocratic criteria have led to a considerable mixing of original identities within the framework of households. Nonetheless, what tends to happen in each household is an evolution toward a single identity, the emergence of new, often barely articulated status-group identities that precisely reify what began as a mixture, and thereby reunify the household in terms of status-group identities. One element in the demand to legitimate gay marriages is this felt pressure to reunify the identity of the household.

Why is it so important for households to maintain singular class and status-group identities, or at least pretend to maintain them? Such a homogenization of course aids in maintaining the unity of a household as an income-pooling unit and in overcoming any centrifugal tendencies that might arise because of internal inequalities in the distribution of consumption and decision making. It would however be a mistake to see this tendency as primarily an internal group defense mechanism. There are important benefits to the overall world-system from the homogenizing trends within household structures.

Households serve as the primary socializing agencies of the world-system. They seek to teach us, and particularly the young, knowledge of and respect for the social rules by which we are supposed to abide. They are of course seconded by state agencies such as schools and armies as well as by religious institutions and the media. But none of these come

close to the households in actual impact. What however determines how the households will socialize their members? Largely how the secondary institutions frame the issues for the households, and their ability to do so effectively depends on the relative homogeneity of the households—that is, they have and see themselves as having a defined role in the historical social system. A household that is certain of its status-group identity—its nationality, its race, its religion, its ethnicity, its code of sexuality—knows exactly how to socialize its members. One whose identity is less certain but that tries to create a homogenized, even if novel, identity can do almost as well. A household that would openly avow a permanently split identity would find the socialization function almost impossible to do, and might find it difficult to survive as a group.

Of course, the powers that be in a social system always hope that socialization results in the acceptance of the very real hierarchies that are the product of the system. They also hope that socialization results in the internalization of the myths, the rhetoric, and the theorizing of the system. This does happen in part but never in full. Households also socialize members into rebellion, withdrawal, and deviance. To be sure, up to a point even such antisystemic socialization can be useful to the system by offering an outlet for restless spirits, provided that the overall system is in relative equilibrium. In that case, one can anticipate that the negative socializations may have at most a limited impact on the functioning of the system. But when the historical system comes into structural crisis, suddenly such antisystemic socializations can play a profoundly unsettling role for the system.

Thus far, we have merely cited class identification and status-group identification as the two alternative modes of collective expression for households. But obviously there are multiple kinds of status-groups, not always totally consonant one with the other. Furthermore, as historical time has moved on, the number of kinds of status-groups has grown, not diminished. In the late twentieth century, people often began to claim identities in terms of sexual preferences which were not a basis for household construction in previous centuries. Since we are all involved in a multiplicity of status-groups or identities, the question arises whether there is a priority order of identities. In case of conflicts, which should prevail? Which does prevail? Can a household be homogeneous in terms of one identity but not in

terms of another? The answer obviously is yes, but what are the consequences?

We must look at the pressures on households coming from outside. Most of the status-groups have some kind of trans-household institutional expression. And these institutions place direct pressure on the households not merely to conform to their norms and their collective strategies but to give them priority. Of the trans-household institutions, the states are the most successful in influencing the households because they have the most immediate weapons of pressure (the law, substantial benefits to distribute, the capacity to mobilize media). But wherever the state is less strong, the religious structures, the ethnic organizations, and similar groups may become the strongest voices insisting on the priorities of the households. Even when status-groups or identities describe themselves as antisystemic, they may still be in rivalry with other antisystemic status-groups or identities, demanding priority in allegiance. It is this complicated turmoil of household identities that underlies the roller coaster of political struggle within the modern world-system.

The complex relationships of the world-economy, the firms, the states, the households, and the trans-household institutions that link members of classes and status-groups are beset by two opposite—but symbiotic—ideological themes; universalism on the one hand and racism and sexism on the other.

Universalism is a theme prominently associated with the modern world-system. It is in many ways one of its boasts. Universalism means in general the priority to general rules applying equally to all persons, and therefore the rejection of particularistic preferences in most spheres. The only rules that are considered permissible within the framework of universalism are those which can be shown to apply directly to the narrowly defined proper functioning of the world-system.

The expressions of universalism are manifold. If we translate universalism to the level of the firm or the school, it means for example the assigning of persons to positions on the basis of their training and capacities (a practice otherwise known as meritocracy). If we translate it to the level of the household, it implies among other things that marriage should be contracted for reasons of “love” but not those of wealth or ethnicity or any other general particularism. If we translate it to the

level of the state, it means such rules as universal suffrage and equality before the law. We are all familiar with the mantras, since they are repeated with some regularity in public discourse. They are supposed to be the central focus of our socialization. Of course, we know that these mantras are unevenly advocated in various locales of the world-system (and we shall want to discuss why this is so), and we know that they are far from fully observed in practice. But they have become the official gospel of modernity.

