

## Twilight of the Modern Princes

Frank Cunningham

Whether intentionally or otherwise, Wagner, in the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, has the ruling god of Valhalla, Wotan, breaking every rule in the hegemony book—where the book is, of course, Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Wotan lacks strategic acumen, instead being manipulated by his wily counselor, Loge, and he falls into every trap that the devious *Nibelungen* lay for him. He is ineffective in inspiring much fear, as nearly all of the opera's cast of characters defy him at one point or another. Further, he fails to command respect and hence support when he needs it of his subjects.

Contradicting Machiavelli's injunction that princes not violate their subjects' property, Wotan steals the ring forged by the *Nibelung* Alberich out of gold which was itself stolen from the earth (the opera becomes remarkably contemporary if references to "gold" are replaced by "oil" throughout). Wotan vacillates between weak-willed sentimentality and transparently immoral behavior. His off-stage demise in the opera's apocalyptic *dämmerung*, unlike that of the tragic figures of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, elicits no feelings of sympathy or regret.

Are we now witnessing the transformation of the world's remaining superpower into a real-life incarnation of Wotan? I shall sketch an affirmative answer and then relate it to the question about what a post-U.S.-hegemonic world might look like.

The intent of the paper is to explicate just one stream of thinking about the concept of hegemony, that found in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*—sometimes collected under the heading of *The Modern Prince*<sup>1</sup>—along with recent modifications by the neo-Gramscians, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and to advance some hypotheses about whether or how the United States with respect to the rest of the world is hegemonic in a Gramscian sense. From the point of view of hegemony theory, no effort is made to demonstrate that the Gramscian model is superior to alternatives, and I leave it to others to test the hypotheses.

Three aspects of the orientation toward politics in Machiavelli's book—the modified title of which Gramsci incorporated in his lexicon of code phrases designed to foil his prison censors and referring to the Italian Communist Party—formed the perspective uniquely developed by him among theorists of the Second Communist International, often prompting denunciation within this circle.

The lead aspect is Machiavelli's "Centaur thesis." The successful prince, according to Machiavelli, is part beast, part human, where only one dimension of the beastly part—that characteristic of the lion—involves domination through

violence and threats. Equally important for Machiavelli are the characteristics of the fox—guile and cunning—and the Centaur’s human dimension, which crucially involves inspiring respect as well as fear and exhibiting qualities of mercy, kindness, forthrightness, and piety as long as these do not convey weakness to subjects or impede decisive action.<sup>2</sup> The lesson Gramsci took from this orientation is that hegemony is more than domination; it also requires leadership, which includes moral and intellectual dimensions.<sup>3</sup> We shall shortly return to this core point.

Another general lesson concerns Machiavelli’s approach to politics as independent of such things as religion or economics, “the autonomy of political science,” as Gramsci put it.<sup>4</sup> Just as Machiavelli recognized that fortune (*fortuna*) constrains human actions, so Gramsci accepted much of the Marxist view about the key role productive forces and relations play in large-scale social projects. However, also like Machiavelli, Gramsci rejected fatalism and instead saw an irreducible and vital place for political leadership, whether skillfully deployed or otherwise, in shaping a society’s future.<sup>5</sup>

This point is relevant for accessing the status of U.S. world hegemony insofar as it is the subject of debates, not entered into in this paper, over whether the overwhelming economic clout of the United States is on the wane.<sup>6</sup> Gramsci’s cautions against fatalistic determinism suggest that an economically dominant force might still fail to be hegemonic and that political hegemony may itself be required for long-term and dependable economic preeminence. An analogous point can be made about superior military capability.

A third aspect of *The Prince* appropriated by Gramsci is sometimes described as the work’s sanctioning of immorality in politics. A more nuanced view of Machiavelli’s intent is that he saw hegemony as something actively constructed (to be sure by deceptive means if necessary) rather than as discovered in a preexisting confluence of the values and worldviews of leaders and led or simply imposed.

A corollary of this stance is that independent skill in hegemonic rule is the key to success. For Machiavelli this meant that either nobles or ordinary citizens could be successful princes, as could those exhibiting any of a variety of personality types. For Gramsci it meant that there was no guarantee that the politically organized working class would be the leading force in what he saw as among the most important current projects of his society, namely the realization of campaigns for national unification started with the *Risorgimento*, but that there was a contest between it and Italian capitalism which would be won by the most adroit at hegemonic construction.<sup>7</sup>

The following list of contrasts, or “dual perspectives in political action and national life,” that Gramsci draws from Machiavelli provides a way to address the specific features of his view of hegemony.<sup>8</sup> He contrasts:

1. Force and consent
2. Authority and hegemony

3. Violence and civilization
4. The individual moment and the universal moment
5. Church and state (placed in parentheses by Gramsci)
6. Agitation and propaganda
7. Tactics and strategy

Where one or more of these contrasts figures in the *Notebooks* Gramsci differentiates himself from rival theorists and leaders of the Italian Communist Party in placing primary emphasis on the second element of each pair, while in dialectical fashion presenting them as simultaneously in tension with each other and interdependent. In the following explication I shall focus first on contrast 4 and then on contrast 2.

