

# Liberalism: Another Tool of Western Hegemony

Written by Charlotte Langridge

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## Liberalism: Another Tool of Western Hegemony

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CHARLOTTE LANGRIDGE, OCT 30 2013

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### **Liberalism Is Simply Another Tool of Western Hegemony.**

#### **Introduction**

*'The "West's" hegemonic desire is made plain by the grandiose claim that liberal capitalist democratic society would be "the end of history"'. (Haut, 2010:200)*

Liberalism on its own is not a tool for anything; however, it is promoted by the "West" to maintain and reinforce its status as global hegemon. Gramsci's (1971) conception of "hegemony" is used to describe the "West's" influence in the global community. Therefore, Gramsci states that consent, not coercion, must be at the forefront of the hegemon's influence. Thus if consent is present, then hegemony is legitimate. This essay argues that the "West" uses liberalism as a tool to maintain its status as global hegemon, because liberalism relies on consent and is therefore self-legitimising. There are three key channels that the "West" uses to reinforce and extend its hegemony. These mirror Kant's (1797) three variables of democracy and liberalism, international institutions, and international trade, which make up a self-perpetuating triangle. This essay also critiques the legitimacy of the Western liberal regime as it has become too expansionist, the regime no longer relies on the consent of states to join, they now have no other option, if they want to gain political or economic power, to go through the Western regime, as is the case with China and Russia. This essay argues that this is a form of concealed coercion which thus delegitimizes Western hegemony. It will define the concepts liberalism, the "West" and hegemony, going on to analyse and critique the three Kantian variables international institutions, international trade and democracy in succession.

#### **Definitions: Liberalism, the West and Hegemony**

Firstly, we must define "Liberalism". Panke and Risse note 'there is no such thing as a single theory of "classical liberalism" in International Relations' (2007:91). Further, Doyle states '[w]hat we tend to call liberal resembles a family portrait of principles and institutions, recognisable by certain characteristics' (1986:1152). Liberalism 'champions [the] scientific rationality, freedom and inevitability of human progress. It is an approach to government which emphasizes individual rights, constitutionalism, democracy and limitations on the powers of the state' (Burchill, 2005:57), seen in a manipulated form within the Washington Consensus (GTN, 2003). Liberalism is distinctly Western. It 'amalgamates Greek rationalism, Roman Stoicism, Christianity, Newtonian physics, and the critique of the European ancien regime' (Gress, 1998, as cited in Puchala, 2005:580). Liberalism has historical roots in the "West", thus the "West" sees liberalism and its extension as natural and legitimate, hence the "West" extends its hegemony with imposed liberalism.

Secondly, the "West" is defined by Hurrell (2006) as the "great power club". Puchala (2005) defines the "West", in economic terms, as a group of capitalist countries, committed to open markets; in political terms, as a 'club of democracies; ideologically, the source and centre of liberal internationalism; hegemonically, a transnational coalition of elites sharing interests, aims and aspirations stemming from similar institutions and common ideology' (2005:577). These shared ideas and ideals unite the elites of the "West" into a Gramscian "Blocco Storico". In the post-Cold War

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era, the “West” is as yet unchallenged and will probably remain so for some time. This is because no single state or coalition of states in the near future will outperform the collective power of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). ‘The celebration of liberalism defines the West; the universalization of liberalism is the West’s project; employing Western power to construct a liberal world is the purpose of Western hegemony today’ (Puchala, 2005:580).

