

Some Notes on the Rise and Decline of the Great Powers, Hegemony, and Gramsci

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Throughout the past two decades there has been a resurgence of the concern with the rise of new great powers and its thematic cousin, American hegemony's challenges and challengers (a resurgence that must be seen, of course, as relative to the static preoccupations of Cold War/bipolar International Relations theory). However, scholarly production has not been particularly enlightening. Not because the subject there considered is unimportant. On the contrary, rises and declines –be it of states, empires, civilizations, inter alia- and the potential to restructure world politics inherent to preeminent or hegemonic political units are powerful engines in international relations. This is why a critique of the epistemological, methodological and empirical aspects of this literature and a quest for more productive avenues of research is necessary.

Neither a comprehensive critique of the literature nor a complete proposal for an alternative research project can be the goal of the present short essay. For the time being it will suffice to open some paths of discussion by way of putting forward certain challenges to this literature and sketching some notes (in a not un-Gramscian way) on alternative paths of research.

By now the reader might reasonably be wondering what does Gramsci has to do with all this. Gramsci's concept of hegemony, but also his ideas on war of position vs. war of movement and passive revolution could eventually be employed, I will argue, as one of the building-blocks of, as Gramsci would have expressed it himself, a counter-hegemonic narrative on the phenomenon of the rise and fall of great powers and international hegemony. (1)

A note on the use of Gramsci: As with most of the work of the Italian Marxist, coming up with a circumscribed definition for these critical concepts and ideas is an arduous, and probably unfruitful exercise. The *Prison Notebooks*, (2) Gramsci's magnum opus, is in itself just notes; ideas dispersed in short chapters that do not claim to be a coherent project (at least in the way we tend to think the argumentative organization of books). Thus Gramsci's own work allows for a not rigidly structured use of his ideas (e.g. there is no need to follow him all the way down in his unorthodox Marxism). Even more, one of the central points of Gramscian thought centers around the notion of a pragmatic understanding of theory. In other words, the search for a "real theoretical truth" is not nearly as relevant as the search for a "useful truth". With this spirit is that I approach the issues of hegemony and rise and fall with the *Prison Notebooks* behind the arm.

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The most diffused argument on the rise and decline of the great powers (3) can be summarized, *grosso modo* –and avoiding existing differences between schools and theorists- as following: the international system, against what balance of power theorists would argue, tends to have a hegemonic power (Spain in the 16th centuries, Portugal in the 17th century, the Netherlands in the second half of the 18th century, Great Britain in the 19th and beginnings of the 20th century, and, from then on, the United States) that establishes a certain international order. But the system is not immutable, the difference in the rates of growth between states will generate competitors to the hegemon, which, if dissatisfied with the present order, will try to bring it down (4) -even if this entails the use of force (*i.e.* a hegemonic war, in the words of Raymond Aron). (5)

Not surprisingly, and in some ways understandably, the literature has an obsession with

transition periods and war. In social scientific terms then, the whole phenomenon of rising and declining ends up as the *explanandum* to explicate the *explanans* (i.e. transition and war). By doing this it obscures an array of phenomena that cannot be studied in a dichotomy of hegemon and challenger. Methodological and empirical issues (e.g. How do we measure power? Is economic rise a sufficient cause for a change in the system? How many cases are historically relevant? etc.) are part of the problem (more on these difficulties below).

Moreover, this approach seems to be propelled by an anxiety generated by the prospect that there will be no huge transformations in the world. In the words of John Gray: "paranoia is a protest against unimportance." (6) In Gramscian vocabulary: people need to think they are living in changing "epochal" times (especially academics that make a living out of "explaining and predicting" these "epochal changes"). The result has been an anxious expectation for the arrival of a challenger to the hegemon and the plausibility of a hegemonic conflict in the process of transition. First came the USSR from the 1950s to the 1970s. When the Soviets proved to be a pathetic challenger, the time came for Japan, the "rising sun." Japan's challenge was dismissed before the end of the 20th century. However, this was not a cause of distress for students of power transitions, now they had China.

As I have showed elsewhere, (7) serious contemplation cannot but conclude that there is little use for the kind of futurology contest that this literature has turned into. Of course, the central question then is: acknowledging that this is a topic that should be seriously studied, how can the discipline go forward?

