

World Order and Hegemony as an Institution of International Society

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I must begin with two sets of thanks. First is to the organisers of this conference for their very kind invitation to participate in this way. The second is to the *UK Economic and Social Research Council*, the research council that is currently funding my three-year project on 'Legitimacy and Hegemony'.

We will hear much about hegemony over the next few days, and – to judge from the paper titles – the many different ways in which the concept is used and understood. I make no claim to ownership of the concept, and certainly do not suggest any single or absolute meaning. However, I do want to advance one version in particular. It addresses a key component of contemporary world order – but only ONE component: the role of the sole superpower. My claim is that we [the IR academic community] haven't made a very good job of theorising this role, and others have made an even worse job of putting it into practice [we can debate *our* responsibility for that outcome].

David C Hendrickson (Colorado College) has commented (many others have said much the same thing): 'At no time in the last 50 years has the United States stood in such antagonism to both the primary norms and the central institutions of international society'. This is the issue that concerns me.

Central to my argument is an important distinction between primacy, on the one hand, and hegemony, on the other. We have been too fixated on the former, and paid not nearly enough attention to the latter.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has enjoyed a position generally described as one of primacy. It has been the single most important actor in international politics. Quantitatively, it is associated with some 25% of global economic activity and 50% of all global military expenditure. The main scholarly debate about primacy has been confined to the likely durability of these conditions: whether primacy will last, or evoke counterbalancing behaviour.

Thus approached, primacy has evoked 2 types of reaction:

- 1) As a set of conditions to be exploited, allowing the US to 'go it alone' and to reshape the world unilaterally – this is not just a theoretical perspective, but became an action policy as well.
- 2) As a problem for everyone else. It is an abnormal condition of international relations, and 'normal' relations have been temporarily suspended. To resume properly, many seem to suggest, we need to await some new equilibrium. We look to the future when US primacy will wane and disappear. In the meantime, we sit it out – and sit on our hands.

This has been an impoverished debate. *Neither* of these two alternatives is acceptable:

- 1) It has been tried and found wanting. This has had a very negative impact on world order, and imposed high costs, not least on the USA, but on many others as well.
- 2) There are acute world-order problems that require collective action *now*. I want to give this special emphasis as central to my argument. We can't afford to wait for a more appealing distribution of power to come along. We need to think creatively about the one that actually faces us, not wish that it were something else. My starting point then is not any rejoicing in the concentration of power in US hands [I come here not to praise it!], but to accept it as a necessary part of urgently required collective international action. By the time we have a more normal distribution of power, it may well be too late.

So is there another choice? I want to talk about an alternative to primacy that offers some prospect of making a constructive contribution to world order. This is not primacy, but what I call *hegemony*. To be absolutely clear, this is *not* a hegemony that presently exists, but one that would require political construction.

What do I mean by this hegemony?

- 1) Not just a set of material conditions in which one state is predominant; not, in other words, primacy alone;
- 2) Not something that is unilaterally possessed by the hegemon; not something that the dominant state has in its pocket;
- 3) It is a status bestowed by others, and rests on recognition by them;
- 4) This recognition is in return for the bearing of special responsibilities.

In short, by hegemony I mean an institutionalised practice of special rights and responsibilities conferred on a state with the resources to lead.

What I describe is a middle position of three to be found in the IR literature. Let me sketch these:

- 1) Hegemony is itself the major problem in international life. Those legitimacy principles that have evolved in international society assume and promote a *dispersal* of power, not its *concentration*. It is often said of international society that it is essentially 'anti-hegemonial'. That is its essential nature.
- 2) Hegemony as the solution to international problems. This is the view that stability is most likely to arise where there is a concentration of power. This is Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), much favoured in 1970s and 1980s, but now largely out of fashion. My position is that, unlike HST, a concentration of material power by itself is no guarantee of international stability. What we have experienced in recent years bears witness to that view.
- 3) The international society approach, and the one I support. Hegemony may offer part of the solution, but in a way different from HST. International society approaches generally seek to negotiate an accommodation between systems of power relations and shared normative frameworks. They take both seriously. This makes possible practices that can be regarded as institutions. Classically, these theorists have specified a number of such institutions of international society – international law, diplomacy, war, the balance of power – and most directly relevant for my argument, the role of the great powers. Historically, and recurrently, international society has recognised the special role and status of the great powers collectively – the P5 in the UNSC is one clear example. This has been done, so it is claimed, because it simplifies international life, and helps instil a degree of central direction to it.

So, in the past, international society has been able to institutionalise disparities of power and degrees of hierarchy. Can this now be done in the case of hegemony?

By analogy with the role of the great powers, my suggestion is that we approach hegemony as a possible institution of international society, in conditions of material primacy. This would rest on a material power distribution, but needs to be something more: it requires a social and a normative-sanction. It needs to be *legitimate*, and this is the key.

How it might become so is a work of complex political construction, and there are no easy blueprints. International-society theorists have suggested that central to the acceptance of the role of the great powers has been the following:

- 1) Not to make their special rights too explicit;
- 2) To act in conformity with their own rules;
- 3) To satisfy demands for just change;
- 4) To co-opt secondary powers where necessary.

These make a reasonable beginning in prescribing what such an institutionalisation of hegemony would require.

Legitimacy lies at the heart of the distinction between the primacy that we have recently experienced, and the hegemony that I offer as a preferable way forward. Why does this matter?

If all we are seeing is simply a *crisis of primacy* (if you like, an impending shift in the distribution of power) the main loser will be the USA. It will see a steady erosion of its ability to manage world order.

If instead (as I happen to think) the main failure instead lies in transforming an existing primacy into an accepted hegemony, then what we face is a *crisis of legitimacy*, and we will all lose as a result. What we lose is the capacity effectively to mobilise international society to meet the very real and urgent challenges that confront us. Let me be very clear on this. My purpose is to strengthen the institution of hegemony in the best interests of international society as a whole, not to augment the individual power of the would-be hegemon.

Legitimacy is not an alternative to power but a key constituent of it. In conditions of primacy, we lose social power if we fail to co-opt the preponderant state's resources for collective ends.

We presently face a big and demanding agenda—for example, climate change, distribution of resources, including food, and proliferation of WMD. International society needs urgently to find ways of institutionalising its relationship with the USA along these lines. This needs to be approached as a two-way street. It requires a fundamental change of direction on the part of the USA to meet these responsibilities. It requires accommodation also on the part of the rest. Constructing such hegemony is no task for the US alone – certainly not just for a new US President – but a task facing us all.

None of this is straightforward. I am conscious of the many problems and challenges – potential decline in US economic primacy, uncertain US political 'will', resistance from other great or secondary powers. I end by mentioning just one of these challenges. For such an institution to become acceptable, it is no longer sufficient that it be legitimated within the confines of the inter-state system alone. Even if this were to stabilize inter-state relations, it would hardly amount to a world order. The institutions of international society are now accountable to a much broader constituency, including the many – but disparate – voices of global civil society. A recent set of essays has sought to document changes in popular perceptions of the USA around the world (such as Farber, *How they Think of US*, 2007). I single out as an example the essay on Turkey which claimed: 'Turks, today, from across the political spectrum fear that the United States, the contemporary aspirant to world hegemon, has lost its moral authority...' (Nur Bilge Criss). To the extent that this is so, it is a measure of the scale of the task at hand, to restore some of that authority. But the costs of failure are equally immense, and will be just as widely shared.

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