### Collective Will

Another corollary of the constructed aspect of hegemony is that a hegemonic agent must both be attentive to the preexisting situations and cultures of those over whom hegemony is exercised and successful at effecting changes in those things conducive to its hegemony. The accommodating dimension of the venture is expressed in Gramsci's view of hegemonic politics as always context-sensitive or "conjunctural," while its constructive dimension requires a hegemonic agent to seize conjunctural moments and, informed by an understanding of historical trends and possibilities ("organic movements"),<sup>9</sup> transform them in accord with the hegemon's aims. Such politics supposes, further, that human nature is not fixed, but is amenable to transformation in the political process itself.<sup>10</sup>

Vital to the conjunctural/organic "art of politics"<sup>11</sup> at the core of hegemony is that a collective will be forged:

An historical act can only be performed by "collective man," and this presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world . . .<sup>12</sup>

Hegemony works, so to speak, on collective wills not on individual interests, and this, in turn, supposes that there are such wills to be worked on. Gramsci makes reference in more than one place to Marx's comment in his "Preface" to his *Critique of Political Economy* that: "mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation."<sup>13</sup> Applied to hegemony, this means that the hegemonic agent creates the very collective will of peoples over whom hegemony is exercised, but materials indispensable for this creation are already found within the latter's cultures, practices, and institutions.

Viewed temporally, the hegemonic project is therefore both continuous and discontinuous with the past. It is in people's shared traditions that one finds elements of a collective will transcending individual interests or, looked at from another direction, provides a common background against which individuals pursue their particular life aims. Attention to these traditions is required both for presenting the hegemon as a champion of some of their aspects (in Gramsci's case of pan-Italian values favoring national unification) and as an agent for challenging other aspects (an example for Gramsci was the transfer of politically relevant loyalties from the church to the state—hence his inclusion of these terms in his list of dual perspectives<sup>14</sup>).

Hegemonic collective will creation also has an atemporal dimension in Gramsci's view of dual popular consciousness. According to this view, people often express ideas and values which their actions belie. An example is working people who espouse political values consistent with a competitive, procapitalist view of the world but who often behave in cooperative if not entirely socialistic ways, as in their workplaces or neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup> The point is not that the expressed values are insincerely or hypocritically espoused. Rather, such situations reflect a conflict, typically deriving from an unthinking acceptance of dominant, "ideological" values of people's society (this is part of what makes for a dominant ideology) which, however, do not fit their lived experiences. An implication of Gramsci's comments about the dual feature of consciousness is that hegemonic construction of a popular will is most secure when it succeeds in bringing the explicit and implicit levels of consciousness into phase.

### Leadership

Gramsci means hegemony to comprise the combinations of all the pairs in the list reproduced previously. However, I think it is significant that in presenting the list he uses the actual term "hegemony" in contrast with authority and not with force. This marks a difference between Gramsci's approach and less nuanced conceptions, including some claiming Gramscian inspiration, that make hegemony synonymous simply with consent or with the union of force and consent. It also highlights the important role assigned to leadership, which Gramsci insists should be hegemonic or what might be characterized as grounded, as opposed to arbitrary or imposed, authority.

As noted earlier, leadership for Gramsci is composed of both political and "moral and intellectual" dimensions, where the latter involves responding to and constructing a collective will as described above. The terms "moral" and "intellectual" are used in part to indicate that the "led" in a hegemonic relation harbor, as common sense, values and interpretations of the world conducive to the continuing hegemony of their leaders. Gramsci also means by this emphasis to distance his view from economistic conceptions which interpret effective leadership as merely understanding laws of history and facilitating or compelling collective action in accord with them.<sup>16</sup> Gramsci's description of the "organic

intellectual” expresses the idea that the hegemonic leader is and is seen as both drawing on and guiding the values and views of the world of those led.<sup>17</sup>

Political leadership can take one of two forms, “transformism”—a term used to describe a gradualist approach to politics in Gramsci’s time and associated by him with “passive revolution”<sup>18</sup>—and what Chantal Mouffe labels “expansion.” Transformism focuses exclusively on those preexisting traditions of a collective will that incline toward a desired political change, while expansive political leadership, which Gramsci sometimes describes as a Jacobin moment in hegemonic leadership, constructs new collective wills—though, as explained earlier, building on or interpreted in accord with existing traditions and in this way differing from actual Jacobinism.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Machiavelli, Gramsci’s concern was not about individual political leaders but groups.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, he maintained that leadership is exercised by one of a society’s dominant economic classes, in his society either by the bourgeoisie or by the proletariat. A crucial thesis—and the one that drew the strongest criticism of him and subsequent Italian Communists by Soviet and other Second International Communist parties—is that class leadership for Gramsci did not mean leadership in the interests of a class narrowly conceived but leadership of the large bulk of a society, working class or not, made possible by the expansion of a popular will in such a way that the specific values and aims of the working class had become congruent with those of the society as a whole. It is worth noting that such congruence (or “organic cohesion”) may be more or less democratic. It is democratic to the extent that a collective will on a societal scale (an “historic bloc”) is a product of ongoing interaction between leaders and led.<sup>21</sup>

### Post-Gramscian Modifications

In their jointly authored *Hegemony and Socialist Strategies*,<sup>22</sup> and in several individually published writings, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe appropriate key aspects of Gramsci’s approach to hegemony, and they make three significant modifications. The most prominent of these is a rejection of Gramsci’s view that only economic classes can exercise hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe see this view as an instance of residual Marxist class reductionism which fails to accommodate the way that other group entities, in particular any of a variety of social movements, might exert hegemonic leadership.