Diversifying the questions we have been asking is one way. For example, the problématique should be not so much *what* will happen when a state rises, or even *which* are the states currently rising, but why have so many states *failed* to rise -a necessary(!) counterpart to understand the deep reasons for "successful" rises. Working on the "rise of the West" in a comparative-civilizational line, Jack Goldstone comments on the tendency to uncritically accept a "winner" bias: "Because all too often, we view world history in terms of 'winners' and 'losers,' elevate to prominence much in the 'winners' history, and obscure or lose sight of similar items in the history of retrospective 'losers'." (8) Until we have a good grasp of why the great-powers-that-could-have-been -or as I call it elsewhere, "failed rises"- (9) follow different trajectories from those considered "successful" rises (while sharing similar departure points) our understanding of rises, declines and hegemony will stay worryingly incomplete.

On the other hand, increasing the complexity in the concept of hegemony (and thus, of power) promises to be a profitable enterprise. And here is where Gramsci enters the scene.

The most convincing Gramscian in International Relations theory has defined the Italian's concept of hegemony in the following way:

"Antonio Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to express a unity between objective material forces and ethico-political ideas in Marxian terms, a unity of structure and superstructure- in which power based on dominance over production is rationalized through an ideology incorporating compromise or consensus between dominant and subordinate groups.... A hegemonial structure of world order is one in which power takes a primarily consensual form..."(10)

One of Gramsci's biggest challenges was how to devise the creation of a new hegemony in Western Europe -that is, an alternative to western capitalism/democracy. The classical methods of frontal and violent attack, essence of the Russian Revolution, or what Gramsci calls "war of movement," were of no use in the West. While it was just a government that the Bolsheviks had to overthrow in order to install a new regime, the proto-Modern Princes (i.e. Communist Parties) in Western Europe would have to confront a much more robust complex represented in the formula "civil society plus state." In this context a "war of

position” would be the best option. The core of this notion is that, confronted to such a resilient organization, one must win the battle from within; create a new hegemony before taking power. According to Gramsci: “A social group can and indeed must, already ‘lead’ before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power)” (p. 47, *Prison Notebooks*). A simple power battle -a new October 1917- was not enough. This is why Cox talks about a “consensual form” and the primacy of ideology.

Going from mainstream IR “thin” to a “thicker” version of hegemony (using Geertzian concepts in a slightly unorthodox way) would problematize the issue of rises and declines in interesting ways.

To begin with, the preeminent place currently occupied in the literature by rates of growth would seem laughable to Gramsci. (11) Both in the analysis/futurology of possible challengers to US hegemony and for the more general dynamics of rises and declines -see especially the libraries of (naïve?) scholarly and journalistic production on the so-called “BRICS”. Even if these trajectories of growth could be accurately predicted (a dubious assumption), inferring a new international *historic bloc* or a new great powers configuration would depend on a leap of faith. Extrapolating Gramsci’s historicism, it could be argued that an essentially material account of power *might* have been plausible during, let’s say, Habsburg preeminence in the 16th and part of the 17th centuries. This has not been the case for a long time. Just as Gramsci devised a qualitative change in European politics, in which civil-society/state and ideas/material-forces were inevitably intertwined, there is case to make that the present international order is too complex to be seen **just** through ratios of economic growth and other material variables. (12) A counter-hegemon would need to do much more than surpass the US materially (however this is defined). But the point is also that the general phenomenon of the rise of great powers is likewise much more complex than devising future scenarios under the bewilderment generated by the BRIC’s growth rates.

Several paths follow the critique of “thin” hegemony. One is to give a more relevant place to discourse, recognition and legitimacy. Achieving great power status or building a hegemonic order is in many ways a discursive affair. In the 19th century recognition as a great power might have been identified by, inter alia, studying who participated in the diplomatic arena as a legitimate great power –e.g. who was sitting as a peer at the table during the Congress of Vienna. This discursive dynamic is probably more complex nowadays –e.g. who is identified in the cover of the Economist as “rising”- but is still an essential element and it should be studied carefully. (13) In a word, achieving a certain status in world politics is not the automatic effect of material variations but the recognition by an Other(s) that a political unit has become part of a particular club or class because, among other things, such a variation in material capabilities has occurred. This mutual empowerment aspect could also be useful in explaining the aforementioned phenomenon of “failed rises” (the development of this idea, however, must be saved for another occasion).