Thirdly, Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony is used. The Gramscian turn offers a way to conceptualise world order free from the confines of state-centric approaches without discarding their importance. Using a historicist framework, they focus upon the emerging subject of global civil society as the ground over which the struggle for hegemony takes place (Germain and Kenny, 1998). ‘The richly textured and suggestive deployment of this concept in the Gramscian IPE literature provides insights into the social basis of hegemony’ (Germain and Kenny, 1998:6). This leads to an enlarged definition of the state, into the base and the superstructure constituting a “Historic Bloc”, or “Blocco Storico”. A historic bloc cannot exist without a hegemonic social class, which in this case is the Western liberal class. The state maintains cohesion and identity within the bloc through the propagation of a common culture, ergo liberalism and market openness. He ‘took over from Machiavelli the image of power as a centaur: a necessary combination of consent and coercion. To the extent that the consensual aspect of power is in the forefront, hegemony prevails’ (Cox, 1983:52). This is how the hegemon retains legitimacy. Western hegemony is made up of the liberal values and culture that the dominant classes possess. It is communicated and exported to the rest of the world through Kant’s three variables of liberal institutionalism: international institutions, international trade and democracy; therefore, the “West” uses liberalism as a tool to maintain hegemony. In addition, there is no need to use coercion as liberalism is self-reinforcing, self-legitimising and self-perpetuating. It absorbs counter-hegemony via its international institutions, economic interdependence and democracy. The prolific export of liberalism has compelled other states to establish international institutions, liberalise their economies and strengthen their democracies. The façade of legitimacy built on perceived consent has eroded into concealed coercion.

## International Institutions

Western international institutions include, but are not limited to, the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Cox states five universal norms of hegemony are expressed through international institutions, in the case of the “West”, liberal international organisation:

(1) They 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 legitimate the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt the elites from peripheral countries and (5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas (1983:62).

These five elements are used to maintain the “West’s” hegemonic legitimacy. The first function institutions have is the maintenance of hegemony. They achieve this through rules that encourage the expansion of the dominant economic forces; the IMF’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which have an extreme likeness to the terms originally implemented in the Washington Consensus, are a manipulated form of liberal ideology (Jones and Hardstaff, 2005, Stiglitz, 2002). The second function is true of the IMF and WB, set up by the US – the metaphorical centre of the “West”. In addition, participation is most often weighted in favour of the dominant powers to maintain this; however, as of November 2010, this has changed as the IMF agreed to reforms of its governance to ensure that developing countries preserve their influence. ‘[T]he 2010 reform will produce a combined shift of 9 percent of quota shares to dynamic emerging market and developing countries’ (IMF, 2012), and a move to an all elected Executive Board, with two fewer European chairs (IMF, 2010). There is an informal political structure within these institutions reflecting the real political and economic power of each participating state, performing an ideological role, reaffirming the hegemonic hierarchy. At the same time, however, they do allow alterations to be made by subordinated interests with minimum pain as a way of legitimising their actions. For example, the Bretton Woods Institutions provided more safeguards for domestic social concerns like unemployment than did the Gold Standard. However, this was on the condition that national policies were consistent with the goal of liberal world economy, thus extending Western influence. (Cox, 1983). This seemingly legitimises the “West’s” hegemony; however, it is actually fulfilling Cox’s

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(1983) fourth function of institutions, to co-op elites from peripheral countries.

Further to the Bretton Woods Institutions the effect of Western hegemony can be seen within the UN. It institutionalises and regulates liberal internationalist world order (Puchala, 2005:571). During the Cold War, for example, the UN was a frequently used instrument of US foreign policy, especially in the condemnation of Iran in 1979. US goals are pursued at the threat of vetoes in the Security Council, preponderant influence over the selection of successive Secretaries General and overrepresentation in the Secretariat. This shows in the denial of China's membership until Washington acceded. This has not gone without criticism mostly from the Group of 77 who perceive the US as using the UN to further the spread of economic liberalism and democratisation. 'The primary role of the UN under the hegemony of the West is to validate the liberal world order' (Puchala, 2005:581), fulfilling Cox's (1983) third function of international institutions, in order to retain hegemony. It is no surprise, therefore, that aspiring powers devote so much attention to these institutions. The Chinese have a fixation with the UN and resist any reform of the Security Council to permit new members (Hurrell, 2006), which would decrease its power. As such, the UN, as a product of Western liberal hegemony, is used as a tool by the US to retain its global position. These institutions are imperative for states to gain legitimacy in the international arena.