A second departure brings Laclau and Mouffe closer to Machiavelli. Gramsci was aware of Machiavelli’s view that identification of an external enemy can usefully serve a prince,<sup>23</sup> and he agreed that sometimes the presence of such a foe is useful in consolidating hegemonic rule. However, he did not portray this as essential and had reservations about how wise or effective hegemony exercised thanks to opposition is.<sup>24</sup> For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is always constructed in contrast with a hostile other. A difficulty for a hegemonic agent striving both to maintain contact with preexisting traditions and to forge a new collective will is that the preexisting traditions typically include values and

goals at variance with one another and with those specific to the hegemon itself. Hostility to a force in opposition to everyone provides a source of commonality where the hegemonic agent is presented as the leading champion in defense against a shared enemy.<sup>25</sup>

Related to this is another modification to the Gramscian scheme drawn from post-structuralist linguistic and political theory. Hegemony for Laclau and Mouffe is achieved through the interplay of equivalence and difference. An agent achieves hegemony in part by championing that which the various subjects of hegemonic leadership have in common (which will include at least a common enemy) in spite of their other differences. This creates the problem that the hegemonic agent, which also has "interests" (using this term in a loose way) specific to itself, must nonetheless represent itself as acting in the common interest; however, part of its hegemonic success lies in constructing a collective will in which the interests of those over whom hegemony is exercised have been articulated with the specific interests of the hegemon. So, for example, Gramsci thought that the Communist Party would become hegemonic when those favoring national unification or rural development saw working-class emancipation from capitalist domination as embodying their aspirations.

If the difference of the hegemon from other sectors of society—called "subject positions" in the post-structuralist tradition—is too stark, it loses the ability to articulate their interests with its own, but to the extent that hegemonic equivalence among all of the subject positions with and through the hegemon is achieved by watering down the latter's specific interests, it ceases to have any content at all, let alone one that can be the articulating center of a common will. This problem is the most evident in the case of populism (which announces itself as all things to all people), but it is present in any effort at hegemonic rule.<sup>26</sup> While there is no recipe for universal or permanent solution to this problem, its structure suggests that among the skills required of a hegemonic agent is to find the best difference/equivalence balance possible in specific circumstances so as to maintain contact with subjects of hegemony without, so to speak, losing contact with itself.

### Hegemony in a Global Context

Applying Gramsci's approach to hegemony in a global context is complicated by the fact that he, like most neo-Gramscians, was mainly concerned with hegemony in the settings of nation-states. In one apt comment Gramsci remarks that international relations follow "fundamental social relations," which in his view are primarily rooted in nation-states.<sup>27</sup> As Robert Cox, one of the few theorists who addresses international relations in explicitly Gramscian terms, puts it: "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."<sup>28</sup>

An alternative perspective is that the globalization of capitalism means that hegemony now rests in the hands of a stateless world capitalist class. This is the view of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who depict a global contest between a capitalist "empire" and a world "multitude" organizing against it.<sup>29</sup> Another alternative is that the primary hegemonic struggle in the world is civilizational, namely between theocratic Islam and the liberal-democratic societies that developed out of Judeo-Christian traditions as famously maintained by Samuel Huntington.<sup>30</sup>

Without arguing the points, I here register skepticism about these theses. Capitalist enterprises certainly are much more mobile and internationally overlapping than in previous epochs, but they still require institutional bases located in individual states or perhaps in gelling clusters of states, as in the case of the EU. Moreover, the global empire thesis does not sit well with what appear to be strong inter-capitalist conflicts along regional lines and within regions among nation-states. Cox's view is that rather than transposing hegemonic conflicts from state to global forums, the internationalization of capitalism exacerbates conflict among nation-states and strengthens the hands of critics of capitalism within them, as populations come to doubt the national loyalties of home-grown entrepreneurs.<sup>31</sup>

It is also doubtful that those who see the world as engaged in a hegemonic clash of civilizations can divorce the putative clash from states. It is noteworthy that this thesis is most prominently put forth by U.S. scholars and policy advisors, who portray their country as the main standard bearer of liberal-democratic civilization. Regarding the competing "civilization," it seems true that militant Islamicists are striving for hegemony at least over one portion of the world independently of national commitments. However, if one distinguishes between the a-national (or pan-national) identifications of would-be hegemonic Islamic leaders and what is required for success in their venture, a case can be argued that without initial hegemony within at least some major states, such as Iran today, the effort would have no chance of success.

