HEGEMONY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

T.J. McKeown
Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA

Keywords: hegemony, hegemonic stability thesis, public good, club good, common pool good, free riding, international cooperation, domination, regime, Antonio Gramsci, positional good, transnational actors

Contents

Summary

Although it is plausible to expect that countries that are unusually well endowed with political resources will have a disproportionate effect on the creation of international regimes, the empirical evidence in support of this is generally mixed, and in the case of environmental regimes it is quite weak. The "hegemonic stability thesis" is also theoretically underdeveloped. A broader conception of international influence, advanced by those influenced by Gramsci, raises provocative questions but has not yet generated a substantial body of research. It is unlikely that an adequate theory of international regime formation can ignore domestic politics, transnational communications and political cooperation by non-governmental actors.

Hegemony has become a popular term in the social sciences. A search of the *Social Sciences Citation Index* on this word yielded more than one thousand articles from the last twenty years. Many of these citations merely use the term to denote a dominant person, collectivity, set of ideas, or practice. It is often used in the study of international relations to describe a country that has a dominant position by virtue of certain resources that it possesses. There are, however, other uses of the term in that field that are associated with an explicit theory.

1. When Do Resource Advantages Beget Political Influence?

Although the usage is often merely descriptive, the practice of terming a dominant country a "hegemon" merits some attention. The resources -- military, economic, or political -- that are useful for influencing the behavior of other countries are not uniformly distributed over the globe, but usually concentrated in a relatively small number of countries. Hegemonic countries are ones deemed to have a very large advantage over all other countries in the possession of such resources. Such an advantage is presumed to translate into unusually great influence over the actions of other countries. The theory of political influence that is implicit in this presumption is that influence is a monotonically increasing function of a country's relative advantage in politically relevant resources. Thus, when a country that is abundant in resources confronts a country that is not, the presumption is that the resource-rich country will be able to induce the other to change its policy. It does so by promises of benefits it will provide for those countries behaving cooperatively, or threats of costs it will impose for those failing to do so.

2. Complications in the Relation between Resources and Influence

Once one broadens the analysis beyond simple bilateral situations, the theory of n-person games suggests that the link between resources and influence is a good deal more complex. If one of the primary consequences of a country having a preponderance of resources is that other countries form coalitions against it, then such a preponderance might well be a dubious guide to predicting how influential the well-endowed country is. Indeed, the venerable concept of a "balance of power" suggests that when a dominant country attempts to impose its will on others, the others will resist whenever they do not share the hegemon's objectives, and that they will form a coalition against it. In such a situation for a country to be truly dominant one of two conditions must occur: either a countervailing coalition does not form, or else such a coalition is too weak to interfere with the purposes of the hegemon.

The writing on hegemony offers two ways of disposing of the problem of coalition formation by the non-hegemonic countries. The first is to argue that the theory is only an account of how public goods are created (see below). If a good is truly a public good, then every country desires it. Since what the hegemon desires is also desired by all the other countries, no country would oppose the hegemon's objectives, though some or all might be tempted to free ride on the hegemon's efforts. This appears to render coalitions irrelevant, but it does not quite succeed. In a situation where different countries propose collective international action to create different public goods (for example, where there are alternative international strategies for dealing with global pollutant -- reduce emissions or help people to adjust to its presence), and resources and governmental attention are only available to create one at a time, then what will happen? Current writings on hegemony do not address this question.

If we attempt to apply the theory more broadly, to include cases where not every country regards the objective of the hegemon as in its interest, then a second argument -- that the heavy preponderance of resources in the hands of the hegemon means that any coalition that does form to oppose it will be unsuccessful -- can be pressed into service. However, because current versions of the theory do not clarify just how much of a preponderance is necessary before the formation of a countervailing coalition is irrelevant, it is therefore not at all obvious what historical events would be inconsistent with the theory.

Another unresolved issue is whether the resources applied to the task of influencing the behavior of other countries are fungible. Does a large military advantage translate into a capacity to influence environmental policy, economic development strategies, or human rights policy? Is it useful to treat a country as being a hegemon in one domain (Saudi Arabia and oil, for example) but not in others? Do resources that influence the behavior of one country have the same effect when applied to other countries? Theorists of hegemony have recognized these difficulties, but as yet they have devised no general solution to this problem.