It should be clear that this is also a call to historicize the sources of power. Since, as Gramsci assumed, hegemony –but any order in general- changes its basic attributes and dynamics with time, likewise the variables that explain how agents interact with those structures should also change. Social scientists tend to be weak against the temptation to over-generalize; a Gramscian outlook could work as an antidote to the follies inherent in the excesses committed in the name of social scientific “laws.”

Another interesting possibility lies in the elucidation of the resilience American hegemony seems to be presenting. Neorealism has been left in an uncomfortable place under the unwillingness of American preeminence to give place to a multipolar or bipolar world (since unipolarity is an anomaly for neorealist theory). A “thick” notion of hegemony would help explain this. Even if material change is continuously going on, “thick” hegemony, as explained before, does not depend exclusively on it. There is an ideological aspect that

reinforces path dependence trajectories that might turn hegemony more resilient even when the US might be losing ground in terms of its material preeminence (this could be paired with neoliberalism's focus on [institutions as central to an hegemon and its order](#)). Hegemonic path dependence does not mean that we have arrived to the "end of History and the last Hegemony", to paraphrase an excessively well-known title. It is, however, an acknowledgment that change in international politics is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

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It is certainly *possible* that one day –probably a long time from now- China will replace the US as the most powerful state, eventually –but not necessarily- building a new international order. It is also *possible* that the "BRICS" (or any other creation from the armies of acronym-chasers) will rise to great power status conforming a multipolar world. The problem is that it is also *very possible* that 30 years from now no one will remember the "rise of China" or the "rise of the BRICS." These are unknowns we cannot escape. As with "Japan's rise" in the 1980s, the infinite paper, ink, and time wasted could end up in the most embarrassing dustbin in the history of the discipline. This should not be interpreted as a call to stop studying these dynamics, but as an emphatic request to critically think about the best way(s) to do this. Though engaging in futurology is definitely the correct approach if the goal is selling books and being published in well-known journals, I argue that the best way to do this if the purpose is building knowledge is: a) increasing the complexity in the use of variables and concepts such as power, hegemony, rise and decline, etc. b) avoiding a "winner bias" and understanding the cases of "failed rises", c) historicizing structural dynamics and properties and the sources that explain how agents interact with those structures, d) engaging with history in the search for clues on how to think about the present and not in an attempt to come up with historical "laws", e) finally, and probably the most important, accepting the complex nature of profound change in international politics instead of escaping to the [triteness of futurology](#) that rather than educating fosters misunderstanding.

(1) This is not an unprecedented line of work. There is a substantive body of scholarly work on Gramscian IPE. It must be said, however, that I will not attempt to engage in a rigorous Gramscian analysis of international relations, but just use some of his ideas as building blocks.

(2) Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, New York, 2010.

(3) See: Gilpin, Robert, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1981; Organski, A.F.K. and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, Chicago University Press, 1980; and Kennedy, Paul, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, Vintage, 1989.

(4) Though some argue that it is the fear of the hegemon to lose its current position that brings about hegemonic war.

(5) Nota bene: Aron worked on the concept of hegemonic war as part of his studies on "total war", and not in the transition framework. This point is pertinent since he should not be included in the group of scholars conforming this literature –being his *oeuvre* of a sophistication and scope not matched by them.

(6) Interview at *The Browser*, available online: <http://thebrowser.com/interviews/john-gray-on-critiques-utopia-and-apocalypse>

(7) Castro, Guzmán, "Measuring the Future: Rises, Failed Power Transitions and the Problem of Systemic Change," unpublished manuscript, University of Pennsylvania, 2011.

(8) Goldstone, Jack, "The Rise of the West – or Not? A Revision to Socio-economic History", *Sociological Theory*, 18:2, July 2000.

(9) Castro, Guzmán, "The (Intellectual) Costs of Hegemony: Hegemonic Bias and the Poverty of the Theories of Systemic Change," unpublished manuscript, University of Pennsylvania, 2012.

(10) Robert Cox cited in Keohane, *After Hegemony*, Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 44.

(11) See [here](#) to laugh with Gramsci.

(12) Gramsci is clear on this: "The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of historic bloc in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces" (p. 377).

(13) There is some encouraging new work on the subject. See: Zarakol, Ayse, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Cambridge UP, 2011, and Suzuki Shogo, "Seeking 'Legitimate' Great Power Status in Post-Cold War International Society: China's and Japan's Participation in UNPKO," *International Relations*, 2008 22: 45.

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