Be these matters as they may, they can be put aside to pursue the main topic of this paper, which is about U.S. hegemony. Two analytic points are in order for relating such hegemony to international affairs. One of these is to note differences regarding the scopes of nation-transcending hegemony aimed at. Insofar as militant Islamicism can be pictured as striving for hegemony, it is not over the entire world, but over those regions of the world where Islam is, or is at least close to, the majority religion. In this respect, it differs from an aspiration of evangelical Christianity that seeks worldwide domination, which in late medieval times included political as well as cultural domination. Chinese Communism sought and perhaps still does seek domination within parts of Asia, unlike the erstwhile Soviet Communism, which strove for global hegemony. The comportment of the United States has vacillated between a misnomered "isolationist" tendency, which aimed at hemispheric hegemony, and what since around the end of the Second World War seems an aspiration for worldwide hegemony.

A second point pertains to the relation when the hegemonic agent in question is a state, such as the United States, between its hegemonic status with respect to

other parts of the world and the hegemonic status within it of a dominant group. Let us assume that in the United States indigenous capitalism is hegemonic, albeit weakened mainly due to rifts within that class. In this case, one could say that insofar as world hegemony is exercised it is by the hegemonic agent "the nation-state of the United States." This is because, on the Gramscian view (and speaking in ideal-typical terms for the purpose of making the analytic point) successful and persisting internal hegemony entails that the country constitutes an organically cohesive historic bloc, as these terms were defined above, with a single collective will.

The question now poses itself, what if internal hegemony is lacking? In general, four possibilities can be considered:

1. Global hegemony is exercised by an organically cohesive state.
2. Global hegemony is exercised by a non-cohesive state.
3. A cohesive state does not exercise global hegemony.
4. Nobody exercises global hegemony.

I see nothing to prevent any one of these possibilities from being, if not realized, at least sought for with some prospect of realization.

Many believe that the United States exercises or until recently has exercised global hegemony. Whether this is the case now is the question addressed in this paper, and it is also an apt question whether there is or was hegemonic cohesion internal to the United States. Except perhaps at the very beginning, the dominant group (whatever that was) in the Soviet Union did not enjoy internal hegemony, since it depended almost entirely on force or the threat thereof to secure popular compliance, but the Soviet Union was nonetheless a serious contender with the United States for global hegemony. Many "lesser powers," such as my own country (Canada), have no realistic aspiration for world or even regional hegemony with or without internal hegemonic cohesion. I shall return to the remaining possibility—that there is no global hegemony—at the end of the paper.

### **The United States and Global Hegemony**

Regarded as a putative global hegemon, the United States is made up of a combination of public and private sector institutions: its government and governing political party, its military, the major economic institutions (financial, industrial, and service), and agencies and institutions that export news and culture. With respect to scope, the ambition is, as the remaining "superpower," for worldwide hegemony. Conceived of as a Machiavellian Centaur, the lion aspect of the United States is its military and economic clout, while the fox aspect is exercised by its intelligence agencies and its ability through diplomacy, bribes, and threats to influence the form and comportment of foreign governments and international agencies such as the IMF, the World Bank, the NATO, and the UN. On its

“human” side, the country represents itself as bearer of private enterprise and liberal-democratic values and as motivated by a desire to bring capitalist efficiency and democratic values to the rest of the globe.

As to whether and how the United States is internally cohesive, this depends upon what is considered its internal hegemonic agent. Gramsci pictured a contest for hegemony in Italy between the working class and the bourgeoisie, where the project of the former was led by the Communist Party. How, exactly, to conceptualize the relation between class and party is a difficult question, not adequately worked out in *The Prison Notebooks*. In lieu of the fuller explication this topic deserves and for the purpose of this paper, one can conceive of the “remote” or underlying agents competing for hegemony in Gramsci’s analysis of Italy as economic classes, one of which was represented by a political party as an aspiring “proximate” hegemon. An analogous picture pertains to the United States, or at least so it seems to me. The remote hegemonic agent is the conglomerate of large economic enterprises and institutions that comprise its capitalist class, in alliance with or, on some interpretations, incorporating its powerful military establishment. At the time of writing this paper, its proximate political leadership is the Republican Party.

In Gramscian terms, capitalism seems to be overwhelmingly hegemonic in the United States. Support from and for the largest capitalist enterprises is comparable for each of its only major political parties. Something like what C. B. Macpherson described as a capitalist-supporting popular culture of possessive individualism<sup>32</sup> looks to be firmly entrenched throughout the land, at both levels of popular consciousness in Gramsci’s conception. Religion, or at least its influential fundamentalist wing that, in accord with post-Gramscian rejection of Gramsci’s exclusive focus on economic classes, could in principle be a hegemonic challenge to capitalism has instead been successfully integrated into a capitalist worldview in the United States. Challenges to the dominant economic structure or culture that go further than demanding welfare measures falling short even of European social democracy are rare. Trade unions and social movements, in addition to being weak, typically advance narrow and relatively modest demands. With a few exceptions, opposition intellectuals seldom go further than to resist the castigation of “liberalism” as an evil on a par with communism. Since well before the collapse of the Soviet Union, an internal socialist challenge to U.S. capitalism has been virtually non-existent.