International institutions employ processes that eliminate counter-hegemonic movements. Gramsci (1971) termed this "transformismo". It absorbs potentially counter-hegemonic ideas and aligns them with the hegemonic doctrine (Cox, 1983). Thus, one method for changing the structure of liberal world order can be ruled in toto. A war of movement needed to challenge Western hegemony is not probable. Radicals, having to acquire control of the superstructure of international institutions, could do nothing with it as the superstructure is connected to the national hegemonic classes of the core states. 'Hegemony is like a pillow: it absorbs blows and sooner or later the would-be assailant will find it comfortable to rest upon' (Cox, 1983:63). International institutions, such as the ones mentioned above fulfil Cox's (1983) fifth function. This does not stop forms of counter-hegemony from emerging however; i.e., the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (SCO, 2012) Sino-Russian military exercises. '[S]uch developments are picked up with alacrity by those looking for signs of a coordinated willingness to challenge Washington, or for evidence of emerging multi-polarity and a renewed potential for systemic revisionism' (Hurrell, 2006:3). These international institutions act as conduits through which liberal values and economic openness are transmitted. The above section shows how the "West" uses liberalism as a tool to maintain hegemony via international institutions. They were born of the "West" in its own image after the Second World War. They are self-legitimising and absorb counter-hegemonic moves: to resist the liberal order is to risk being categorised together with rogue regimes and with the enemies of economic and political freedom. Receiving a question mark above their legitimacy and authority as a sovereign state. The "West" now dictates what constitutes legitimacy.

## International Trade/ Economic Interdependence

International trade acts as a medium of communication and depends on the expectations of peace with the trading partner (Russett, 2010). The economic interdependence of the EU underpins democracy and makes war between member states economically irrational. The principles of liberal international trade are built upon Western capitalism, namely, competition and free trade. It first united the "West" and now the "West" seeks to unite the world using the tool of economic liberalism. We can see historically how economic liberalisation organisation spread: for example, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation has become known globally as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, spreading Western liberal hegemony. (Russett, 2010). It is widely recognised that the prevalence of capitalist economies is a major feature of the Western order. The "West" tries to entice new states into its liberal system via the absolute and relative gains argument. Advanced capitalism creates higher than average prospects for absolute gains so states want to embrace economic interdependence to avoid the need to pursue relative gains. Lindert and Williamson (2003) 'find clear convergence among countries that integrate more fully into the [liberal] world economy, but divergence between those who elect to remain insulated from global markets'. The relative versus absolute gains argument points to a power explanation of why states will try to mitigate anarchy. Here the absolute gains produced by economic openness are so ample that states have a large incentive to abridge anarchy. The increase of international trade fourteen-fold (1950-1994) can be attributed to the spread of liberal economic policies (WTO, 1995). There are also political reasons that Western states seek to maintain economic openness, for example, 'free trade spreads and strengthens liberal democracy. The expansion of capitalism that free

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trade stimulates tends to alter the preferences and character of other states in a liberal and democratic direction, thus producing a more strategically and politically hospitable system' (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999:192) for the "West" to import liberal ideology, thus demonstrating the reciprocal nature of Kant's variables.

The strategy of economic openness, used by the architects of the post-World War II liberal order, acts as a buffer to 'regional blocs, trade wars, illiberal regimes, and ruinous rivalry': would-be counter-hegemonies (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999:192). 'Roosevelt sought to create a one-world system managed by cooperative great powers that would rebuild war-ravaged Europe, integrate the defeated states, and establish mechanisms for security cooperation and expansive economic growth' (Ikenberry, 2008:28). Barriers to economic participation are low, and the potential benefits are high to encourage other states to integrate. For example, China has already discovered the substantial economic returns that are possible by operating within the Western open-market system. One of the ways Western hegemony absorbs counter-hegemonic attempts is through international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It rests on the presumption that it is normatively valuable and beneficial to participate in the global activity of capitalist free trade (Sterling- Folker, 2010); because state power is built upon sustained economic growth, China is aware that it cannot gain this without integration into the Western capitalist system, and thereby joining the WTO. 'The road to global power, in effect, runs through the Western order and its multilateral economic institutions' (Ikenberry, 2008:32).