Universalism is a positive norm, which means that most people assert their belief in it, and almost everyone claims that it is a virtue. Racism and sexism are just the opposite. They too are norms, but they are negative norms, in that most people deny their belief in them. Almost everyone declares that they are vices, yet nonetheless they are norms. What is more, the degree to which the negative norms of racism and sexism are observed is at least as high as, in fact for the most part much higher than, the virtuous norm of universalism. This may seem to be an anomaly. But it is not.

Let us look at what we mean by racism and sexism. Actually these are terms that came into widespread use only in the second half of the twentieth century. Racism and sexism are instances of a far wider phenomenon that has no convenient name, but that might be thought of as anti-universalism, or the active institutional discrimination against all the persons in a given status-group or identity. For each kind of identity, there is a social ranking. It can be a crude ranking, with two categories, or elaborate, with a whole ladder. But there is always a group on top in the ranking, and one or several groups at the bottom. These rankings are both worldwide and more local, and both kinds of ranking have enormous consequences in the lives of people and in the operation of the capitalist world-economy.

We are all quite familiar with the worldwide rankings within the modern world-system: men over women, Whites over Blacks (or non-Whites), adults over children (or the aged), educated over less educated, heterosexuals over gays and lesbians, the bourgeois and professionals over workers, urbanites over rural dwellers. Ethnic rankings are more local, but in every country, there is a dominant ethnicity and then the others. Religious rankings vary across the world, but in any particular zone everyone is aware of what they are. Nationalism often takes the form of

constructing links between one side of each of the antinomies into fused categories, so that, for example, one might create the norm that adult White heterosexual males of particular ethnicities and religions are the only ones who would be considered "true" nationals.

There are several questions which this description brings to our attention. What is the point of professing universalism and practicing anti-universalism simultaneously? Why should there be so many varieties of anti-universalism? Is this contradictory antinomy a necessary part of the modern world-system? Universalism and anti-universalism are in fact both operative day to day, but they operate in different arenas. Universalism tends to be the operative principle most strongly for what we could call the cadres of the world-system—neither those who are at the very top in terms of power and wealth, nor those who provide the large majority of the world's workers and ordinary people in all fields of work and all across the world, but rather an in-between group of people who have leadership or supervisory roles in various institutions. It is a norm that spells out the optimal recruitment mode for such technical, professional, and scientific personnel. This in-between group may be larger or smaller according to a country's location in the world-system and the local political situation. The stronger the country's economic position, the larger the group. Whenever universalism loses its hold even among the cadres in particular parts of the world-system, however, observers tend to see dysfunction, and quite immediately there emerge political pressures (both from within the country and from the rest of the world) to restore some degree of universalistic criteria.

There are two quite different reasons for this. On the one hand, universalism is believed to ensure relatively competent performance and thus make for a more efficient world-economy, which in turn improves the ability to accumulate capital. Hence, normally those who control production processes push for such universalistic criteria. Of course, universalistic criteria arouse resentment when they come into operation only after some particularistic criterion has been invoked. If the civil service is only open to persons of some particular religion or ethnicity, then the choice of persons within this category may be universalistic but the overall choice is not. If universalistic criteria are invoked only at the time of choice while ignoring the particularistic criteria by which individuals have access to the

necessary prior training, again there is resentment. When, however, the choice is truly universalistic, resentment may still occur because choice involves exclusion, and we may get “populist” pressure for untested and unranked access to position. Under these multiple circumstances, universalistic criteria play a major social-psychological role in legitimating meritocratic allocation. They make those who have attained the status of cadre feel justified in their advantage and ignore the ways in which the so-called universalistic criteria that permitted their access were not in fact fully universalistic, or ignore the claims of all the others to material benefits given primarily to cadres. The norm of universalism is an enormous comfort to those who are benefiting from the system. It makes them feel they deserve what they have.

On the other hand, racism, sexism, and other anti-universalistic norms perform equally important tasks in allocating work, power, and privilege within the modern world-system. They seem to imply exclusions from the social arena. Actually they are really modes of inclusion, but of inclusion at inferior ranks. These norms exist to justify the power ranking, to enforce the lower ranking, and per-

versely even to make it somewhat palatable to those who have the lower ranking. Anti-universalistic norms are presented as codifications of natural, eternal verities not subject to social modification. They are presented not merely as cultural verities but, implicitly or even explicitly, as biologically rooted necessities of the functioning of the human animal.

They become norms for the state, the workplace, the social arena. But they also become norms into which households are pushed to socialize their members, an effort that has been quite successful on the whole. They justify the polarization of the world-system. Since polarization has been increasing over time, racism, sexism, and other forms of anti-universalism have become ever more important, even though the political struggle against such forms of anti-universalism has also become more central to the functioning of the world-system.

The bottom line is that the modern world-system has made as a central, basic feature of its structure the simultaneous existence, propagation, and practice of both universalism and anti-universalism. This antinomic duo is as fundamental to the system as is the core-peripheral axial division of labor.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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