The story is rather different when one turns to the current executive branch of the government. One cannot say that the Republican leadership of the country, at least as of 2006, enjoys hegemonic status. Far from forging a collective will, it presides over a divided society which it was central in creating due to its embrace of fundamentalist religion, attacks on social services, promotion of irresponsible economic policies, and adventurist and ill-thought out military ventures. Lack of internal hegemony at the level of government is especially significant in the United States with respect to its underlying capitalist hegemony. The reason for this is that unlike many if not most other countries, U.S. political discourse is not

conducted in terms of economic class. This means that a focus on political parties, or what I have called the proximate contenders for hegemony, tends to exhaust political thinking.

In one respect, the displacement of class awareness onto a fixation with political parties strengthens capitalist hegemony in the United States. As long as a governing party delivers itself of appropriately nationalist rhetoric and conducts foreign policy accordingly, attention is diverted from activities of the larger capitalist enterprises that work against the national interest; so challenges to class hegemony due to globalization in the way Cox describes are muted. In another respect, however, lack of hegemony on the part of the governing party when it is the main focus of popular political consciousness renders globally hegemonic projects difficult by dampening internal enthusiasm and by projecting the image of a divided nation abroad. Among the things that fatally undermined the Soviet Union's quest for global modern princedom was realization by champions abroad of its stated values that it lacked internal hegemony largely in virtue of betrayal of these very values.

### **Gramscian Criteria of Hegemony**

Let us now see how well the United States stacks up in comparison to some of the specific Gramscian criteria of hegemony.

#### ***Enemies***

Recall that Gramsci reservedly agreed with Machiavelli's view that external enemies are sometimes useful to consolidate hegemonic leadership. "A wise prince," Machiavelli advised, "must, whenever he has the occasion, foster with cunning some hostility so that in stamping it out his greatness will increase as a result."<sup>33</sup> In terms of garnering internal hegemony, U.S. governments might well be unequalled in following this counsel. Regarding global hegemonic efforts, the tactic has been less successful. While the U.S. leadership in combating Communism was approvingly recognized in some, but not all, global regions, the failure to attract more than a few allies into the "coalition of the willing" in the Iraq war indicates that the Islamic terrorist enemy has less hegemony-building appeal externally than internally.

#### ***Transformism and Expansion***

Gramsci's main worry was that an exclusive focus on gradualist transformation would deny an aspiring hegemonic agent the ability to create a new collective will around visions specific to the agent. He thus saw an essential "Jacobin" moment to hegemonic projects. In one sense the United States in recent years has

certainly not lacked a revolutionary, Jacobin thrust, namely in its uncompromising neoliberal vision of a world market free of constraining regulations or confining extra-economic goals.

In addition to this not being the sort of Jacobinism that the socialist Gramsci could applaud, its radicalness has been untempered by that dimension of transformism that Gramsci thought was required for hegemony, which is to maintain some contact with existing traditions. It is noteworthy that neoliberal policies were most eagerly embraced in the former socialist countries possessed for the most part of Communist-era traditions considered by most of their populaces as unworthy of preservation. But in other portions of the world, and beginning in some of the former socialist societies too, the neoliberal project is either rejected (as in much of Europe and most recently in several countries of South America) or its policies are imposed by force, for instance, as conditions for debt relief or loans.

### *Collective Will*

Judging whether a constructed collective will serves hegemonic ends requires, in the first place, estimation of whether, regarding the content of this will, it has the potential for generalization—in the current discussion to the entire world. Also requisite is to determine whether a hegemonic agent has the capacity to represent itself as the embodiment of that will. As to content, the global will that a hegemonic United States wishes to forge—there is no need for speculation about this, as it is often proudly announced—is the union of capitalism and liberal democracy, each conceived of on the U.S. model, where this means relatively unregulated capitalism admitting of very large disparities of wealth and representative, party-political democracy toward the “thin” end of a spectrum stretching from the recommendations of such as Joseph Schumpeter to those of John Stuart Mill or John Dewey.<sup>34</sup>

I am inclined to think that liberal democracy generically conceived—that is, the integration of institutionalized means for collective self-determination with protection of individual rights—is a realistic and attractive candidate for a common global political will. The shortcoming of U.S. promotion of this goal is that it advances an excessively narrow conception of liberal democracy and it includes capitalism as a value within the *content* of the projected will.

Of course, if, as was averred earlier, capitalism is hegemonic in the United States, then that country’s government will wish to promote capitalist hegemony globally as well. But there is a difference between doing this by portraying a capitalistic United States as the bearer and leader of global liberal democracy and building the specific interests of the U.S. hegemon into the very conceptualization of the global will it seeks to construct. The latter tack loses contact with those not already committed to U.S. style capitalism and, in a way that Machiavelli’s fox would decry, flags its self-interest in hegemony. (The same problem was encountered in late Communism, which also projected democracy,

though not of a liberal variety, as a worldwide goal that it could achieve, but which *defined* this democracy in narrowly class terms as “proletarian” or “socialist.”)