The challenge now is to make China so institutionalised that it has no choice but to become a full-fledged member of it. The US cannot thwart China's rise, but it can help ensure that China's power is exercised within the institutions that the "West" has crafted, institutions that will protect the interests of liberal states in the crowded global economy. (Ikenberry, 2008) However, Wade (2007) argues that the WTO, under the banner of "free trade and a level playing field", has in fact tipped the playing field decisively in favour of the "West" as seen in agreements about textiles, agriculture and intellectual property. Therefore, trade, investment and technological flows are increasingly concentrated in the OECD. This pattern of international economic activity reinforces historical structures of dominance and dependence, liberalisation and Western power. As a result, Western hegemony is also delegitimized as there is no other option for China to gain political power without economic prowess. In order to gain economic power, they are forced to conform to the "West's" liberal ideology; therefore, Western hegemony is not relying on consent, but a form of concealed coercion.

However, Chorev (2005) identifies contradictions between the WTO to Western hegemony. For example, it has become increasingly difficult for the US, in spite of its economic resources, with the legalisation of trade disputes to pursue goals not compatible with the legal logic of the WTO. Under GATT, the US could impose liberal trade rules on others while retaining protectionist measures at home; conversely, with the inception of the WTO, the US could no longer effectively maintain its protectionist policies. Although this has detrimental effects for the US, it does work to legitimise Western hegemony and encourages other states to join the WTO. Furthermore, the structural transformation of the WTO means that the political influence of member-states has been reshaped. Now decisions reflect the liberal internal logic of the WTO meaning member-states have actually lost authority to the organisation itself. 'Paradoxically, now that states have better capacity to take advantage of what the system offers, the system only offers a one-sided benefit: liberal goals can be successfully achieved, but protectionist goals are effectively silenced' (Chorev, 2005:344). Again this means that liberal world order and Western hegemony is maintained. However, it does disadvantage weaker states that need to protect labourers in their own country because their economy is not yet strong enough to embrace economic openness.

Additionally, the "West" pushes states to liberalise their economies, believing that this is beneficial for all, especially the liberal world, yet in few countries does the liberalisation of their economies actually improve the wealth of the mass public. Mexico is just one example where WB and IMF involvement has been more destructive than beneficial. Most Mexicans would have been better off in 1998, had their government kept policy autonomy by not imposing economic liberalisation, and supported jobs for people in the population's bottom 80 per cent who saw their income steadily decline after 1982 (Pieper and Taylor, 1998). Moreover, not only have the liberalising policies of the IMF and WB had detrimental effects for under-developed countries, but Stiglitz (2002) states that today even the IMF agrees that they has pushed liberalisation too far, destabilising Western hegemony and contributing to the global financial crisis of the 1990s. It was pushed to the breaking point, and experienced resistance. Here one can see how the

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liberal policies of the “West” have even failed itself, and raise questions of legitimacy.

## Democracy

This section discusses the effects of Kant’s third variable, democracy and how it is used in conjunction with his first and second variables by the “West” to maintain liberal hegemony. Morozov (2010) states how democracy itself is Western in origin. Its promotion in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia together form ‘a complex layer cake of integrative initiatives that bind the democratic industrial world together’ (Ikenberry, 2004:622). It is not surprising that the “West” has become infatuated with preserving and extending its control over institutions, markets and world politics, given that liberalism has produced such asymmetrical rewards for the “West” and the rest. Consequentially, non-western countries are under continuous pressure to liberalise politically and economically, and import policies from Western Europe and the US (Morozov, 2010) and the standards are set by comparison to the US and the EU as par excellence. A key factor for explaining democratisation is East Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. Economic liberalisation here led to the rapid growth of the middle classes and in turn the rise of social movements concerned with labour exploitation. This is the Lipset (1959) hypothesis; thereby there is a causal relationship between economic development and democracy, which has been the basis of US foreign policy for the last twenty five years. Because the “West” has become so infatuated with the exportation of democracy, so much so that it will resort to intervention, it has in fact delegitimized its role as global hegemon.