A third unresolved issue is the lack of consensus on how much of a resource advantage is necessary before a country merits the designation “hegemon”. There is general agreement among hegemony theorists that the USA at the end of World War II was such a hegemonic power, and not much less agreement that Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was, too. However, the precise temporal boundaries of UK or US hegemony are the subject of considerable dispute. Partly because there is no theoretical basis for an operational definition of hegemony, its empirical boundaries are quite fuzzy. Thus one might, for example, treat Rome in ancient times, Portugal and Spain in the sixteenth century, or Holland in the seventeenth century as hegemons. There is no strong *a priori* reason to reject such a definition, but no strong reason to accept it either.

3. Public Choice Theories of Hegemony

The study of the intersection of economics and politics by means of the analytical tools of game theory and microeconomics is commonly termed public choice theory. Within that theory, the notion of public good is one of the central concepts. A public good is one that possesses the properties of non-excludability and jointness. The first term implies that if it is supplied to one, it is supplied to all; the second, that the supply of the good to one party does not diminish its supply to others. International liquidity, the condition in which the international financial system provides sufficient money and credit to facilitate the completion of international transactions, is one such public good. Other commonly mentioned public goods include an open international trading system, clean air, preservation of the ozone layer, fresh water, the oceans and their fisheries, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the absence of general war.

The concept of hegemony is important in discussions of the provision of public goods because of a structural problem that often occurs whenever a community attempts to provide such goods for itself. By definition, a public good provides more social benefits than it does private benefits ¥¥ any private action to provide it creates a positive externality. However, if decisions about how much of the good to provide are made by private individuals acting in an uncoordinated fashion, then each will decide on the basis of net private benefit -- that is, whether their own benefits exceed their own costs. From the standpoint of society, it would be better if they decided on the basis of net social benefits. However, since they do not, it is possible for them to decide not to devote resources to creating public goods because the private advantage is insufficient, even though the social advantage would be substantial. They thus take a free ride on the backs of those who do decide to contribute to the production of the good; in extreme cases nobody contributes to its production.

Public choice theorists of hegemony argue that the presence of a hegemon eases or solves the problem of free riding. It could do so if it were so "large" compared to the size of the system as a whole that its private benefits from the provision of a public good were an appreciable fraction of total social benefits. Then the hegemon will decide to contribute to the production of the good, regardless of the decisions of the other countries. Its unilateral actions will not supply as much of the good as would occur if every country contributed, but the large private value to the hegemon of the good ensures that it will be supplied. In addition, the hegemon may induce other countries to contribute to the supply of the good. As long as it derives net private benefits from doing so, it will make promises or threats and carry them out in order to induce other countries to aid in supplying the good. This argument is sometimes termed the "hegemonic stability thesis" or "hegemonic stability theory".

Although an argument about the role of a hegemon in the creation of public goods can be applied to a wide variety of issues in international politics, it has been made most often and most notably in the case of international monetary relations and international trade. Charles Kindleberger suggested in 1973 that for the international monetary system of the 1930s to be stabilized, some country had to play the role of stabilizer. Although there is general agreement that the USA played this role during the post-World War II era, its central role diminished with the disappearance of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates in the early 1970s. Empirical research suggests that the international monetary system before 1914 is better understood as one in which a small number of European central banks managed the system in a decentralized but cooperative fashion. London was certainly very important in this era, but does not merit the designation "hegemon", at least when applied to money. (The current era of "managed" floating rates has attracted little attention from hegemony theorists.)

The claim that the UK and the U.S. played similarly hegemonic roles in the promotion of an open international trading system is partially supported. With regard to the UK, it is well known that she unilaterally lowered her tariffs in the nineteenth century, most notably by the abolition of the Corn Laws. It is also well known that the USA was instrumental in establishing a multilateral trading system after World War II and that it promoted lower tariffs -- particularly lower European tariffs -- in a number of multilateral trade negotiations in this period. However, both powers also behaved in a protectionist fashion when it suited their interests. In addition, they were hardly the only supporters of a more open global trading system, and prosperous global economic conditions in the post-World War II period also facilitated a general opening of all countries' trade. Econometric studies that attempt to find a relation between the preponderance of system resources held by the richest state or states and the degree of openness of the international trading system yield very mixed results; positive findings are dependent upon the exact way in which the relationship is operationalized and tested.

Empirical work examining the role of hegemons in the creation of international environmental rules and regulations has concentrated on consideration of the development of the ozone regime. The evidence suggests that a hegemony theory of public goods provision is of little value in understanding events in that domain. Although the USA and the European Community countries adopted positions favoring stronger regulation in the mid-1980s, they were not strong leaders of the effort to protect the ozone layer before then. The changes in the politics of ozone that induced them to support regulation were not any increase in the "power" of the USA or the European countries, but rather the accumulation and skillful public presentation of scientific findings, which altered the positions of firms, the general public, scientists, and government decision-makers.