Putting this topic aside, it now needs to be asked whether the United States can realistically present itself as the leader in a worldwide effort to secure liberal democracy (explicitly defined in capitalist terms or not)—in Gramscian language, whether it is organically cohesive with the rest of the world. A problem in this connection resides in the country’s own comportment. For Gramsci a hegemonic agent portraying itself as the embodiment of a collective will must actually possess the values of that will, and for Machiavelli, it must at least appear to do so. This puts the United States in a difficult position. Even if one does not think that such things as the electoral college system and unbridled campaign donations create severe democratic deficits, its propensity to support anti-democratic and brutal dictatorships abroad when convenient does not go unnoticed by people in other countries, whose skepticism about the commitment of the United States to worldwide democracy can therefore be understood.

### *Organic Intellectual*

The hegemon considered as an organic intellectual is attentive to preexisting traditions and values which are drawn on as the political-cultural material out of which a collective will is formed. A good example may be found in the justly acclaimed skill of the founders of the United States to forge a single country eventually with values unique to it from states and regions exhibiting a wide range of alternative political and moral values. More recent comportment of the United States on the international scene has not exhibited the same sensitivities. This has been most evident in the case of its promotion of *laissez faire* capitalism, especially in the developing world. Perhaps such a project could never have succeeded and softer forms of capitalism should have been promoted. At the very least an effort was required to lay ground work for an economic transformation and to try to ensure that the only preexisting traditions left alone were not those involving corruption.

In terms of liberal democracy, Central and South America offer examples of lost opportunities. The Cuban revolution was to all appearances a popular one, which turned to Communism only after being rebuffed by the United States. Perhaps it could have been brought into the liberal-democratic fold instead, even though this might have required flexibility in accommodating to the unique economic and political circumstances of that country at the time. Support for prior regimes with dubious democratic credentials in other countries in the region—Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela—has resulted in governments elected partly on the basis of criticisms and often ostentatious denunciations of the United States on democratic grounds.

Insofar as the clash of civilizations thesis reflects dominant U.S. thinking about the Islamic world, this exhibits a different kind of hegemony-defeating

insensitivity. On this view, there is an essential rupture between Islamic religious cultures and liberal democracy such that there is no path from the former to the latter. Quite aside from there being at least as much reason to doubt a path to democracy from such once U.S.-supported dictators as the Shah of Iran or Saddam Hussein, a Gramscian perspective counsels at least looking for democratic potentials within religious traditions, which, to the extent that they are dominant within a population, may be indispensable material to forge new values. (It has often been noted that liberal and democratic values in Western Europe themselves arose from religious worldviews, which they later supplanted.<sup>35</sup>) In practical terms this would mean attending to those in the Islamic world who see anti-theocratic and democratic potentials within Islam to seek out ways of adjusting rhetoric and forging alliances in accord with their perspectives.<sup>36</sup>

Another task of the organic intellectual on a world scale is to portray itself as congruent with or at least not at variance with daily popular culture. Previous hegemonies, such as Britain and France in their imperialist heydays, were adroit at this. By contrast, U.S. hegemony is hindered by the aggressive export of its culture to the rest of the world. Whatever success such campaigns enjoy in sales of cultural products seems by default rather than by preference (what else to see on TV than American soaps and detective stories, where else to find an affordable meat lunch than at Macdonalds?). Saturation by this culture may inculcate new cultural tastes on the part of some people, but for others it has the effect of creating a target of hostility, as for example, when some recent protests of U.S. killings of civilians in Baghdad included demonstrators beating a statue of Ronald Macdonald.

### *Equivalence and Difference*

The primary current sources of equivalence among those societies supposed to be subject to U.S. hegemony is their common fear of Islamic-fundamentalist-based terrorism, which the United States is the leader in combating. Exercise of this leadership, however, narrows the breadth and strength of equivalence-sustaining identifications in two ways. First, despite occasional references to the source of terrorism being a psychotic hatred of freedom *per se* on the part of people who happen to be Islamic believers rather than Islam itself, terrorism is clearly sutured with Islam in the U.S. global hegemonic project. This has the effect of creating resentment on the part of people in large parts of the Islamic world who are therefore reluctant to be part of a (willing) historic bloc led by the United States.

This resentment is reinforced by the "crusade" character of the U.S. war on terrorism, even including use of the term in one of President Bush's early rallying cries. Another feature of the U.S. conduct of the war on terrorism that strains equivalence is its unilateralism. An important aspect of hegemony exercised in a Gramscian way is that the hegemon does not act in a unilateral way. The whole point of such hegemony is to achieve a fusion of social actors within which the

hegemon's leadership is acknowledged but regarded as the practical exercise of a common will.

Why does not the United States abandon the anti-Islam crusade stance and the unilateral conduct of its opposition to world terrorism? One reason, I suggest, is that these things are needed to maintain loyalty on the part of two groups within the United States important to its current leadership, namely the Christian right and pro-militarist hawks. A Democratic administration might be prepared to forego the loyalties of these groups (though to the extent that the hawks include the country's arms industries, not to mention wings of its top military leadership, this is a tall order), but in the longer term it would face a problem common to any administration in the United States.