Nevertheless, China, and its counter-hegemonic ideology, bucks this trend, showing that economic advances and increasing openness have actually contributed to the stability of authoritarian rule (Gallagher, 2002). On the other hand, Gallagher (2002) does make an important qualification that the reforms and economic openness in China have resulted in delaying political change, not an end to political change. As a part-result of this, Kagan (as cited in Deudney and Ikenberry, 2009), insists that the “West” should abandon its expectations of global democratic hegemony. They should instead look to strengthen internal ties among liberal democracies through a form of a “league of democracies”. He suggests a realist notion: “balance of power rather than concert of power”. However, Deudney and Ikenberry (2009) disagree with this statement. They argue that the success of autocratic regimes such as those in China and Russia are not a denunciation of the liberal way; their recent success has depended on their access to the international liberal order, and they remain dependent on its success. Therefore, they are not true counter-hegemonies: as stated above, they must go through the liberal (Western hegemonic) system, for example the WTO and the UN Security Council, to gain any real political power.

Moreover, ‘given the powerful logic that connects modernisation and liberalisation; autocratic regimes face strong incentives to liberalise’ (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2009:79). As a result, Western hegemony absorbs these counter-hegemonic ideas by making the liberal path more accommodating and appealing. Because of this, ‘the near-universal eagerness of peoples and states to join the expanding capitalist international system gives further credibility to this liberal vision’ (2009:80). Hence, the “West” should seek to integrate China and Russia further, thus encouraging them to convert to democracy. ‘Proposals to “draw up the gates” of the democratic world and exclude non-democratic states- with measures such as exclusion of Russia from the G8- promise to worsen relations and reinforce authoritarian rule’ (2009:93). Therefore, via the liberal system of increased integration of autocratic regimes thus predisposing them to cooperation, pacifying them as a potential threat, and eventually converting them to democracy, Western hegemony is maintained.

This is not to say that the democratic crusade of the “West” has not come under criticism. Morozov (2010) states how non-western leaders criticise the “West” for being undemocratic, for usurping power and promoting their “civilisational” interest in the name of democracy, and being undemocratic themselves. For example Putin, at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (February, 2007, as cited in Morozov, 2010), asserted that the “unipolar world” promoted by the “West” is “a world of one master, one sovereign”, with “nearly the entire legal system of one state, first of all, of course, of the US, has transgressed its national boundaries and... is being imposed on other states”. He goes on to argue that the unilateral actions of the “West” are illegitimate, because no state can find refuge in international law (Putin, 2007, as cited in Morozov, 2010). This form of Western interventionism ‘delegitimizes the political process of the state intervened in’ (Chandler, 2006:485), hence denying any non-Western standards of democracy of any credibility. ‘[D]emocracy [imposed from the outside] is often presented as a solution to the

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problems of the political sphere rather than as a process of determining and giving content to the good life' (Chandler, 2006:483). However, when the "West" needs to impose democracy from the outside it calls into question the issue of consent. Rather the "West" is exporting democracy via concealed coercion. This is true both in the case of the US's "democratic crusade" and its "with us or against us" logic, and in the case of the EU policy of conditionality, which strives to remodel the neighbours, from Montenegro to Russia to Libya, in its own image and likeness. In Richard Cheney's (2006) statement in Vilnius, the "return to democratic reform in Russia" is synonymous to Russia's "aligning with the West".

## Conclusion

Western hegemony uses liberalism as a tool for its maintenance, via the self-perpetuating triangle of international institutions, international trade and democracy. Once a state is integrated into one via its all-encompassing nature, the state will be gradually integrated into the other areas of the liberal world order. Furthermore, the triangle absorbs any attempts at counter-hegemony, which reinforces its own legitimacy. However, this essay has also highlighted the cracks in Western hegemony. It argues that the increasing aggressive nature of exportation the "West" employs with regard to liberalism actually works to delegitimize its hegemony. As legitimate hegemony, as Machiavelli (as cited in Cox, 1983) states, rests upon consent, the "West's" need to employ concealed coercion to align emerging states with regard to gaining political and economic power, such as China, actually delegitimizes the hegemonic status of the "West". As such, the "West's" position is under threat as a result of their own actions – shattering their own perceived legitimacy.

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*Written by: Charlotte Langridge  
Written at: University of Bristol  
Written for: Dr. Yongjin Zhang  
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