Whether or not one believes the United States to be a hegemon, it is quite problematic to argue that it has acted like one with regard to recent international environmental issues. In areas such as disposal of hazardous wastes, climate change, Antarctic minerals, and the Global Environmental Facility its role was quite different from that in the creation of the post-World War II trade and monetary regimes or the United Nations. In that earlier era, the US leadership was strong and consistent, but not in the case of these environmental issues. In the case of the Convention on Biodiversity considered at the Rio Conference, the United States was the only attending country not to sign the agreement -- this despite its earlier role in helping to launch the negotiating process leading to this Convention. If the US is a hegemon in the current era, then either the measures in question do not create international goods that are sufficiently public, or else the theory must be viewed as simply failing to predict what will happen.

-
-
-

Bibliography

Cox R. W. (1987) *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History*, 500 pp. New York: Columbia University Press. [Attempts to apply Gramsci's ideas in a broad history of modern international relations.]

Eichengreen B (1989) Hegemonic stability theories of the international monetary system. In Cooper R. N. et al eds., *Can Nations Agree? Issues in International Economic Co-operation* Washington, D.C. USA: Brookings Institution. [Concise and well-argued discussion of applicability of hegemonic stability thesis to international monetary system.]

Grundmann R. (1998) The strange success of the Montreal protocol: Why reductionist accounts fail. *International Environmental Affairs* 10 (3), 197-220. [Grundmann contends that extant public choice (i.e. "reductionist" models) cannot account for the development of the regime regulating the production of ozone-depleting substances. He argues for the importance of social networks and "symbolic resources" (simple, compelling stories) -- features of the situation neglected by extant public choice theories.]

Hausken K and Plümper T. (1996) Hegemonic decline and international leadership. *Politics and Society* 24 (3), 273-295. [Along with Lake's essay, this provides a useful summary of the state of the art in public choice models of hegemony, with some extensions of the theory.]

Keohane R.O. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, 290 pp. Princeton, NJ USA: Princeton University Press. [Assesses the role of hegemons in the creation of international regimes in trade, money and oil, and makes a strong case for international institutions as an alternative support for international regimes.]

Kindleberger C.P. (1973) *The World in Depression, 1929-1939.* Berkeley: University of California Press

Lake D.A. (1993) Leadership, hegemony, and the international economy: Naked emperor or tattered monarch with potential? *International Studies Quarterly* 37 (4), 459-489. [This review of public choice models of hegemony argues that their development is worthwhile, but notes numerous problems, most of which still remain unresolved.]

Mueller D.C. (1997) Public Choice II, 518 pp. Cambridge, UK :Cambridge University Press. [This volume includes surveys of economic models of public goods and club goods creation and collective action. It is an excellent general introduction to public choice models.]

Rasler K.A. and Thompson W.R. (1994) *The Great Powers and Global Struggle: 1490-1990*, 275pp. Lexington, KY, USA. : University Press of Kentucky. [Useful introduction to the analysis of hegemony over the last five centuries.]

Von Moltke K. (1997) Institutional interactions: the structure of regimes for trade and the environment, pp. 247-272. In Young O.R., ed., *Global Governance: Drawing Insights from the Environmental Experience*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The M.I.T. Press. [Highly useful comparison of the performance of hegemony theory in environmental and non-environmental issues. Many of the other chapters in this volume will also be interesting to students of international environmental politics.]

Yarbrough B.V. and Yarborough R.M. (1992) *Cooperation and Governance in International Trade -- The Strategic Organizational Approach*, 182 pp. Princeton, NJ USA: Princeton University Press. [Nests a treatment of the hegemonic stability thesis as applied to international trade within a larger framework encompassing other paths to the creation of trade regimes.]

Biographical Sketch

Timothy J. McKeown is Associate Professor of Political Science, University of North Carolina. He has also been Visiting Professor at the Fuqua School of Business and Department of Political Science, Duke University. He holds a degree in Political Science from Macalester College and received his PhD in Political Science from Stanford University. Professor McKeown is a member of the American Political Science Association, and the International Studies Association. Among his consulting activities are his work for the US Council on Competitiveness, and for the US Department of Commerce and American Enterprise Institute. Professor McKeown has numerous publications, including scholarly articles in the journals *International Organization, International Studies Quarterly, British Journal of Political Science, World Politics*, and *American Political Science Review*. Among his recent publications is his edited volume, with Dan Caldwell, of *Diplomacy, Force and Leadership: Essays in Honor of Alexander L. George* (Boulder: Westview, 1993).