The most obvious alternative to seeing the source of terrorism in psychopathological or religious terms is to view it as the outgrowth of such things as social and economic problems and the geopolitics of oil. Genuine multilateralism, as through the United Nations, would most likely focus on these things. But such a focus is threatening to what I have claimed is the ultimate internal hegemon in the United States, namely its large moneyed interests. Hence, both political and economic features of the United States make the problem of finding a balance between equivalence and difference in the exercise of hegemonic rule especially difficult and in my view without major changes in the political economy of the country intractable.

### *Dämmerung*

If the claims of this paper so far are accurate, they point to the inescapable conclusion that the United States does not exercise global hegemony in a Gramscian sense of the term. Before relating this conclusion to the topic of post-hegemony, some comments about an alternative interpretation of hegemony are in order. It might be granted that the United States is not a global hegemon in Gramscian terms, but that it succeeds on a fallback criterion of Machiavelli. He argued that the hegemonic leader should be both respected ("loved") and feared, but that "it is much safer to be feared than to be loved when one of the two must be lacking."<sup>37</sup> By implication, Machiavelli is suggesting that, though not ideal, hegemony exercised through domination alone is possible.

A worry Gramsci had about force—here taken as the employment or the threat of employment of military action or economic retribution—offers one interpretation of this view. His comments on this topic are contained in a criticism of teleological, messianic left-wing politics, but they apply to the contemporary, capitalist United States. He sees the source of resort to bellicose measures as residing in a fatalistic belief in the inevitable success of one's cause. Such a belief leads to a downplaying of politics in favor of economic and military activity seen as appropriate for controlling temporary hindrances to the march of history. The most detrimental employment of force thus motivated, Gramsci thought, was its use against potential allies.<sup>38</sup> The general point is that one cannot divorce a

strategy of exclusive reliance on domination from a presupposed worldview which, in turn, means that such reliance implicates a richer conception of hegemony than simply as domination.

An alternative interpretation of a fallback, Machiavellian position is that foregoing an aspiration to be loved for a politics of fearful domination reflects a feeling of desperation bred of the inability to achieve full hegemony in a richer sense. It should be noted that pure domination still does serve a would-be hegemon's ends, albeit, if Gramsci is right, more tenuously than full-blown hegemony, and it is indeed something to be feared: a lion uncontrolled by vulpine cleverness or human values is a frightful creature.

### A New Dawn?

I have argued that on a fully Gramscian concept, the United States does not enjoy global hegemony today, and it may not even live up to the less demanding criteria of Machiavelli. If these claims are accurate then what can one anticipate in the future? Some might hope, or fear, that the United States can still profit from its "last superpower" status to achieve world hegemony (perhaps a new administration could employ advisors who read Gramsci and Togliatti instead of Strauss). Or it might be forecasted that some other emerging world power will succeed—China? Japan? India? the EU? I am not competent to evaluate such prospects, but am intuitively doubtful.

Assuming that no one society can realistically be expected to achieve global hegemony, there remain two possibilities. One is perpetual Hobbesian warfare among nation-states and perhaps regions none of which can realistically aspire to global domination, thus putting the world into a state of anarchy. This would at least once again give realist political-scientific international relations experts something to do, but it is otherwise not an attractive prospect. The other possibility is the sort of future hoped for by Cox and others of "a pluralistic world in which different groups of countries pursued different paths of economic and social organization which reflected and sustained their different cultural patterns."<sup>39</sup>

Whether a pluralistic world would admit of or require an overarching, cosmopolitan government is no doubt a matter for continuing debate. It does seem, though, that some common values are essential if such a world is not to revert to Hobbesian anarchy. Cox identifies as the requisite values: general commitment to a sustainable global ecology; mutual support in promoting social equity to avoid "a situation where internal cleavages become a stimulus to aggression"; sincere agreement to avoid violence in settling conflicts; and a consensus on protecting human rights.<sup>40</sup>

Commitment to these or some similar list of common, transnational values would constitute a global Gramscian collective will. Due to the diversity of values within and among regions of the world, one cannot count on *finding* consensus on the values implicated in a collective will, and it is inconsistent with pluralism to

try *imposing* such values.<sup>41</sup> This means that a collective will must be *constructed* which leaves the questions of how such construction might take place and who is to do the constructing. In keeping with the modest aim of this paper, I shall not attempt to develop answers to these vital questions. Suffice it to note that from a Gramscian perspective and in a pluralistic world lacking a hegemonic agent, the values would have to arise out of or at least find resonance with whatever germs of them exist in the world's various traditions. As to the agency question, it at least seems clear that, absent Valhalla, those who think that achieving a pluralistic world is a worthy goal should start work—that is, cultural-political work—to this end at home.

*A version of this paper was presented at the conference, Dehegemonization: The U.S. and Transnational Democracy, at the Center for Global Studies and Center for Ethics, George Mason University in April, 2006. I am grateful to participants of that conference and to Robert Cox and Chantal Mouffe for useful feedback.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gramsci's notebooks were written between 1928 and 1933 while in prison in Turin. All references below are to *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). Hereinafter, *PN*.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (posthumously published in 1532), in *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1979), 131–36. Hereinafter, *Prince*.

<sup>3</sup> *PN*, 57, 104–5. Reference is made to the Centaur thesis by Gramsci at *PN*, 170, where the “human” side of the Centaur seems to be that dimension of hegemonic rule that forges consent.

<sup>4</sup> *PN*, 136–37.

<sup>5</sup> *Prince*, chap. 25; *PN*, 133–36 and see 168, 360.

<sup>6</sup> A pertinent debate may be found in *The New Left Review* between Giovanni Arrighi, who argues that U.S. global economic hegemony has all but disintegrated (“Hegemony Unraveling” in two parts, vol. 32, March–April, 2005 and vol. 33, May–June, 2005) and Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (“Superintending Global Capital,” vol. 35, September–October, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> On the autonomy of politics in general for Gramsci, see *PN*, 136–44.

<sup>8</sup> *PN*, 169–70.

<sup>9</sup> *PN*, 177–79.

<sup>10</sup> *PN*, 133, 360.

<sup>11</sup> *PN*, 178–79.

<sup>12</sup> *PN*, 349. Sue Golding's interpretation of Gramsci's political theory centers on this view: *Gramsci's Democratic Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), see chap. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, “Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in *Marx and Engels: Selected Writings in One Volume* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 181–85, at 183, referred to by Gramsci at *PN*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Alternatively (but compatibly with this interpretation), Gramsci was thinking of Machiavelli's contemporary, Francesco Guicciardini, the President of Romagna, whose reference to the combination of “arms and religion” as essential for durable rule was appropriated and expanded along the lines of the pairs making up Gramsci's dual perspective. See *PN*, editors' note 71, at 170.

<sup>15</sup> *PN*, 326–34. Left-wing sociologists who apply this conception of Gramsci's empirically include Michael Mann, *Consciousness and Action Among the Western Working Class* (London: Macmillan, 1973) and Bryan Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> See *PN*, 132–34.

<sup>17</sup> See *PN*, 330, 376–77.

<sup>18</sup> *PN*, 104–14. The term was coined by a conservative politician, Vincenzo Cuoco. See the editorial note explanation at *PN*, 59, n. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *PN*, 58ff and see 128–33. Mouffe discusses this distinction in “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1979), 168–204, at 182–83.

<sup>20</sup> *PN*, 129: “The Modern Prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will . . . begins to take form.”

<sup>21</sup> *PN*, 418 and see the passage quoted in the editor’s note 8 on p. 56. Notwithstanding the fact that Gramsci made few explicit references to democracy, his notebooks are seen by many contemporary commentators as providing the basis for a radical democratic theory. See the book by Golding, *Gramsci’s Democratic Theory*, especially chap. 6, and Esteve Morera, “Gramsci and Democracy,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (1990): 23–37.

<sup>22</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> *Prince*, 148.

<sup>24</sup> *PN*, 129.

<sup>25</sup> *Socialist Strategy*, 125–27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–34, and see Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), chap. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *PN*, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Cox, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 140. Cox qualifies without abandoning this view in his more recent *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1977).

<sup>31</sup> Cox, *Political Economy*, 103.

<sup>32</sup> Macpherson coined this term to describe the culture he thought essential to a capitalist market society. Central to this culture are fixation of private property, competitiveness, and consumerism. One source is his *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), see essay I.

<sup>33</sup> *Prince*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> I survey the theories within this spectrum in *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), chaps. 3 and 6.

<sup>35</sup> Among those who explicate this history are Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> A well-known example is Khaled Abou El Fadl; see an essay by him and reactions in *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*, eds. Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). The views of other prodemocratic Islamicists are surveyed in Nader Hashemi, “Inching Toward Democracy: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World,” *The Third World Quarterly* 24 (June 2003): 263–78; and John Esposito and Jon Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). In my own view, there is a general tension between a theocratic tendency endemic to all the main monotheistic religions and democracy, so it is a mistake to single any one of them out. It is also a mistake to conclude from the recognition of such tension that cultures formed around a religion cannot contain within them prodemocratic potentials as well as theocratic ones. I discuss this issue in “The Conflicting Truths of Religion and Democracy,” in *Human Rights and Democracy*, ed. John Rowan (Charlottesville, VA: Philosophical Documentation Center, 2005), 65–80.

<sup>37</sup> *Prince*, 131.

<sup>38</sup> *PN*, 168: "Force can be employed against enemies, but not against a part of one's own side which one wishes rapidly to assimilate, and whose 'good will' and enthusiasm one needs."

<sup>39</sup> Cox, *Political Economy*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 155–56.

<sup>41</sup> In her own advocacy of "a pluralist democratic order," Chantal Mouffe criticizes proffered solutions to the question at hand within mainstream liberal-democratic political philosophy for either facile assumption of value consensus or anti-pluralist exclusion. Chantal Mouffe *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2005), chap. 9.